

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET – 4th February 2010

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

MERSEYSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY SERVICE CONTRACT RENEWAL 2009/10

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The Council jointly funds the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service, which provides specialist advice on the Local Development Framework and planning applications. Technical expertise and funding is shared between the 5 Merseyside District Councils and Halton Borough Council, thus providing economies of scale and specialist services that could not be effectively provided at District level. Sefton Council is the lead authority for procurement of the service.
- 1.2 The report asks Cabinet to agree to the renewal of the contract for provision of this important advisory service for the one year period to 31st March 2010 in accordance with paragraph 5.1.2 of the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. Funding is to be shared between the Corporate Services and Technical Services Departments and can be accommodated within existing budgets.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS) is based in Maghull and provides a range of specialist advisory services to subscribing Authorities. These services include advice on current and emerging European and national environmental policies, assistance with Local Development Plan Document preparation (including the joint Merseyside Waste Development Plan Document), Sustainability Appraisal, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Directive. In support of development management decisions, MEAS advises on site-specific environmental matters, including the analysis of Environmental Assessments. The MEAS has provided advice on a series of major planning applications in recent years, including the Neptune proposals at New Brighton and the Wirral Waters proposals.
- 2.2 The MEAS has been established for a number of years, having been set up to support the core Districts of Sefton, St Helens and Knowsley. More recently, Liverpool City Council, Wirral and Halton have become partners, with annual contracts. Management is provided through a directing group drawn from senior officers in the 6 Authorities, who provide overall direction and monitor performance and workload.

2.3 Funding for 2008/09 was divided as follows:

District	08/09 contribution	% of Core Budget	Actual work % 08/09	09/10 core contribution (assumes 0% inflation)	% of Core Budget
Sefton	£95,267	24.7%	26.1%	£95,267	24.7%
Knowsley	£95,267	24.7%	19.6%	£95,267	24.7%
St Helens	£95,267	24.7%	25.3%	£95,267	24.7%
Halton	£15,943	4.2%	6.3%	£15,943	4.2%
Wirral	£31,673	8.2%	12.4%	£31,673	8.2%
Liverpool	£50,985	13.3%	10.3%	£50,985	13.3%
Totals	£384,402			£384,402	

This table also shows the 2009/10 contribution, which reflects the actual amount of work carried out on behalf of each District in the past and the potential for growth in service provision. As in previous years (Cabinet 10th December 2008, Minute 314 refers), the core Districts have continued to subsidise Halton, Wirral and Liverpool. The core Districts remain concerned that a more equitable distribution of funding should be achieved.

2.5 Discussions with the Director of MEAS have proposed that the core funding should remain in place but that any additional work in Wirral, over and above that already timetabled and costed (MEAS provide itemised breakdowns of officer time by project) should be paid for on a 'Pay by project' basis, with MEAS billing Wirral Council for additional time, at already established rates (para 1.8 of the draft legal agreement submitted by MEAS). Such additional work and cost will normally arise from proposals such as Wirral Waters, where a proportion of the planning application fee will have to be directed to the cost of specialist MEAS advice. The core funding to Wirral has remained at the 2008/09 level of £31,673, reflecting the low level of inflation.

3. Benefits

3.1 The service provided by MEAS offers the following benefits:

- The service provides good value for money, when set against the cost of commissioning private consultants for individual pieces of work;
- MEAS combines local knowledge with technical expertise not otherwise available or economic for individual Districts to provide;
- It provides a capacity to provide common approaches to local environmental issues (an approach supported by national advice, including the White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities');

- Specialist planning policy advice on waste, minerals and contaminated land; and
- Preparation of pan-Merseyside Local Development Framework Documents, such as the Joint Merseyside Waste Development Plan Document, Supplementary Planning Documents and Minerals Evidence Base (this is a supporting document to Wirral's Local Development Framework Core Strategy).

4. Other Considerations

- 4.1 MEAS is one of several specialised units that provide support to the Merseyside Districts. Others include the Merseyside Policy Unit within The Mersey Partnership, Mott MacDonald Merseyside Information Service and the Archaeology Unit within the National Galleries and Museums on Merseyside. The subscription arrangements and charges vary.
- 4.2 Members are asked to consider a single year's contribution to MEAS, rather than a longer-term contract renewal. This is because sub-regional arrangements are still to be reviewed, following the setting up of the City Region Cabinet and its constituent Environment and Waste Board. Wirral is the lead authority on the development of the Environment and Waste Board and that Board will consider the most effective way of delivering the services currently provided by MEAS.

5. Summary

- 5.1 MEAS provides a significant technical contribution to several important areas of planning policy and development management. Continuation of this service will continue to provide Wirral with access to high quality, low cost, specialist environmental advisory service at a time when the need for such services is increasing.
- 5.2 Whilst funding can be provided from existing resources, current constraints limit commitment to the current year, after which the situation will need to be reviewed in consideration of the budgetary position at that time and any revised arrangements that the City Region Cabinet propose. Any additional costs beyond the agreed work programme and budget will have to be funded on a 'Pay by Project' basis, reflecting in part additional income to the authority gained as a result of planning fees on major applications (such as Wirral Waters) that generate the additional work for MEAS.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 Current funding is provided from existing Corporate Services Departmental budget, alongside a similar contribution from Technical Services Department (50:50). The funding requirement of £31,673 for 2009/10 can be accommodated within Corporate Services budget (£15,836.50) and Technical Services budget (£15,836.50). Any additional funding requirements for work over and above this budget will be funded from departmental resources, including the relevant planning application fee, subject to the Directors of Technical Services and Corporate Services delegated powers.
- 6.2 The contract commitment is time-limited to 31st March 2010, reflecting the need to reconsider the provision of joint services to the sub-region in the future.

6.3 The funding agreement sought by this report does not include contributions towards the preparation of the Joint Merseyside Waste Development Plan Document, for which Cabinet made provision at its 30th June 2005 meeting (Minute 80 refers).

7. Staffing implications

7.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

8. Equal Opportunities/Equality Impact Assessment

8.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

9. Community Safety implications

9.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

10. Local Agenda 21 implications

10.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

11. Planning implications

11.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

12. Anti-poverty implications

12.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

13. Human Rights implications

13.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

14. Social Inclusion implications

14.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

15. Local Member Support implications

15.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

16. Background Papers

16.1 The following background paper has been used in the preparation of this report:

‘Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper, Department for Communities and Local Government, October 2006

RECOMMENDATION

In accordance with paragraph 5.1.2 of the Council's Contract Procedure Rules, Cabinet agrees to extend the MEAS contract on the terms described above for the 2009/10 financial year, until 31st March 2010, at a cost for core services of £31,673 for 2009/10.

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