

PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Annual Joint Scrutiny of the Partnership 2024 Final Report

Councillors ELDC: F. Martin, C. Dickinson, J. Makinson-Sanders

Councillors BBC: C. Rylott (Chair), S. Evans (Vice Chair), P. Marson

Councillors SHDC: B. Alcock, M. Booth, C. Brewis

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), Andy Fisher (Deputy Chief Executive, Programme Delivery), John Leach (Deputy Chief Executive, Communities), John Medler (Assistant Director, Governance & Monitoring Officer), Jackie Wright (Chief Delivery Officer, PSPS), Rachel Robinson (Group Manager, Organisational Development), representative from the staff forum (anonymous).

Background and Introduction

The function of scrutiny within each of the partner Councils plays an important and key role within the overall governance arrangements for each of the partnership Councils and for the Partnership as a whole.

When the Partnership was formed in October 2021, the approved business case demonstrated a number of opportunities for the South & East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership.

Progress on these identified opportunities, plus other key issues, form the basis of this annual joint scrutiny of the Partnership and details can be found in the scoping document at **Appendix 2**.

The panel met 5 times, interviewed 11 witnesses with questions based mainly on the Key Lines of Enquiry, and conducted a short questionnaire among all Councillors and members of the Corporate Management Team to canvass their views. There was a 52% response rate from Councillors and a 47% response rate from Corporate Management Team for the anonymous questionnaire. A summary table showing the key themes that came out of the questionnaires is attached at **Appendix 3** and key issues were discussed by the Task Group during the scrutiny meetings.

Evidence Gathering

The questions below were used for the different guest witnesses and questionnaires:

Questions for Leaders

1. How is the partnership assured they are going to meet the deadlines for the introduction of food waste?
2. What are the Leaders thoughts on how we prepare for the Mayoral Combined Authority and ensure the services we deliver are enhanced?
3. How will each Councils budget be impacted if interest rates fall and are we prepared for the change?
4. What other legislative changes are likely to impact on the partnership, how do we monitor these?
5. Are you confident that the Councils have the capacity and resilience to deliver improvements across the Partnership and do more for our Communities?
6. What do you think the priorities for the Partnership should be over next 12 months?

Questions for Senior Leadership Team

1. How is the Partnership responding to shared and common challenges and opportunities at a local and sub-regional level across south and east Lincolnshire?
2. Are you confident that the Councils have the capacity and resilience to deliver improvements across the Partnership and do more for our Communities?
3. What do you think the priorities for the Partnership should be over next 12 months?

Questions for the anonymous CMT and Councillor questionnaire

1. What do you think have been the positives of the S&ELCP so far? Do you have any examples of positive impact you would like to share?
2. What would you improve about the S&ELCP? Do you have any suggestions you would like to share?
3. What do you think the key area(s) of focus should be for the Partnership in the year ahead?

Task Group Discussion and Analysis

The Task Group generally agreed that the S&ELCP is vital for all 3 Councils in terms of providing shared knowledge and expertise, joined up / aligned working practices and financial resilience.

The Group interviewed a number of Councillors and Officers during September and October. From those discussions, it was clear that the Partnership is widely supported and is felt to be working well. The Group explored a variety of issues with those interviewed and gained insight into what is going well, as well as areas that still need improvement – including areas of focus for the coming months.

Leaders

The 3 Leaders provided interesting and different perspectives on the questions and issues put to them. It was clear they all recognise the benefit of the Partnership and working together. Key issues for the Partnership such as waste and legislation that are being dealt with collectively, clearly demonstrate it is helpful to have a partnership approach in order to learn from each other, share best practice, and have an aligned single procedure. The example of devolution was given, and Leaders advised that being part of the Partnership has helped the Councils lobby for greater representation within the Mayoral Combined Authority and this joined up approach needs to continue to ensure our voices are heard and we can continue to access funding pots to deliver for communities across all 3 Councils.

Senior Staff

Senior staff provided useful and relevant information for the Task Group to consider. They felt that service reviews will not only increase savings but release capacity for teams. The Alignment and Delivery Plan helps structure work for the coming year and further ahead, both for individual Councils and across the Partnership, enabling services and teams to plan effectively for upcoming pieces of work.

Senior staff highlighted that the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) does not now reflect how the Partnership has developed and could potentially become restrictive if not reviewed and updated to allow flexibility. The Group agreed that the time is right for a review of the MoA. This will ensure the document is still relevant and will allow Partnership to have the flexibility to develop and improve as needed.

The Task Group were advised that having the weight of the Partnership is important for those key areas where we can lobby for greater funding or representation and take advantage of more and bigger schemes.

The importance of managing risk properly was highlighted, including planning carefully for the future in terms of finances and wider challenges facing the Councils and sector as a whole.

Senior staff advised they work hard to ensure we don't lose the place-based focuses for each of 3 councils, even when submitting shared bids/responses for projects/issues. Councillor engagement is key to the success of this.

Staff Forum

Hearing the views of the workforce, via the staff forum, was a breath of fresh air, and it was enlightening to receive a rounded perspective on various issues.

