

## SOUTH EAST ENGLAND COUNCILS

### EXECUTIVE

Date: 20 September 2019

Subject: 2020/21 Business Plan - Direction of Travel



Report of: David Covill, Director South East England Councils

### Recommendation:

The Executive is asked to

- a) agree that South East England Councils' Business Planning and Budget processes should become aligned with proposals for the 2020/21 Business Plan and budget presented to the Executive in December 2019
- b) support the development of a communications strategy to increase the reach of South East England Councils and the number of techniques employed
- c) indicate the themes that should feature in the 2020/21 Business Plan and advise on matters in section 3
- d) consider how to strengthen the working relationship between South East England Councils and member authorities.

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## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 In previous years the annual Business Plan has been approved at meetings of the Executive during the autumn and taken effect in the latter part of the calendar year. The financial year however commences on the 1 April. It is proposed to align these so that both commence in April. It is important to emphasise the relationship between the Business Plan and the Budget as South East England Councils considers its future direction and resourcing.
- 1.2 Proposals for the 2020/21 Business Plan and Budget will be presented to the Executive in December 2019. To transition to the new arrangement the Business Plan will last from January 2020 to March 2021.
- 1.3 The Business Plan is also a stage in a review of the role and priorities of the organisation moving forward to ensure that it has a distinctive and strong identity, and a sustainable business model.

## 2 Communications and engagement

- 2.1 An inherent strength of South East England Councils' is that it is a transparent body which is open to Counties, Unitaries and Districts. This distinctive identity deserves a higher profile, including within member authorities. There must be a strong narrative about the

South East, its strengths, potential and requirements. The narrative should set out South East England Councils' position on key matters to be used in a timely way and available for Members to use in their other representative roles.

- 2.2 The nature of communications has changed radically in recent years and social media has moved from being an 'add on' for Government and public bodies to a primary tool of engagement. Social media offers a cost-effective way to reach a wider audiences and is also more immediate; for example, some groups representing local authorities comment on Government announcements on the same day meaning something published two weeks later can have less impact. It also provides the opportunity to promote the work of others in the South East
- 2.3 Officers will be preparing a communications strategy which identifies key audiences, a core narrative and new techniques including the use of social media.

### **3 Business Plan 2020/21 - themes and activities**

- 3.1 The existing Business Plan is based on the following themes

#### People, Places & Economy

- Sustaining South East economic success
- Opportunities for local authorities post Brexit
- Future of the high street
- Managing impacts of the South East's ageing population
- Liaison with London and Wider South East.
- Housing & planning

#### Local Government Finance & Infrastructure

- Infrastructure investment and needs
- Highlight South East returns on investment
- Sustainable local government finance

- 3.2 There is also cross cutting work such as monitoring legislation and the data dashboard.
- 3.3 Members are asked to indicate whether the preparation of the 2020/21 business plan should be based broadly on the same themes recognising that national events and policies will have an impact, and that the nature of activities will evolve.
- 3.4 Members are asked to comment on three matters in particular:
  - a) a notable absence is any explicit reference to the environment although this has a high profile nationally and with residents. Matters such planning, housing and transport do encompass protecting the environment, tackling climate change etc but does the Executive wish to give greater prominence to the environment in the business plan?

- b) how should South East England Councils best add value in respect of infrastructure? Putting the overarching case for increased investment is certainly a core activity but how much further should we go, in particular so as not to cut-across the work of the two sub-national transport bodies? Are there other elements of infrastructure pertinent to the work of South East England Councils which should feature in the business plan?
- c) the South East argues for increased freedom from Government control, often in the context of the ability to generate new sources of income or as a general matter of principle. Are there any specific freedoms which Executive Members wish to pursue on a collective basis during 2020/21?

#### **4 Relationship with member authorities**

- 4.1 The main method of engagement is through Member attendance at meetings. Each Council is represented by its Leader or a Cabinet member. All representatives are invited to at least two meetings a year. The Executive meets three times a year. Meetings provide the opportunity for attendees to contribute to policy development, share views and ideally take ideas back to their authority thereby informing councils' own work and leaving a legacy even if the Member representative changes.
- 4.2 In respect of officers, there is a lead Chief Executive (Timothy Wheadon at Bracknell Forest Council). Planning officers from a number of authorities make some contribution to the work of South East England Councils linked to the Wider South East Partnership, but this is considerably less than in the other constituent areas.
- 4.3 Other officer involvement in South East England Councils is limited. There is a huge amount of expertise within Councils on matters such as communications, finance, economic development and the environment. Some of the work that officers do within authorities to advise members may be relevant to the South East as a whole and useful in putting a case to Government.
- 4.4 Members are asked to comment on the current arrangements and the principle of increasing the level of working between South East England Councils and authorities within the constraints of time and resources.

**David Covill**  
**Director**