

TWO TIER WORKING IN ESSEX

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report introduces Neil Kinghan's report on two tier working in Essex and seeks Members comments on its content, so that these can be fed back.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Neil Kinghan, whose background includes working for the Communities and Local Government Department and its predecessor departments in Central Government, has been employed by Lord Hanningfield of Essex County Council on a consultancy basis to examine two tier working in Essex. As part of his brief, he has met with all District Council Leaders and Chief Executives. He has now delivered his initial report, which is attached as Appendix 1.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The report has been circulated to all District Council Leaders and Chief Executives seeking responses to its content. The Executive Board may now like to consider it and determine what, if any, the response from this Authority should be.
- 3.2 From an officer viewpoint, there are some welcome proposals in the report in terms of improving communications, partnerships, etc. However, it is felt there would be merit in some clarification around the roles/relationships of the County/District and the relative strengths of each level. In this context, clarity around who takes the lead on community leadership and the so-called 'place shaping' agenda needs to be determined; otherwise, there is a danger of duplication and public confusion in this area. From a Rochford viewpoint, the County's willingness to play an active role in the Area Committee structure and to delegate budget to those forums would be a welcome move towards developing a more localised agenda and clearer accountability at the local level. Also, a review of the County's own Area Forum structure would be welcomed.

4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The main risks involved in the two tier debate relate to reputation, the emerging legislation and inspection frameworks; all of which require improved and more cost effective working between the tiers.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Much will depend on the outcome of Neil Kinghan's report. At this stage, however, the implications are in terms of officer and Member time.

6 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Executive Board **RESOLVES** to determine its comments on the Neil Kinghan paper, for feeding back to Mr Kinghan and Essex County Council.

Paul Warren
Chief Executive

Background Papers:-

None

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INTRODUCTION

TWO-TIER WORKING IN ESSEX

This report sets out my findings on the present state of two-tier working in Essex and on the initiatives that are being taken to improve it. It offers a number of recommendations for further improvement in the relationships between Essex County Council, the District and Borough Councils and the two unitaries and other partners.

There have been a range of difficulties in the past, there remains a degree of suspicion on all sides, and there are likely to be ups and downs in the relationship in the future. But there have been encouraging improvements in the last six months and there is a shared commitment among the Leaders and Chief Executives of all the authorities to work better together to deliver better services for the people of the County.

I believe that the recommendations made in this report will secure a better understanding between local authorities in the county and will help members and officers to work more effectively together. They are consistent with the approach which the Leader and Chief Executive of the County Council are taking in developing their vision for Essex.

My recommendations will also address the two most important challenges which the Local Government White Paper, published in October 2006, set for those counties in which two-tier local government is retained – those of providing strong local leadership and securing value for money. Together with other steps being taken in the County, they will strengthen local democracy and promote the delivery of high quality, cost-effective public services for local people.

My report reflects the discussions I have had with Leaders and Chief Executives of the twelve District and Borough Councils and the two Unitary Councils in Essex. They have all been generous with their time and their willingness to discuss the relationships with the County Council. I am grateful to them for their help and cooperation.

The report also reflects my discussions with the Leader, members of the Cabinet, the Chief Executive, the Head of Policy, the Senior Management Board and the Corporate Management Group in the County Council. I thank all of them for their comments and their ideas, many of which I have drawn on in this report.

My programme of visits began in March this year and much has happened since then that will affect the way the County Council and the Borough and District Councils work together. Some of these changes were prompted by issues raised in my discussions, others for different reasons. There are several promising initiatives under way that will address issues covered in this report, if we can collectively deliver them successfully.

My recommendations are grouped by theme, as set out below. Under each theme, I discuss the issues raised which need to be addressed and the initiatives already under way to address them. I have recorded the issues which seemed to me to be the most important and which were raised in more than one of my meetings. In so doing, I have inevitably been selective and mine is the responsibility for the selection.

