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EUROPEAN ACTION PLAN 2002 - 2003

1. Introduction

1.1 The European Action Plan sets out the annual work programme of Buckinghamshire County Council's European Team. The European Union is a broad subject matter and a European dimension has the potential to benefit almost every service area and function of the County Council and associated partnership work. While a host of initiatives taking place in individual service areas reflect the County Council's involvement and approach to the European Union, and also reflect key themes and issues being focused on at European level, this Action Plan sets the annual targets and monitors the direct role and impact of the County Council's corporate European Team.

1.2 During 2002 the European Team will focus on 6 key policy themes that are particularly prominent at the current time at European level and that can bring added-value to current council priorities and key initiatives. The European Team's 4 strategic objectives detailed in the European Strategy will focus mainly but not exclusively on these key cross-cutting themes.

This years key cross-cutting themes for the European Team are:

2. Governance

2.1 Changes to the way governmental bodies are organised and called to account are being made in all spheres of government – local, regional and international.

2.2 Locally in Buckinghamshire, the County Council has recently put in place new modernised structures to reflect trends towards more accountable democracy and new powers being realised by local government - such as the 'power of well being'. This will be achieved in Buckinghamshire through partnership with a range of agencies in the county, under the auspices of the New Bucks Partnership for Action. This same partnership body is also spearheading the Buckinghamshire Community Planning process. Many of the proposed key issues addressed within the Countywide Community Plan, such as transport, the environment, access to lifelong learning, and care for less advantaged sections of the community are also key policy areas being addressed at European level.

2.3 In particular, the Committee of the Regions (the Brussels based body made up of local councillors from throughout the EU that are consulted with by the European institutions on matters of local authority interest) provides a forum for debate on such issues. This is one of the several channels the County Council can use to have its voice heard in Europe, in particular through the appointment in January 2002 of the Leader of the County Council, David Shakespeare OBE, as an alternate member of the Committee of the Regions. In his position on the Committee for Constitutional Affairs he will debate issues around the transparency and legitimacy of the EU Treaties and how local authorities can be best represented in the future European structure.

DRAFT

2.4 The UK nationally is currently undergoing a process of public sector modernisation and a significant movement towards a much stronger regional agenda. The White Paper on the English Regions published in May 2002 stresses the role of proposed directly elected Regional Assemblies. Already in the south east the existing regional development agency and assembly are playing a significant European role through their partnership in South East England House (the region's permanent Brussels representation) and also through the SEEDA/SEERA Joint Europe Committee developed regional European Action Plan. This is being delivered in partnership across the region and monitored by the South East European Officer Group. Buckinghamshire County Council currently holds the secretariat of this group.

2.5 The European legislative and institutional base is also subject to potential reforms. The Convention on the Future of Europe was established in March 2002 and is a precursor to the next EU Intergovernmental Conference that will see further reforms to the way the European Union is run. It follows the European Commission White Paper published last year on European Governance that strongly emphasises the equal role of different 'spheres' of governance from the local authority to the Council of Ministers. The Convention is made up of representatives of national parliaments, the European Parliament and national governments. The Committee of the Regions has observer status.

Key activities - Governance:

- **Organise and host an EU governance themed event focusing on the role of the Committee of the Regions. (European Strategic Objective 1)**
- **Track developments and discussions taking place within The Convention on the future of Europe taking special interest in how they affect local authorities. (European Strategic Objective 1)**

Link to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 2: Be the voice of Buckinghamshire on a wide range of public bodies.**
- **Aim 3: Work, regionally, nationally and internationally to secure a strong, dynamic, sustainable economy and highly skilled workforce within Buckinghamshire.**
- **Aim 5: Give our Councillors the opportunity to develop and extend their knowledge and skills so that they can be ambassadors for their areas and the County Council.**

3. *Europe and the Consumer*

3.1 Much of the new legislation that maintains consumer protection in the UK – from product and food safety to the labelling of local products and the affects of changes to the farming industry, emanates from the European Union. A proactive approach to Europe by Buckinghamshire enables the County Council to engage in European dialogue either directly, through South East England House, or via regional and national bodies, to reflect our interests and become prepared before it becomes

DRAFT

law. The alternative is to wait until new laws are in force that may require unexpected and costly responses.

