

Notes of a meeting South Hams and West Devon 24 October 2016.

In attendance: Cllr John Tucker (Leader SHDC), Cllr Philip Sanders (Leader WDBC), Steve Jordan (Executive Director – Strategy and Commissioning, Head of Paid Service, SHWD), and Sophie Hosking (Executive Director, Service Delivery and Commercial Development, SHWD).

Cllr R Evans and J Stuckey (clerk)

The Leaders of South Hams and West Devon (Cllr John Tucker (Leader SHDC), Cllr Philip Sanders (Leader WDBC) introduced themselves and gave some background information.

Both Councils had been aware that changes were needed and when West Devon found themselves without a Chief Executive (theirs had gone to South Hams) the decision was made to share. There were a series of restructures which started with a combined 15 directors and resulted in a reduction to 7. Due to changes in pension law the Chief Executive then needed to retire and at this point the decision was made not to replace but to appoint 2 Directors - Steve Jordan (Executive Director – Strategy and Commissioning, Head of Paid Service, SHWD), and Sophie Hosking (Executive Director, Service Delivery and Commercial Development, SHWD).

I.E.S.I (said easy, a company from the South East, owned by councils) was appointed to work on a restructure and appoint to the new posts. Following this all staff were offered voluntary redundancy. Impact behaviour assessments were undertaken by all staff and everyone that wanted to stay had to apply for a job. Posts were all new. The Leaders considered that during this process they got rid of most of the 'deadwood' and managed to hang on to most of the good people. No posts were ring fenced – anyone could apply for anything.

The Leaders reported that this had been a tough time from a Members perspective. Both authorities had been 'family type' set ups and Members knew and trusted their officers. Members were reluctant to travel to joint meetings but it was clearly understood that the main driver was financial. The overall objective was to save (savings quoted as £8m) and the budget for the 2 authorities is set until 2021.

The Leaders considered that they had an agenda for growth and that silo working had been removed.

Members were adamant that there would be no loss of sovereignty for each council. Both meeting structures operated independently and reports that required decisions were taken to both. To date both authorities had agreed on all decisions.

The most difficult area to agree had been harmonisation of staff terms and conditions. The two authorities had different travel agreements and redundancy levels so these areas had to be sorted.

From a customer point of view nothing had changed. They were moving towards online self-service as much as they could.

As part of the restructure an admin function had been put in place that took care of all admin for all services. Officers, such as Planners or Environmental Health could then concentrate solely on the technical part of the job that no one else could do. The case management IT system allowed for multi skilling of staff.

The first change was to systems and functions. Officers now hot desked (only 6 workstations per 10 employees) and worked from home at least 2 days a week. Hours worked at home could be at any time to suit the employee. Only the reception desk and customer support team (phones) were manned. If Members felt the need to talk to an employee rather than email they could SKYPE. Performance stats showed that productivity was greater.

This had allowed the councils offices to become cost neutral as other space was rented out.

Both Directors agreed that getting the IT right was crucial.

The next stage, which was currently being worked on, was to put all services into a company, privately owned by both councils, to contract work. A business case was being drawn up for this. Staff would tupe and each council would procure services from the company. Other councils would also be able to procure council services from them.

With regard to funding they did not break down costs on a day to day basis but had come to an agreement about how costs were split for example 60 40 on planning, 50 50 on IT.

Both sides felt that the future for local authorities would be in commissioning services. For example, even if waste services were operating different schemes, they could still be managed by a central team.

When asked how the changes had been received by staff the Directors said that it had been a rollercoaster. 30% of staff had left (80 on one day) and grieving had taken place. It had been a tough time with a dip in performance. They were now coming out of this. There were queues for phone calls but they were no worse than in previous years, although perception was that it was worse. The Directors stressed the importance of Members being on side during this time. Staff surveys had shown concerns regarding capacity but staff had also said that they would recommend it as a place to work. The survey had a 67% response rate, which was high.

If the new company happened staff would tupe to it and contracts could be changed in the future. Pay could be profit related.

Good relationships with the trade unions had helped.

The authorities had an excellent HR specialist and they offered her services should they be required.