

## **PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY PANEL – MEETING NOTES**

**Date and Time:** Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2022, 6:00pm

### **Rob Barlow**

- We spent considerable time discussing and agreeing the business case to ensure financial savings; money into the region; and most importantly the ability to have conversations with partners not open to them before - including shared work programmes and discussions around, for example, IDB levies with Government. These were difficult conversations to open prior to the Partnership.
- There were concerns initially about the fast pace of the partnership – it moved at a quicker pace than anticipated to everyone's credit.
- Pleased that many staff have been able to further their career in the first 12 months. There are greater opportunities for advancement.
- We have done well with our profile as a Partnership – it is known by Government and achieves regular national media profile in Local Government press
- Trust - some of the organisational barriers have broken down positively between staff cohorts and staff are trusting one another.
- In creating a single organisational culture, there are still lessons to learn as officers and much work to do
- There is a challenge to PFHs as some aren't currently engaging cross partnership and in doing so could achieve more for the Partnership.
- Constitutional differences - more work to consider around standardisation and alignment.
- PSPS - need to do more with the company given their criticality.
- ICT still a barrier and more integration needed.
- Service Reviews - small scale so far - need to consider a wider scale of transformation to achieve Partnership benefit.
- We have met with Government officials to explain that half Council Tax collected goes to IDBs rather than councils being able to use to fund services like other Councils can. There has been an unofficial promise they would seek to build something into the financial settlement this year to help – I have concerns that staff turnover at government means this get lost in transition. We remain hopeful but no guarantees.
- Constitutional review is a big piece of work - it is a challenge. There are areas of the constitution worth looking at first - contract procedure rules for examples. Hard for officers when limits/processes are different.
- We are not leaving posts vacant to show savings, we are actively recruiting to vacant roles. Many of the savings so far were there on day one - with savings initially from senior management team and a few from service reviews. A lot of benefit has been from cost avoidance so far as opposed to removing costs.

- We are filling posts well generally, but Housing Revenue Account at SH is a challenge sometimes. We are seeing a lot of turnover, but that is the nature of the employment market generally at present.
- We have had lots of feedback from partners. As we do good things, we should promote them as having the public on side is helpful.
- Devolution issue - changes at Government make the situation hard to read. They may delay until a general election or might need to push forward to create a more efficient model of Local Government. Much of what we are doing is what we would be doing if we were to be a single local authority. The work we have done has placed us in the best possible place for the future.
- Transport and other areas not in our remit – it will be a long haul to see any real change in these areas as we are not directly responsible but do have more power to influence the solutions.

### **Adrian Sibley**

- Officers are spread more thinly. Teams/Zoom has helped with this by reducing travel time. There is an issue with taking the same presentations to multiple different meetings and streamlining would be helpful.
- Things turned around more quickly than we thought.
- Strengths brought to partnership e.g., Christine excellent governance.
- Bringing on lots of projects for all 3 councils.
- Need to embed the partnership through the tiers of areas / services. This would not be about where teams are based - it would be about working as partners and the solution would look different for each team.

### **Councillor 1**

- SHDC joining was a much smoother process than when we brought forward the ELDC/BBC alliance.
- We now have different officers with different strengths – it is about using those strengths for the benefit of the whole partnership and not just individual Councils.
- I am pleased with how things have gone so far; we have knowledge we didn't have before.
- It is about more than money saving; we also have greater representation with external partners.
- Communication – it is useful to have regular updates for councillors from each directorate.
- PSPS – need some nuances to help work through issues but on the whole, we work well with them. It is important to keep them on side to know they are valued even when there are blips.

- Future – we can get more out of this; we can push the partnership to other service areas and empower others with decision making
- Staff development is key to recruitment and retention
- Cultural change – executive / cabinets meet, joint scrutiny meets, we are working hard to provide opportunities to bring different groups of councillors together to understand how each other works.
- Education, skills, employment – will have more success with this as a partnership over time (e.g., Plant & Bean factory).
- Best use of officer time – shared briefings / member days, align papers/templates, video presentations for use at all 3, we have paved the way with joint scrutiny and executive/cabinet, also some more joint briefings coming up too on Police and NHS.

