

Agenda Item No: 5

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny (Resources)

Date of Meeting: 21st February 2013

Report Title: Scrutiny Review of Partnership Working

Report By: Scrutiny Review Team

Purpose of Report

To report recommendations arising from the scrutiny review on partnership working.

To detail review team membership, objectives, methods, key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Recommendation(s)

- 1. That, subject to comments by the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the recommendations of the Review Team are forwarded to the 2nd April Cabinet for consideration.**

Reasons for Recommendations

To ensure the review findings and subsequent recommendations are cascaded and appropriate actions followed up subject to Cabinet approval.

Introduction

1. A Scrutiny Review on partnership working was included in the 2012/2013 Overview and Scrutiny annual work programme. The review began in September 2012, concluded in January 2013 and fell within the remit of the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
2. The focus for this review developed from Member's interests in how best to improve understanding of local partnership working and hold local partnerships to account in the context of a particularly challenging financial climate.
3. Review team members were conscious that the financial challenges facing the Council meant that scaling back Council activity could place increasing emphasis on partnership working at a time when there is potentially less HBC officer capacity to support partnership working.
4. In this context, the review team sought to explore how best to determine whether existing partnerships are fit for purpose and what could be learned or recommended as a result of gathering evidence from partnerships of interest to Scrutiny Members and their constituents.
5. The Quality Bus and SeaChange partnerships were chosen by the review team and evidence sought from key representatives from each partnership.

Review Objectives

6. To consider the effectiveness of the Quality Bus Partnership and SeaChange Ltd partnership by exploring for each their:

Governance arrangements

Added value

Performance, Finance and Risk Management arrangements

Termination agreements

Communication with the public

7. To gather evidence on the above functions of the stated partnerships with a view to:

Gaining a better understanding of the particular partnerships of interest to Councillors and their constituents.

Sharing associated learning from a critical evaluation of the stated partnerships

Membership of Review Team

8. The Review Team Members were:

Councillor Andrew Cartwright

Councillor Warren Davis

Councillor Mike Howard

Councillor Peter Pragnell

Councillor Mike Turner

Councillor Trevor Webb (Chair)

Councillor John Wilson

9. Officer support:

Mark Horan Policy and Partnerships Officer

Michael Courts Scrutiny and Democratic Services Support Officer

Rasoul Shahilow Head of Parking and Highways

Neil Dart Director of Corporate Services

Methodology

10. The review team began with in depth scoping sessions, refining the review focus through selecting partnerships and agreeing lines of inquiry to inform discussions with each partner.

11. Desktop internet based research was undertaken to explore the concept of partnerships and to investigate work done elsewhere concerned with the evaluation, audit and governance of local government associated partnerships.

12. The following working definition of partnerships was agreed by members for the purpose of the review:

‘An agreement between two or more independent bodies to work collectively to achieve an objective’ Audit Commission (2005)

13. The principal research method used to gather evidence from stated partnerships was qualitative semi structured face to face interviews with key representatives from each partnership.

Selecting partnerships and refining the focus of the review

14. The review team acknowledged through initial discussions that the Council is involved in a wide range of partnerships and that various members of the review team had different degrees of understanding with regards to the many partnerships within which the Council is engaged.

15. While the objectives set out from paragraph 6 assert the need for a fuller understanding of the partnerships stated for this review, the review team acknowledged the broader need to encourage and promote understanding of partnerships working in the public interest, in line with the Council's commitments to accountability and transparency.
16. Given the unprecedented financial challenges facing the town, the review team were keen to specifically explore how economic partnerships were faring. In particular the resilience and flexibility of partnerships under review in the face of a prolonged period of austerity and a contracting local Council.
17. The Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) was chosen because issues of bus route availability were of interest to members and their constituents. Review team members also felt that the public profile of the partnership was less prominent than it had been and were keen to explore reasons for this.
18. The QBP was also selected for review as it was felt to reflect a more traditional longer standing economic partnership in which HBC has been involved. Members were mindful that HBC officer capacity to support the partnership had lessened in recent years and were interested to explore any implications of this.
19. The SeaChange partnership was understood to have more recently evolved and emerged within a challenging financial climate to continue to support the town's regeneration ambitions.
20. Members were therefore keen to better understand how this newer partnership worked, how it had adapted to continue those regeneration ambitions shared by the Council, and, the Council's contribution to this partnership.
21. The review team were keen to better understand how both the QBP and SeaChange partnerships worked in practice, each partner's audit and governance arrangements and their continued sustainability and viability in a difficult financial environment.
22. Evidence gathering from each partner was based on a series of questions the review team adapted from a list used by the Audit Commission to assess partnership audit and governance arrangements (see appendix C).

