

JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL OF THE STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

Joint BBC/ELDC Scrutiny of the Strategic Alliance

Councillors ELDC: F. Martin, E. Mossop (Vice Chair), H. Matthews, S. Devereux, D. Mangion, C. Newman, D. Edginton.

Councillors BBC: S. Woodliffe, J. Welbourn, J. Skinner (Chair), A. Dani, K. Chalmers, P. Goodale, D. Brown.

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

Witnesses: Councillor Craig Leyland (Leader, ELDC), Councillor Paul Skinner (Leader, BBC), Councillor Jonathan Noble (Finance Portfolio Holder, BBC) Rob Barlow (Joint Chief Executive), Christine Marshall (Deputy Chief Executive / S151 Officer), Adrian Sibley, (Deputy Chief Executive, Programme Delivery)

Introduction

In July 2020, Boston Borough Council and East Lindsey District formed a strategic alliance. The Councils retained their independence and have been working towards a single officer team to deliver their respective priorities. The alliance was projected to deliver £15.4m in savings over ten years; whilst providing both Councils with greater capacity to deliver their priorities.

This joint scrutiny panel was asked to undertake a review of the alliance and merged workforce, focusing on 4 key areas:

1. To understand the progress that has been made so far in bringing together functions and teams across the alliance;
2. To assess whether joint working on the planning and delivery of services has mitigated pressure on the Councils' budgets; and whether projected savings (money and capacity) are being achieved;
3. To understand the opportunities that have been secured by the Councils' working collaboratively together;
4. To understand how it has been possible to merge cultures, the difficulties that have arisen from this and how this can be managed.

The panel met 3 times, interviewed 6 witnesses (Questions found at **Appendix C**), and conducted a survey among BBC and ELDC Councillors to canvass their views. The results of the survey are attached at **Appendix D**.

Panel Discussion / Analysis

Managing a scrutiny across our two Councils is no easy task as alignment of Councillors' diaries to attend these joint meetings becomes more difficult. This is illustrated by the fact that the report is led by two Councillors, Judith Skinner, the elected Chairman and Edward Mossop, the Vice-Chairman who chaired the final meeting. Going forward, these difficulties could be exacerbated by the entry of South Holland into the alliance and so we note that early fixing of dates for future joint scrutiny would be welcomed.

That said, the panel could not have managed this process without the guidance and expertise from Rebecca James and James Gilbert who were supportive throughout the meetings and we are grateful to them and also to the witnesses who were interviewed for willingly giving up their evening to talk to us. The remote meetings were conducted in a relaxed, yet challenging manner and all Councillors present contributed to the debate. Thank you!

The interviews were conducted over two meetings with senior Councillors and members of the Officer leadership team including the Chief Executive. Members adhered to the 4 key areas of enquiry as outlined above and used evidence from the Councillor questionnaire and information from the staff satisfaction survey to further challenge the witnesses. The interviewees gave a wholly positive picture of the progress of the alliance illustrated by examples of how teams across two Councils have come together. We sought assurance that the projected savings as outlined in the original agreement were being achieved (they are). We asked for examples of how collaborative working has furthered opportunities for both Councils (e.g., towns fund bids) and further suggested ways in which the alliance could effectively use combined power to achieve successful outputs (e.g., lobby on behalf of the IDBs). We asked about how the merging cultures of two and now, three Councils can be successfully managed and, in our recommendations, have highlighted suggested ways of doing this to create a common identity for this large area of Lincolnshire. The notes from our meetings are attached at **Appendix E**.

In addition to the witnesses who were interviewed the panel agreed to send out a short questionnaire to all Councillors to gauge their views on how they felt the alliance was progressing. We received fifteen responses, the full results are attached at **Appendix D**. There were several common themes that emerged from the responses which have formed the basis of some of our recommendations. These include clear lines of communications, cementing relationships, alignment of policies and joint meetings. Not all Councillors are positive about the alliance and it is also noted that a large majority did not respond to the questionnaire. Thank you to those that did respond and for the useful pointers that guided us.

Our final hour of discussion led to the refining of our recommendations which were circulated the day after our meeting and agreed by email. An additional recommendation relating to the continuing joint scrutiny monitoring of the now,

three-way alliance was included to ensure this important joint work of non-executive Councillors continues going forward.

Recommendations

1. That staff 'snapshot' surveys are reported to Overview / Scrutiny on a 6-monthly basis along with staff turnover figures, in order to monitor any significant changes;
2. Review the ICT roadmap priorities and ensure that shared email addresses for officers is given the highest priority;
3. To develop a shared strategy to ensure that staff are valued and given opportunities to progress, with a view to enhancing recruitment and retention;
4. To better communicate to staff, councillors, and residents any relevant updates or priorities, and to celebrate the successes across the alliance;
5. To provide opportunities for more collaborative working for all councillors, such as scrutiny panels, project groups, and other shared opportunities across the alliance / partnership, especially where there is commonality, e.g., licensing and planning policy;
6. To provide an opportunity for councillors to visit partner districts to meet other councillors and gain an awareness of the 'place' of other districts;
7. Move to an alignment of policies, e.g., procurement, climate change, and recycling;
8. To encourage the development of a strong sense of identity within the 3 areas of the alliance and the opportunities that they offer. This will help develop a sustainable, resilient, and vibrant economy and population;
9. To prepare a strategy so the partnership is fully prepared for the possibility of devolution.
10. That the alliance should work together to lobby the government to ensure the financial sustainability of the IDBs on which the residents and the land of the 3 councils heavily rely;
11. To convene a shared scrutiny panel of the 3 Councils in the new Partnership at the end of the first and second year, in order to undertake a review of the Partnership and merged workforce.

Report authors: Councillor Judith Skinner and Councillor Edward Mossop