## **Councillor 2**

- We have been carefully treading this first year – it has been not without challenge but is important for this to happen at a steady pace to ensure things are done for the right reason.
- Budgets and shared learning set us in good stead for future challenges e.g., devolution – this is a useful footprint for a way forward, the potential of what we have done is positive.
- We faced incredible challenges through covid, but we became an alliance then a partnership whilst dealing with those challenges.
- Concerns over PSPS, helpful to learn from these and move forward.
- I have good relationship with other leaders – it is good to know a sense of their 'place' and where they are from / how they see things.
- We are already seeing real differences; we have a much bigger say/impact in things we are involved in than we did on our own.
- Levelling up / shared prosperity has been a 3-way piece of work.
- Not always apparent to the public what we are doing and why.
- We need to keep up with the fundamentals, but also shout about the 'extras' we do as we've not always had the funding share, we should have but still managed to get good outcomes.
- Starting to work together more closely e.g., arrangements for Operation London Bridge were a good example of strong partnership working.
- Politically we are about improving residents 'place' wherever that is, some see the partnership as a threat to traditional councils, but I want to sell the benefits of being part of a bigger group that has different strengths and backgrounds but with many common threads to tie us together.

## **Panel discussion – emerging themes and recommendations**

The panel discussed what they had heard and noted the following as key areas for further discussion / investigation:

- How to make the best use of officer time (e.g., recordings of presentations);
  - Constitution / policy alignment;
  - Embed partnership through all tiers;
  - Culture needs to be cascaded / embedded ;
  - More departmental collaboration / amalgamation;
  - Bring public on board re: benefits of partnership;
  - Barriers with ICT;
  - Influencing key issues outside our remit.
- } 3 linked themes

**Date and Time:** Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2022, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

### **Christine Marshall**

- This was a big change, and it takes time to adjust – for SHDC more as staff jumped from working for 1 council to 3 councils, whereas BBC and ELDC went from one, to two, to three so the change was slightly more gradual;
- Each council had their own strengths to bring to the Partnership, for example Boston from a size perspective benefits from the extra staff resource and expertise;
- It is easier to have 1 conversation with partners for all 3 councils and also gives us a much more powerful voice;
- It is good for staff in terms of opportunities for promotion compared with a single authority, which in turn helps with recruitment;
- We have a good mix of members who are happy to work together;
- There is some disconnect from 'place' especially in SHDC and these issues need to be picked up;
- Councillors and residents are sometimes waiting too long for responses so this needs to be improved;
- Sometimes we look inwards too much to compare each other, instead of comparing to other authorities
- Some frustration over the time it is taking to align governance and processes;
- Good pace in getting things done – but also need to be mindful of careful adjustment to allow for place / intricacies of each council;
- Some good opportunities for efficiencies with PSPS;
- Pace of change was impacted by Covid, grants, Ukraine, the legacy of these issues had to be absorbed first;
- Need to use S113 to share staff on more projects to help build relationships;
- There is a need to realise this is not going to be perfect straight away, we are 3 large areas with similarities and differences;
- Need enhanced arrangements on 'place';
- We need a Partnership transformation resource to drive change and ensure the capacity to follow it through;

- Closer working with PSPS, this needed to have been factored in more at the start of the journey;
- Need to ensure robust governance;
- alignment of policies is key – ICT aligned, HR currently in final stages of being aligned, CPRs due to go through approval process shortly;
- PSPS – we have changed what we want from them so they will need time to adjust their plans to align and take advantage of new ways of working;
- There will be more opportunities for efficiencies through PSPS once theirs and our processes are aligned;
- There are some big projects to work on and some service reviews may take 1 – 2 years to fully align teams;
- Top 3 recommendations before the elections in May 2023 – 1. Transformation resource to enable service reviews, 2. Process of supporting members queries, 3. Key work with PSPS as a facilitator.