The themes are:

1. Communication
2. Governance
3. Devolution
4. Partnership
5. The Local Area Agreement
6. Shared Services and Procurement
7. Representation and Collective Engagement

The County-District balance

This report draws heavily on the discussions I have had with the leaders and chief executives of the District and Borough councils, in its description of the issues that need to be addressed and in its recommendations for action, though the recommendations are mine, not a set of proposals made by the leaders and chief executives. The perspective it offers is therefore predominantly a District one. It contains some trenchant criticisms of the County Council.

Those criticisms are not balanced by counter-points about the Borough and Districts from within the county council. It does not seem to me to be valuable to initiate a back-and-forth process of this kind. The report is inevitably, therefore, less than wholly balanced. It is very much to the credit of the leader and chief executive of the County Council that they asked me to invite feedback from the Districts and Boroughs in the knowledge that the result would not be an even-handed one.

It seems to me clear that responsibility for some of the problems in the County/District relationship in Essex is a shared one – as all the leaders and chief executives would themselves recognise. The Districts and Boroughs have sometimes chosen not to cooperate with the County Council, or to respond positively to county initiatives, when different choices were open to them. Some of the problems of communication addressed later in this report are exacerbated by difficulties within District and Borough councils. The question of capacity is central to any analysis of the county-District relationship and to recommendations for improving it.

Any such analysis must recognise the imbalance in resources and therefore capacity, between the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs. The County Council's net current expenditure for 2007/08 is budgeted to be £1.666m; by comparison the total net current expenditure for all twelve District and Borough Councils in 2007/08 is budgeted to be £477 m. It is inevitable that the County Council will be much more capable of devoting resources to collective initiatives than the Districts and Boroughs and that their capacity to lead, or respond, will always be constrained by their limited resources.

At the same time, the County Council is itself subject to serious resource constraints in relation to the range of services it provides. It cannot take sole responsibility for funding joint initiatives, nor will it wish to agree to make a significant contribution to any new programme unless it can see a strong case for doing so in line with its objectives for the County.

My recommendations are designed to recognise the imbalance in the resources and capacity available to the County and the Districts and to draw from each in accordance with their ability to contribute. In many cases, the resource requirement is very small, in one or two more substantial. The greater share of the resource cost will inevitably fall on the County Council but the package of recommendations set out here will be successful only if the Districts and Boroughs feel able to make their contribution too and if their senior members and officers are willing to commit their own resources as appropriate. It will be for all authorities to judge whether the commitment is worth making, to secure better working relationships.

1. Communication

Issues to be addressed

- perceived failures by the County Council in communicating effectively with the Districts, in particular, failure to inform them in good time of decisions or plans affecting their areas: "we find out when the local press rings up or when we are invited as members of the public to attend meetings", e.g. on street-lighting changes, library opening and on arrangements for consultation meetings on Council Tax in town centres;
- alleged reluctance to consult properly or to listen to the responses to consultation, in particular on issues where District and Borough councils have relevant statutory responsibilities or responsibilities are shared, e.g. on the County Council's plans for decentralising responsibilities for Children and Young People's Services; or on issues where the County Council has promised to consult but has chosen not to do so before acting, e.g. on some Highways issues;

NB: there are also instances where District and Borough councils are said not to have kept the County Council, or other Districts, in touch with their plans, for example, in relation to the recent merger initiatives. There have been problems of communication within District and Borough Councils where senior members or officers may have been part of the County Council's policy development process but the Leader and Chief Executive are not aware of the process;

- lack of consistency of approach to meetings between Leader/Cabinet and Chief Executive/SMB at County/District level. More of an issue for the smaller Districts some of whom say that they rarely see some senior members and officers from the County Council, than for the larger Boroughs and Districts;
- lack of a reliable and coherent system of engagement at member/senior officer level. Some Leaders and Chief Executives are happy to contact Lord Hanningfield or Joanna directly if they have a problem or an issue to raise, others may be more reluctant to do so. They do not have a reliable point of contact at member/officer level to help them deal with the County Council;
- no coordination of communication to the public, via newsletters or other means. Should we have a County newsletter, Essex Matters, and twelve Borough and District newsletters all published and distributed separately?