The difference in Boston's Municipal Buildings compared to SHDC and ELDC was highlighted, along with the need for a better working environment – the building and facilities are of a lower standard than other 2, although it was recognised this is largely due to the age of the building.

The staff forum advised that no major issues had been identified, it was more 'small niggles,' with staff already aware who to speak with on these. There is more engagement between staff across the Partnership now, but we do need to continue to build workforce relationships as a Partnership in order to continue to develop. It was acknowledged by the Task Group that building on the single organisational culture of 'One Team' was a positive thing for Councillors as well as staff.

Recruitment and retention

There was a good discussion on recruitment and retention – it was clarified that this is a national issue, but it was highlighted that this needs to be monitored to ensure we are adapting to different ways of engaging with potential employees through the recruitment process and how we can retain staff through internal training and development opportunities.

Capacity challenges in some services – it was noted regarding the need to be careful of attributing this solely to the Partnership, as only 10% of roles are employed across the Partnership, while the rest still work for their original sovereign Council. This is an area that needs to be looked at and discussed/addressed as part of service reviews rather than as a specific S&ELCP issue.

ICT

Information received on this issue was positive and showed the good progress made since the Partnership was formed. Councillors acknowledged the huge amount of work done in this area over the past 3 years (such as aligned phone systems, M365, antivirus software and ransomware) as well as the plans in place for next steps such as server environments, which is a big opportunity for 2027 in terms of both alignment and cost efficiencies. There is now good information sharing, so everyone knows the timescales for those bigger pieces of work.

Councillors

We undertook an anonymous questionnaire again as in previous years, with a good response rate. A summary table showing the key themes is attached at **Appendix 3**, this included the positives, as well as areas for improvement and suggestions of what the focus for the year ahead. The areas for improvement and focus for the year ahead did seem to mainly lie in how we can further align policies/systems/processes to enable further efficiencies of time and that single way of working for those working across all 3. There has been lots of progress in terms of policies and processes, lots more planned for the coming months.

Scrutiny – it was agreed that getting partnership scrutiny right is important, both for annual and joint scrutiny work. The current processes are not working as well as they could be, and attendance is affected (average attendance 69% in 2024). In addition, the annual scrutiny has a restrictive membership model and fixed scope, which does not give the flexibility needed to fully review areas relevant to the Partnership. It was agreed that allowing a more flexible approach to partnership scrutiny, for example seeking members who actively want to be part of a topic review, would make the process more effective in future and also aid better attendance. It was also felt that mandating an annual review was unhelpful and flexibility should be provided to allow annual review where appropriate, but also not to require it if no review was needed.

Partnership working needs to be understanding of additional workload and pressure on members too. There is a need to ensure that Group Leaders can manage their groups workload and commitments (e.g. on outside bodies) to guarantee availability for meetings as much as possible to have proper representation.

When considering capacity, again it was noted that Members should not be forgotten in this conversation. There is additional workload directly relating to the Partnership, which is in addition to the workload and responsibilities for sovereign Councils.

The Task Group agreed that work on a long term IDB funding solution should be kept as a top priority. Preparation for Devolution needs to be at the forefront too, plus awareness of potential next steps regarding LGR.

The Group were keen to ensure that partnership risks continue to be monitored and that all Councillors are kept informed on key issues and areas of interest.

Financial resilience important – for sovereign councils as well as the partnership and it was highlighted that finances need to be viewed both in terms of budgets for sovereign councils and also in terms of savings for the partnership, to ensure full cost benefits continue to be realised.

Conclusion

Our indicators of success for this scrutiny review were:

1. Assurance that the Partnership is on track to deliver its stated aims;
2. Assurance that results are being achieved in key/relevant areas;
3. To identify key objectives/focus for the coming year.

The 'task group discussion and analysis' section above show how we have gained assurance of the first 2 indicators, while the recommendations below cover indicator 3 by identifying the key focus and objectives that came out of this scrutiny review.

Recommendations

1. Ensure service reviews are completed as per the agreed Alignment and Delivery Plan to ensure correct capacity and increase savings;
2. To ensure the Partnership Risk Register is reviewed and updated regularly by SLT so existing and emerging risks continue to be monitored and can be managed/mitigated effectively;
3. Through the Alignment and Delivery Plan planning process, ensure forward planning for upcoming known and potential changes;
4. Review the MOA for the Partnership to ensure it remains relevant and builds in flexibility to allow the Partnership to develop (for example to improve the way the annual partnership scrutiny works).
5. Ensure Officers and Members are kept informed on key issues, for example Devolution and LGR;
6. Use the 'weight' of the S&ELCP to help lobby on common issues that affect the sub-region, for example the work of the SIG with regard to internal drainage boards.
7. The S151 officer should actively consider how projects coming forward contribute to the savings required in the MTFs for each sovereign council in order to deliver financial resilience.
8. As part of the work being done on aligning constitutions, streamline the partnership scrutiny process to make it more effective.
9. Monitor staff turnover (including reasons for leaving) via the Workforce Development Board, review trends in recruitment to ensure we are not out of kilter with national trends and work to remedy any negative findings.

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