

SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING



Date: 19 March 2015

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

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

Recommendations

- i) Recognise the success and cost effectiveness of joint working by SEEC-SESL since 2012
- ii) Discuss three options for the future SEEC-SESL working relationship emerging from a member task group meeting
- iii) Recommend a preferred option to put to all members at the SEEC AGM and to SESL when both meet on 25 June 2015.

1. Background

- 1.1 In July 2012, SEEC and SESL members agreed a closer working relationship between the two organisations to reduce costs, minimise duplication and promote a single voice for the South East.
- 1.2 Many steps agreed in 2012 have been introduced, resulting in effective, influential joint submissions to Government and cost savings. In the past year, SEEC and SESL worked together on some 75% of written input to Government, shared ministerial meetings (eg on flooding) and held joint sessions with speakers including Tony Travers and Sir Edward Lister. Combined expenditure in 2013-14 was £323,000, a saving of one third over planned separate expenditure of £476,000 in 2012-13.
- 1.3 Joint working has delivered significant benefits but these factors now make review timely:
 - Election of a new Government in May 2015 – a single, strong voice will maximise South East influence for the incoming Government. Our current two-organisation arrangements confuse ministers and stakeholders and dilute our voice.
 - All councils are under continuing pressure to transform services and reduce costs – I believe we must apply the same principles to SEEC and SESL. For example, potentially cost-saving decisions from 2012 on a single staff team & location remain unimplemented.
 - In line with Conservative Group rules SEEC Chairman Cllr Gordon Keymer CBE is standing down in June 2015 at the end of his 3-year term.
 - I will not be a candidate in the forthcoming election for officers of SEEC or SESL, which allows me the space to make this presentation for member consideration.

2. Task group discussions

- 2.1 In November, six councillors were nominated to a task group on future SEEC-SESL working. The group, which met on 15 January 2015, comprises:
 - Cllr Van Coulter (Lab), Oxford City, SEEC member
 - Cllr Nicolas Heslop (Con), Tonbridge & Malling BC, SEEC Secretary & Treasurer
 - Cllr David Hodge (Con), Surrey CC, SEEC Deputy Chairman & SESL member
 - Cllr Keith House (Lib-Dem), Eastleigh BC, SEEC Vice Chairman
 - Cllr Roy Perry (Con), Hampshire CC, member of SEEC & SESL
 - Cllr Martin Tett (Con), Buckinghamshire CC, SESL Vice Chairman & SEEC member.
- 2.2 I believe a new, combined organisation is the best way to represent the South East. Other areas with a single body have a stronger voice with Government. We owe it to our voters – who elect both district and county councillors – to work together to do our best for them.
- 2.3 At the task group there was majority support for a single stronger voice that would:

- Encourage all tiers to work together to reduce silos, inefficiencies and recognise the complementary roles of different tiers – eg housing as a vital factor in public health.
- Help overcome current fragmentation that risks the South East underselling itself.
- Be more effective. At present there are too many organisations, spread too thinly, with several councils not in membership of any body. A single body with stronger communications could be a more effective voice for the South East.

2.4 The majority also supported a cross-tier, cross-party body with 4 priorities:

- Economic growth and skills
- Planning & housing
- Funding & infrastructure investment
- Community health and care.

Governance could include a Chairman and Vice Chairman, supported by 3 Deputy Chairmen, one each from a district, a unitary and a county. A fair voting system would be needed to ensure all tiers had a voice. Calling the new body 'South East Council Leaders' would carry more weight with Ministers.

2.5 A counter view argued that SEEC already has cross-tier, cross-party membership and it could do more to engage more members and influence more effectively. This could leave SESL as a special interest/ networking group for counties and unitaries. It was not clear the task group had a remit to suggest disbanding SESL to merge it into a new body. This discussion drew out differing views on the current effectiveness of both SEEC and SESL.

3. Future options

3.1 The group agreed to put forward three options for discussion by the wider membership. For me, in deciding between options the most important question is the role of SESL:

- If SESL sees itself as an influencing body, our decision should focus on whether we should continue to accept fragmentation of the South East voice or move towards a stronger, single voice.
- If SESL sees itself as primarily a networking 'club' with no major influencing ambitions, this should eliminate many existing overlaps and leave a clear role for SEEC to develop its influencing role more strongly.

The options for members to consider are:

1. Maintain status quo but take steps to reduce duplication at meetings

This recognises that SEEC and SESL are operating in the same arena by continuing a joint work programme to influence policy issues. It therefore accepts there will be some fragmentation of the South East voice to ministers, residents, councillors & stakeholders.

2. Create a new, single organisation as the South East voice, combining the best elements of SEEC and SESL and a value for money review

This recognises that SEEC and SESL are operating in the same arena and moves towards a single, united voice rather than a fragmented approach. Work would be done to design & consult on purpose, objectives, desired outcomes & governance options for a single body. County/unitary meetings could continue as pre-meets of the new body.

3. Review SEEC to enhance and promote its role as the single cross-tier 'lobbying' voice for the South East

This recognises that SEEC and SESL have different roles, with SEEC as the all-tier campaigning/influencing organisation and SESL as an upper tier networking/ special interest group. This option accepts that more should be done to strengthen SEEC's work as the single South East voice. Staffing, budget, governance & subscriptions would be reviewed. There would need to be agreement with SESL on respective roles with most influencing done by SEEC. This may lead to a future review of the need for SESL.