Initiatives being developed

- Lord Hanningfield's newsletter to Leaders of Borough and Districts in June 2007;
- regular meetings between some County Cabinet Members and their Chief Officers with Borough and District Leaders and Chief Executives; on Highways and Environment, for example. This has been a priority for a number of Cabinet members this year, and is welcome in many Districts;
- an increasing number of joint management team meetings.

Recommendations

1. **The County Council should put in place standard procedures for notifying Borough and District Councils and all elected members in the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs, of decisions and County events affecting their areas, in advance. Informing the Boroughs and Districts should be a standard element in all communications plans.**

2. The newsletter from the Leader of the County Council to the Borough and District Leaders should be quarterly. It will be for District and Borough Councils to ensure that it is distributed to other members. The Chief Executive of the County Council should offer a parallel newsletter to District and Borough Chief Executives.
3. The County Council should establish an electronic notice board on its web site to provide a forum for publicising information about decisions affecting Essex by all authorities, including the County, the Boroughs and Districts, and the Police and Fire and Rescue Authorities.
4. The County Council should review its consultation procedures to ensure that Borough and District Leaders and Chief Executives are always consulted personally and in good time where there are statutory and shared responsibilities at District level.
5. An annual programme should be developed for contact between the County Council and all the Boroughs and Districts at Cabinet and SMB level, to ensure that all Boroughs and Districts are visited by the Leader and Chief Executive at least once a year, more frequently as appropriate, for some Boroughs and Districts and some Cabinet/SMB members, and that the visits are coordinated.
6. The annual programme of contacts should, from time to time, include joint staff meetings for front-line staff from the County Council and the Borough and District councils, where they work in the same geographical area or on issues on which authorities are in partnership together, for example on environmental services or crime reduction.
7. Each member of the Cabinet and SMB should take personal responsibility as lead member/officer for one or two Boroughs or Districts – “the County’s ambassador” – to take an interest in all the County’s business with their District, with support from a “relationship manager” in the County Council. These arrangements should take the place of the existing area coordinators whose personal contributions are often well regarded but sometimes seen as diffuse and unfocussed. Each of the new roles should be subject to clear and specific terms of reference.
8. These contact arrangements within the County Council should be reflected in reciprocal arrangements in Borough and District Councils, under which senior members and officers, with support, should provide the leading point of contact for the County Council.

9. Borough and District Councils should review their external communications, to ensure that they keep other local authorities in touch with their news, and their internal communication systems, to ensure that the leader and chief executive and other senior members and officers are aware of significant contacts with the County Council.
10. The County Council should invite District and Borough Councils, and other partners, to consider the case for holding an annual Essex managers conference, to provide a networking opportunity for middle managers, in the public sector in the County.
11. The County Council should initiate a discussion with the Boroughs and Districts on the possibility of sharing production and distribution of their newsletters for the public, if they wish to do so. Some Authorities will wish to retain their own branding; but we might also see "Essex Matters for Uttlesford or for Rochford; or the Harlow Times might include an Essex section, or local authority newsletters might include contributions from PCTs or other partners

2. Governance

Issues to be addressed

- inconsistent relationships between County and District members for the same areas in many parts of the County; in some areas there are well developed and close working relationships between County and District members in others there is little expectation that members from the two tiers will work together on behalf of their shared constituents;
- the present Area Forums are not seen to be in touch with District concerns nor to be effective in serving joint County/District interests;
- lack of a framework or incentives for County members to engage consistently with their areas or with District or Parish Councils in their areas;
- no consistency of approach to devolution beyond local government or to encouraging public participation in local government issues, though the County Council has a good relationship with Parish Councils in some parts of the County;
- no shared or consistent approach to member development or training; no training programme to match the needs of local members.

