



**Ward:** Not Applicable  
**Item No.** 6  
**Subject:** Partnership Working –  
Towards a Strategy

**Meeting:** Simultaneous Executive  
Meeting

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## **1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF PAPER**

- 1.1 Following acceptance by the Simultaneous Executive Meetings earlier in the summer of the need for a strategy to steer our partnership working, this report seeks to update members on how the work and programme of activities is progressing and seeks guidance from elected members on some of the key options. The report also makes reference to work that is going on in parallel within the wider West Sussex context that represents a very similar set of issues for partnership working in the light of the Government White Paper and the likelihood that it will place great emphasis on improving the way two-tier areas operate, heavily promoting additional partnership working to achieve efficiency improvements.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 The Members of Worthing Borough Council's Cabinet and Adur District Council's Policy and Strategy Committee are recommended:
- (i) to note the progress and timetable outlined for the production and agreement of a partnership strategy between the two authorities;
  - (ii) to endorse attendance by both Leaders of the two Councils at the Officers' Seminar on 29<sup>th</sup> September to outline the Member view of the way forward on partnership working;
  - (iii) to indicate which of the major strategic approaches for partnership working is likely to be preferred by Members.
  - (iv) provide strategic guidance on the potential organisational implications.

### **3. “PARTNERSHIP” – WHAT DO WE MEAN?**

- 3.1. All readers of this report will have their own idea in mind when they see the term partnership within the text. And it is true to say that its usage within local government as an expression of more than one authority working together to a common purpose has covered a multitude of different arrangements. These have ranged from occasional joint events to “soft” arrangements to do something collectively, right the way through to “hard” partnerships, with financial and legal arrangements in place.
- 3.2. For the purposes of this discussion, any reference to partnership implies the formal shared-services end of the spectrum. AWS is a good example.
- 3.3. In the climate of the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, the Lyons investigation of local government tasks and finance and the forthcoming White Paper, it is certain that there will be pressure on local government to achieve savings and efficiencies via partnerships and shared services.

### **4. CONTEXT**

- 4.1 The partnership working that has taken place between Adur and Worthing councils has placed us at the forefront nationally of creative partnership working. However, as we progress partnership working within the Adur/Worthing services partnership (AWS) and in other areas of activity involving partnerships, it is clear that there are common complexities. There are many seminars and conferences that raise these issues as questions, but there are few authorities who are ahead of us in providing answers.
- 4.2. Statements made by Government during the summer have suggested very strongly that a comprehensive reorganisation of local government is now an unlikely way forward. However, the other side of that coin is that there will be no choice on the delivery of improved two-tier in areas like West Sussex and the requirement for huge efficiency gains as a result.
- 4.3. Within West Sussex the high level of partnership working already underway is seen as a strong example of how improved two-tier arrangements can contribute to this new direction for local government. However, despite the existence of examples such as AWS, the CenSus partnership between Adur, Horsham and Mid Sussex and the West Sussex Accessible Services Partnership (WSASP), it is unquestionable that partnership working between different authorities does face common challenges.
- 4.4. Members will be familiar with the difficulties we have faced within AWS. Issues of governance, territory and the surrender of individual control are just a few examples that have been faced within AWS and which are replicated with each new partnership initiative we attempt to take forwards.

- 4.5. All of this suggests that if a major increase in partnership working is seen to be the way forward for improving the efficiency of local government, then we need a much more organised approach to it within West Sussex. This has been expressed in previous meetings as the need for a partnership strategy and this paper outlines some initial steps to that objective.

## **5. THE STORY SO FAR**

- 5.1 The history of partnership working between Adur and Worthing councils goes back some years. This started many years ago with some tentative exploration of whether a joint depot could be operated between the two authorities. However, the mix of issues and personalities involved in both organisations did not conclude this arrangement satisfactorily. In simple terms the risks and uncertainties outweighed the advantages, particularly in the short term.
- 5.2. Since then, a much stronger drive for efficiency and cost savings has been pursued and the long term future of authorities has been seen to depend much more on the degree to which they can demonstrate a wider perspective on service delivery and organisational structure. In recent years within Adur and Worthing this has led to a huge volume of discussion about how to move partnership working forwards. AWS and its joint depot and, more recently, the Authorities' agreement to establish a joint refuse and recycling service is a notable success.
- 5.3. In exploring the way forward for AWS and the sharing of depots, creation of joint services etc., it was obvious that there were many common themes to be resolved if we were to progress a wider range of partnership activities between the two authorities. Essentially the governance, legal and financial arrangements dominated the debate in almost any service under discussion. As a result of this dialogue between the two authorities at senior officer and member level led to an early consideration that merging the authorities might well be a quicker way of delivering the benefits of working in partnership. Members commissioned this task and two senior managers spent six months researching it.
- 5.4. The conclusion of this work was that the burden of issues surrounding democratic representation; precepting and government funding formulas (to name just a few) were substantial. Therefore, the issues for taking full merger forwards were too onerous and too long term to expect a long term commitment from the members and officers of both authorities to deliver it. However, it was decided to continue with service by service mergers and partnerships to take things forwards.
- 5.5. Since then progress has been made in a number of areas. However, it is becoming clearer by the day that we need a 'bigger picture' to guide future arrangements. SEMS, endorsed by both councils, has also agreed to pursue further partnership working and requested a partnership strategy to guide this.