### **Michelle Sacks**

- Greater sphere of influence e.g., we hosted DEFRA today, wouldn't have happened as an individual council;
- What we can do collectively and collaboratively is much greater as a three rather than individually;
- Joint scrutiny work – recognition of positive collaboration, and more meaningful outputs (such as the Public Transport scrutiny);
- Reputation and ability to deliver
- Governance can be bureaucratic, process focused and risk averse – need to reflect on this and in transition to a shared, One Team approach could look at being more strategic and less risk averse, more flexible in how we deal with things so we can be innovative
- Managing member expectations - response to member times need work better – is there a better process for this.
- Alignment of portfolios would help when looking to align other things such as policies. E.g., my PFHs meet together but for other PFHs not always possible as there are different mixes – one for post-May;
- Managing member expectations – in terms of what is happening in each area – whilst we are still a new partnership reflecting that some areas are more developed, because of Town Fund as an example, and partnerships are more firmly established, but this does not mean this can be not delivered across the whole partnership;
- One voice – transport, sub-regional impact
- Inward investment – having a 3-council partnership makes the difference when making business cases to prospective partners and investors
- Sharing of expertise – helps with funding submissions on quick turnaround;
- Alignment of constitution in terms of decision-making process – creates complexities as 3 processes to follow to get 1 decision made;

- PSPS – finance and ICT not been an easy process – they don't always appreciate that some of the client base is councillors and that their issues need to take priority e.g., when starting a meeting;
- Need some innovation from PPS to allow us to carry out what we as councils want;
- S113 agreements – should have as many staff on these as possible to allow further collaboration between teams;
- Align all 3 council's constitution as a priority to ensure we are as efficient and effective as possible;
- Program in more all-member events face to face to build relationships, share experiences across the 3, opportunity to hear things directly from councillors – brings more breadth and depth;
- Priorities 1. Governance – alignment and flexibility, 2. S113 staff arrangements, 3. PPS to match our ambition and aspiration, 4. Work more collaboratively with PPS and partners and build on our reputation for collaborative working;

### **John Leach**

- Partnership can work like a unitary in terms of a higher profile with partners and better resilience, whilst respecting the three councils sovereign identity;
- The 3 councils work collaboratively on challenges faced
- A larger organisation offers more opportunities for staff careers;
- We operate at size and scale effectively and efficiently;
- We are on the right footing to do more as a 3. We had good starting points as individually all had things to positively bring to the Partnership Each Council does really well so together, we can do a really fantastic job to deliver good services to all our residents;
- Uncertainty and in some instances a lack of confidence can be a challenge – need to turn this into a positive. We need to help build self-confidence, there are lots of positives.
- Has been a steep learning curve, need to be careful not to move too fast or be too greedy. The system needs to be able to cope.
- Be impactful rather than try to do too much too soon; there's been some great progress so far and it's important to keep a balanced and at the same time progressive momentum
- Build on our resources and capacity over time in order to achieve all our ambitions for the three sovereign councils;
- The 3 councils have understandably different cultures, we need to encourage a level playing field on standard matters by looking at policies, procedures, constitution, whilst respecting and understanding local identity;
- Need to be empowered by the size and scale of the partnership to get on with what we have been tasked with;
- Some good progress– climate change strategy, community safety strategy, £400K of funding for community safety, £7.2 million green

homes/sustainable warmth funding, community lottery, carbon reduction plan, Healthy Living Board, Envirocrime contract for the Partnership progressing, emergency planning arrangements in place across the sub-region – all done by joint teams for the Partnership, same thing for 3 councils but using one team;

