

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader's Portfolio 11 March 2010
AUTHOR/S: Chief Executive / Corporate Manager for Community and Customer Services

REVIEW OF ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (LGA)

Purpose

1. This report reviews the Council's ongoing membership of the Local Government Association in terms of the benefits to the organisation derived from the annual subscription of £12,850 and seeks a decision by the Leader in respect of whether the Council should continue in membership.
2. This is not a key decision.

Considerations – History and purpose of the LGA

3. The LGA was created in 1997 to provide a voice for local government in the national arena. It is a voluntary membership body, funded entirely by subscriptions, which lobbies and campaigns for changes in policy and legislation on behalf of member councils and the people and communities they serve. The organisation states that its business is to:

'Change minds – the minds of citizens, of councils, of partners and of government – and persuade them that everything we do, with and on behalf of councils, will improve the lives of citizens and communities.'¹

It seeks to do this through:

- (a) Working closely with member councils to ensure that its activities are aligned with the needs of their diverse communities;
- (b) Campaigning for change in those areas which matter most to councils e.g. providing advocacy support in response to local or national situations such as the Icelandic Bank crisis.
- (c) Generating positive stories about local government in the national and specialist media, and working to rebut negative stories e.g. criticism of highway authorities following the recent salt shortages.
- (d) Initiating policy and debate about policy, tailored to local needs e.g. publication of a review of the first year of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA);
- (e) Working with government to influence the legislative agenda, challenging where appropriate;
- (f) Maintaining a presence in Brussels to influence EU legislation and policy;
- (g) Commissioning research to provide an evidence-based policy frameworks, able to anticipate relevant future developments proactively;

¹ <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/1846877>, page 4

- (h) Delivering a comprehensive programme of conferences and events to enable members and member councils to engage in the LGA's work and provide information about new and forthcoming developments.

Considerations – Specific services for LGA member councils

4. As a member of the association, the Council receives the following:
 - (a) Allocated places on the General Assembly of the LGA, which meets twice yearly.
 - (b) The opportunity, subject to the political selection process, to sit on one of the Association's boards, panels or commissions (these include the boards of other organisations with the LGA group – see paragraph 9 below).
 - (c) The opportunity to join a Special Interest Group. The group is most direct relevance to this Council is the District Councils' Network.
 - (d) Access to the LGA improvement partnerships, established particularly to support outstanding or failing councils;
 - (e) Membership of a task group or advisory network, to ensure the LGA's work is grounded in the experience of local councils.
 - (f) The opportunity to attend quarterly briefing meetings for District Council Leaders.
 - (g) Access to the facilities at Local Government House in Central London.
 - (h) Access to legal advice secured on behalf of member councils.

5. In recent years, the Council has chosen not to nominate Members to attend the General Assembly. There is no representation by the Council on any of the bodies mentioned in points (b) – (e) above. The Executive Director (Corporate Services) attended a meeting of District Council treasurers at Local Government House in December 2009.

6. Membership also gives the Council access to a range of services:
 - (a) The LGA website, containing information about the LGA, its policies and activities, lobbying (including parliamentary and public affairs briefings), publications, events, meetings and other services;
 - (b) Dedicated links to the websites of other central and regional bodies, local authorities and key partners;
 - (c) The LGA information centre, 'LGconnect', offering members a direct enquiry line via 'phone and e-mail.
 - (d) Reduced delegate rates at one-day and residential conferences;
 - (e) LG Alerts – a weekly information service sent to member authorities' Chief Executives, and published on the LGA website;
 - (f) LGA publications, many free to member authorities, covering subjects such as Bills and research reports.
 - (g) 'First' magazine – a weekly news magazine delivered free directly to the homes of all councillors, and 'First on-line', a web version containing additional content.
 - (h) Press releases and daily news headlines – published in the 'news' section of the website. Registered users in member councils receive this information via an e-bulletin.
 - (i) The opportunity to join 'PANet', the public affairs network, which provides a parliamentary monitoring and intelligence service through e-mail alerts and face-to-face briefings.
 - (j) A research and analysis bulletin drawing on the work of the LGA research division and related research output.

7. Consultation with the Executive Management Team did not provide evidence that the above services were widely used. Much of the information on the LGA website is currently freely available without the need for membership or registration; however, the LGA has advised that, from 2010-11, access to much of this information will be restricted to member councils.
8. Expenditure on LGA conferences was £893 in 2007/08, £1,125 in 2008-09 and nil in 2009-2010.

