



Report to Cabinet

Subject **An Approach to Partnership Working**

Date **16 September 2004**

Author **Deputy Chief Executive**

1. Purpose of the Report

To outline a framework for partnership working between Gedling Borough Council and Rushcliffe Borough Council.

2. Background

Although all Councils face an increasing number of pressures to deliver innovative, efficient and effective services, smaller district Councils face additional problems directly related to their smaller staffing levels.

Issues around service resilience are compounded by relatively small staff numbers and the scarcity of some key professional staff.

Opportunities for creativity and innovation can also be more limited, reflecting the smaller base of professional and policy based staff. This in turn can adversely impact upon a Council's ability to develop new initiatives, innovative methods of service delivery and respond to time critical issues. Opportunities for sharing learning are also more limited as well as cross-fertilization of ideas between officers with respect to service improvements and developments.

All authorities are now required to produce a Procurement Strategy and increasing attention is being given by both central and local government for the need to achieve efficiency savings. Excellence in procurement as a means of achieving savings to reinvest in frontline services is the latest mantra, particularly since by doing so it reduces pressure on the Council Tax. The report of the Gershon Efficiency Review Team has also contributed towards this aspect, with 'leaked' efficiency saving targets of up to £15 billion. Although the report is not to be published it will form a backdrop to central government required efficiency savings, which currently are expected to be around 2.5%.

The revised CPA process is also placing increased emphasis on partnership working and there are potentially significant advantages to those Councils that are prepared to innovate and work in partnership.

3. Information

With the review of the Senior Management Structure consideration has been given to future developments and how the Council will meet the challenges facing it, both externally, in the context of government initiatives/directives and the revised CPA process and internally, in developing the culture and ethos of the Council to meet these demands.

At the same time an approach was received from Rushcliffe Borough Council regarding the possibility of joint working and sharing good practice. A meeting with the Chief Executive of Rushcliffe and his senior management team was attended by the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive. Broad agreement was reached on the principle of joint working and co-operation.

In effect there are a range of options available to the respective Councils in terms of sharing information and learning, reciprocal cover arrangements, procurement of services all the way through to joint service provision. These form a continuum from minimal engagement through to a complex partnership approach to service delivery. In the context of this report partnership working will be used to refer to any of these arrangements, although possible examples of each type are given in appendix 1.

Any arrangements need to be mutually beneficial to both parties if the necessary trust is to be built up that will enable complex service options to be developed and implemented. Equally, such developments can, as current experience shows, take time to develop and can frustrate new initiatives. Accordingly it is proposed that the full range of options outlined above be explored to generate some 'early wins' that can also be used as pilots to identify and overcome potential difficulties.

Difficulties range from cultural attitudes, staff perceptions, management reluctance to 'give away' management responsibility through to political considerations. Such difficulties are potentially far outweighed by the advantages that such arrangements can offer, from the relatively simple efficiency gains through to an improved CPA score arising from true partnership working.

In order to develop an appropriate framework for joint working it is necessary to agree some basic criteria governing the relationship between the two Councils. The first of these has already been alluded to, that of mutual benefit. Any arrangements should provide mutual benefits to both parties, not only for the obvious necessity of ensuring that each Council's residents receive value for

money but also to build up the trust necessary for more complex arrangements to work without becoming entangled in an overly bureaucratic regime.

Related to this issue of minimising bureaucracy any agreement should be outcome rather than output focussed, albeit linked to clear service performance indicators or other success criteria as appropriate. It is not how a service or process is delivered but whether the intended outcome is achieved that is important. A fixation on outputs rather than outcomes can stifle innovation and step change.

The government is increasingly placing emphasis on efficiency gains and any such arrangements will also need to demonstrate how this is being achieved. This does not necessarily mean a reduction in staffing, for example efficiency gains can as importantly arise through increased productivity and/or reduction in unit cost achieved through computerisation etc. Further gains can be achieved through improved service resilience, larger units essentially being more resilient to staff absences before service delivery suffers or the need to engage agency arises.

Another consideration is that effectively any area is open to challenge and the possibility of partnership working. Although support services are an obvious candidate for a partnership approach this should not mean that other services should be excluded if real benefits can be achieved. As important is that elements of a service may be considered, and areas with professional skill shortages may be prime candidates for such consideration. Essentially there should be a presumption in favour of partnership working where improved outcomes can be demonstrated.

A final consideration is that of 'ownership', neither Council can afford to be precious about who runs a partnership service or for that matter the sharing of good practice. A jointly procured service should be managed by either but not both, with responsibility and accountability for that service resting with the host Council. Although information would be made available for performance monitoring the host Council will be responsible for ensuring service delivery and meeting of the agreed outcomes. It is inefficient use of resources and unacceptable for staff to have to report to two managers.

It will however be necessary to address the issue of governance for those areas that are provided by a partnership approach and further consideration will need to be given as to how this can best be achieved without creating a bureaucratic process.

Appendix 2 outlines a protocol for partnership working. Although this report and the protocol has been written in the context of partnership working with Rushcliffe Borough Council the principles are applicable generally and preliminary discussions have already taken place with Gedling Primary Care Trust on

potential areas for partnership working. A joint bid has been made to work with the IDeA on performance management in Local Strategic Partnerships for example.

Specific areas for consideration though are consultation with the Trade Unions and the involvement in Scrutiny in developing this process. The involvement and support of staff in this process is important if it is to be successful. The Council has demonstrated through the review of highways within Engineering and Property Services that it can achieve efficiency savings whilst still maintaining good working relationships with both the affected staff and the relevant Trade Unions. It is important that this relationship be maintained and accordingly it is proposed that consultation take place with the Trade Unions and the general principles involved.

