

FOURTH OPTION AUTHORITIES LOBBY

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Committee's view as to whether Members would be interested in participating in a Fourth Option lobby group and, if so, suggestions as to what form that should take.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Council has recently been approached by Selby District Council seeking our views on the guidance available to Fourth Option Authorities and suggesting ways in which that might be improved.

3 THE PROPOSAL

- 3.1 Selby District Council is a Fourth Option Authority operating a streamlined committee system under the "alternative arrangements" allowed by the Local Government Act. They have found it difficult on some issues to work out the best practice to adopt, as the guidance and information available to Local Authorities often assumes a Cabinet/Executive model.
- 3.2 They therefore organised a conference for Fourth Option Authorities operating in the north to discuss common issues. The Conference was held in February and attended by 16 Fourth Options Authorities. There was a general feeling that most of the concerns aired would also be shared by Fourth Option Authorities in the south of the country. At the end of the conference it was proposed that the question of setting up a forum in which Fourth Option Councils can exchange experience, identify best practice and help one another to improve, should be explored.
- 3.3 The major topics identified were:
- Governance
 - Performance management
 - Overview and Scrutiny
 - The special problems of Districts with small populations and limited resources
- 3.4 Two main possibilities for a forum were suggested at the Conference. The first was to establish a Special Interest Group within the Local Government Association dealing with the interests of Fourth Option Authorities. The second was to establish an independent association of Fourth Option Authorities. This would not be as ambitious as the

former Association of District Councils (ADC), but might nevertheless be more responsive to small authorities' needs than the LGA at present.

- 3.5 It was also felt that the issues raised may be of general interest to any small local authority and not just those operating under alternative arrangements.
- 3.6 Selby have therefore written to ask whether this Authority would be interested in joining such an association or group. The Authority also asks for views as to whether the group should be focussed on small authorities in general or Fourth Option Authorities in particular. Also, whether the Council would prefer to pursue these special interests within the LGA or separately from it.

4 OFFICER COMMENTS

- 4.1 It is considered that there would be merit in joining a Fourth Alternative Lobby Group, especially if it proved to be as effective as TACFIG, in which we were a lead Member. Clearly, whilst Rochford on its own has a limited impact on the Government/local Government agenda, a cluster of similarly sized and structured authorities with a common set of issues is likely to have a better chance of influencing the agenda. At the same time, sharing experiences with similar sized and structured authorities would in itself be a useful learning tool.
- 4.2 If Members did agree in principle to join such a group, a forum inside the LGA would appear the more appropriate, rather than a distinct and separate body outside it. Otherwise, it is likely the Group's influence and effectiveness on the Central/Local Government agenda would be very marginal.
- 4.3 As to the Authorities who should be invited to join, whilst there are a number of issues which are common to all Districts with populations of 85,000 or under, regardless of their political arrangements, there would appear to be merit in concentrating, at least initially, on those Authorities operating the Fourth Option.
- 4.4 In summary, it is therefore considered that this Council should indicate an "in principle" acceptance to joining such a group, but within the umbrella of the LGA rather than outside it. Also, that the membership of such a group be restricted in the first instance to those authorities operating the Fourth Option arrangements.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Whilst no resources are required at this stage, it may be that if such a body is established, an annual membership fee might be required.
- 5.2 Alternatively, if such a body could be established within the LGA, any fee may be absorbed within the overall LGA subscription. At present the LGA subscription is £14,000 per annum.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 That the Committee recommends to Full Council in principle support for a Fourth Option Forum, operating within the umbrella of the LGA rather than outside it, with a membership confined to those Authorities operating the Fourth Option Political arrangements in the first instance.

Paul Warren
Chief Executive

Background Papers:

Letter and attachments from Selby District Council dated 19th March 2004

For further information please contact Paul Warren on:-

Tel:- 01702 318199
E-Mail:- paul.warren@rochford.gov.uk