3.2 During 2002 and early 2003 key issues being dealt with by the European Commission's DG SANCO, responsible for consumer policy, include the revision to legislation for product safety and the beginning of negotiations on legislation around the safety of services. The latter could have a significant affect in the longer term on local authorities as it may cover the safety of public amenities such as swimming pools and leisure centres. The year 2002 sees the establishment of a new European Food Authority and the further development of European food policy. There will also be a European Commission food safety campaign in early 2003 which will impact on producers and consumers alike.

3.3 Many of these regulations will both directly and indirectly affect consumers and producers in Buckinghamshire. For example, the recently established Buckinghamshire Food Group, led by the Economic Development Team, involves local producers that will have to comply with labelling regulations and food standards considerations. While the County Council's Trading Standards department places emphasis on food safety and animal health as amongst their current key priorities.

3.4 Similarly, DG ENV, the directorate general of the European Commission for environmental policy, is proposing new and revised legislation that could directly impact upon local authorities. The 2nd reading of the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive in the European Parliament took place in April 2002. This proposes to make it incumbent upon producers to collect waste electrical components from 2005. Also, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive is to be revised to increase targets to recycle more waste from households. This could strongly impact upon local authorities as the responsibility to collect is placed upon councils to collect an increased amount of waste products similar to the effects of the recent Fridges Directive.

3.5 These legislative developments will require new methods to be put in place so that internationally, regionally or locally imposed targets can better be achieved. A key local document in this context is The Buckinghamshire Waste Strategy 2001-2021. This aims to move from the culture of landfill towards more recycling and composting as well as using more hi-tech methods of gaining added-value from waste management. This will be complemented later in autumn 2002 by the south east regional waste strategy that is being developed by the South East Regional Assembly (SEERA).

Key activities – Europe and the consumer:

- **Co-organise a Thames Valley European Forum themed Brussels seminar around EU consumer affairs policy. (European Strategic Objective 3)**
- **Track legislative and policy developments around WEEE and ROHS. (European Strategic Objective 1)**
- **Work closely with Trading Standards Department to track and proactively respond to legislative and policy developments. (European Strategic Objective 1 and 4)**

DRAFT

Link to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 7: Encourage a fair, honest and safe trading environment, giving particular attention to providing consumer advice, giving guidance to small businesses and tackling those issues of greater concern to the public.**
- **Aim 7: Work with other authorities to reduce the amount of waste we all produce and develop a waste disposal strategy.**

4. *Sustainable and Rural Development*

4.1 The Buckinghamshire landscape is 80% rural and with it brings issues and challenges such as supporting and sustaining the agricultural sector, developing in a sustainable way the rural nature of the county for the benefit of local people and those visiting the county, and developing greater linkages between the rural hinterlands and the urban centres.

4.2 The year 2002 is a significant year for international responses to sustainable development as August sees the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. The EU will take a leading role aiming to reinvigorate Agenda 21 that was launched 10 years ago. The European Commission's 6th Environmental Action Plan, '*Environment 2010: Our future, our choice*' published in 2001, sets out in particular 4 key objectives and targets that provide the context for its policy actions. These objectives are largely in accord with County Council's current environment activities: *Tackling climate change* – the County Council continues its work in partnership with the Thames Valley Energy Agency, funded by the European Commission's SAVE II programme. *Nature and biodiversity* – the Buckinghamshire Biodiversity Action Plan sets out key targets to maintain the County's natural habitats and flora and fauna. *Environment and Health* – this issue is once again reflected in the County Council's Waste Strategy 2001- 2021. The Buckinghamshire LA21 Strategy is also a key document in the county's achievement of the *sustainable use of natural resources*. The European Commission continues to promote this strategic position through annual events such as Green Week and through key priorities under funding programmes such as LIFE III, or Interreg III for example.

4.3 The year 2002 also sees the continuation of the debate around the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy. This is set to see a shift away from production subsidies for the farming industry towards grants for rural development activity, puts food safety on the top of the agenda following the BSE and FMD crises, tries to ensure greater food quality as well as recognising that forthcoming EU enlargement will have a critical impact upon levels of funding available to areas such as the UK.

4.4 Buckinghamshire too places a strong emphasis on rural development that is principally delivered through the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Strategy and other countywide plans such as The Buckinghamshire Landscape Plan, The Buckinghamshire Tourism Strategy and the Buckinghamshire Joint Economic Development Strategy. Key projects including the Buckinghamshire Food Group and the Bernwood Ancient Hunting Forest Project contribute to improving the rural

DRAFT

economy in a sustainable way through farm diversification and tourism initiatives, community projects and landscape improvements.