- Like many places need better IT infrastructure;
- Regardless of devolution, we need to do this now as it is the right thing to do for our 3 councils;
- We have a higher profile, more resilience, better pool of knowledge;
- Collaboration has enabled many projects including access to various grant funding schemes, Towns Fund, UK Shared Prosperity Fund;
- Benefits for staff ambitions and their career development and also for the councils in terms of succession planning;
- We can use best practice from each authority to deliver better services across all 3 areas;
- There have been some savings as well as cost avoidance
- There is more to do regarding service reviews
- Key things to resolve / alignment where possible in terms of constitution, terms and conditions, resourcing, ICT;
- Need to build on communications 1. To ensure officers and councillors are up to date, supporting the role of councillors with good information and on delivery, 2. To build relationships, face to face on the ground as well as virtually, 3. To ensure awareness of roles across the Partnership;
- Need to build on opportunities for collaboration between departments;
- Alignment of portfolios where appropriate;
- S113 opportunities for more staff;
- Need clearer understanding of the collective resources available (internally and externally, working with partners);
- Need to ensure we never lose focus about why we are here is to deliver excellent public services for our residents. Always seeking to ensure continuous improvement through collaboration;
- Top 3 recommendations before the elections in May 2023 1. Ensure financial resilience, 2. Be realistic whilst agreeing progressive activity through the Annual Delivery Planning process, 3. Always ensure we know what direction councillors want us to go in as that is the 'sense check' for officers.

### **Panel discussion, including emerging themes and recommendations**

- SHDC did not have an easy partnership with Breckland, so had a concern over things not going well this time either;
- It was agreed by panel members that there is a need to move forward to the future of the partnership and look to future opportunities, draw on the shared expertise and ensure councils are 'on the same page';

- There is a need to listen to officer expertise and use it to help deliver;
- There is a need to break down the barriers that stop officers getting on with things;
- Important to use each other's strengths;
- Joining as three means we have the benefits of a large partnership but with the ability to keep things local and keep the local connection;

**Date and Time:** Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2022, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

### **Councillor 3**

- More joined up strategic planning
- High level agreement on priorities
- Bigger single voice as a sub-region
- More influence with partners
- Shared senior management works well, junior members need to also feel part of the partnership
- Need to ensure balance with member briefings, can seem Town Deal focused sometimes
- Bigger opportunities as a 3, more outward thinking, seen as a bigger partner and better option by external partners, can have wide ranging discussions that lead to some key priorities being dealt with
- Shared expertise of getting funding has been shared across the partnership
- Peer Review is designed to help us improve so the 1-year point seemed a good time to ask what we have done well and to get pointers on what to focus on moving forward.

### **Councillor 4**

- We have influence as a partnership now
- Officers can speak at a regional level, and we are able to build on this
- There are resources we can tap into such as planning expertise
- Communication is harder to ensure it is kept relevant across 3 sovereign councils
- Economic side aligned quickly; other departments are not as easy to align as they are 'place' centric rather than area/region centric
- Need to realise areas of service may all move at a different pace
- Need to ensure the public know how the partnership works and how it can benefit them
- Increased workload due to joint projects
- Need all member briefings for things that affect the partnership and council specific briefings for things affecting sovereign councils



### **Councillor 5**

- We can do more joint work as portfolio holders, but need to move steadily to ensure we get it right
- We have good foundations to build on, but need to ensure we are being measured and thoughtful
- Looking at joint opportunities such as hydrogen production plants;
- Agreement generally with the points raised by other councillors

### **Councillor 6**

- I am cautiously optimistic; it is early days and there is more work to do
- It is currently more difficult to access information, it takes longer to get answers
- Huge increase in workload for PSPS during Covid that created a backlog they weren't prepared for, this cleared now but did cause difficulties at the time
- We need to build on economies of scale
- We need to share best practice and expertise across all 3 councils
- We are more efficient as we have an integrated finance system across the 3 councils
- I think PSPS should stick with the 3 councils they have for now and consolidate what they are doing and ensure it is right
- There is no substitute for human interaction, the councils need a different split in home / office requirements as PSPS have

### **Councillor 7**

- Good to have a shared team structure, I now deal with staff across the partnership, and we have gained some excellent staff
- There is motivation to get things delivered
- Concerns around structural changes caused some confusion initially, particularly amongst councillors
- Pressure on staff now working across 3 councils, need to manage the workload carefully
- We are on track to deliver shared services and savings
- We can share knowledge and staff expertise
- We need better / more communication for members, and this would help embed the partnership more quickly
- We may be too reactive; we need to identify the right kind and level of support for the extra workload successful grant funding brings
- The delivery teams are under pressure due to our success rate in accessing financial Capital support and we need to identify the right kind and level of support to deliver the extra workload successful grant funding brings

- We are 3 areas historically left behind, now we are getting money offered to us, we need to ensure we are in a position to make the most of those opportunities
- We lost a good finance officer due to our inadequate home working policies, so if we wish to obtain and retain good staff, we need to be mindful of the difference between what officers want and what councillors want.

