

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 21 February 2006

Portfolio Holder: Councillor J Knapman

Item: 5 (b)

2. LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT FOR ESSEX

Recommending:

That the Council sign up to the Local Area Agreement with Essex County Council on the basis of the following priorities:

Priority 3 – Ensure development is designed to promote healthier living in the built environment and provide decent and affordable housing;

Priority 10 – Reduce crime and the fear of crime; and

Priority 12 (formerly 11) - Actively manage our environment.

2.1 A Task and Finish Panel were requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review proposals by the County Council for new Local Area Agreements (LAA) for Essex. These proposals were discussed on 28 November 2005 and referred to the Cabinet on 19 December 2006.

2.2 The LAA is a contract between Local and central government which is intended to secure improvement across a number of areas for a three year period. The LAA scheme was first published in June 2004 and a number of pilot schemes were run in a first phase. The second phase was announced in June 2005 which included Essex. It is clear that the Government expects every authority to participate in the LAA process.

2.3 Essex has now made an initial bid via a prospectus for Essex that was worked up between the County Council and participating bodies and submitted at the end of September 2005 to GO-East based upon new Guidance issued by the Government. The government had some suggestions to make about points of emphasis and detail but have confirmed that they are content with the LAA priorities set out in the prospectus. These priorities are grouped around four blocks: Children and Young People; Safer and Stronger Communities, Healthier Communities and Older People and Economic Development and Enterprise.

2.4 The Essex Local Area Agreement is a joint project between the Essex and Local Strategic Partnerships. Essex County Council and District and Borough Councils are the key delivery agencies supporting their respective Local Strategic Partnership in the delivery of the Essex Local Area Agreement.

2.5 The Council played no part in the preparation and submission of the prospectus. Each District/Borough Council and Local Strategic Partnership in Essex was asked to look at the priorities and choose which ones are most relevant to their local situation and what contribution it is willing to make towards a successful outcome and in particular what priorities they are prepared to support.

2.6 The Panel considered the list of priorities together with draft targets. The Panel recommended that the Council sign up to three. Those being related to:

(i) Ensuring development is designed to promote healthier living in the built environment and provide decent and affordable housing (Priority 3):

Reason. It is a priority for this authority to secure the provision of decent and affordable housing. The draft alterations to the local plan already contain a target for the number of dwellings to be built to the lifeline homes standard. The requirement for developers to submit Health Impact Assessments with relevant planning applications by April 2009 is a matter the Council could seek to address.

(ii) Reduce crime and the fear of crime (Priority 10):

Reason. The Council has a statutory duty to participate in the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and to target its mainstream services in such a way as to contribute to reductions in crime. This ranges from planning estate layout and design, to windows and doors in Council houses, to anti-social behaviour and CCTV. Just about all of the Council's Services have a role to play (if not a duty) in relation to this agenda.

(iii) Actively manage our environment (Priority 11)

Reason. The environmental agenda is an important issue for this authority. Early indications are that the targets will cover waste, domestic energy (CO² emissions) and car travel (CO² emissions). The Council's published plans set high priorities in some of these areas and the Council is making major investments on recycling and waste minimisation. The Green Belt and possible impacts of the East of England Plan are also important issues.

2.7 The Cabinet have supported the view of the Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that authority should sign up to these priorities in principle and that Overview and Scrutiny should have a role in the monitoring of performance of the agreement.

Reason for decision:

2.8 It our view that, although the Council could impact upon other Priority areas in partnership with other bodies, the three highlighted areas are based upon the statutory responsibilities of the authority and are areas in which the Council could make a positive impact.

Options considered and rejected:

2.9 The Council could choose not to participate in the LAA. However it is clear that the Government places great emphasis on these agreements. The Audit Commission, in their Strategic Plan have also indicated that they expect that Top Tier authorities should have such LAA's by 2006/7.

2.10 Additionally in order to ensure the successful delivery of a Local Area Agreement, the Government Guidance holds out the prospect of significant freedoms and flexibilities.

Consultation undertaken:

2.11 No external consultation has been possible although we have noted that the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership has given some consideration to this matter already and given conditional notice that it is likely to support Priorities 1, 4,10,11,12 and 13.

Resource implications:

Finance: Identification of existing budgets to be spent on activities to support the LAA outcome targets.

Personnel: Existing

Land: None identified

Community Plan/BVPP reference:

Relevant statutory powers:

Background papers: Officer Report of J Scott considered at meeting on 28 November 2005, other issued papers for the meeting on the 28 November 2005 can be found at www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/local_democracy

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: The nature of the LAA will positively effect the Environment and Crime and Disorder/

Key Decision reference: (if required) Not a key decision

Developments since the meeting of the Cabinet

A “near final” draft of the Local Area Agreement was released on 25 January 2006, with the advice that one or two details remain to be settled. This draft differs from the last in that the 13 priorities have now become 14. This has come about as a result of the Government’s recently launched “respect agenda” which has necessitated the amendment of the original priority 10 – reduce crime and the fear of crime into two new priorities which are 10 – reduce crime, the harm caused by illegal drugs and to reassure the public, reducing the fear of crime and 11 – build in respect in communities and reduce anti-social behaviour. The original priority 11 which the Task and Finish Panel recommended and the Cabinet accepted now becomes 12. The revised draft also introduces the possibility of achieving stretch performance and reward grant by incorporating the Local Authority Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA2) but no real detail is given. In view of this the Council may wish to consider slight amendments to the priorities recommended by the Cabinet.

New Recommendations

That the Council supports the principles in the Local Area Agreement in general, recognising that all of the targets could see benefits for the population of the Epping Forest District and in particular agrees to target its activities on the following priorities and notes the suggested addition of priority 8.

Priority 3 – Ensure development is designed to promote healthier living in the built Environment (both targets).

Priority 8 (new) – Keep vulnerable children and young people safe. These reflect the Council’s housing duties and participation in the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. (Three targets, one of which carries reward grant).

Priority 10 (amended) – Reduce Crime, the harm caused by illegal drugs and reassure the public, reducing the fear of crime. (Four targets, one of which carries reward grant).

Priority 11 (amended) – Build respect in communities and reduce anti-social behaviour. (One target); and

Priority 12 (renumbered) - Actively Manage our Environment. (Three targets all of which carry reward grant).

Financial Implications

In order to achieve the priorities identified in the Essex Local Area Agreement, all partners were asked to notify those budgets that are available to be pooled and those that could be aligned. Pooled funding will be managed within the Essex Partnership and aligned funding will continue to be held and managed by its existing owners, but will be spent on activities that support LAA outcome targets. The County Council advises that to date some £300 million of pooled and aligned funding has been identified. Most of this funding comes from within the County Council itself. In so far as this district is concerned the only funds to have been pooled is the £150,000 grant monies received from the Building Safer Communities Fund and normally paid to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. The grant comes via the Home Office and it is the Home Office that has decided this money should be pooled. No other monies have been identified for pooling or alignment although this could change as the process comes to a conclusion. Any such change is likely to relate to aligning funds so that the Council remains in control rather than pooling where the money is passed over to the Essex Partnership.