Initiatives being developed

- Braintree's model for three Local Committees, supported by Locality Managers with delegated budgets for environmental works. The Local Committees may include County and District members and representatives of other local public authorities. The objectives of the new Committee will be to involve local communities more effectively in decision-making, to ensure that there is better joining up between service providers, for example, in housing and social care, and to reduce duplication between the tiers of local government;
- Rochford's model for three Area Committees which Parish Councillors (and possibly County Councillors) may be invited to join. The Area Committees will hold local public service providers to account and may take on delegated budgets, in due course;
- Some interest in other areas for improving joint working between the County and District members;
- The County Council is considering the case for inviting members from each of the twelve Districts and Boroughs to join its scrutiny committees (three members on each of the four LAA-based committees).

Recommendations

- 12. The County Council should develop a programme for delegated budgets for all County Council members to be spent in agreement with the District members for their areas, and Parish Councils as appropriate, with a timetable for implementation. Similar programmes have been implemented in several counties, including West Sussex, Staffordshire and Kent.**
- 13. All County Council members should ensure there are regular discussions with the District members for their areas about joint working on matters of local concern, engaging with Parish Councils and other local groups, where such arrangements do not already exist.**
- 14. County Council Members should invite District Council Members from the same areas, and their MP, to join them in joint constituency surgeries (a Hampshire model).**

15. The County Council should give its support to Braintree and Rochford District Councils in developing their Local/Area Committees and new governance arrangements, with County Council Members participating as invited. The County Council should take the lead in setting an example for the police and other public sector providers in being held to account by the Committee on relevant issues.
16. The County Council should promote a debate about the development of parallel models across the County, and propose an external review of progress in twelve months time, with a view to supporting similar initiatives in line with each Districts preferred approach.
17. There should be a review of the Area Forums, involving County, District and Borough members in developing proposals for such arrangements in future.
18. The County Council should promote a debate about the possibility of developing Community Forums across the County, as a possible alternative option to the Braintree/Rochford approach, as a mechanism for engaging the Community with local public service providers including Local Government, the Police, PCTs and others, to be led by the Boroughs and Districts, on a regular cycle of public meetings (a model developed successfully in Derbyshire).
19. The arrangements for involving District members in the County Council's scrutiny groups should be developed in close consultation with the Districts, and should be subject to external review of their effectiveness after twelve months;
20. County and Districts should consider the case for a more formal development programme for all members in the County, to address issues such as leadership, governance, devolution, equality and diversity, including Member seminars to be held across the County at times when local members can attend.

3. Devolution

Issues to be addressed

- expectations have been raised in the past that the County Council would devolve decision making and funding to Borough and District Councils, on Highways via Local Service Agreements, and in other areas such as Country Parks and Youth Services. These expectations were then not realised;

NB: this is more of a concern to some District and Borough councils than others. Some have an appetite for devolution; others are less interested and some recognise that they have limited capacity to cope with devolved responsibilities;

- decentralisation of Children's Services is seen to have bypassed the Districts and to run the risk of producing arrangements which may be difficult to reconcile with local governance and management arrangements within Districts;

Initiatives being developed

- the development of new devolutionary proposals for Highways, to allow Borough and Districts to determine priorities for local Highway works, to a total value of £100 m over five years;
- an extensive programme of consultation and engagement is now under way on Children's Services, to ensure that all District and Borough Leaders and Chief Executives have a clear picture of the new arrangements. The role of CYPSPs is being developed in a way that is seen as valuable by several Boroughs and Districts.

Recommendations

- 21. The County Council should take forward its devolution plans on Highways as a demonstration model of devolving governance and decision-making, for publicising within the County and outside, seeking the views of the Districts on the content and proposals and reflecting their views as far as possible in implementation.**
- 22. Each Cabinet member and SMB member should be asked to review their programmes to consider the case for delegating decision making to some or all of the Districts, either for works within a financial limit or in relation to specific areas of responsibility; Country Parks, Youth Services or Supporting People might be potential areas for devolution.**
- 23. The County Council should revisit the model of Local Service Agreements as a mechanism for delivering devolution in services other than highways.**
- 24. The new arrangements for devolution within the Children and Young People's Group should be reviewed in the light of the consultation process now under way; the role of CYPSPs should be further developed in line with local views.**

