SOUTH ESSEX COUNCILS - UPDATE

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To provide an update to the Committee regarding the work of South Essex Councils and the Joint Committee.

2 LINKS TO COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Links to all the Council's priorities and objectives.

3 RECOMMENDATION

3.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

(1) To note the report

4 INTRODUCTION

4.1 South Essex Councils (formerly known as the Association of South Essex Councils or ASELA) has been renamed South Essex Councils (SEC). SEC comprises an equal partnership between the four second tier councils (Basildon, Brentwood, Castle Point and Rochford) and two unitary councils (Southend and Thurrock) in the south of the county along with Essex County Council.

4.2 The governance arrangements for SEC are underpinned by a formal Joint Committee which meets publicly in the member chamber of one of the SEC councils. Meetings are also live-streamed. The secretariat arrangements and accountable body financial status is managed by Southend City Council on behalf of the Joint Committee.

4.3 More information can be found here https://www.southessex.org.uk/ which is also where public agendas and meeting minutes are published.

5 UPDATE

5.1 Following the local elections in May 2024, there were several changes in political leadership for SEC councils and this, together with the snap General

Election meant that the Joint Committee did not formally meet until 3 December 2024 to elect a new Chair and Vice Chair for the year. Leaders had, however, met informally during this time and officers continued to progress work.

5.2 At the meeting on 3 December 2024, Cllr Gavin Callaghan of Basildon Borough Council was elected unanimously as Chair with Cllr James Newport of Rochford District Council elected unanimously as Vice Chair. The meeting received a financial update on the finances available to the Joint Committee but deferred any further work pending the publication by the Government of the English Devolution White Paper which was expected to be published on 16 December. Members felt that the implications of the White Paper for SEC and its continued mission and work were inextricably linked and so, it would be prudent to see what the White Paper contained before commencing or commissioning further work.

5.3 The agenda of the meeting can be found here Meeting Agendas & Minutes | SEC

South Essex Growth Plan

5.4 To date, SEC has been working on its refreshed approach to focus on South Essex as an engine of economic growth. To that end, working with key businesses and public sector partners including Thames Freeport and Thames Estuary Growth Board, SEC has been working to define a robust place narrative for South Essex and develop ambitious delivery plans for a South Essex Growth Plan.

5.5 However, further work on adopting and implementing a Growth Plan across SEC has been paused because of the potential implications of not just the English Devolution White Paper but also the proposed reform of planning law and guidance, including a revision of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

5.6 Those SEC councils which are local planning authorities responded to the NPPF Consultation in the Autumn without prejudice to the Council’s own representations submitted separately in response to the detail of the Government’s consultation. This collective response reflected SEC’s shared commitment to work together to promote prosperity and support their local communities. Amongst other things, the response reflected the importance of spatial planning, forward funding of infrastructure and the importance of Metropolitan Greenbelt and a large coastline used as both a major port and industrial centre but also forms part of a protected coastal landscape and areas are at risk of river and coastal flooding. It also made the point that economic prosperity is one of the key drivers of the SEC partnership and the NPPF fails to recognise the key link between housing growth and employment opportunities. South Essex already suffers from a situation where the difference between workplace earnings and resident earnings is substantial, and housing growth without employment growth would only exacerbate this problem and place more strain on our infrastructure as many residents commute to London or the nearby city of Chelmsford. SEC consider that the best way to deliver the sustainable places that people want to live, may be through working together on strategic plans and identifying growth corridors or other larger scale growth opportunities which will help with the much needed delivery of major infrastructure.

5.7 SEC is convinced that this is the right approach, but delivery of these objectives is now subject to the detail of the English Devolution White Paper.

English Devolution White Paper

5.8 The English Devolution White Paper was published by the Government on Monday 16 December 2024. The White Paper sets out the Government's proposals for a statutory framework to regulate devolution of power from central to local government to Strategic Authorities across the whole of England and bring into alignment the existing devolved authorities. In addition, the White Paper proposes reorganisation of the two tier local government structure in order to improve or in some cases facilitate the process of devolution and the creation of Strategic Authorities.

5.9 How the constituent councils of the county of Essex respond to the White Paper is yet to be formally agreed but SEC will have a role to play and so remains an important forum for the Council to participate in.

6 RISK IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There is a risk that further delay will stagnate the progress and momentum of the SEC work. This is a risk which the Joint Committee acknowledges along with the importance of SEC to come to a conclusion as quickly as possible as to what its next steps are.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 None.

8 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 None.

9 HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None.

10 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed as no decision is being made.

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Background Papers: -

Report to Scrutiny Committee 6 March 2024

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