

**Item 5(a) – Joint Working Project between Sevenoaks District Council
and Dartford Borough Council – Proposed Forward Operating Model –
Supplementary Budget Request**

The Cabinet's Recommendation to Council

At its meeting on 13 October 2011 the Cabinet considered the matter as follows:

“The Chairman welcomed members of the Social Affairs Select Committee to the meeting and explained that he had changed the order of the agenda to take this item at the start of the meeting. He explained that timetabling difficulties had meant that it had not been possible to take this matter to a meeting of the Select Committee which is why Members had been invited to attend the Cabinet during discussion of this matter.

The Portfolio Holder for Safe Communities presented a report which advised the Cabinet of the outcome of the feasibility study and business case for the joint working project between Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) and Dartford Borough Council (DBC) in Environmental Health, and set out the proposed operating model for the joint service. It was proposed that the Environmental Health Service for both Councils would be provided from the Dartford office, with a satellite office based at Sevenoaks, with existing face to face services for customers being retained. Members were reminded that the two Councils had shared an Environmental Health Manager since August 2008 and that the Cabinet had commissioned consultants to examine the feasibility of developing joint working arrangements and the preparation of a business case in September 2010. The initial work had been carried out by Price Mariners consultants and completed by Darren Walklate, the consultant who had worked on the Joint Revenues and Benefit Service, and had followed a similar methodology to complete the business case and develop an implementation plan. The criteria used to evaluate defined options for joint working were detailed in the report including the requirements to fulfil statutory obligations, deliver £300,000 pa savings across the two authorities from 2012/13, improve capacity and resilience, deliver agreed service standards, allow for further savings/generation of income whilst remaining accessible for customers. It was estimated that joint savings over a five year period would total £1.68 million and allowing for estimated implementation costs of £486,000 this would deliver a pay back period of 1.6 years. The proposed service standards and organisational structure were outlined and feedback from the consultation exercise carried out with staff during August and September was reported. It was anticipated that the proposals should be implemented in full from April 2012 and would be supported by a formal governance document and partnership agreement. The report explained that Dartford Borough Council would be considering the proposal at its Cabinet Meeting on 27th October 2011.

In commending the report and recommendations to Cabinet the Portfolio Holder for Safe Communities reminded Members that the Council was working successfully in a number of partnerships with other authorities, and

notably with Dartford Borough Council on the Revenues and Benefits Service and that a similar partnership arrangement for the Environmental Health Service was viewed as the best way to deliver an effective service whilst delivering the level of savings required and preserving as many jobs as possible for Environmental Health staff. If the Council had had to find the savings in-house this would have resulted in a major restructuring and the loss of many more posts.

The Cabinet was addressed by an officer from the Environmental Health Team, Charles Hook, who reiterated the concerns of the staff affected and the strong reservations which he believed his colleagues had about the proposals and the location of the service at Dartford with only a satellite office at Sevenoaks. He suggested that other options had not been investigated to the same degree and that basing the service at Dartford would make it difficult to conduct site visits in the south of the District. There were also concerns about the role of the Scientific Officer in the new structure and how this could impact on service delivery.

The Head of Environmental and Operational Services provided clarification on how the satellite office would work. This would involve a hot desk set up for up to 8 officers at any one time and there would be a management presence on-site for two days per week. This would enable officers to base themselves at Sevenoaks when requiring to carry out visits in the south of the District or to journey from home if more practicable. In terms of the Scientific Officer post he explained that it had been decided to retain this post from within the existing Dartford structure and that the capability of Sevenoaks officers to carry out this work would ensure greater resilience for this aspect of the service. He also stressed that the proposals would deliver all of the criteria for the service which were set out in the report. Whilst it was true that up to seven posts could be affected it was stressed that a number of vacancies had been held back in both services and that currently only a maximum of two posts across the two authorities might be subject to redundancy. In response to a question from a Member the Council's arrangements for redeployment, including training and mentoring arrangements, were explained.

The Chairman of the Social Affairs Select Committee agreed that savings had to be made and that if savings were not made in this service they would have to be found elsewhere. She understood staff concerns about change but cited the success of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Service which had initially been of similar concern to the staff involved. She felt that there would be careful monitoring both of service standards and staffing and that any concerns would be brought before Members if appropriate. She felt that this was the best solution for staff and the Council's customers and reflected working arrangements being introduced throughout the private and public sectors.

Members recognised that the proposals were unsettling for staff but considered that they offered the best way of moving forward with the opportunity to develop a new joined-up Environmental Health Service. It was felt that the provision of a satellite office and other measures made it possible for the service to be based at Dartford and that the proposals would deliver

and effective service for the Council's customers whilst achieving the savings required and protecting as many staff as possible in the circumstances.

Resolved: That

- (1) the proposed operating model for the joint provision of Environmental Health Services with Dartford Borough Council as detailed in the report and Appendix A to the report, be approved;
- (2) the Leader of the Council and the Safe Communities Portfolio Holder be delegated the authority to agree the Heads of Terms for a partnership agreement;
- (3) a provision of £243,000 investment costs be recommended to Council to support the implementation of the project as a supplementary budget request (this figure represents a 50% share of costs) and**
- (4) the Leader of the Council and the Safe Communities Portfolio Holder, together with the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Community and Planning Services be delegated to approve any consequential actions required in order to implement the proposed business model".

Note: Text in bold type represents a recommendation to the Council.