4. Partnership

Issues to be addressed

- the County Council is seen to approach partnership working reluctantly, and at too late a stage in the development of new policies or programmes; and to show a preference for getting things done quickly or unilaterally, in the absence of a strong partnership culture;
- in some of the smaller districts, there has been a view that the County Council could do more to support their efforts in programmes such as regeneration where the District council may find it difficult to recruit and retain high quality professional staff;
- less than whole-hearted support on the County's part for Local Strategic Partnerships in some Districts; criticism of the quality of the County contribution or lack of contribution, in some cases.

Initiatives being developed

- invitations from Colchester and Chelmsford to the County Council to play a more active role in their LSPs. In Colchester's case the County Council has taken significant steps already to support the regeneration schemes; the invitation now is to join the Public Service Partnership Board. In Chelmsford's case, the invitation is to take a fuller part in the Chelmsford Tomorrow Campaign;
- a joint initiative by the County Council and Castle Point Borough Council to recruit a regeneration manager has been successful; the County Council has provided significant support to several regeneration schemes, e.g. in Tendring town centre;
- there is an increasing number of good examples of policies and programmes on which the County Council has worked in partnership with Districts and other partners from the beginning, notably on the Waste Management Strategy and the new LAA, and recently in Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

Recommendations

- 25. The County Council should accept the invitations from Colchester and Chelmsford to take a fuller role in their LSPs, to provide a catalyst for other public sector bodies in leading the transformation of their areas, with a commitment to invest further funds jointly with other partners.**

26. The County Council should ask its new "ambassadors" (Rec 7) to review the relationships with all the LSPs and other partnerships (CDRPs, CYPSPs) in the County, to ensure that cooperation and representation are effective; and to make recommendations for strengthening the County's contributions to them.
27. The Chief Executive and SMB should emphasise the importance they attach to partnership working, in messages to staff, staff meetings and on a day-to-day basis. A toolkit for partnership working should be developed to guide staff in this area. The performance appraisal system should give specific focus to partnership working.
28. The County Council should consider the case for a Partnership Fund for Essex, to be funded jointly by the County, the Districts and Boroughs, the Police and Fire Authorities and other public sector partners. The fund would be used for purposes to be agreed by the partners, e.g. in support of the voluntary sector, for economic development, or to meet environmental or cultural objectives. It could be financed through a LPSA or LAA reward grant or on business-related projects via the supplementary business rate in future, when relevant legislation is introduced. Alternatively, it might be funded by a small top-slice from each authority's budget (a more difficult option in the light of the CSR).

5. The Local Area Agreement

Issues to be addressed

- less than full engagement between the County and Districts and Boroughs in the development of the first LAA for Essex. For some Districts and Boroughs, the LAA is still inclined to be seen as the County's business in which they have some part to play, but not one to which they attach great importance. For others, the issue is the County's reluctance to see them as full partners or to recognise the potential for them to lead on a "local LAA" for the District and Borough.

Initiatives being developed

- there have been lots of discussions about the LAA involving Leaders and Chief Executives and other members and officers in the Districts and Boroughs and extensive further engagement is underway as part of the development of the LAA. This has developed strongly since my work in this area began:
- a consultation exercise on the governance of the LAA is underway at present;

- Harlow has developed its own LAA, which it would like to see integrated effectively with the county-wide LAA;

Recommendations

29. The LAA is of sufficient importance to all local Authorities in Essex that it demands commitment from all authorities in the County to secure effective engagement. The Treasury's Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration describes the LAA as "the central delivery agreement between central Government, local Government and its partners" (para 6.36, page 82). The LGA has made a similarly strong commitment to the role of LAAs in future local/central relations. The LAA will deliver the County's Sustainable Community Strategy.