### **Councillor 8**

- Worried there is too much in the Annual Delivery Plan
- Strong alliance across the 3 councils, thinking alike and sharing so much, such as the coastline, drainage board, gives us a strong footing if devolution comes along
- Lots of work to do, need to be mindful not to overload staff
- Useful to look and compare through performance indicators
- Need to ensure all staff are aware of the partnership and the benefits it can bring
- Have moved too fast on some things, need to stop, and take stock, rethink priorities, cannot keep adding extra work just because the opportunity may be there
- As finance portfolio holders, we are sovereign lookers as we each have to balance the books for our sovereign councils, we have no specific shared budget
- There are not as many issues as I feared there may be, but because our finances are run through PSPS, we need to ensure they can grow to provide the services we want them to
- Officer core have been through the pandemic and lockdown so are prepared for the coming months, we may need to brush up our business preparedness and risk register (James Gilbert clarified that there is a single emergency plan and continuity plan being created for the partnership)
- Harder to get answers and decisions, made more difficult by home working, I feel staff need a better balance of home and office working to allow them to learn and collaborate and discuss more easily

### **Councillor 9**

- The partnership has been positive, I believe we should be a 4-way partnership to include PSPS as they are integral to what we are doing
- Services provided through PSPS are becoming aligned, creating capacity and resilience
- Creating efficiency and capacity in the longer term is easier now we also have Boston in the team
- Timing of the partnership wasn't ideal for PSPS as they were already tasked with bringing BBC on board, the partnership was added very quickly after that

- There has been additional staff turnover due to workloads and it has been difficult to recruit to some senior positions
- PSPS have found it more difficult to liaise with Council staff, harder to meet and chat and have informal discussions when staff are working remotely
- PSPS are trialling different ways of working such as a 4-day week, people applying always ask what the home / office split is
- Boston needed time and investment to be brought on board, we need to be aware of the pace of change, steady the ship to ensure resilience
- There is a lot of pressure on PSPS, we should concentrate on the 4-way partnership and ensure it is settled and happy.

### **Panel Discussion**

Key thoughts from panel members on priorities moving forward were noted as follows:

- Pace of changes
- Balance of home and office working
- Member response times
- Improve public perception
- PSPS recruitment and retention issues
- Public and backbench knowledge of the Partnership
- Alignment of systems and processes such as ICT
- Capacity regarding finance – being proactive not reactive regarding funding pots available
- Ability to be proactive not reactive in terms of funding availability

**Date and Time:** Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

### **Lewis Ducket**

- PSPS has adjusted fairly well but also had some challenges brought about by additional work/timing ;
- The Partnership was announced only 6 months after we had started 'onboarding' Boston Borough Council, which created additional work/requirements which impacted on resourcing
- Our initial priorities were aligning finance, HR, and payroll systems both for the S&ELCP but also as we are doing this as part of onboarding BBC;
- Customer contact and revenue and benefits had additional significant workload demands, linked to covid support measures (grants/energy rebates payments etc
- ICT technological alignment process has started both in supporting partnership but also aligning BBC across PSPS services;

