

MERSEYSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY SERVICE – CONTRACT RENEWAL

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.
- 1.2 This report asks Members to agree to a renewal of the contract for provision of this important advisory service for the period to 31st March 2009 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 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 control decisions, MEAS advises on site-specific environmental matters, including the analysis of Environmental Impact Assessments.
- 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. 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 2007/08 was divided as follows:

District	07/08 contribution	% of Core Budget	Actual work % 07/08	08/09 core contribution (assumes 2.5% inflation)	% of Core Budget
Sefton	£92,942	28.2%	24.5%	£95,267	24.7%
Knowsley	£92,942	21.9%	20.3%	£95,267	24.7%
St Helens	£92,942	28.2%	25.6%	£95,267	24.7%
Halton	£15,450	3.6%	6.3%	£15,943	4.2%
Wirral	£30,900	7.2%	11.5%	£31,673	8.2%
Liverpool	£46,350	11.8%	10.9%	£50,985	13.3%
Totals	£371,526.00			£384,402.00	

This table also shows the 2008/09 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. In effect, 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.

2.4 In addition, extra work arises, as a result of national legislation (such as the need for Sustainability Appraisal, SEA and Appropriate Assessment), together with the support required for the preparation of Local Development Frameworks.

2.5 MEAS have calculated the Wirral contribution for 2008/09 as £31,673, reflecting an increase for price inflation (2.5%, reduced from an initial assumption of 3%) over the 2007/08 figure of £30,900.

3. Benefits

3.1 The service provided by MEAS offers the following benefits:

- A review of MEAS in 2003 showed that the service provided 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 and minerals.

- Preparation of pan-Merseyside Local Development Framework Documents, such as the Joint Merseyside Waste Development Plan Document, Supplementary Planning Documents and Minerals Evidence Base.

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, unlike previous contract renewals, which have been progressed on a three-year agreement. This is because sub-regional arrangements will be reviewed, following the agreement of all Merseyside Local Authorities to the setting up of a City Region Cabinet, to be supported by a series of Boards (Cabinet 16th October 2008, Minute 229 refers). Wirral is the lead authority on the development of an 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 control. Continuation of this service will provide Wirral with access to a 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.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 Current funding is provided from existing Corporate Services Departmental budget, alongside a similar contribution from Technical Services Department. The funding requirement of £31,673 for 2008/09 can be accommodated within Corporate Services budget (£15,836.50) and Technical Services budget (£15,836.50).
- 6.2 The contract commitment is time-limited to 31st March 2009, 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 implications

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

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous>

RECOMMENDATION

- (1) 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 until 31st March 2009, at a cost of £31,673 for 2008/09.

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