The role of District and Borough Councils in generating their plans for their areas and in developing, agreeing and then implementing the county-wide LAA is critical to its success, given their place shaping role and their direct responsibility for targets in key areas, such as Housing and Environmental work and the shared responsibilities they have on other issues, such as Crime and Disorder, Supporting People, etc. Information sharing will be essential to the development of this partnership working.

The LAA should provide both a Plan for Essex and a plan for each District and Borough, i.e. a Plan for Basildon, a Plan for Brentwood, a Plan for Harlow, etc. Local Plans should be the responsibility of each District and Borough Council, the County Council should commit itself to providing full support in developing each of the plans and to integrating them with the Plan for Essex. The leadership arrangements for the LAA blocks should be reviewed in light of the present consultation exercise on governance, and in line with the new arrangements for Leaders' meetings (see Rec 35).

6. Shared Services

Issues to be addressed

- the shared service agenda remains largely an aspirational one in Essex as it is in most of England. There are many initiatives under way, involving the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs but few of them have yet achieved any significant change;
- the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs will all face significant financial pressure in the light of CSR07, when the local government settlement for the financial years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2011/12 is

published. The Government has said it will expect 3% efficiency savings a year from local government;

- it is not at present clear how local authorities in Essex (or elsewhere) will deliver on significantly tougher efficiency targets. The potential savings from even a measure of rationalisation of the property assets for which local authorities are responsible, valued at £2.1 bn for Essex County Council alone, or from a new approach to procurement, where the County Council itself spends £680 m a year on external goods and services, works and utilities secured through third parties, would provide a much more satisfactory solution to this problem than severe cuts in front-line services;
- most leaders and chief executives, and senior members and officers, recognise the case for shared services but have considered the barrier to achieving them too difficult to overcome quickly – because they have been reluctant to entrust the supply of their services to their neighbours, or been nervous about the prospect of takeover by neighbouring authorities. In some cases, the starting point is that the existing services of the district or borough is already providing excellent value;
- there have been some encouraging moves towards sharing recruitment of specialist staff between authorities and to sharing appointments, for shared or joint officers, which could enable the smaller districts to use expertise they cannot afford on their own, e.g. on regeneration between the County and some Districts and HR and other subjects between Districts. But such examples remain unusual;
- the provision of contact centres and direct service lines for the public has developed in Essex without any significant coordination. There are six separate contact centres, operated by Essex County Council, Braintree, Colchester, Harlow, Rochford and Uttlesford; other boroughs and districts operate more traditional contact arrangements. Within the County Council, there are 13 direct service lines operated at service level. Many of these provide an excellent service – Social Care Direct for example. But the public is presented with a complex range of contact arrangements and many different telephone numbers – organised in line with the priorities of the providers, not the users;
- some attempts to address these issues, on the part of the County Council, have been seen to be less than successful. County Legal Services are not seen to offer services which will meet all the specific needs of the districts. A pilot for exchange of contact centre staff between the County Council and Harlow was dropped. It is said that the County Council abandoned plans for a joint contact centre with Colchester in favour of its own centre located nearby;

- examples of more successful approaches to shared services elsewhere in the country are relatively few. Derbyshire County Council has developed a menu of services which the County Council, districts and boroughs, the Police and Fire and Rescue authorities make use of, but it is still in development. The Anglian Revenues Partnership provides joint revenues and benefits services to three districts in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Buckinghamshire County Council is proposing a shared officer service for the county and districts as part of its pathfinder proposals. But examples of shared services in place and delivering significant savings are still few in number;
- the risk is that, in the absence of a concerted effort by local government in Essex and elsewhere, to overcome the barriers to shared services and to rationalise property, procurement, recruitment, contact centres, etc, the Government will intervene and impose a centralised approach to shared services that fails to take account of local circumstances or to deliver better services to the public.

Initiatives being developed

- the new partnership between Essex County Council and Brentwood Borough Council is a radical new initiative to bring together the services provided by the two councils under one chief executive;
- Colchester Borough Council and Braintree District Council are exploring joint working and bringing their services together, to improve services and make the best use of taxpayers' money;
- there are a number of other initiatives in place to promote shared services in Essex
 - the Essex Online Partnership
 - the Procurement Agency for Essex
 - the Essex HR Partnership
 - the Emergency Planning Partnership, awarded Beacon Status early this year
 - the Braintree Children's Trust
- the County/District Shared Services Working Group is overseeing and promoting these initiatives.

