

(For Democratic Services use)

Decision Number: 26 (2016/17)

Portfolio Holder Executive Decision Statement

The Local Authority (Executive Arrangements)(Meetings and Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012

Subject:

Response from Sevenoaks District Council to the All Party Parliamentary Group on District Councils: inquiry on collaboration and devolution.

Details of Decision taken

To submit a formal response to the APPG inquiry

Reason for Decision

To provide evidence of the importance of the district tier in local government structures, highlighting the trust and collaboration that exists at a local level between residents, partners and the District Council; to provide examples of our innovative work at a local level including health, and offer suggestions regarding the future possibilities and opportunities for local government to receive further devolved powers.

All Documents considered:

Invitation e-mail to Councillor Fleming on 24 November 2016 from Mark Pawsey, Member of Parliament for Rugby and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for District Councils to submit evidence to the inquiry.

Details of any alternative options considered and rejected by the Member when making the Decision:

The Council could have chosen not to respond to the invitation to submit evidence; however as an innovative authority we would wish our views

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to be heard and counted.

Financial implications

There are no financial implications that arise directly from the decision to respond to this consultation.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

None

Equality Impacts (Consideration of impacts under the Public Sector Equality Duty)

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Local Member (s), other Portfolio Holders and/or Directors/Heads of Service Consulted

CLlr Fleming - Portfolio Holder for Policy and Performance



Details of any conflicts of interest

a) declared by any executive member who is consulted by the Decision Taker

None


b) and any details of dispensations granted by the Chief Executive in respect of any declared conflict

None

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Decision taken by:	Portfolio Holder for Policy and Performance
Signed by Portfolio Holder	
Date of Decision	19/12/16
Record made by:	Lee Banks, Head of Transformation and Strategy
Date of record:	19/12/16

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All Party Parliamentary Group on District Councils: inquiry on collaboration and devolution.

Response from Sevenoaks District Council

December 2016

1. Background and Context

Sevenoaks District Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the All Party Parliamentary Group's work on promoting the role of district councils and their potential to contribute successfully to devolution and collaboration. **We are pleased to offer examples of our innovative work at a local level and to offer suggestions regarding the future possibilities and opportunities for local government to receive further devolved powers.**

We believe we are an innovative council and are always striving to be thought of as one of the best councils in the country. This year we became one of only five organisations globally to be awarded Investors in People Platinum. We have also won in two categories at this year's MJ awards, were shortlisted in the Association of Public Sector Excellence awards, and are shortlisted in the categories of Finance and Council of the Year for the 2017 Local Government Chronicle awards.

On November 29 this year we were judged the overall winners in The Guardian Public Sector awards having also won in the Finance category.

Many of these awards were in recognition of our achievement this year in becoming financially self-sufficient. We no longer depend on government grant to make ends meet. We do not outsource any of our services, holding a strong belief that we can best succeed if we invest in our own people and empower them to take risks and innovate.

Our financial independence is the culmination of a 6 year journey which has involved not only commercial acumen but workforce development including a leadership masterclass. At a time when local authority resources were shrinking at an unprecedented rate, our productivity soared. **Perhaps this position allows us to demonstrate what the potential could be for councils in the future regarding devolution if more become self-sustaining through a combination of business rate devolution, entrepreneurial activity and leadership.**

2. Devolution and Joint Working in Kent

We have been operating successful partnerships and shared services with other Kent districts since 2011. **These arrangements involve working with County, District and Unitary Councils.** With Dartford: (revenues and benefits, internal audit and environmental health), with Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone (licensing); and with

Tonbridge and Malling (building control). We also share a service with a Surrey council, Tandridge, on back office finance systems.

This year we also welcomed a London borough, Bexley, to our licensing partnership and a second London borough, (Bromley) is also interested in joining.

While continuing to develop these approaches we have focused more recently on integration on a West Kent basis looking at a broader interpretation of devolution with Kent County Council, including co-commissioning, integration, and delegation.

The three districts of West Kent (ourselves, Tonbridge & Malling and Tunbridge Wells) are broadly considered a functional area due to geographical clustering and shared characteristics (North and East Kent have distinct functional areas but we remain open to shared services and partnerships as above).

The driving factors behind this may vary from district to district in West Kent. At Sevenoaks District Council we are in the fortunate position of being financially self-sufficient and our starting point is on maintaining this so that we can not only protect existing services but enhance these and provide new ones in response to residents' priorities. However we recognise that sharing similar characteristics and geographical proximity with the two other districts can bring efficiencies and improvements with closer working with the County.

Kent County Council has demonstrated an awareness of the benefits this could bring to support them in achieving their strategic outcomes, recognising that the closer the decisions are made to residents, the more effective they are likely to be. We believe districts have the ability to collaborate further when the bottom line is about benefits to residents and improved service delivery, rather than simply saving money.

