

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Chief Executive
To
Cabinet,

On
15 September 2020

Report prepared by: Tim MacGregor, Policy Manager

Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) update

Relevant Scrutiny Committee(s): Policy and Resources;
Cabinet Member: Councillor Ian Gilbert
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

1. Purpose of Report

To provide a general update on ASELA, as well as wider developments including the establishment of an ASELA and Local Government Reform Working Party.

2. Recommendations

2.1 That Cabinet note the updates provided in this report, in particular:

- A. The ASELA prospectus has now been submitted to government.**
- B. The stated position of Essex County Council in relation to Local Government Reform (LGR).**

2.2 That Cabinet:

- C. Support the on-going programme of work to explore and develop local government reform options with neighbouring councils.**
- D. Note that specialist advice will continue to be obtained, under officer delegations and within approved budgets, to support the exploration of options, assess and validate data and help ensure the best outcomes for Southend-on-Sea.**

3. Background

3.1 At a meeting on 22 July, Cabinet agreed to fully support a collaboration with South Essex Authorities to deliver regeneration across South Essex.

3.2 Since then, councillors have been briefed on ASELA and the forthcoming Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper. In addition, the ASELA/Local Government Reform Working Party has been formally constituted by full Council (10 September), prior to which it met informally (2 September).

3.3 Essex County Council have publically stated their preferred option for local government reform (further details are provided below), which featured in the Working Party discussion and consideration.

4.0 ASELA Update

4.1 The ASELA 'Growth and Recovery Prospectus 2020' has been submitted to government and conversations with civil servants are commencing.

4.2 In the absence of, or until such time that formal governance arrangements are agreed for ASELA, all key decisions which form part of the ASELA delivery work programme and which significantly affect Southend will continue to be made by Southend on Sea BC.

5.0 Essex County Council proposal

5.1 Essex CC's proposal outlines a Greater Essex Combined Authority with a directly elected mayor, operating above newly formed unitary councils. This proposal replaces the current system of one county council, 12 Districts and two unitary councils. Essex CC argues that the County has a sense of identity and is large enough to be effective strategically, and be taken seriously by Government to pursue the regeneration and growth required for a post COVID economy. A small number of unitary authorities would, it says, provide economies of scale, and clearer lines of accountability.

5.2 ASELA authorities, including Southend on Sea BC, however, have written to the Government, to oppose the County's proposal for a CA. Their collective view is that:

- The proposal is a rebranded Essex County Council, which has not, to date, unlocked the opportunities in South Essex and in many ways has held the area back through insufficient investment.
- A CA covering nearly 2 million people is too large an area for effective democratic accountability.
- Essex is a County of two halves with a more industrial/commercial south and a more rural north.
- A single CA with a mayor based outside of the ASELA region will create tension between the Greater Essex agenda and the unique potential and opportunities that South Essex offers.
- Being close to London, means South Essex has unique circumstances that it can capitalise on, particularly around infrastructure and labour supply to and from London.

6.0 ASELA/LGR Working Party

6.1 The ASELA/LGR Working Party informally met on 2 September to consider the terms of reference, to receive an update on ASELA and the currently anticipated content of the forthcoming Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper.

6.2 The Working Party acknowledged the shared ambitions of Southend on Sea BC and the ASELA delivery work programme, including key cross border infrastructure projects needed to unlock future economic ambition. The Working Party highlighted the importance for the Council to be represented in any decisions affecting the borough.

- 6.3 In discussing the forthcoming Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper, the Working Party acknowledged Essex CC's proposal and concluded that it would be prudent for Southend on Sea BC to engage in conversations with neighbouring Councils on future governance reform, including unitary options.
- 6.4 In view of the steer provided by the Working Party it is recommended that Cabinet support a programme of work to explore and consider local government reform options with neighbouring councils. This will mean that specialist advice will continue to be obtained, under officer delegations and within approved budgets, to support the exploration of options, assess and validate information and data (including that from Essex CC) and help ensure the best outcomes for the borough.

7. Other Options

- 7.1 Do nothing – this option is not recommended because it is clear that both government and subsequently Essex County Council are proposing significant changes to local government across England, including Essex. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the council to develop proposals that provide the best possible outcome for Southend's residents while satisfying the government's criteria.

8. Reasons for Recommendations

- 8.1 To note the update on ASELA, the position of the ASLEA/LGR Working Party and to consider the appropriate next steps in supporting the on-going programme of work to explore and develop local government reform options.

9. Corporate Implications

9.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map

The ASELA delivery work programme refers to the economic agenda for the South Essex region, how it can deliver new jobs, new transport infrastructure, new homes, and the future governance arrangements to deliver better outcomes for its existing, and new, residents and businesses. These all contribute in a significant way to various aspects of the Southend 2050 Road Map, particularly the objectives in Opportunity & Prosperity and Connected & Smart.

9.2 Financial Implications

Resources for specialist advice will be obtained from within existing budgets. Neighbouring councils are also expected to make a financial commitment to this work.

9.3 Legal Implications –

Relevant legislation will follow as necessary to enact any changes arising from the Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper.

9.4 People Implications – None at this time

9.5 Property Implications – None at this time

9.6 Consultation – None at this time

9.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications
None specific

9.8 Risk Assessment – None at this time

9.9 Value for Money – non specific

9.10 Community Safety Implications – none specific

9.11 Environmental Impact – none specific

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10. Background Papers - none

11. Appendices - none

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