

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING



Date: 12 November 2014

Subject: **SEEC and SESL: Next steps**

Report of: Cllr David Hodge, Deputy Chairman, South East England Councils

Recommendations

- i) Commend the success of joint working by SEEC and SESL over the past two years
- ii) Establish a councillor task and finish group to consider next steps to build on this success and ensure maximum benefits are delivered for SEEC-SESL memberships
- iii) Ask the task and finish group to report back to both organisations with recommendations by 19 March 2015.

1. Background

- 1.1 In July 2012, SEEC and SESL members collectively agreed to support closer working between the two organisations to reduce costs, minimise duplication and increase the benefits of speaking with a single voice for the South East.
- 1.2 Many of the steps agreed in 2012 have now been introduced successfully, resulting in effective, influential joint submissions to Government and cost savings. In the 12 months to July 2014, SEEC and SESL worked together on approximately 75% of their written input to Government. They also shared ministerial meetings – eg on flooding – and held joint sessions on finance and London's housing demand with speakers such as Tony Travers and Sir Edward Lister. Combined expenditure in 2013-14 was some £323,000, with both organisations delivering below budget. This represents a significant saving of £153,000 over planned expenditure of £476,000 in 2012-13. Since 2012, annual drawdown of SEEC's legacy reserves has been substantially reduced to make them sustainable for the long term.

2. Fit for the future?

- 2.1 SEEC and SESL joint working has delivered significant benefits but current pressures make it timely to review operations and ensure we are fit for the future, for example:
 - i) In our own local authorities we are under continuing pressure to transform services, so we would be negligent if we didn't apply the same principles to SEEC and SESL. For example, decisions from 2012 on a single staff team and single location remain unimplemented, so we should now reconsider the potential this offers for further streamlining bureaucracy or for increasing our collective influence and value to members.
 - ii) A strong collective voice for South East authorities remains important to help us make the case for the 8.8m people we all represent. For example, it is vital we continue to make the case for investment in the South East alongside cities and work with London to address shared housing and infrastructure challenges
 - iii) Conservative Group rules set a 3-year limit on SEEC Chairmanship, so Cllr Gordon Keymer CBE has announced he will stand down in summer 2015. A review now will allow members to combine an assessment of future needs with succession planning.

3. Factors to consider

- 3.1 Setting up a time-limited task and finish group will allow members to consider what they value in SEEC-SESL membership and what more membership could deliver, eg:
- i) What should be the aims, objectives and priorities for SEEC-SESL for the future?
 - ii) Is it time to move to one organisation that speaks with a single, stronger voice for South East authorities and our shared electorate? Work over the past year shows we are already collaborating successfully on most issues, so for many – Ministers included – the difference between the two organisations is indistinct and detracts from a single, strong voice.
 - iii) How best can members work together to develop a strong local government view for the South East?
 - iv) What outcomes are the most important to SEEC-SESL members in offering membership value for money?
 - v) Previous discussions on closer working focused on support for the different tiers of authority. Is it time to focus instead on how we best represent South East interests on big cross-cutting policy issues that affect all of us and that all tiers can play a part in delivering? For example:
 - Economic growth
 - Public health and integrating care
 - Planning and housing
 - Funding and investment needs.
 - vi) Are there other areas of work that members want to prioritise? For example, should there be a dedicated resource allocated to communications?
 - vii) Is it better to focus on a few key areas or spread resources more thinly over a wider range of topics?
 - viii) What is the best way to address any unresolved differences of opinion between tiers on policy input to Government?
- 3.2 Once there are clear recommendations on objectives and priority outcomes, attention should then switch to structures and how best officer support can be organised to meet member needs. Again, there are a number of factors to consider, but decisions on future format should follow decisions on outcomes. For example:
- i) Staffing needs, including levels of skills and experience. Current staffing across SEEC and SESL is 4 FTE. Staff and HR implications of any changes would need to be considered.
 - ii) Subscription levels and use of reserves.
 - iii) Format and frequency of meetings.
 - iv) Constitution.
 - v) Governance and office holders, including fair representation across different tiers of authority.