Key Findings

23. Audit and governance arrangements for both the Quality Bus Partnership and SeaChange Partnership are detailed in appendix A & B.
24. Both partnerships demonstrated to the review team that they had sufficient audit and governance arrangements in place to meet the objectives of each of the respective partnerships.
25. Evidence given from partnership representatives was certainly persuasive, suitably impressing the review team and bringing the team up to speed on the current purpose, focus and progress of each of the partnerships under review.

Quality Bus Partnership (QBP)

26. Following evidence gathering from key members of the partnership, the review team were satisfied that there were sufficient channels for Members and local people to address bus related issues and that the Bus Users Group and County Council Councillors involved in the QBP served as an important check on QBP activities.
27. The significance of effective local public transport and therefore efficient bus provision was highlighted by the review team as vital to meet the regeneration ambitions of the town.
28. In the context of these regeneration ambitions, bus services from Bexhill into Hastings and the pending Bexhill to Hastings Link Road were discussed. Members raised the importance of increased availability of routes from Bexhill to Hastings to boost the day time and evening economies and the viability of community transport schemes on less profitable routes.
29. Stagecoach representatives welcomed and encouraged Members to raise any ideas or concerns and this invitation has been extended to all HBC Councillors from the Commercial Director of Stagecoach.
30. Stagecoach intimated that there maybe scope to expand the QBP to include Rother District Council which the review team felt was worthy of further exploration given the pending Link Road. Stagecoach representatives also made the point that their early involvement in the development of the Link Road would serve to heighten the provision of bus services on this route.
31. Members had aired concern that they were not as up to speed on the activities of the partnership as they had been in the past, when the performance of the QBP had been directly scrutinised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as a result of the QBP having a stronger prominence in the Council's Corporate Plan.
32. Members did acknowledge that the QBP required lesser intervention and involvement from Councillors than it had at its inception, and that in recent years when the QBP had a greater prominence in the Corporate Plan, performance issues were few and far between.
33. Members were also mindful that HBC officer capacity to support the QBP had lessened and that it was highly unlikely to increase to previous levels within the current financial climate.
34. It was made clear from QBP partners (ESCC and Stagecoach) that reduced HBC officer capacity had not negatively impinged on the function of the partnership and that the partnership continued to work effectively.
35. Review team members considered that the role of raising awareness, communicating the activities of partnerships working in the public interest and the continued sustainability of such partners depends very much on the activities of key brokers within such partnerships.

36. Members reflected that the greater awareness and prominence of QBP activities in previous years was in part due to both the County Councillor portfolio holders involved in the QBP also serving as local Hastings Borough Councillors.
37. As local Borough Councillors they could raise the profile of QBP activities among other local Councillors in the day to day formal and informal interactions at the Town Hall, and Members could then pass on this information where appropriate through their ward activities.
38. This reflection prompted the review team to also consider the role of Members as champions, advocates, ambassadors and in some instances, brokers of partnerships serving the public interest.
39. These roles were felt to be further complicated for scrutiny members taking these on while also having to hold such partnerships serving or acting in the public interest to account which was felt to be further complicated when the Council isn't the lead partner or, such partnerships are not working exclusively in the public interest.
40. This is the case within the QBP where Stagecoach are the lead partner whom have to answer in the first instance to their Board, rather than other partners in the QBP or indeed elected Members/Scrutiny Committees.

SeaChange Partnership

41. Evidence gathering with representatives from SeaChange followed those sessions with the QBP.
42. Members welcomed the contribution made by the Chief Executive of SeaChange for the partnership work he had led to sustain an arms length regeneration vehicle for the locality, following the winding up of Seaspace.
43. The review team also thanked the Chief Executive for his offer to give Councillors an annual update on SeaChange activity and the invitation to do so at the new Enviro 21 Business Park.
44. Post evidence gathering, the review team acknowledged the personal capacities and capabilities of the SeaChange Chief Executive as a skilled broker and his personal commitment to the area. Through doing so, the review team acknowledged the need for such roles in effective partnerships.
45. At the same time, the review team felt that much of the SeaChange efforts were attributable to (and perhaps over reliant on) its Chief Executive and in doing so questioned how sustainable the efforts of SeaChange and its partners could be without its leader.
46. As part of the evidence gathering, the review team heard that SeaChange efforts were primarily focused at supporting existing and new businesses in and to the area, rather than the wider public interest per se.
47. While Members were quite clear of the positive knock on effects for the wider public of increased business activity locally, they were keen to explore further the

Council's role in the SeaChange partnership and how SeaChange activity dovetailed with the Council's wider objectives and corporate commitments.