3. The Sevenoaks Model

Proposals have been developed between the three districts and the county that show ambition and are capable of being implemented quickly, building on the positive discussions between Leaders to date. **Leaders have agreed to look at where responsibilities sit within all tiers of local government, and consider opportunities for devolution (up, down and across), delegation, integration and co-commissioning that would enable either more efficient delivery (due to economies of scale), greater responsiveness to local priorities, or a more seamless customer journey due to synergies with other services currently provided at another tier.**

The West Kent Integration Board is looking at **all service areas and focusing on those which are likely to deliver the best outcomes: health, early support, highways and community safety.** The flexibility of approach is working well; for example, there is an acknowledgement that there are existing structures to support and develop growth

and economic development across the three districts in partnership with the County Council that do not need replicating because they are already delivering better outcomes given the budget constraints. At the same time, there is recognition that some areas of work such as sport and recreation are better delivered at a very local level.

4. Shared Principles

These are:

- Retain the individual sovereignty of the four authorities.
- Focus on those services that we control. Continue to press Government for devolution, but that is secondary to taking action now in relation to improving those services we deliver.
- Develop structures that enable services to be co-commissioned, delegated, devolved or integrated both vertically and horizontally.
- Postpone, where possible, any tendering, commissioning, or contract letting whilst new working arrangements are being established.
- Save money by taking out waste and duplication, increasing income, and improving effectiveness through integration.
- Avoid cost shunting by taking a holistic and transparent approach to the identification of savings.
- KCC will seek to align service delivery groupings to the West Kent geography as far as possible, recognising the need also to reflect relationships with the CCGs.
- Existing partnerships will be respected – individual authorities may have partnerships which will continue to sit outside the West Kent arrangements.

5. Advantages of district devolution

Strategic policy-making faces many challenges, not least the very localised nature of key services such as housing and business growth which can differ even within neighbourhoods. While there is the need for a strategic body at County or regional level, there is also a need for a meaningful transfer of responsibility to a much lower level.

Our role as **place-shapers** is crucial to the wellbeing and ongoing success of our neighbourhoods: we have responsibility for Local Plans, housing, community development, economic growth – all of these require a direct and transparent dialogue with our residents with whom we already have a relationship built on trust.

Devolution deals elsewhere thus far have come under criticism for a lack of transparency.¹ Although this was partly due to the demands of the original timescales, there are lessons to be learned from this: the district council governance structure makes it easier for these decisions to be explained, especially if they are ones taken by those doing the explaining.

Not only that but district Councillors often double up as Parish and Town councillors and the positive benefits of communication in this regard are a distinct advantage. Our most recent resident's survey in 2015 told us that 74% of residents trust us 70% feel we keep them informed, and 79% are satisfied with how we are doing, 87% of those who responded agree we should work with others to reduce costs, 87% to invest to generate income, and 91% that we should continue to make savings.

At present there seems to some tension between the various levels of government regarding devolution. Significant devolution deals such as the Northern Powerhouse exemplify what is possible with consistency of leadership and shared ambition played out over years if not decades. For other areas, this cohesiveness has not been there and it is perhaps not surprising that other deals have not survived the initial enthusiasm for devolved powers. A focus on structures, rather than outcomes, has had a cost.

This is where district devolution has a distinct advantage: the scale is more achievable while still allowing for ambition, and the proximity to those most affected by the decisions enables more accurate targeting and definition of outcomes, (something the CLG Select Committee recommended in their report). Districts are ideally placed between the higher (County) and lower (Parish and Town) levels and therefore able to make the right connections and links. In short, this speaks to the "bespoke deals" recommended by Select Committee earlier this year and that recognises "a system that allocates local services and a local voice to districts and more strategic and cost-sensitive services to counties has stood the test of time".²

We contribute to every one of the County's strategic outcomes: directly delivering, funding, influencing and collaborating. It would make sense for this to be built upon and strengthened but in order to do so we need greater access to commissioning and influencing those decisions. Our main success thus far in this regard has been in the area of preventative health, building on our role in delivering public health outcomes to create a "District Health Deal".

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/communities-and-local-government/CM9291-Select-Committee-Response.pdf>

² http://districtcouncils.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/DCN_NWOW_INLOGOV_Report_final-1.pdf

6. The District Deal for Health

Designed and put forward as a model for all districts to take on board, the deal plays on the existing role of district councils in public health, identified by the King's Fund in their report last year³, and provides an enhanced model to support the district and county outcomes.

This is a bespoke model for the three districts, co-commissioned with the County.

Our HERO service (Housing, Energy-saving, Re-training Options) has been running since 2009 and has helped to keep levels of homelessness extremely low through offering advice and guidance services to support residents to move on with their lives and plan for a future. Like many other districts, we have in place the community and partner infrastructure to influence others and to work with communities and residents at a local level.

