

JOINT SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING NOTES

Name of Panel: Joint BBC/ELDC Scrutiny of the Strategic Alliance

Date and Time: 23rd September 2021, 6pm

1. Election of Chair (BBC) / Vice-Chair (ELDC)

Councillor Judith Skinner was elected Chair and Councillor Edward Mossop was elected Vice-Chair.

2. Panel Discussion of Scope / Lines of Enquiry

Councillor Fiona Martin suggested that a short questionnaire be sent to all ELDC and BBC councillors asking for their opinions on the issues raised in the lines of enquiry. It was agreed that the questions should be open-ended and look for positives and suggestions for improvement.

It was agreed to invite the following witnesses:

- Leaders of ELDC / BBC - Councillors Craig Leyland and Paul Skinner;
- Finance Portfolio Holders for ELDC / BBC – Councillors Jonathan Noble and Richard Fry;
- S151 Officer (former and current) – Adrian Sibley and Christine Marshall
- Chief Executive – Rob Barlow

Questions for witnesses were also discussed and it was agreed that the lines of enquiry be turned into questions and asked to witnesses as below:

1. Are you happy with the progress that has been made so far in bringing together functions and teams across the alliance? (For Rob Barlow, Leaders)
2. Do you feel the Alliance has mitigated pressure on the Councils' budgets; and are you confident that projected savings (money and capacity) are being achieved? (For S151 Officers & Portfolio Holders)
3. What opportunities have been secured by the Councils' working collaboratively together? (For all witnesses)
4. Do you feel it has been possible to merge cultures? Have any difficulties arisen and how can this be managed? (For Rob Barlow, Leaders)

Discussions were had around opportunities such as the Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund. ICT progress was also discussed, as was staff turnover including reasons for leaving, with the panel requesting figures for comparison with previous years.

It was agreed that 2 further meetings would be required and that they would be on Thursday 7th October at 6pm, followed by a final meeting on Thursday 14th October at 6pm.

The Scrutiny Officer was asked to action the following requests:

- Request an ICT road map from Jackie Wight with accompanying cover note;
- Create, circulate, and analyse an all-member questionnaire;
- Request information on staff surveys and 'snapshots' from Rachel Robinson;
- Request information on staff turnover and information held on reasons for leaving from HR/PSPS.

Date and Time: 7th October 2021, 6pm

3. Questions for Councillor Skinner

Councillor Skinner (CPS) made the following comments in response to the questions he was asked:

- CPS is very happy with the alliance; it has been a challenge and sometimes there are gaps, but he has been pleasantly surprised;
- He feels the councils have managed to combine expertise to benefit the alliance. For example, the Towns Fund and other bids have been more successful because of it;
- Opportunities have included greater capacity and resilience, sharing of best practice and cost savings;
- Difficulties with merging staff and cultures seems to have been minimal.

The following points were also noted:

- CPS is confident about the way forward and does not feel this is a fragile alliance;
- There is a need to work together to the best for our areas;
- There is a tendency for Boston to have a more negative outlook, but there is work ongoing to change that and ensure the residents are on board;
- Senior officers felt some strain, particularly in the early stages, but overall, the right officers fill the right posts;
- CPS is pleased with shared officer team the alliance has in place;
- With all the changes and different ways of working, it is important to ensure people are on board;
- CPS confirmed that ELDC and BBC Leaders, Deputies and finance portfolio holders have regular meetings with the Chief Executive;
- Council sovereignty is not up for discussion. This alliance (and now partnership) works well as the 3 councils all have similar rural and coastal issues and can work together on these;
- If devolution was forced upon us, we would have more say;
- As policies come up for updating it will make sense to align them.

4. Questions for Councillors Noble (CJN)

Councillor Noble made the following comments in response to the questions he was asked:

- CJN noted that Covid has changed things in terms of finances, both ELDC and BBC received government funding and BBC currently has a surplus;

- CJN advised that the alliance was on course for meeting the projected savings;
- Opportunities for the future include taking advantage of economies of scale, working together, and learning from each other;
- Procurement service will eventually align although certain things will need to be different;
- Having a SPOC such as a shared Chief Executive and S151 Officer has meant financial savings;

The following points were also noted:

- It was felt by the panel that most residents had reacted positively to the changes;
- It was noted that as the shared officer core has effective line management then the challenges of working across 2 (now 3) councils should be easily managed;
- Although there may occasionally be operational issues, officers are picking up on these before they get out of hand;
- Having 2 and now 3 councils will mean that policies start to align, but the strategic direction may differ as each council could have different priorities;
- Concern was raised over the drainage board levies for next year

5. Discussion of questionnaire results

- IT seems to be one of the main areas for concern, particularly the syncing of email addresses;
- CJN suggested that most of the concerns raised may be allayed if councillors read the regular email updates and Leader briefing;
- The panel were disappointed by the low number of responses and asked for the questionnaire to be circulated again;
- Communication was flagged as an issue; although the new contact book that has just been circulated should go some way to ensure improvements;
- Timings for responses from officers to councillors needs to be aligned across the alliance. CJN advised that he had raised this with the Chief Executive and the aspiration is that all councillor queries should receive a response within 2 days;
- CPS advised that there is a discussion regarding having an officer across the partnership to collate and track councillor queries moving forward.

Emerging Recommendations (from 23/09 and 07/10):

- Shared email address for officers;
- Officer capacity;
- Communications between Councillors and Officers;
- Progress on ICT alignment.

