

HIGHWAYS LOCAL SERVICE AGREEMENT

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report outlines the key elements of the draft Highways Local Service Agreement and seeks Members' views on the arrangements that will apply in Rochford.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The County Council has concluded that the existing arrangements for the delivery of a highways service in Essex, through a mixture of directly provided services and District agencies, cannot continue.
- 2.2 In January 2004, the County Council served notices on the agency Districts (not Rochford) confirming that the current arrangements would terminate on 31 March 2004, to be replaced by new Local Service Agreements (LSA).

3 PRINCIPLES OF THE LSA

- 3.1 The new LSA is intended to ensure there is clear accountability and consistency in decision making and, of course, to improve service delivery.
- 3.2 The LSA allows for decision making to be made around an agreed division of the road network into county routes and local roads. Districts signing up to the LSA will be able, subject to resources, to make decisions about work on local roads and will have discretion to determine priorities in respect of a number of issues. Appendix 1 provides details of the proposed decision making split. It should be noted that in a number of areas, whilst the final decision will remain with the County Council, decisions will only be taken following consultation.
- 3.3 Each District will be required to establish its own organisational arrangements to deal with decisions taken under the provisions of the LSA. An Area Joint Highways Panel for the South area will be established to communicate and disseminate highway issues and plans; the Panel will be chaired by the Chairman of the Area Forum with County and District representation. In addition, there will be one-to-one meetings held by the Highways & Transportation Portfolio Holder with each District at least once a year.
- 3.4 The budget for Highways will be set by the County Council, but will be channelled through Area Highways Offices (centres of excellence) for both county routes and local roads.
- 3.5 A closely related issue is the arrangement for the replacement of "Contract 2000". The new contract arrangements will be in place from 1 April 2006.

4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1 Rochford is not an agency District and, therefore, in many respects the principles of the draft LSA reflect the existing working arrangement with the County Council. Rochford has an opportunity to consider the details of work programmes on the District's roads: details of the annual maintenance programme, for example, are reported to Members for their views, although the final decision remains with the County Council.
- 4.2 There is some devolution of decision making at the moment. For example, the decision on Traffic Regulation Orders was devolved to Rochford several years ago, but the background preparation is carried out by the Area Highways Office.
- 4.3 Under the provisions of the proposed LSA, consultation would continue to be a key part of the working arrangements. However, the proposed county route/local road split would mean that Rochford would have a little more scope to adjust the balance of work programmes to best suit the needs of the local roads.
- 4.4 Further, as shown in Appendix 1, the District could also have responsibility for a number of other issues, such as the provision of brown signs, or managing the arrangements for roundabout sponsorship. The administrative arrangements would be carried out via the Area Highways Office.
- 4.5 One of the challenges for the new system is the arrangement for dealing with complaints about the condition of the roads. Under the existing arrangements, it is common for Rochford to receive calls about the roads; these are passed to the Area Office to deal with.
- 4.6 Under the new LSA, reports received by the District Council would continue to be channelled through the Area Office and a new computer system (CONFIRM) would assist this process. Regardless of the county route/local road split, the Area Office/centre of excellence would provide resources as appropriate to deal with the problem.
- 4.7 At the present moment there is much confusion amongst residents about where the responsibility lies for dealing with highway matters. A resident is usually more concerned with seeing a resolution to their problem than worrying about which organisation is accountable. That being the case, the LSA is intended to provide close partnership working between the County Council and the District Council, to enable a seamless service to be provided to the public.
- 4.8 Overall, the LSA will not result in significant changes for the way the highway service is delivered in Rochford. The removal of the agency arrangements for Districts like Basildon and Castle Point is far more significant.
- 4.9 However, the LSA will provide Rochford with an opportunity to be more involved in decisions about local roads in the District and, within the limits of

available resources, take decisions that best reflect local needs. A key will be whether the Area Office can deliver the District Council's decisions in a seamless and responsive way relative to the other priorities it might be dealing with.

- 4.10 In relation to county routes, County Highways would continue to consult the District Council prior to taking decisions.
- 4.11 With regard to related issues such as consultation on planning applications, it is anticipated that specialist advice would continue to be provided to Rochford in much the same way as at present; advice on the majority of applications is provided by Area Office staff. In relation to major applications, advice is provided by a specialist team at County Hall. In the past, the timeliness of responses from the County Hall team has been problematic. It is hoped that the new LSA will provide a mechanism to improve this response.

5 RISK IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Strategic Risk

The responsibility for making decisions about works on local roads will be passed to the District Council under the provisions of the draft LSA. However, this arrangement will be in partnership with the County Council and the resources of the Area Highways Office (centre of excellence) will provide the mechanism for service delivery. However, it will be important for the Area Highways Office to meet the District's agenda, or the District Council's reputation will suffer.

5.2 Resource Risk

The budget for highway works will continue to be agreed by the County Council, though part will in future be identified for the local road network. The total allocation for works to local roads will be dependent on the overall County Council budget setting process.

5.3 Operational Risk

The LSA is intended to ensure there is a seamless service provided to residents. It will be important that the Area Office does have appropriate levels of resourcing to ensure that an appropriate level and quality of service delivery can be achieved.

5.4 Reputation Risk

Rochford District Council will need to ensure that works to the local road network are appropriate and carried out to the required standard. The District Council will have more accountability, but, of course, local decisions can be considered that best reflect the needs of the District's residents.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Rochford District Council will be able to make decisions about local roads that best reflect the needs of the District. For example, at the moment, Rochford pays for additional verge cutting over and above the County Council minimum to ensure that the District is kept visually attractive and tidy.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 It is not envisaged that there will be resource implications emerging from the proposed LSA. The budget for highway works will continue to be determined by the County Council centrally. In cases where the District Council decides that works or activities should be carried out in relation to the local road network, the resources of the Area Highways Office will be available to undertake the necessary administrative work, etc. At the present moment, highway issues are channelled through the Environmental Services Committee and the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee. This arrangement could continue in the future, but Members may, in due course, want to consider if there is a need for an alternative arrangement to best deal with highway issues.

8 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There will no doubt be opportunities for Parish Councils to express their views to the District Council about arrangements for works, etc, on local roads.

9 RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS**

That Members consider the details of the proposed LSA and determine whether it would be appropriate for Rochford District Council to sign up to the new arrangements.

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Background Papers:-

Draft LSA – November 2004, Essex County Council

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