

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET

8TH DECEMBER 2011

SUBJECT:	MERSEYSIDE ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY SERVICE CONTRACT RENEWAL 2011/12 AND 2012/13
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	ACTING DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION, HOUSING AND PLANNING
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR PHIL DAVIES REGENERATION AND PLANNING STRATEGY
KEY DECISION?	YES

1.0 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 service for the two years 2011/12 and 2012/13 to 31st March 2013 in accordance with paragraph 21.1.1 (ii) of the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. Funding can be accommodated within existing budgets.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 In accordance with paragraph 21.1.1 (ii) of the Council's Contract Procedure Rules, Cabinet agrees to extend the MEAS contract on the terms outlined, for the financial years 2011/12 and 2012/13, until 31st March 2013, at an annual cost for core services of £31,673.

3.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

3.1 Cabinet is asked to agree to a further two-year extension to the current contract for the provision of specialist environmental advisory services across Merseyside at an annual cost to Wirral Council of £31,673. These services are provided by the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service, for which Sefton Council is the lead authority. The costs of the service are shared across the five Merseyside local authorities and Halton Council, the costs being apportioned on the basis of the level of service provided to each District Council.

4.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

4.1 The Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS) is based in Bootle 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 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 Wirral in recent years, including the Neptune development at New Brighton, the Wirral Waters proposals and the International Trade Centre.

4.2 The MEAS has been established for a number of years, having been set up initially to support the core Districts of Sefton, St Helens and Knowsley. More recently, Liverpool City Council, Wirral and Halton Councils 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.

4.3 Funding for 2010/11 was divided as follows:

District	10/11 contribution	% of Core Budget	Actual work %10/11	11/12 core contribution (assumes 0% inflation)	% of Core Budget
Sefton	£95,267	24.7%	26.2%	£95,267	24.7%
Knowsley	£95,267	24.7%	24.4%	£95,267	24.7%
St Helens	£95,267	24.7%	25.2%	£95,267	24.7%
Halton	£15,943	4.2%	5.2%	£15,943	4.2%
Wirral	£31,673	8.2%	8.4%	£31,673	8.2%
Liverpool	£50,985	13.3%	10.6%	£50,985	13.3%
Totals	£384,402			£384,402	

- 4.4 The table shows the proposed 2011/12 contribution for Wirral, which reflects the actual amount of work carried on behalf of the District in the past and the potential growth in service provision. As in previous years (Cabinet 4th November 2010, Minute 209 refers, 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, albeit to a lesser extent recently. Although the Core Districts remain concerned that a more equitable distribution of funding should continue to be achieved, the operation of a 'pay-by-project' approach for Wirral has lessened these concerns.
- 4.5 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 previous and current legal agreements submitted by MEAS). To date, this provision has resulted in additional costs of £7,199.45 in 2009/10 (for the Wirral Waters East Float application) and £6,707.78 in 2011/12 (for the Peel International Trade Centre application). Both of these sums can be accommodated within Departmental budgets. The core funding for Wirral for 2011/12 has remained at £31,673, a figure that has now remained unchanged for the last three financial years, reflecting past low levels of inflation and the absorption of costs by MEAS.

5.0 BENEFITS

5.1 The service provided by MEAS offers the following benefits:

- The service continues to provide 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. This has proved particularly useful with MEAS officers acting as knowledgeable intermediaries with statutory consultees on proposals such as Wirral Waters;
- It provides a capacity to provide common approaches to local environmental issues, especially those of a strategic nature (an approach supported by national legislation at section 110 of the Localism Act 2011);
- 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).

6.0 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 Members are asked to consider a two-year rolling further contribution, longer than the existing one-year arrangements but not a longer-term renewal. This is to give some certainty to arrangements, which are still to be resolved in the context of the City Region Cabinet, on which Wirral is the lead authority on the development of shared services.

7.0 SUMMARY

- 7.1 MEAS provides a significant technical contribution to several important areas of planning policy and development management. Maintenance of this service will continue to provide Wirral with access to high quality, low-cost, specialist environmental advice at a time when the need for such services is increasing.
- 7.2 Whilst funding can be provided from existing resources, current constraints limit commitment to a short-time period, 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 and the International Trade Centre) that generate the additional work for MEAS.

8.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 8.1 If the MEAS contract is not renewed, the Council will have to procure specialist environmental advice from other sources, at a higher cost than the current MEAS contract. Whilst the MEAS contract is managed by Sefton Council as lead authority, all Merseyside authorities have agreed that the current arrangements through the use of MEAS offer the most cost-efficient means of procuring such advice.

9.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 9.1 No other options have been considered.

10.0 CONSULTATION

- 10.1 No consultation has been carried out.

11.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

11.1 There are no implications for voluntary, community or faith groups arising from this report.

12.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

12.1 Current funding is provided from existing Regeneration, Housing and Planning Department budget. The funding contribution of £31,673 can be accommodated within the Department's budget. This figure has not increased since 2008/09, 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 Acting Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning's delegated powers.

12.2 The contract commitment is time-limited to 31st March 2013, reflecting the need to reconsider the provision of joint services to the sub-region in the future.

12.3 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).

12.4 There are no additional IT, staffing or asset management implications arising from this report.

13.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

13.1 If Cabinet agrees to the continuation of the MEAS contract, the Director of Law, Human Resources and Asset Management has delegated powers to sign the contract with Sefton Council.

14.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

14.1 There are no specific implications in this report for equal opportunities, including women, ethnic minorities or the elderly.

14.2 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not required

15.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

15.1 .There are no implications arising directly from this report.

16.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

16.1 The services provided by MEAS support statutory functions in development management and development planning. Without such expert and specialist advice, the Council would be at risk of making unsound decisions.

REPORT AUTHOR: **Richard Lewis**
Investment Strategy Manager
telephone: 0151 691 8222
email: richardlewis@wirral.gov.uk

REFERENCE MATERIAL

(i) Localism Act, November 2011

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Cabinet	10th December 2008
Cabinet	4th February 2010
Cabinet	4th November 2010