

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: 25 September 2014

Subject: Ongoing dialogue with London – options for South East political engagement

Report of: Cllr Gordon Keymer CBE, SEEC Chairman



Recommendations:

SEEC Executive members are asked to:

- i) Discuss housing, planning and infrastructure implications for the South East arising from rapid increases in London's population
- ii) Consider whether the South East should build specific, strategic political dialogue with London on these topics in advance of the next London Plan review, due to start in 2016
- iii) Support creation of a cross-tier member task and finish group to consider options for dialogue with London.

1. Background

- 1.1 This month SEEC officers gave evidence to the planning inspector who is reviewing London's strategic planning document (Further Alterations to the London Plan - FALP). In evidence, and during consultation, the South East supported Mayor Boris Johnson in his ambition to meet the capital's 49,000 a year housing need within London's boundaries.
- 1.2 However, other evidence to the inspector – from developers and some London boroughs – called for part of the capital's housing demand to be met in the South East and other areas outside London. There were also some calls for London to increase house building to 62,000 a year to meet a backlog of demand more quickly.
- 1.3 London is unusual as it must still produce a strategic plan, despite abolition of regional planning elsewhere in England. FALP updates certain aspects of the strategic plan. The inspector will weigh up all views on FALP and publish recommendations later in 2014. However, proposals have already been made that London should begin a full review of its plan in 2016, including new analysis of population, housing demand, where new homes should be built and the need for related infrastructure such as schools, transport, utilities and waste.

2. The South East position

- 2.1 South East councils have consistently argued that it is not viable or sustainable to assume that any of London's unmet housing need can be delivered in the South East. The South has its own pressures of rising demand, poor infrastructure and reviewing green belt for housing, while ensuring protected land such as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are preserved.
- 2.2 Despite these constraints the South East is building more than London – on average 22,700 homes a year over the past three years, compared to 19,100 a year in London. Together, the 67 local plans across the South East currently aim to increase building to some 32,000-33,000 homes a year. Further increases to meet London needs would be unacceptable to many South East voters.
- 2.3 SEEC and SESL leaderships currently hold high-level meetings with London Deputy Mayor Sir Edward Lister, discussing a range of topics. While useful, these meetings do not provide for the detailed political discussions that would be needed to resolve the strategic challenges if the planning inspector – or a 2016 London Plan review – recommends that the South East should build more homes to meet London needs.
- 2.4 There have also been several officer sessions arranged by the GLA to explain technical work behind FALP. However, feedback from South East officers is that these sessions

have been primarily presentations of London's work rather than an opportunity for genuine two-way dialogue on developing ideas.

- 2.5 There is a growing view among some South East leaders that we need a level of strategic political engagement with London to influence development of future London Plans, rather than simply respond after the event. Although not a statutory document, London's current *Infrastructure 2050* consultation already raises the prospect of meeting London housing need in the South East.
- 2.6 Such a dialogue would not replace local discussions between individual South East authorities and their London neighbours, but would aim to give the South East a voice in influencing the overall strategy that informs local bi-lateral discussions.
- 2.7 A collective political approach to setting out the South East's challenges, constraints and opportunities could play an important role in future dialogue with the Mayor and GLA. It would also establish links in advance of the election of a new Mayor in 2016, now that Boris Johnson has confirmed he will not stand for a third term.

3. Options for the South East

- 3.1 With the inspector's report on FALP pending and a full London Plan review already proposed, South East leaders have a short space of time to consider the pros and cons of building closer links with London to address future housing and related infrastructure challenges.
- 3.2 Members are asked to consider establishing a cross-tier task and finish group to report back to SEEC in 2015 on options for political engagement with London, for example:
- Is there a role for regular political meetings between London and a representative group of South East leaders? And if so:
 - What would be the role and objectives of any meetings?
 - How frequently would meetings be needed?
 - Who would represent the South East at these meetings? Is there a role for LEPs?
 - What would be the key topics to address? For example housing, transport, economy, utilities, schools, environment, waste?
 - Who would members want to meet? The GLA, London boroughs, developers, utility companies, local authorities in the East of England?
 - How would we ensure a bottom up approach that avoids the risk of recreating unpopular top-down regional planning? How could strategic meetings best complement local relationships?
 - What are risks of not having political engagement with London on issues such as housing?
 - What would Leaders need to support them at these meetings?
 - How could support for Leaders be provided? Would a network of officers in member authorities be viable, facilitated through SEEC?
 - Could some shared technical work on housing save individual councils money?
- 3.3 SEEC task and finish groups normally comprise 12 members. Allocating seats in line with this year's political template would give a membership of up to 13 when allocations are rounded to whole numbers and if seats were offered to smaller parties not currently represented on the SEEC Executive:
- Conservatives 7 members (actual allocation 7.03)
 - Labour 2 members (actual 1.788)
 - Lib-Dem 2 members (actual 1.62)
 - Smaller parties 2 members (actual 1.548).