## **6. WORKING TOWARDS A PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY**

- 6.1 Over the past year or so, since the decision was taken not to promote a full merger of the two Councils, our partnership strategy has, in effect, been to continue progressing partnership activities and the development of shared services wherever possible, or practicable. To an extent, this “bottom up” approach is fair enough as an overall working arrangement.
- 6.2. However, it is becoming clearer, each time we look at a new potential area of partnership working, that the overall arrangement that such partnerships will sit within are fundamental to the way in which they might be progressed. Without this “bigger picture” it is also easy for detailed practical issues, such as the concerns or preferences of individual members of staff, to have an undue impact on the benefits that could be delivered via a partnership approach to service provision.
- 6.3. Setting this clear strategic direction for our partnership working is clearly a job for the Members of both authorities, and in some respects this needs to be expressed jointly for the partnership and separately for each of the authorities.
- 6.4. Officers have been working extensively on the technical and operational details of our existing partnership working and on new or emerging areas where partnership working might be considered. This process is continuing in respect of the partnership strategy and Members will see later in this report the details of some joint work that is programmed to take place between Worthing and Adur officers in the form of a joint officer workshop. However, it is important to recognise that this approach does require at its front end the strategic steerage from Members and this lies at the heart of the development of our partnership strategy.
- 6.5. Once we have that political steerage, Members workshops can be set up to facilitate the next steps in preparing the content of a partnership strategy. An event in October would seem appropriate, after which a draft strategy might be presented to the SEMs on 13<sup>th</sup> November or 11<sup>th</sup> January, depending on how much debate and revision is required. Following SEMs each Council would consider the way forward and hopefully endorse the recommendations of SEMs.

## **7. SO WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIC CHOICES?**

- 7.1. In outlining the main choices, this Report has not focussed on all the detailed issues within them as this would cloud the simplicity of the choice which needs to be made and the clarity of the guidance that is needed for future partnership working and shared services to progress. For this purpose it is also assumed that, following the extensive research done on a full merger of the two authorities, that a full merger of the authorities is *not* back on the agenda. Similarly, it has been assumed that the Government White Paper will propose improving two-tier arrangements, potentially with heavy financial/efficiency targets rather than a local government reorganisation.

7.2. Therefore, at the highest level, the main options for steering our partnership strategy over the years to come are, in the briefest terms, as follows:-

1. **Unravel existing partnerships/shared services and return to fully independent arrangements.**

This is listed only as a theoretical possibility. It would run completely against recommended best practice and make it even harder for both Councils to deliver the emerging “improved two-tier” imperative being set for local government.

2. **Maintain our existing level of partnership working (AWS, etc.), but draw a line under further developments.**

3. **Continue with existing partnerships and use an “as and when” approach to further partnerships/shared services between the authorities.**

This is the current approach and its disadvantages are the reason that SEMS commissioned the production of a partnership strategy. It could nevertheless remain as the preferred way forward if Members choose it.

4. **Work towards a comprehensive merger of services.**

As a footnote to this strategic option, it is recognised that complete merger of services would never actually occur. Our Council merger research revealed a number of activities that would need to remain separate for legal, electoral, council tax and other statutory reasons. However, this could be relatively small in substance. It is also true to say that there are some services, emerging in the debate about shared services and partnership working, that need to be retained on a separate basis as they have such a local flavour.

7.3. Options 1, 2 and 3 are familiar to Members and largely self-evident in their implications. However, Option 4 deserves some elaboration.

