

MERSEYSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY SERVICE CONTRACT RENEWAL 2010/11

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 shared services that could not be effectively provided at District level. Sefton Council is the lead authority for procurement of the service.
- 1.2 This 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 2011 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 on a wide range of statutory functions. 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 2009/10 was divided as follows:

District	09/10 contribution	% of Core Budget	Actual work % 09/10	10/11 core contribution (assumes 0% inflation)	% of Core Budget
Sefton	£95,267	24.7%	27.1%	£95,267	24.7%
Knowsley	£95,267	24.7%	19.5%	£95,267	24.7%
St Helens	£95,267	24.7%	23.9%	£95,267	24.7%
Halton	£15,943	4.2%	7.3%	£15,943	4.2%
Wirral	£31,673	8.2%	11.5%	£31,673	8.2%
Liverpool	£50,985	13.3%	10.7%	£50,985	13.3%
Totals	£384,402			£384,402	

This table also shows the proposed 2010/11 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 4th February 2010, Minute 311 refers and 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 Cabinet agreed at its meeting on 4th February 2010, that additional work, 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 has been directed to the cost of specialist MEAS advice. The core funding to Wirral for 2010/11 has remained at £31,673, a figure that has remained unchanged for the last two financial years, reflecting the low level of inflation and the absorption of costs by MEAS.

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, Minerals Evidence Base and Renewable Energy Evidence Base (these last two being supporting documents to Wirral's Local Development Framework Core Strategy).

4. Other Considerations

- 4.1 MEAS is a key specialised unit that provides support to the Merseyside Districts. This shared service is staffed by experienced, specialist staff, whose skills would otherwise have to be provided in-house in each District or by external private consultants. The costs of providing the service by others than MEAS would require additional staffing resources in each District to provide support for statutory development control and development plan functions.
- 4.2 Members are asked to consider a further 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 shared services currently provided by MEAS (subject to any proposals then being agreed by each District's Cabinet).

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 2010/11 can be accommodated within Corporate Services budget (£15,836.50) and Technical Services budget (£15,836.50). This

figure has not increased since 2008/2009, reflecting the absorption of increased costs by efficiency measures within MEAS. 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 2011, 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 The services provided by MEAS support statutory functions in development control and development planning. Without such expert and specialist advice, the Council would be at risk of making unsound decisions.

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 2010/11 financial year, until 31st March 2011, at a cost for core services of £31,673 for 2010/11.

K. ADDERLEY

Interim Director of Corporate Services

This report was written by Richard Lewis in the Strategic Development Division of Corporate Services, who can be contacted on 0151 691 8222.