4.5 The rural development pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy provides grant aid to support this kind of activity through the England Rural Development Programme. Current regional priorities under this programme include: promoting environmentally friendly farming, protecting and enhancing distinctive landscapes, countryside character and historic environment, and encouraging diversification of the rural economy and stimulate related activities.

Key activities – Sustainable and rural development:

- **Make a contribution to the delivery of the environment and sustainable development action lines of the South East Regional European Action Plan. (European Strategic Objective 2 and 4)**
- **Work with the Economic Development Team to support the establishment a high-level rural group for Buckinghamshire to focus on issues of strategic interest including CAP reform. (European Strategic Objective 2)**
- **Work with the Strategic Planning Team to develop a bid to the Interreg IIIb programme around the concept of Jobless and Spaceless Growth. (European Strategic Objective 3)**

Link to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 3: Devise and implement policies which support rural communities to reflect the changing nature of agriculture and the difficulty of providing services in rural areas.**
- **Aim 3: Protect the rural nature and beauty of Buckinghamshire whilst enhancing the urban environment.**

5. Education

5.1 Education is a primary concern of national and local government throughout Europe. Whilst each Member State is responsible for the content and organisation of its education system, the EU aims to add value to national and local policies by encouraging and supporting European co-operation on a range of projects, initiatives and professional development opportunities.

5.2 For example, Comenius – part of the Socrates programme – aims to develop the European dimension in school education by supporting projects and partnerships between schools. Comenius also provides a European dimension in professional development by enabling teachers to undertake training in another European country. Such training opportunities complement the Teachers International Professional Development Programme – part of the Buckinghamshire Advisory Service Continuing Professional Development Portfolio – and meet the aims of

DRAFT

Buckinghamshire's Educational Development Plan that emphasise continued professional development. Similarly, the Arion programme provides funding for advisors and senior teachers to investigate different aspects of education on a study visit to another European country. On return to their LEA, participants act as multipliers sharing expertise and best practice from across Europe.

5.3 In comparison with other policy areas, EU education policy is based more on co-operation and co-ordination rather than legislative instruments. The European Commission's DG for Education and Culture defines its role as preserving the best of the diversity of educational experience in Europe, while harnessing it to raise standards and meet the educational requirements of the 21st century. To this end, the EU produces policy documents in areas of common interest.

5.4 In 2001, the EU adopted a White Paper on Youth Policy and an Action Plan on eLearning. Buckinghamshire too is in the process of producing a formal Youth Policy that will for example emphasise the role of local young people in the national Youth Parliament initiative. In February 2002, EU leaders adopted a report on Future Objectives for Education and Training and an associated work programme. This will have significant impact upon the UK for example through the promotion of early language learning in schools or the teaching of entrepreneurship at various educational levels.

5.5 In the longer term, the European Commission has proposed making 2004 the European Year of Education through Sport. This will focus on the economic and social benefits of sport and the role that local authorities play in promoting sport. This will provide Buckinghamshire with an opportunity to develop countywide initiatives around this theme.

Key activities - Education:

- **To promote European professional development opportunities for teachers through the Buckinghamshire Advisory Service Continuing Professional Development function (European Strategic Objective 3)**
- **To proactively promote European co-operation opportunities to Buckinghamshire schools. (European Strategic Objective 2 and 3)**

Links to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 9: Support schools in strengthening the quality of leadership and management at all levels.**
- **Aim 9: Recognise the value of our teachers and invest in their development to improve the quality of teaching, thus increasing attainments at GCSE and enhancing pupils' personal development.**

DRAFT

6. Social Policy and Public Health

6.1 At the heart of European social policy is the inclusion of all individuals and communities into wider society. This includes increasing employment levels, on-going development of the knowledge driven economy and recognising changing approaches to work organisation, and also social protection. While Buckinghamshire has a very low level of unemployment, something which other regions of Europe aim to aspire to, there are some less advantaged groups in the community that could be supported into learning and employment. The County Council has a strong record in supporting activities under the European Social Fund that provides funding for projects that tackle unemployment, promotes social inclusion and encourages lifelong learning.

