

LOCAL SERVICE AGREEMENTS – PROGRESS REPORT

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report updates Members on the progress made on this initiative and seeks Members' agreement to the way forward.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 At last July's Council meeting, Members considered a report concerning the potential for establishing a Local Service Agreement (LSA) between Essex County Council and this Authority. This initiative, promoted by Lord Hanningfield, the Leader of Essex County Council, aims to secure improvements in service delivery/target achievements through negotiation and agreement between the tiers.
- 2.2 At the July meeting, Members agreed that talks be held with the County Council around the potential for such a Local Service Agreement. The services identified as possibilities for investigation included the elderly, youth services, highways and back office issues such as recruitment, training and development (mins 378/02).
- 2.3 An update report was produced in October 2002 which outlined progress (mins 483/2002)

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 Since that time, Officer discussions have taken place in an attempt to look at the potential for a Local Service Agreement between the District and the County to secure service improvements for local residents in these areas. A meeting has also taken place between the Leader of the Council and the County Cabinet member for Strategic Co-ordination and Stakeholder Liaison. Nevertheless, progress on the exact details behind such an Agreement has been limited to date, as the County has attempted to move the agenda forward across the whole of Essex.
- 3.2 The stage has now been reached where the County has set out its views on the basis for a Local Service Agreement between Essex County Council and Rochford District Council. As well as the proposals made by the District Council, the County Council has identified a number of other areas it feels may be worth further investigation and discussion, with a view to some form of agreement on the way forward.

- 3.3 The key areas that could be included in a Local Service Agreement between the County and District are now as follows:

Elderly

- 3.4 The County Council is committed to rationalising the care support available to the Rochford District Council's Sheltered Housing Schemes, through the letting of block contracts to the independent sector. The development of block domiciliary contracts was a recommendation arising from the Best Value Review of Older Persons Services to build up a consistency of supply in each locality. The emphasis would be upon two providers meeting all required independent sector supply in each District Council locality (with a penalty if they were unable to meet that supply request). These contracts will come into effect from September 2003. The advantage is that the same domiciliary care provider will be working across the whole of a sheltered unit, thereby improving efficiency, co ordination and effectiveness.
- 3.5 There is an acknowledged need to develop a more joined-up approach to IT support systems between the County Council, Health and District Councils. A pilot to explore possibilities around the Single Assessment Process is being planned.
- 3.6 Discussion is taking place regarding the feasibility of improving access for older people of low cost reliable gardening services. Not only does this improve the quality of lives of older people, but also reduces the possibility of older people being targeted in crime as they are less visibly vulnerable. However, no specific time frame has been agreed as yet.
- 3.7 The County Council is working with Rochford as well as a number of other district councils to explore the roles and responsibilities and organisational interface on the Disabled Facilities Grants. The commitment is to minimise duplication and to streamline processes.
- 3.8 The County is happy to explore the use of sheltered accommodation for intermediate care facilities and for collaborative care teams. The County is also willing to discuss with the District the development of a jointly agreed strategy for the best use of housing and support services from a range of partners - RDC, County and Housing Associations, to best meet the changing needs and expectations of our older residents.

Youth related services

- 3.9 The County Council's general approach to the request from boroughs and districts across Essex for better arrangements for local decision making over youth services has been to strengthen the local Youth Strategy Groups (YSGs). Whilst these local groups will operate within the overall arrangements for the developing local Children and Young People's Strategic Partnerships (CYPSPs), they will need to play the joint lead role across the 13 to 19 agenda locally (including the Connexions service). The County now suggest that a senior elected member from the borough or district will chair the group in each area and wish to pursue this with the District.
- 3.10 Regarding schools, the County Council is seeking to develop this theme with the District by working with schools, and the development of extended schools and neighbourhood learning. The County wish to explore jointly with schools, the District Council and other agencies, the potential for joint service hubs with schools, where the possibilities of the provision of a range of services to children, young people, and potentially the wider community, through groups of schools can be fully assessed.

Highways and Transportation

- 3.11 The specific concerns that have been raised by the District are being addressed as part of the County's overall approach to LSA development in this area. A County-wide task force has been set up to look at what can be achieved. Tailored arrangements for the District Council will be possible within the overall framework for the LSA after the work of the Task Force has been completed in July 2003.

Thames Gateway

- 3.12 The District wishes to ensure the full engagement of all County services in specific regeneration programmes across the area. The County are happy to establish a timetable with you to take this forward, working with other partners under the Thames Gateway programme.
- 3.13 The County accepts that further work is needed on the nature of any delivery vehicle involving Rochford. The County is keen to work with the District Council and in this aspect and to develop specific projects in partnership as they are identified.

Legal Services

- 3.14 All local authorities in Essex have entered into an agreement to provide legal services to each other where requested and there was available capacity. This agreement has been in place for approximately 5 years

and appears to be working well with the County and other authorities undertaking work for each other. Some Authorities (Basildon, Braintree, Chelmsford, Maldon, Uttlesford and Essex Councils) have created a joint advocacy team based upon the County Council's existing advocacy team. The idea is that participating authorities can use the advocacy unit as though it was part of their own legal service. A project board was established to provide some joint management control over the operation of the unit with payment for its services being through money or secondment of staff. The joint unit has been running successfully for nearly two years and since its inception, the project has been joined by Castle Point Borough Council.