48. Follow up discussions took place with the Deputy Leader of the Council and the Council's Director of Corporate Resources. The interview schedule for these discussions is included in appendix D and minutes in Appendix E.
49. The Deputy Leader also serves as the Council's representative Director on the SeaChange Board. Review team members were interested in performance management information and how this is cascaded to respective local authority partners.
50. Review team members accepted that commercially sensitive information could restrict the extent and speed with which SeaChange activity and performance could be made public.
51. The review team were also keen to explore the extent to which those residents from the Town's most deprived¹ wards could directly benefit from new or increasing businesses in the town, to help meet the Council's corporate priority to 'narrow the gap.'
52. The review team were aware that new businesses have relocated to the town, as a result of the work of SeaChange and the importance of the town's education offer was discussed. Review team members heard how the local University campus and Colleges remain key partners supporting people to become work ready and that there were a number of schemes underway to facilitate and encourage work readiness.
53. Review team Members stressed that it is important to capture (and share) the learning from such education initiatives so that these can be further tailored to support the Council's aspirations to narrow the gap and to enable a greater number of local people (and particularly those from deprived wards) to directly benefit from the opportunities afforded by SeaChange activity.

Conclusions

54. The exploratory nature of this review has resulted in an updated understanding of those partnerships under review for Scrutiny Members but has also enabled review team Members to critically reflect on their Scrutiny and broader Councillor roles and functions relative to partnerships under review.
55. A key outcome of the review had been to enable increased understanding and communication between representatives of economic partnerships (SeaChange, the Quality Bus Partnership) and Scrutiny Members.
56. Review team members are keen to continue to develop ways to engage in better dialogue with partners, so that they can be up to speed on the activities of such partnerships and where appropriate champion the activity of partnerships undertaken in the public interest while also holding such partnerships to account from a scrutiny perspective.

¹ Half the wards in Hastings have areas ranked as experiencing the levels of deprivation in the highest 10% nationally from the 2010 Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

57. The recommendations that follow are broadly split between follow up activities that are a direct result of face to face discussions between the review team and partner representatives and those that encourage improved understanding and accountability for HBC affiliated partnerships.

Recommendations

1. All Members take up the offer made by the Stage Coach Director to contact him directly with views and ideas on improving bus services – details to be re-circulated via the Members Bulletin to enable this.
2. Stagecoach and the QBP are linked in and involved where appropriate in the development of the Bexhill to Hastings Link Road to ensure best possible bus routes and enhance employment and regeneration opportunities for the town - management response to advise how best to achieve this.
3. The notes of the Quality Bus Partnership and Bus Users Group meetings be circulated to Scrutiny Members by email, to raise awareness of the work of these partnerships. A nominated contact for each of the partners will also be included.
4. Councillors Webb and Pragnell to meet with Stagecoach to discuss how plans for a Community Transport Scheme might be progressed.
5. The offer made by the Chief Executive of SeaChange to give Members an annual briefing on SeaChange and the activity of key economic partners be taken up and referred to the Members Training and Development group, with a view to incorporating this into the annual programme of Member training and briefings.
6. The Council's representative on the SeaChange Board request a retrospective annual performance report from SeaChange, following discussion with the Scrutiny Committee Chairs on appropriate performance measures, and:
 - That the subsequent report is cascaded to all elected Members.
 - The annual briefing requested at recommendation 5 also provides members the opportunity to follow up on issues raised in the proposed annual report.
7. The Council's representative on the SeaChange Board or his nominee update Scrutiny Members on the progress made by SeaChange's education partners (University and Colleges) on the various initiatives to enable local people from particularly deprived wards to become work ready.
8. The audit and governance questions (Appendix C) used to directly gather evidence from partnerships for this review be used to produce clear and concise overview summaries of Council affiliated partnerships and that these be made public via the Council's website to aid understanding and transparency:
 - a. The audit and governance/partner arrangements for the Council's two largest partnership contracts Waste and Grounds Maintenance (that have saved HBC in excess of £1million p.a.) be summarised and published as suggested.

- b. The thematic partnerships under the Local Strategic Partnership be summarised and published as suggested.
 - c. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committees use these audit and governance questions as a basis for future scrutiny partnership work.
9. The Management response detail a suitable timeframe and set out the responsible lead Member or Officer to progress recommendations made where necessary.

Wards Affected

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

Area(s) Affected

Central Hastings, East Hastings, North St. Leonards, South St. Leonards

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	Yes
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	Yes
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	Yes
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	Yes
Organisational Consequences	Yes
Local People's Views	Yes

Background Information

- Appendix A Interview Schedule with the Quality Bus Partnership
- Appendix B Interview Schedule with SeaChange
- Appendix C Audit and Governance questions
- Appendix D Interview Schedule Questions for SeaChange follow up meeting
- Appendix E Minutes from SeaChange follow up meeting.

Officer to Contact

Officer Name Mark Horan
 Officer Email Address mhoran@hastings.gov.uk
 Officer Telephone Number 01424 451485