While continuing to deliver on all our standard health prevention activity, we aim to expand the HERO way of working, and to capitalise on these relationships, to make sure that "every contact counts" so that **any** partner (for example a voluntary sector worker, social landlord or Fire Service) who visits a vulnerable or older person in their own home can deliver an assessment, and will be able to use our central referral process to assess all risks including health, social and housing needs, then refer on to the Adult Health Improvement Service, which we will deliver. We aim to prevent hospital admissions and to support independence and ageing well.

We now have a member of staff located with the discharge team at local hospitals, able to respond rapidly to requirements for home adaptations through the Government-funded disabled facilities grant which we manage in-house. **This is an example of local knowledge and intervention saving Primary Care and Social Care budgets.**

County recognises that we are the best-placed partner to deliver our Health Enhancement Plan as we have trusted relationships with GPs and PPGs, with existing referral pathways in place and working, a solid base of statutory provision to build on, tried and tested health improvement skills, excellent partner relationships including private and social landlords, town and parish councils and the voluntary sector and communications tools that work including extensive community consultation.

7. Further challenges...and opportunities...and Brexit

Discussions around larger devolution deals also referred to the perceived reluctance of some central government departments regarding the "letting go" that is required for devolution to function properly. This is perhaps not surprising, given the

³ https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/district-council-contribution-to-public-health-nov15.pdf

perceived risk and issues regarding accountability. We are aware that this could be reflected at County and District level and are continuing to debate our own governance arrangements. This is not, however, preventing us from moving forwards and looking at options that provide Members and our residents with the assurances they require.

8. The LEP

On a more local level, our LEP covers the whole of the South East, and while there are more local economic partnerships in which we participate that report up to the LEP, these do not have the devolved powers necessary to make a real difference.

We recognise the Government's priorities as announced in the Autumn Statement regarding housing and infrastructure and the additional funding via the Local Growth Fund for this and the promise of an early draft of the Housing Bill. However, we also need confirmation of the Government's intentions regarding the Local Growth Fund and LEP funding in general in light of the vote to leave, including the EU Leader programme that is successfully supporting rural businesses in West Kent. We suggest that if this could provide a platform on which to discuss a more locally devolved set of responsibilities, districts would be enthusiastic participants. **Much reflection has already occurred as a result of the vote to leave the EU, with some commentators suggesting that this provides an ideal time for true subsidiarity (decision-making at the lowest possible level) to be embedded in the way Government is conducted.**

9. Business Growth and Skills

We fully support the County's ambition for the adult skills budgets to be devolved to them. Sevenoaks has a distinctly high level of small businesses; around 90% of all employers in the district fall into this category. A devolved skills budget would make more tailored approaches possible, and would support more businesses to become engaged in discussions on skills and training for their workforce. The apprenticeship levy will give the vast majority of councils new responsibilities for apprenticeship training especially for young people; it would make sense for this to be complemented by more local budgets and powers over other adult skills training to form a more rounded offer.

The commercial aspect of our financially self-sufficient success has been due to a large extent on trading on our detailed knowledge of our local property market and on our decision to invest in it; **if we are to become reliant on business growth for our future income, it is vital that we have the capacity and powers to promote the right kind of growth and to have the right tools to support employers and inward investors.** We would be very keen to explore with the Department of Education for example, how to achieve some flexibility with the apprenticeship levy in this regard in

order to provide a bespoke offer that truly meets the needs of employers and young people, contributing to productivity rather than numbers of starts.⁴

10. Summary:

- Districts like Sevenoaks are particularly well placed to instigate and lead the kind of collaborative work required for devolved powers because they are close to the communities they serve due to their size and the services they offer.
- This position of trust and closeness to our communities provides the foundations for the district layer to be consolidated and built upon within current structures, in order to promote local innovation, bespoke solutions and efficiencies that work for residents and offer value.
- Sevenoaks Council has demonstrated the right behaviours, culture and trust to enable collaboration to work both now and in the future.
- These behaviours are more important than structures; we suggest the current emphasis on structures has proved a distraction away from the gains and benefits of devolution and of the potential outcomes
- Districts offer consistency and longevity: much of the two tier structure has been in place since 1972; compared with the changing landscape of structures in health and education, and Whitehall generally, districts offer stability and are easily recognised by residents
- Sevenoaks Council as a multi-award winning authority, financially independent, could offer a model for future councils and could pilot how this could work: self-sufficiency plus.
- West Kent Integration Board has developed a model for collaborative working that could be replicated with other district clusters across England
- The model enables the districts to deliver outcomes which they would not be able to otherwise. We have started with health and are looking at a range of other activity from highways to early help that could result in better outcomes
- We have in place the community and partner infrastructure to influence others and work with communities, and therefore the potential to facilitate devolution even further down where this would be appropriate

In the meantime, we will continue our discussions at both Leader and officer level within Kent, continue to work with the County to press upwards for further devolved powers, and would be happy to work with Government on any pilot initiatives that would help to move this important agenda forward.

⁴ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Delivering-the-value-through-the-apprenticeships-programme-summary.pdf>

