

JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Joint Scrutiny of the Partnership – Final Report

Councillors ELDC: F. Martin, E. Mossop (Chair), H. Matthews

Councillors BBC: J. Welbourn (Vice Chair), J. Skinner

Councillors SHDC: S. Walsh, B. Alcock, M. Booth

Officers: James Gilbert (Assistant Director, Corporate) Rebecca James (Scrutiny Officer)

Guest Witnesses: Councillor Craig Leyland (Leader, ELDC), Councillor Paul Skinner (Leader, BBC), Councillor Lord Gary Porter (Leader, SHDC), Councillor Jonathan Noble (Finance Portfolio Holder & PSPS Board Member, BBC) Councillor Peter Coupland (Finance Portfolio Holder, SHDC), Councillor Richard Fry (Finance Portfolio Holder & PSPS Board member, ELDC), Rob Barlow (Joint Chief Executive), Christine Marshall (Deputy Chief Executive / S151 Officer), Adrian Sibley (Deputy Chief Executive, Programme Delivery), Michelle Sacks (Deputy Chief Executive, Growth), John Leach (Deputy Chief Executive, Communities), Councillors Nick Worth (Deputy Leader, SHDC), Nigel Welton (Deputy Leader, BBC), Graham Marsh (Deputy Leader, ELDC), Rodney Grocock (PSPS Board Member, SHDC), Lewis Ducket (Chief Executive, PSPS), 2 members of the staff forum (anonymous)

Background and Introduction

On 1st October 2021, Boston Borough Council, East Lindsey District Council, and South Holland District Council formed the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership. The Councils each retained their independence but have been working towards a single officer team to deliver the Partnership Business Case for the sub-region and each Council's respective priorities. The Partnership was projected to deliver £42 million in savings over ten years; whilst providing all three Councils with greater capacity to deliver their priorities.

The approved business case demonstrated a number of opportunities for the Partnership. Progress on these identified opportunities form the basis of this annual joint scrutiny of the Partnership and can be found in the scoping document at **Appendix B**.

The panel met 5 times, interviewed 18 witnesses with a set of standard questions, found at **Appendix C**, and conducted a short questionnaire among all Councillors to canvass their views. The results of the questionnaire are attached at **Appendix D**. Notes from the meetings can be found at **Appendix E**.

Panel Discussion and Analysis

“Be impactful rather than do too much too soon”

We have interviewed a large number of the Senior Leadership Team (Councillors and Officers) over the past month. From our discussions with them, it is clear that there is widespread support and satisfaction in the direction the Partnership is travelling. Financial saving, still the major driver, has been justified along with the sharing of staff, the opportunities for their advancement and the bigger single voice at a strategic level were the most quoted examples of the benefits of the Partnership. Examples of how successful funding bids such as the UK Prosperity Fund have brought benefits to the three Councils have been demonstrated. The ongoing discussions at Government level over IDB's as yet unresolved, were cited as difficult conversations prior to the Partnership. However, there is recognition that the Partnership in order to develop successfully, has to work harder to develop that single organisational culture and there are still significant barriers preventing progress in this. These include the integration of ICT, a stronger relationship with PSPS, constitutional alignment and service reviews.

We also interviewed the Chairman and Chief Executive of PSPS to enquire how the organisation has adjusted with a third partner, South Holland District Council joining the Partnership. PSPS has had to rise to significant challenges such as staff turnover, recruitment, capacity and working from home in addition to the assimilation of Boston Borough into PSPS over the past two years. As the Partnership has evolved, it has asked more of PSPS and therefore a re-prioritisation of plans is required. Closer working with PSPS at the onset of this journey would have helped as they should be seen as a key facilitator to the Partnership, described by one as a fourth partner. Ahead of the Partnership are some major service reviews and it must be understood that this will be resource-hungry taking up to two years to fully align teams. An enhanced transformation budget will be required to progress this.

The panel were keen to sound out the views of a wider selection of staff and asked to interview members of the Staff Forum. The forum has representation from across all three Councils and meets every six weeks. There is frustration about the alignment of ICT across the Partnership especially when staff are unable to access different IT systems at partner offices. There is uncertainty over the alignment of pay and conditions and no clear timescale. Overall, communications with service managers, team meetings and response to requests appear inconsistent with the One Team approach. A clear, consistent, and honest message to staff about the purpose of service reviews for example, is needed otherwise staff will just assume that it is about cuts.

As with the joint scrutiny of the Alliance between Boston and East Lindsey, all Councillors were asked to complete short questionnaire on the progress of the Partnership. There were mixed responses but there were more Councillors willing to engage and respond this time. A key theme emerging for Councillors were response times across the Partnership, including PSPS not only for Councillors but for staff and

members of the public. Other responses cited frustration with ICT and more targeted communication to the public, making them aware of the benefits of the Partnership. There is an opportunity for more Councillors to act as a 'sense check' to ensure that officers are aware of what direction councillors want to go in as our recommendations are more targeted and time lined than our scrutiny into the partnership last year. We are keen to see these recommendations together with the recommendations arising from the Peer Review Group tracked through the three Council's Scrutiny Committees along with regular updates on progress.

I would like to thank all the Councillors who took the time and trouble to take part in this important piece of work. Also, I must thank Rebecca James and James Gilbert for supporting us and for their invaluable advice.

Recommendations

1. Alignment of ICT systems and processes across the Partnership will begin with a scrutiny group reviewing the draft Partnership ICT Strategy document. An initial meeting will take place by the end of January 2023 and then adoption of an ICT Strategy and associated action plan to be completed by April 2023;
2. Communication needs to be improved – including:
 - 2a) To remind all staff of the requirements surrounding Member response times at a service/directorate meeting, in line with each sovereign council's constitutional requirements. This should be done by the end of January 2023;
 - 2b) Ensure the internal communication review addresses issues raised by staff (Council and PSPS) and is completed by the end of January 2023 and then start to implement any recommendations by February 2023;
 - 2c) There should be more targeted and relevant communication to the public to raise awareness of the Partnership and specifically its benefits. The websites to be updated by the end of January 2023 to include more information about the Partnership's work to date;
 - 2d) To develop a Partnership Communication Strategy during 2023/24 and for this to be identified as an action in the next Annual Delivery Plan;
3. With regard to the alignment of key policies, a list of those identified on the policy register to be part of the Annual Delivery Plans going forward, to be taken to each Council's relevant scrutiny committee for review;
4. The three Leaders to consider the merits of aligning Portfolio roles and responsibilities across the Partnership to assist with a more streamlined system for officers to work with;

5. The Cabinet / Executive to consider the merits of aligning the Constitutions of the three Councils where appropriate;
6. To recommend that the Partnership asks the Independent Remuneration Panel to ensure that in undertaking its next review it takes on board the different levels of Member allowances across the Partnership;
7. Involve PSPS at an early stage in the development of each year's Annual Delivery Plan to ensure joined up working and planning / capacity for planned work. Officers to meet to agree how this would work by the end of January 2023;
8. The Group Manager – Organisational Development to look at the barriers to successful recruitment and retention of staff to mitigate capacity issues, including apprenticeships, succession planning and progression opportunities for current staff. A review with recommendations on tackling the issues to be completed by March 2023;
9. Ensure there is sufficient funding in each Councils transformation budget to support the service review programme;
10. Ensure that the pace of change is realistic and achievable.

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