6.2 Following this theme of inclusion EU leaders recently agreed that 2003 should be designated the European Year of People with Disabilities. This follows the very successful European Year of Languages in 2001 during which the Thames Valley European Forum held a successful seminar on Sign Language in the Workplace. During 2003 the European Commission will support and fund events at a European, national, regional and local level that set out to raise awareness of the rights of people with disabilities and to promote equal opportunities. The ESF funded Buckinghamshire Agency for Supported Employment (BASE) has gone a long way to work together with people with learning disabilities and mental health difficulties to increase their involvement in the local economy and has been showcased at national level. This is one example of a local success story that can be demonstrated as best practice at European level through such themed years.

6.3 Buckinghamshire Adult Learning, part of Adult Services, has also already used ESF to increase access to information and communications technology training initiatives in the county. In particular to address issues such as: empowering individuals in disadvantaged areas of the county by increasing their ICT skills, meeting the needs of SMEs for ICT training, and sharing knowledge and skills through the application of ICT in providing flexible learning opportunities.

6.4 All district areas in Buckinghamshire have in the last couple of years consulted upon and drawn together partnership developed community safety strategies. Particular themes focused upon in these documents include crime and the fear of crime and also tackling violent crime. Similar to education, the criminal justice system in the UK is not within the competency of the European Union, however through several funding programmes the European Commission does look towards developing best practice in tackling some aspects of community safety that member states are particularly concerned about. One concern shared EU wide that is also of relevance to Buckinghamshire is the combating of violence particularly against children, young people and women. Locally, the Home Office funded Sunlight Project is looking at the causes and prevention of domestic violence within the county.

6.5 The health of individuals determines their ability to be active within and contribute to the economy and the local community. The development of three Primary Care Trusts within Buckinghamshire aims to bring all health and social care agencies together to provide more integrated services from health promotion to acute

DRAFT

hospital services. The European Commission is currently in the progress of drafting a new framework for public health that will focus upon health and social issues such as health information and targeted actions to promote health and prevent disease.

Key activities:

- **To track the EU policy developments particularly with regard to the Public Health Framework and identify possible opportunities for Buckinghamshire. (European Strategic Objective 1 and 3)**
- **To continue to gain optimum benefits from the European Social Fund for Buckinghamshire. (European Strategic Objective 3)**

Links to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 2: Work with all partners, including the police, to make Buckinghamshire a safer place in which to live, work and travel.**
- **Aim 6: Enable Learning Disability clients to achieve their potential and to participate fully in the life of their community, e.g. supported employment, access to community resources and lifelong learning.**

7. *Transport*

7.1 Tackling the effects of increased traffic whilst widening travel choices are central elements of Buckinghamshire's Local Transport Plan (LTP). They are also dominant themes in the recent European Commission White Paper on the Common Transport Policy. *European Transport Policy for 2010: Time to Decide* proposes a strategy designed to reduce transport growth, whilst easing pressure on the environment and placing users at the heart of transport services.

7.2 Many of the proposals put forward in the White Paper require measures to be taken at an international, European and national level. Others demand consistent action by regional and local authorities. These include rationalising the use of the car and improving road safety. Besides the LTP, these objectives are also consistent with Buckinghamshire's local Public Service Agreement (PSA).

7.3 Europe provides an opportunity through funding and networking to respond to transport issues and concerns. The European Commission supports research and development into energy and the promotion of clean urban transport through its Framework Programmes for Research and transport features strongly in the new Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Development that will cover the period 2002-2006.

7.4 The County Council has recently joined the European Transport Network, POLIS that provides us with on-going dialogue not only with transport officials in the European Commission but also transport practitioners throughout the EU. Such EU-level co-operation is a way of showcasing our successful activities to a wider

DRAFT

audience and helping to inform and influence future service delivery in Buckinghamshire.

Key activities - Transport:

- **Active involvement in the POLIS network with a view to securing EU funding (European Strategic Objective 2)**
- **EU-level co-operation where it helps to inform and influence transport service delivery in the County (European Strategic Objective 1 and 2)**

Link to Council's Supporting Policies:

- **Aim 3: Protect the rural nature and beauty of Buckinghamshire whilst enhancing the urban environment.**
- **Aim 10: Tackle the effects of increased traffic through the promotion of road safety and traffic calming schemes where appropriate.**
- **Aim 10: Provide wider travel choices and seek innovative ways of providing public transport services, particularly in rural areas.**