Recommendations

- 30. It is clear from the new initiatives developed between the County Council and Brentwood Borough Council and between Colchester Borough Council and Braintree District Council, that several leaders and chief executives in Essex are willing and able to consider radical new approaches to shared services. The success of these initiatives will provide a benchmark for others in Essex and elsewhere. The County Council and all the boroughs and districts should give them their support and review their progress on a regular basis.**
- 31. It is essential that the many initiatives under way in the County should be taken forward to the delivery of substantial savings and improvements in service delivery – or dropped. The County Council and the Districts and Boroughs should agree firm targets for each of the next three financial years, for:-**
- savings to be delivered by Essex On Line Partnership**
 - rationalisation of the property holdings of all local authorities in the County**
 - savings to be achieved by joint procurement**
- It may be that some of these initiatives will have the support of some, but not all the local authorities in the Council. That should not stand in the way of their development.**
- 32. The County Council and the District and Borough Councils should ask the Shared Services Working Group to make firm recommendations on the value and viability of other initiatives, on HR and back-office services for example; and take forward only those proposals that the Group believes have a realistic prospect of success.**
- 33. It is for District and Borough Councils to consider the case for further cooperation between each other, in particular on revenues and benefits, and what they can learn from the Anglian Revenues Partnership.**
- 34. There is a particularly strong case for a review of the existing Contact Centres and direct service lines in use across the County, with a view to establishing a single number service that the public can use for all calls to local authorities and to rationalising the existing call centres and direct service lines. Such a review could yield both expenditure savings and a significant improvement in the quality of service for the public – provided the County Council and District and Borough Councils are prepared to act on the outcome of the review. Here again it will be better if all authorities are involved**

but a coalition of the willing may be more achievable than a complete consensus.

7. Representation and Collective Engagement

Issues to be addressed

- pre-existing arrangements for collective engagement between the County Council and the Districts and Boroughs have been unsatisfactory. ELGA was seen as a talking shop which the County Council dominated and to which the District and Borough Councils were unwilling, or unable, to make significant contributions;
- there is no effective means of bringing together all the public bodies in Essex to address the broad strategic agenda with each other – the Police, Fire and Rescue, Health, further and higher education bodies, etc;
- the existing arrangements for engagement between chief executives of the County Council, District and Borough Councils and the two unitary Councils are not working as well as they should. They provide for information to be shared but rarely for discussion leading to joint resolution of problems and joint action;
- attempts to develop an effective Essex Partnership Board have foundered on the difficulty of securing agreement to arrangements for representation on the Board with less than all fifteen authorities as members.

Initiatives being developed

- discussions have begun on a new arrangement to replace ELGA, through a new leaders group to meet regularly;
- invitations have been sent to public bodies across the County to a meeting in December, to discuss a new Partnership Forum for Essex.

Recommendations

- 35. The discussions on new leaders' meetings should be taken forward to produce an arrangement which all the leaders will see as valuable for the future. The objective should be to agree on meeting arrangements in which all authorities are willing and able to take the initiative in leading discussions. Similar arrangements could be developed for chief executives' meetings.**

36. The County Council and Boroughs and Districts should develop the model of a Partnership Forum in which all major public sector bodies in Essex would take part – all the local authorities, the Police, Fire and Rescue Service, Health bodies, education, etc, with representation from the voluntary and private sector. Such a forum has proved very successful in Derbyshire where it is seen as an essential networking opportunity by senior figures in all the relevant bodies.

37. If such a Partnership Forum is established, its members should consider the case for an Executive Board to be drawn from the membership, and the nature of representation on the Board, and the case for a jointly funded secretariat independent of any individual authority, to support the Forum and the Executive Board.