There is potentially a significant role for Scrutiny in helping to develop the process and identify potential areas for consideration. One possibility would be for Resources and Management Scrutiny to consider this issue.

4. Resource Implications

Development of any partnership working proposals will have resource implications. There should however be compensatory gains as initiatives are developed and implemented.

5. Recommendation

That Cabinet endorse the concept of partnership working as defined within this report and agree the protocol for partnership working as set out in appendix 2.

Appendix 1 Examples of co-operation and partnership working

Sharing information and learning

Both Councils are actively engaged in developing service improvements and new initiatives. Each has developed expertise in a range of areas that the other may find beneficial. An example is this Council's approach to Crime and Disorder. Rushcliffe have indicated that they would wish to learn from the success of our partnership.

Rushcliffe has already pursued LSVT with its housing stock. There is the potential to learn not only how that process was undertaken but as importantly how the residual functions are managed. Irrespective of whether or not Gedling pursues LSVT there will still be learning points to be gained from the Rushcliffe experience.

The CPA process focuses on learning and sharing learning with other organisations, not just internally. Sharing the learning experience also opens the organisation up to external challenge, which in itself is often useful in engendering change.

Reciprocal Cover Arrangements

Both Councils have a number of functions where the loss of a member of staff is critical and for which there may be recruitment difficulties. For example the Council's health and safety function has just one key individual. If recruitment of a replacement were to be unduly protracted there would be a danger of key priorities being missed. Normally this would be resolved by taking on agency staff, which can be extremely expensive. An alternative is to make arrangements with another authority to provide basic cover. The providing authority 'loses' out in the sense that they do not achieve all their objectives, the receiving authority gains in that key priorities can still be addressed. This is a rather limited view though, in that potentially each organisation gains from the flexibility and security such an arrangement provides. Costs can be recharged so that neither authority subsidises the other but each can rely on the co-operation of the other to ensure critical issues can still be progressed until a replacement is obtained.

An added benefit is that such arrangements provide a learning opportunity for the staff involved and enable them to experience and potentially develop new ways of working based on their experiences in the other authority.

Procurement

There are areas of service that the Council currently buys in from the private sector. Sometimes this can represent best value and it will not be the intention to change such practice just for the sake of partnership working. Other times though the private sector represents the only option and is not in itself best value and internal provision is simply not viable. It may be appropriate in those cases to consider procurement from another authority. This Council for example provides

services on just such a basis to the EMRLGA. Such an approach may well be possible with Rushcliffe in that they have staff dealing with a number of issues that this Council does not. Services could be procured either on an ad-hoc basis as and when required, or for other areas through an outcome based service level agreement. This option could provide better value for both Council's as well as avoiding the need to take on staff should the workload increase but not sufficient to justify a part or FTE post.

Partnership Working

In essence one of the Councils manages and provides a joint service for both authorities. This could range from a relatively minor but discrete service such as NNDR collection through to a joint homelessness unit. As these examples demonstrate it can cover a support service function through to a frontline service. Key to any development would be outcomes related to improved service, efficiency gains and service resilience.

Such partnership working need not be physical in the sense of actual service provision it can also mean sharing and utilising ICT resources, ranging from joint procurement and use of dedicated servers through to joint finance or performance management packages including installation and maintenance. This could be extended to business continuity to provide additional resilience in the event of a major catastrophe.

Appendix 2

Joint and Partnership Working

Protocol

Gedling Borough Council and Rushcliffe Borough Council recognise the benefits in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, quality and resilience of service delivery that can be derived from mutual support, partnership work and joint procurement and service delivery. They therefore agree that they will work together to identify and take advantage of joint and partnership working opportunities.

This Protocol sets out the principles upon which such work will be based.

Underlying Principles

- Joint or Partnership working will be entered into to achieve one or more of the following objectives:
 - To improve performance of a service
 - To improve efficiency of an already well-performing service
 - To share knowledge, experience and learning between partners
 - To maximise capacity, for example by sharing specialist staff
- Joint or partnership working will be outcome oriented, with outcomes defined and agreed in advance.
- Joint or partnership working will be entered into for mutual benefit of the partners, agreed jointly between the partners involved.
- Joint or partnership working will be based on mutual trust between partners involved.
- Joint or partnership working will be approached from a positive standpoint, with an emphasis on problems solving to overcome barriers, rather than letting any barriers become obstacles to progress.
- Accountability for services delivered through joint and partnership working will remain with the organisation(s) with whom statutory responsibility rests.
- Joint or partnership working will be underpinned by appropriate legal and contractual arrangements between partners, with a presumption towards minimum bureaucracy consistent with meeting legal requirements.

Operational Principles

- Day-to-day managerial responsibility for services delivered through joint or partnership working should rest with the agency providing the service, though overall accountability remains with the organisation(s) with whom statutory responsibility rests.
- Performance standards and targets will be agreed from the outset, which link to and contribute to the desired outcomes. These standards may vary between partners, depending on the level of service required by each partner. The agreed standard(s) will be suitably documented.
- Performance against the standard agreed will be managed by the agency providing the service, linking into constituent partners' performance management arrangements.
- Staffing and other resourcing costs will be allocated fairly and transparently between partners. Salary levels will generally be in line with those of the organisation delivering the service
- Joint or partnership working may be introduced on either a permanent or temporary/interim basis as required. Where the latter applies, the duration of the arrangement should be agreed from the outset.
- Detailed process and contractual issues will need to be agreed in each instance of joint or partnership working, drawing on these overall and operational principles.