

Forest Heath District Council

(This report is not a key decision. This report has been subject to appropriate notice of publication under the Council's Access to Information Rules)

Report of the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing and Transport

CABINET

4 DECEMBER 2012

CAB12/052

PROPOSED JOINT STEERING GROUP FOR PLANNING POLICY AND GROWTH

(Key Decision Reference: NOV12/12)

1. Summary and reasons for recommendation(s)

- 1.1 Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council have already established the principle of working together to consider and agree planning policy matters which affect both districts uniformly. This creates a consistent approach for communities and applicants, and reduces duplication of effort under a shared officer structure.
- 1.2 This report proposes a development of this approach to create a councillor forum in which all common issues affecting growth in the West Suffolk area can be debated prior to consideration by the two councils' cabinets.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 **It is recommended that a West Suffolk Growth Steering Group be established on the basis set out in paragraphs 4.5 to 4.9 of this report, and that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services be authorised to appoint Members to this Group in accordance with the nominations of the Group Leaders.**

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3. How will the recommendations help us meet our strategic priorities?

- 3.1 The recommendations will help to deliver the following strategic aims:
- A stronger local economy which is capable of growing
 - Meeting the district's housing needs

4. Key issues

- 4.1 St Edmundsbury Borough Council's Cabinet has, for several years, had a Sustainable Development Working Party. The Working Party has a Borough-wide remit to 'advise the Cabinet and Council on the formulation of the Local Development Framework for St Edmundsbury and associated planning policies'. It also looks at environmental management issues.
- 4.2 Forest Heath District Council has a Local Plan Working Group with a similar remit to advise on the Local Plan Review process, with the aim of producing an appropriate Local Development Framework for the Council.
- 4.3 Both of these existing working parties will continue to be needed in order to consider planning policy matters specific to each district. However, there are many planning policy matters which are common to both Councils, and which merit joint consideration. This process has already successfully started between the two Councils, for instance the recent work on the joint Development Management Policy.
- 4.4 Given the emphasis both Councils place on growth, and the shared challenges they face in that regard, there is also the opportunity to create a joint group which looks at the wider issues of growth across West Suffolk, whether these be in relation to planning policy, infrastructure, housing, economic development or environment.
- 4.5 Both cabinets have therefore asked for such a joint group to be established. The draft terms of reference of such a group, a *West Suffolk Growth Steering Group* (provisional name) would be to advise the cabinets of Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council on:
- (a) creating the conditions to encourage and support sustainable growth across the whole of the West Suffolk area; and
 - (b) common planning policy affecting both districts.
- 4.6 However the Steering Group would be asked to refine its terms of reference at its first meeting.
- 4.7 It is suggested that the Steering Group comprises 12 members, six from each council. The Chairmanship and Vice-chairmanship would rotate annually between the two Councils. Membership of the Steering Group would be politically balanced, and each Council must ensure that its Development Control Committee and planning policy bodies (the Local Development Framework Working Group in the case of Forest Heath) are represented, alongside members of the two Cabinets. Meetings will be governed by normal access to information rules in both Councils.

- 4.8 Frequency of meetings would initially be quarterly, but this can be reviewed in the light of workload.
- 4.9 As stated, the joint steering group for growth outlined above will not remove the need for each council to maintain a planning policy group to advise on matters affecting its own district, including the area-specific elements of their Local Development Frameworks. Therefore there is no proposal to remove the Local Plan Working Group. However, the fact that some of its workload may now be undertaken by the joint group can be reflected in the planning of the 2013/2014 calendar of meetings, if appropriate.

5. Other options considered

- 5.1 None.

6. Community impact

6.1 Crime and disorder impact *(including Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998)*

- 6.1.1 Not applicable.

6.2 Diversity and equality impact *(including the findings of the Equality Impact Assessment)*

- 6.2.1 Not applicable.

6.3 Sustainability impact *(including completing a Sustainability Impact Assessment)*

- 6.3.1 A sustainability impact assessment is not required. The new group will, however, have achieving sustainability amongst its core objectives.

6.4 Other impact *(any other impacts affecting this report)*

- 6.4.1 This proposal increases both councils' ability to put forward a common view on issues affecting West Suffolk to other regional and national partners and agencies.

7. Consultation *(what consultation has been undertaken, and what were the outcomes?)*

- 7.1 Both cabinets have been consulted and support this in principle.

8. Financial and resource implications *(including asset management implications)*

- 8.1 There would only be a negligible change, if any at all, to existing budgets for holding meetings. At the same time, there would be cost and time benefits of only having to consider common issues affecting both councils once, rather than at two separate meetings.

9. Risk/opportunity assessment *(potential hazards or opportunities affecting corporate, service or project objectives)*

Risk area	Inherent level of risk (before controls)	Controls	Residual risk (after controls)
A consistent approach is not taken by the two councils to common issues affecting growth in their areas	Medium	Establish a joint steering group to consider these issues and advise the cabinets.	Low
There is duplication of effort on common issues affecting both councils	High	Establish a joint steering group, which allows member and officer time to be spent to best effect.	Low
The specific issues facing each district are obscured by the common approach	Low	Such issues will still be considered individually by the councils through their own planning policy working groups.	Low

10. Legal and policy implications

10.1 None. Meetings will be held in accordance with the constitution of the Council.

11. Ward(s) affected

11.1 All.

12. Background papers

12.1 None.

13. Documents attached

13.1 None.