6. Next meeting

It was confirmed that the next meeting would be on 14th October 2021.

The Scrutiny Officer was asked to action the following requests:

- All Councillors not in attendance to be sent a recording of tonight's meeting, along with a request to listen to it in preparation for the meeting on the 14th;
- The councillor questionnaire to be readvertised to all ELDC and BBC councillors for an extra week;
- Information requested at the first meeting to be circulated to the panel once received.

Date and Time: 14th October 2021, 6pm

In response to a number of questions, the following information was provided from the witnesses, along with a number of comments from panel members:

- Rob Barlow indicated he was happy with the results of the staff survey and believed anything above 60% was a positive result. He thinks the changes everyone has gone through including the pandemic, home working, alliance/partnership, have heightened normal anxieties.
- Councillor Leyland felt there was a lot of context to read into the survey results, it being such an unsettled time had not helped. He felt the situation does need monitoring, as so much has been expected of staff over last 18 months. It is hard to quantify where you want to be in a %, it is important to understand why figures are where they are.
- It was noted that satisfaction is difficult to gauge, the panel mostly felt it was a reasonable figure and that communication from senior staff ensures others feel included and informed.
- Regarding the survey, it was confirmed that a full survey was done but there is a focus on 4 key areas for tracker surveys each quarter. The panel suggested a need to dig down into the results to check it is not a particular service area that has concerns.
- Regarding updates, the Chief Executive sends out a weekly email or video to all staff. The 2 Councils have also launched their 'values and behaviour' work, which builds on information from surveys.
- Regarding staff turnover, Rob Barlow indicated numbers were as expected, many due to retirement, promotion etc. Councillor Leyland also felt the level was acceptable, not impacting on service areas and not creating gaps and vacancies.
- Rob Barlow indicated that historically lots of movement is with people moving between councils in the area. This may impact the alliance / partnership and relocation, as there will be the possibility to offer more development opportunities within the partnership as well as attracting people from a wider area.
- A number of examples of opportunities from collaborative working were noted. The main example is the Town's Fund – the council's received the highest allocation of funds and have been held as an exemplar by Government. Also, ELDC heritage and tourism bids were better because of BBC input and BBC property schemes were better for ELDC input. Also, joint bids have just gone in for the levelling up fund and for the Pandemic response, the alliance provided extra resilience.
- Drainage board issues were raised, and a discussion was had on whether the new 3-way partnership could have more influence. The panel were

advised that 3-way working had already begun, including joint pitches to government etc.

- Adrian Sibley indicated that BBC was able to save money on a new IT system as they could use the ELDC/SHDC system and arrangements.
- Procurement – panel members suggested the need for an aligned policy. It was advised that before she left, Alison Penn had mapped some timelines on when contracts were due for renewal (contract mapping). Currently the 3 Councils have differing arrangements for procurement, but the plan is to look at a collective approach for this area. There has been a new procurement resource appointed who will look at strategy, spend analysis/review among other issues. At a strategic level, it is recognised we need higher level of expertise than we currently have. Christine Marshall advises the panel that the plan is to align as much as possible to make procurement a smooth process for the officer core. She also indicated this was a key opportunity for savings moving forwards and for avoiding increases.
- Councillor Leyland advised the panel that it was difficult initially to find time for joint working, but we have good reasons to do it, so it was worth the extra effort. Central Government usually hit local government first, so our partnership will protect us, help us save money and give us capacity to deliver too. He also noted the partnership has ambitions and wants this to work, with regular joint meetings as 2 councils now moving to 3. He noted there were more than needed at the moment in order to learn how each other works, so we can model the best way.
- Rob Barlow indicated that the partnership is still early days, everyone is learning the different cultures and ways of working. The partnership has not reduced staff numbers so are better resourced. This is a new concept, so the partnership has had some scrutiny from peers. Rob Barlow noted that the first 6 months are key to ensuring the partnership is landed successfully. External partners keen to meet with us as a 3, this means we do things once instead of 3 times. Culture is easier for staff as there is no politics involved, just new colleagues. There is a need to ensure challenge / opportunities for members is embraced to ensure things are not territorial.
- The panel were keen to explore opportunities to come together to be aspirational for their areas while keeping sovereignty.
- Rob Barlow indicated the partnership now has Growth and Delivery Teams in the new structure, which will help land big ideas, projects, investments. For example, there could be discussions with highways on A16 as this road is key to all 3 areas for different reasons. There could also be other opportunities in agriculture and health.
- Councillor Leyland advised of the need to take a strategic view, an example being the challenge to the Environment Agency to secure development of tourism on the coast. There can also be joint challenge where needed on heritage, agriculture, tourism. Teams need to keep at it and work together to get things done.
- Regarding devolution, Councillor Leyland believes there is more potential to get a better deal as a partnership of 3 and we have to be prepared to deal with issue if arises.
- Overall, it was felt that the Councils are on track to achieve the projected savings. It was noted that the move to a triple partnership will make the

original projected savings for the alliance savings more difficult to quantify, but there will be a new 3-way target moving forwards.

Agreement of potential recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged over the course of the meeting around the staff survey, government lobbying, and partnership working. These were discussed, along with emerging recommendations from previous meetings. 10 recommendations were drafted and agreed at the meeting. It was agreed that the final report to accompany the recommendations would be drafted by the Chair and Vice Chair and circulated to the members of the panel before being submitted to the relevant Committees for consideration.