- There are continual evolving adjustments/changes/additional requirements at the moment and likely to be more going forwards
- There are still challenges with the remaining pandemic work which is still creating extra pressure – high levels of calls/closing off covid support activity such as energy rebate scheme;
- Staff turnover has also been a challenge during part of the post pandemic phase; however, this is impacting all organisations and not just PSPS
- Reprioritisation of work – lots of what PSPS do is cyclical, so the changes disrupted some of that regularity coupled with the need to do additional work without any additional resource ;
- Staff turnover issues meant at times we had additional demands coupled with normal work with either new staff or additional work needing to be absorbed
- We Need to re-look at priorities and what will have the most impact;
- PSPS is not currently looking to expand outwards, rather to provide more services to existing partners such as a procurement service;
- Pre-partnership we were doing lots of things twice in 2 different ways, now we can look to align back-office functions so they are done in the same way across the partnership – this will then create capacity'
- We hope to recruit and retain staff in a changing work market to provide a more streamlined and efficient service, a shared model of delivery across the partnership and realise the benefits of the councils having a LATCO vehicle for delivery;
- I am aware of some challenges which were faced between PSPS, and partner councils and they occurred at the same time with big programmes of change work – onboarding BBC created difficulties, but some issues were not linked to the creation of the partnership but linked to covid grants and council tax rebate payments and BBC receiving the PSPS delivery of shared model service v's the in-house model they were used to;
- There is the option for the councils to look at how they commission services in the future and align programmes of work;
- The Partnership need to involve PSPS at an earlier stage with some projects of their forward planning
- The balance between the current cost of PSPS Services v's service levels expected needs careful monitoring – the councils may have to consider further investment into parts of PSPS to achieve some of their future ambitions – there are big expectations placed on HR/Finance and ICT;
- ICT – opportunity to achieve alignments of systems across all 3 councils;

## Q&A session with staff members

*James Gilbert left the meeting at this point to allow the staff members joining the meeting to speak openly and honestly without a member of management team present.*

- Staff forum meets every 6 weeks and has representation from across all 3 councils and different service areas and teams;
- Issue of staff terms and conditions raised, no answer as yet;
- Ongoing issue of capacity, including recruitment and retention;
- ELDC and BBC have number of concerns from some frontline staff and those services out in the community;
- At an operation level, if you work across more than one council, you cannot access the different IT systems at partner offices;
- There are better career opportunities as a partnership
- More access to cross council expertise;
- Creates more resilience if done correctly;
- Partnership is a mystery for many residents, staff out in the community still refer to their sovereign council when identifying themselves to residents;
- Closing CAPS at ELDC was an issue for elderly, vulnerable and disadvantaged;
- Staff need to be told reasons behind why certain requests are declined or decisions rejected;
- Staff would like a timescale for the review and alignment of pay and terms and conditions;
- Managers need to be honest with staff about the purpose of service reviews and staff otherwise just assume it is about cuts;
- Inconsistency in how requests for new posts are approved, Boston staff feel unfairly treated on this issue;
- Recruitment is difficult across the country, but our salaries are not competitive, and we are not 'savvy' enough in how we advertise jobs;
- Need to do recruitment well, attract the right people to the area and to the jobs we have;
- Morale is low and stress levels are increasing, staff do not feel that there is 'One Team' as managers do not follow the Value and Behaviours instilled on the rest of the staff;
- Inconsistency in team meetings and staff receiving information and updates about the partnership;
- Home working is different from person to person but there needs to be flexibility and choice depending on the needs of the service;
- There is a leadership programme, but there is a need for something on a more 'entry level' for junior staff;
- The leadership programme needs improving – you are developed but not necessarily progresses;
- Need to make the most of the apprenticeship levy as they do at BBC;

- Would be good to meet with PSPS staff to ensure good working relationships but as the Partnership is new, need separate staff forums at this time;

### **Panel discussion / emerging recommendations**

- ICT, communication, and alignment seem to be the key issues raised by those we have spoken with
- Need accountability from Leaders on recommendations, suggest these are monitored more regularly than once a year
- Need to include staff forum members at all future scrutiny of the partnership panels
- Are HR a barrier to successful recruitment?
- Infrastructure of our areas affect recruitment
- Managers need to follow the 'One Team' values and adopt best practice to ensure all staff are kept informed and feel part of the partnership – great branding, is it followed through by everyone?
- Frustration with delays in the ICT work programme including the shared strategy for the Partnership