- 3.15 The County would like to discuss with us further working arrangements between our respective Legal Services and whether we would wish to join the advocacy service.

Procurement

- 3.16 The County has facilitated the introduction of a Procurement Agency for Essex. Its prime focus will be on developing capacity and skills to support Districts and Boroughs and to deliver both quick win efficiencies and long-term collaborative procurement approaches. Twelve Authorities have indicated support for the principle and an Interim Board has been established. The County would like to discuss whether Rochford now wishes to join the County-wide Procurement Agency.

Assets

- 3.17 The County Council is working on a key strategic review of asset management, with a view to making better use of property all round, and in particular speeding up the disposal of surplus property. Part of this work will be to look at the scope for working more closely with partners. One of the strands of the review will be to look in depth at different areas of the county in turn. The County will be starting with West Essex with a particular focus on Harlow. Depending on the outcome of this pilot, the County intend to pursue a programme of reviews in all areas over the next 2 years and would like to work with the District Council on the review in Rochford.

Libraries

- 3.18 Pilots for joint working on selected libraries are being developed. The key areas of interest include:
- joint local management arrangements
 - shared information points;
 - improved access to services;

- involvement in planning - including mobile routes;
- integration of services.

These developments will be taken forward locally with the respective authorities. The County are happy to explore the extension of these arrangements to libraries in Rochford District once the pilots have been evaluated.

Customer Services Strategy

- 3.19 The County Council's Access to Services Best Value Review Improvement Plan recommended a customer service strategy that delivers a step change in accessibility for users of County Council services. It notes that customers do not differentiate clearly between different service providers. Partnership with District and Borough Councils, Health and other agencies providing public services in Essex will be key to its success. Therefore, the strategy is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of evolving partnerships.
- 3.20 Over the next 6 months detailed project plans for an expected 3 year customer strategy implementation programme will be prepared. This work will include some piloting of shared access with District and Borough Councils. The County are initially piloting projects on shared access with Harlow and Braintree Councils, and the County would welcome the opportunity to discuss options for similar shared access in Rochford District.

Human Resources

- 3.21 The County have recognised that the County and Borough Councils are frequently dealing with the same issues in terms of human resources, and particularly in the areas of recruitment and training and development. The County are happy to develop opportunities for the District Council to have access to County Council services, such as the Staff Development Programme, on a consultancy basis. This will be the subject of further discussion.

4 OFFICER COMMENT

- 4.1 To receive some formal response from the County Council to the District's initial suggestions is a welcome development. It is hoped that the District and County can now proceed towards an "in principle" agreement for an LSA, at least in terms of the Elderly, Youth Services, and Highways and Transportation. At the detailed stage, much work still needs to be done in all three of these areas, but providing the negotiations revolve around working smarter, improving linkages and communications and working together on joint solutions, no particular problems are envisaged. The caveat is around resource implications

and clearly, if additional resources are required, then the matter will be reported back to members for consideration.

- 4.2 As members are aware, progress in connection with Thames Gateway is proceeding at pace and the County's commitment to work with the District Council on a potential delivery vehicle is welcome.
- 4.3 In connection with legal services, the opportunity to look at further working arrangements is a positive step forward and clearly the District can look at the relative merits of joining the County-wide advocacy arrangement.
- 4.4 As to the County-wide procurement initiative, at this stage it is not recommended that we pursue this initiative as part of the LSA. The Council's high value services are contracted out on long term contracts. The Council has also recently entered into a partnership with five other Essex Authorities and the IDeA to develop an "e" procurement initiative to cover more of its day-to-day requirements. In the circumstances, therefore, it is felt that for an annual subscription of around £8,000, there is insufficient value to be gained from joining the County-wide Procurement Agency at this time.
- 4.5 In relation to the other areas identified by the County – Assets, Libraries, Customer Services and Human Resources – there would certainly be value in pursuing these matters further, although much will depend upon the detail which emerges.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 No additional resource requirements have been identified in the discussions to date. The only resources expended to relate to senior officer and member time.
- 5.2 If resource issues do emerge in the course of further discussions with the County, then these will be reported back to members for decision. At this stage, however, the focus is more on improving work processes and communications, decision-making and co-ordination between the Authorities.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Whilst not required by statute, it is clear that much of the rent local government legislation encourages partnership working and innovation between the tiers.

7 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Council:

- (1) note the progress to date and the County's response to the District's suggestions as to the areas to be covered by a Local Service Agreement
- (2) agree to the principle of the District Council signing a Local Service Agreement to advance closer working relationships between the District and the County in the areas outlined in the report, subject to the officer comments outlined above. (CE)

Paul Warren

Chief Executive

For further information please contact Paul Warren on:-

Tel:- 01702 318199

E-Mail:- paul.warren@rochford.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Letter from Cllr. Stephen Castle, the County Council's Cabinet Member for Strategic Coordination and Stakeholder Liaison dated 5 June 2003.