Considerations – the LGA Group

9. The LGA group comprises, in addition to the association itself, the following associate organisations with distinct roles within the local government field:
 - (a) **Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)** – The IDeA supports improvement and innovation in local government, and recently supported the Council in its response to the Corporate Governance Inspection report through the provision of services such as Member Mentoring and ‘Top team’ development of senior Elected Members and Officers. It should be noted that this support was secured through regional government funding, although there is a significant body of on-line examples of best practice and support available on the IDeA’s website.
 - (b) **Local Government Employers (LGE)** – LGE works with local authorities on many issues related to pay, pensions, terms and conditions of employment. A key role is to support the employers’ side of the national pay negotiation in negotiations with trade unions, central government and other organisations. The Council is not part of the national pay negotiation, therefore does not directly benefit from LGE’s representation. Nevertheless, the Human Resources Manager has advised that LGE provides a valuable advice and support service in respect of employment issues.
 - (c) **Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services (LACORS)** – Promotes quality regulation in matters such as licensing and gambling, food safety, hygiene and standards, offering comprehensive policy advice and guidance to councils and their partners, disseminating good practice and providing up-to-date information on relevant policies and initiatives affecting local people and services. LACORS’s work is highly relevant to the Council’s Health and Environmental Services, and the Corporate Manager has stated that the advice and guidance produced is of valuable assistance in interpreting legislation and planning services accordingly. He estimates that, should the Council be required to undertake the interpretation of policy and legislation in-house, the annual cost would be likely to exceed that of the Council’s annual LGA subscription of £12,850.
 - (d) **Public-Private Partnership Programme (4ps)** – 4ps works in partnership with local authorities to secure funding and accelerate the development, procurement and implementation of large-scale private finance initiative schemes, public-private partnerships and procurement support. The Council has not engaged the services of 4ps.
 - (e) **Leadership Centre for Local Government (LCLG)** – LCLG works with leaders in councils and local strategic partnerships to help develop their thinking on leadership and to develop their skills and qualities as effective leaders.
 - (f) **LGCommunications** – Although not formally part of the LGA group, LGCommunications is an organisation which is endorsed by the LGA and IDeA. It is a national subscription body (currently £200 per year) made up of

member associations which works to raise the standard of communications in local government. The Council is a member, and the Communications Manager has stated that the organisation provides a valuable service in terms of advice and direct communications support in respect of key national issues.

Comment and Analysis

10. Consultation with senior management has revealed that the direct benefits to be derived from the Council's LGA membership are small and, in terms of accessible material versus that is available to member subscribers only, difficult to quantify. Furthermore, access to the resources identified as being as greatest value to the organisation, those provided by LACORS and the LGE, is not dependent on LGA membership.
11. Any cost-benefit analysis should be considered alongside the indirect benefits to the Council arising from the LGA's advocacy work for local government, policy development and lobbying on its behalf. There is merit in the Council continuing as a member of the LGA 'family' in order to maintain SCDC's status as an outward-looking authority which is able to influence regional and national policy and one which is self-aware enough to recognise when external support may be required in future, organisationally and in response to the changing needs of the community. Any decision to withdraw from the LGA could result in damage to the Council's reputation, and give rise to a perception of insularity and isolation. It may also be borne in mind that, whilst the withdrawal of the Council's subscription would not in itself mean the LGA ceasing to support its member group organisations or advocating district councils on the national stage, should such withdrawals develop into a 'domino effect', the LGA may become unviable and its single voice for local government lost.

Implications

12.	Financial	As identified in the main body of the report, cessation of the Council's membership of the LGA would give rise to an annual saving of £12,850; however, there is a requirement for one year's notice to be given of any intention to cease membership, therefore no saving could be realised until 2011-12.
	Legal	As stated above, there is a legal requirement to provide one year's notice of any intention to cease membership. As such, any decision not to renew the Council's subscription for 2011-12 should be taken before 31 March 2010.
	Staffing	There are no direct staffing implications arising from this report and recommendation.
	Risk Management	As outlined in paragraph 11 above, a withdrawal from the association carries the risk of damage to the Council's reputation.
	Equal Opportunities	There are no direct equal opportunities implications arising from this report and recommendation.

Consultations

13. The Executive Management Team (EMT) was requested to provide details of the specific LGA services they made use of. The commentary in the 'considerations' sections above reflects feedback by EMT members. The resources most valued were those provided by LACORS and the LGE; paragraphs 8(b) – (c) refer.

Effect on Strategic Aims

14. The support, guidance and best practice provided by the LGA has the potential to enhance the Council's capacity to deliver all its strategic aims, and those of the local community. This indirect benefit must be balanced against the opportunity cost of the annual subscription, savings from which could be reallocated towards the provision of front-line services.

Conclusions/Summary

15. Whilst an internal study has identified that the Council derives limited direct benefit from its subscription to the LGA, it is considered on balance that the ability of the LGA to provide a single voice for local government and provide targeted support to assist councils with continuous improvement, together with the resources provided by the LGA and specific organisations within its group which continue to be valued by senior officers, justify the annual cost of the subscription. The Leader is therefore recommended to maintain the Council's subscription, subject to the matter being reconsidered in one year's time. Given the year-long notice required to cease the Council's membership, taking this course of action will mean the earliest that the Council could leave the LGA would be April 2012.

Recommendation

16. That the Council's continuing membership of the Local Government Association be agreed, subject to its subscription being further reviewed by 28 February 2011.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

'Your LGA – a Guide to LGA services 2009-10', from the LGA website:
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/1846877>

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