#### **Considering Option 4 – The Comprehensive approach**

7.4. This strategic choice would give the clearest and least ambiguous target for officers to implement. It would give a very clear message to all staff of both authorities that Members are committed to improving services and efficiencies by creating larger combined services, rather than battling on in smaller, separate arrangements.

7.5. It would then be possible to put a timescale on each of the services to be partnered as there would be much less uncertainty about the bigger picture. Project management disciplines could then be applied to manage the way forward.

- 7.6. Selection of this objective would suggest the need for a single officer structure (with the exception of a few services and statutory functions). This on its own would deliver savings and efficiencies, in due course, regardless of the other obvious service quality advantages.
- 7.7. If it is decided that a merged officer structure is the best way to take the strategy forward, then the choice and technicalities of a host authority for the shared services is a less significant issue. Clarifying who the employer is and what employment rules apply could be covered by secondment, for example. We would be working towards a common purpose and a shared bottom line. However, if Members were to prefer to stay with the more pragmatic (and less predictable) Option 3, then the identification of the host authority is a more significant matter and it has to create a more detailed and technical arrangement between the two authorities.
- 7.8. Alternatively, or this might happen in due course as more services become jointly-run, a separate joint local authority company might be created. This would have some advantages (in being separate from both partners) and would have transparent governance and financial arrangements with each. In many respects, this could be viewed as an extension of the AWS concept into the longer term.

## **8. DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY**

- 8.1. Following the SEMS meeting in July, the development of the partnership strategy for Adur and Worthing Councils has involved substantial discussion amongst senior officers about the options we have for taking this initiative forward. Meetings of the Joint Management Team have also considered this paper and the options it portrays.
- 8.2. An important joint Managers Conference has been put into the diaries for the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2006. An agenda and format for the day has been outlined and all managers relevant to attend notified. The product from this important conference is intended to point the way to both a partnership strategy and the first elements of a project plan to deliver it. Nevertheless, its success does, to a considerable extent, depend on the clarity of the long term vision for our partnership working. To this end, both Leaders have been invited to outline the political imperative at the start of the day. The degree to which they can indicate which of the main strategic options the two Councils might work towards would naturally focus our effort down the path that is most likely to be desired by elected Members of both authorities.
- 8.3. Once the product of the Officers' Seminar on 29<sup>th</sup> September is digested and interpreted, it is intended to hold a workshop for the Members of both authorities. There has been some discussion of how this might be conducted. For example, should the event be cross-party? The implications of any decisions are relatively long term and any project plan to take matters forwards in this way would be placed at some risk if the direction of travel is not agreed on a relatively universal basis.

- 8.4. Following the digest of these forums, it would be the intention to report to the SEMS meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> November with a proposed strategy for partnership working between the two authorities. Thereafter, each would subject the proposals to their separate Councils as it would be entirely appropriate for such an important step (if any step is proposed) to be endorsed by both full Councils.

**IAN LOWRIE**  
**Chief Executive**

7<sup>th</sup> September 2006

## **Appendix**

### **1.0 Council Priority**

- § Promoting Partnership Working
- § Keeping Council Tax Down

### **2.0 Specific Targets**

#### **(A)**

- § Improved refuse and recycling targets.
- § Streamlined and modernised working practices
- § Increased efficiencies and reduced overheads
- § Increase recycling
- § Promote regeneration

#### **(B)**

- § Preparing to respond to Government White Paper

### **3.0 Sustainability Issues**

- 3.1 None specific to this report, but underlying issues are about long term sustainability of Adur District Council.

### **4.0 Equality Issues**

- 4.1 Promotes larger critical mass – in turn more likely to provide capacity to deliver.

### **5.0 Community Safety issues (Section 17)**

- 5.1 Consistent with proposed merger of CDRP's.

### **6.0 Human Rights Issues**

- 6.1 Matter considered and no issues identified.

### **7.0 Financial Implications**

- 7.1 No specific financial proposals.

### **8.0 Legal Implications**

- 8.1 The paper concerns broad strategy at this stage. Legal issues would arise once a way forward is chosen for investigation.

### **9.0 Consultations**

#### 9.1 (A)

- § Joint Chief Officers Management Team.

(B)

§ Report subject to minor modification.

**10.0 Risk assessment**

10.1 Risk management would be part of wider investigation following choice of strategy.

**11.0 Health & Safety Issues**

11.1 None specific. Generally a bigger organisation might have greater expertise.

**12.0 Procurement Strategy**

12.1 Not applicable.

**13.0 Partnership working**

13.1 This is the specific topic for the report and needs no elaboration here.