

JOINT SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Joint Scrutiny of the Partnership 2023 – Final Report

Councillors ELDC: F. Martin (Vice Chair), C. Dickinson, G. Horton

Councillors BBC: S. Welberry, C. Rylott, L. Savickiene

Councillors SHDC: C. Brewis (Chair and Report Author), B. Alcock, M. Booth

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

Guest Witnesses: Councillor Craig Leyland (Leader, ELDC), Councillor Anne Dorrian (Leader, BBC), Councillor Nick Worth (Leader, SHDC), Rob Barlow (Joint Chief Executive), Christine Marshall (Deputy Chief Executive / S151 Officer), Adrian Sibley (Deputy Chief Executive, Programme Delivery), John Leach (Deputy Chief Executive, Communities), Rachel Robinson (Group Manager, Organisational Development), 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 efficiency 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 10 witnesses with a set of standard questions, and conducted a short questionnaire among all Councillors to canvass their views. The key themes that came out of the questionnaire are attached at **Appendix C**. Partnership Progress documents can be found at **Appendix D and E**.

Evidence Gathering

The questions below were asked of all guest witnesses. Questions 1, 2, and 4 were also used for the all-Councillor survey. 44 Councillors from across the Partnership responded, which constitutes a 36% response rate.

1. What do you think have been the positives of the S&ELCP so far?
2. What would you improve about the S&ELCP? Is there anything you would do differently?
3. What progress has there been against the recommendations in the original business case and what issues have there been in terms of implementation?
4. What do you think the key area(s) of focus should be for the Partnership in the year ahead?

Panel Discussion and Analysis

I think I speak for the whole 'task and finish group' in saying how very much we appreciated the willingness of members, directors, and staff to deal with our questions both frankly and thoroughly.

We were also pleased to find that the responses regarding both progress thus far, and issues still to be addressed, were almost unanimously in agreement!

The overall impression we have got was, in short:

"Thus far, so good and well done, but much still needs to be done to make our partnership even more effective and successful".

Issues raised by many of those we spoke with covered specific areas of concern.

Retention of staff and successful recruitment were considered essential. Mention was made by several people regarding success coming from internal training, and also of contacts with further education institutions, but much remained to be done.

Alignment, especially but not only in ICT, was regarded as essential, and was still raised as an issue.

There is a need for regular briefings of members, and to others, regarding progress on aims, and how the partnership is working together.

All responders stressed that closer alignment could very well bring disproportional (in the positive sense!) benefits, but as with all suggestions, there needs to be clear intended deadlines as to when an improvement might be achieved.

Sight should not be lost of devolution, whether sought by ourselves, or imposed by a government of either persuasion, and on where our intentions and preferences might lie.

Differential pay scales were raised. This is a very complex issue, but needs to be faced up to, even though it is largely caused by 'history' of the Councils' pre-Partnership.

Capacity is a very large issue, but successful recruitment would help address this.

Our close relationship with PSPS has been mentioned frequently, and our recommendation acknowledges that, and stresses the 'common issues' which are shared with the Partnership. There is the need to continue the good working relationship with PSPS to ensure challenges in recruitment and capacity can be tackled successfully to support the delivery of key projects/priorities.

We were especially impressed by the 'Partnership Progress Delivery Update' documents (found at **Appendix D and E**), which illustrated just how much had been achieved within S&ELCP in quite difficult times.

We may sometimes need 'outside help' to enable us to meet our aims more expeditiously.

Councillor expectations should be high. We cannot afford, even momentarily, to 'sit back on our laurels', despite already having been noticed regionally and nationally. We also need to build on our links, not only with PSPS, but with all other partners.

We have a number of recommendations, which we commend to you. I would like very much, as Chair of the Task Group, to express my sincere gratitude to the members of the Task Group, for their constantly constructive involvement, and to thank James Gilbert, and above all Rebecca James, for their unstinting help to us, enabling us to reach this position and report back to yourselves.

Recommendations

1. ICT:
 - a) Estimated timescales to be added to the ICT action plan as soon as they are known, with the priority being the ability for staff to collaborate more easily across the Partnership.

2. Communication:
 - a) Promote the work being done internally around retention and recruitment so there is better awareness amongst staff of activity and progression opportunities, including further education;
 - b) Promote the Partnership to raise awareness of its benefits to staff, Councillors, and residents;
 - c) Arrange Partnership-wide briefings to provide key updates on the activity and progress of the Partnership as appropriate/relevant.

3. Capacity:
 - a) Take account of workload when bidding for and accepting future funding/grant opportunities – for example, look to work with partners on projects to bolster capacity;
 - b) Look to ensure activity in recruitment and retention works towards a further improvement to the work done around new recruits, career development and succession planning;
 - c) For the Partnership and PSPS to work closely together to ensure resources are available to support the delivery requirements of both organisations.

4. Alignment:
 - a) Constitution – to accelerate the alignment of the 3 constitutions as a priority and develop an associated timeline;
 - b) Service reviews – to ensure these are progressed at the earliest opportunity to allow full advantage for team working;
 - c) Pay scales and T&Cs – to clearly set out timescales for the review of staff terms and conditions and shared officer pay.

Report author: Councillor Chris Brewis