



Slough Borough Council

Maximizing potential - governance through a local authority shared service

Slough Borough Council is a small unitary authority that has a strong commitment to the delivery of adult learning and skills and like all local authorities has its governance arrangements routed within a democratically elected member structure.

Unlike further education colleges, local authorities do not have a formal governing body focusing on adult learning. Governance arrangements are encompassed within the local authority structures, with the curriculum being informed by the council's strategic priorities and financial, procurement and other support services governed by local authority regulations.

The strategic decision-making in Slough is through a cabinet structure, members of which are elected and appointed by the controlling Labour administration. A member of the cabinet has responsibility for Opportunities and Skills; a brief that includes adult learning. The Education and Families Scrutiny Panel is the forum through which performance and service review is undertaken.

The review of governance arrangements was undertaken in a climate where all local authorities are going through major change processes, leading to new ways of working and new models of delivering services. Other factors supporting its timing were the new localism and big society agendas and the emergence of Community Learning Trusts.

The review sought to identify what the best model would be to secure continuity of adult learning for local residents in a changing climate with reduced funding. Challenges include the differing agendas of the partners, political sensitivities, and the need to bring about efficiency savings.

What was the catalyst / driver for reviewing the governance structure?

Slough's review was originally triggered by the changes in minimum contract levels imposed nationally by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills. The second factor was the increasing pressure on local authorities to identify efficiencies while safeguarding front-line services.

Although Slough is just above the minimum contract level, neighbouring Berkshire unitary authorities were in a similar position, just below or above the £500,000 level. Officers were prompted to explore a variety of models and potential partnerships which could sustain future delivery. Slough's elected member with responsibility for adult learning was informed that the minimum contract level may increase and this would have a direct impact on the ability of the council to continue to receive Skills Funding Agency funding.

From the outset there was a strong political will from elected members, supported by senior officers, of the need to ensure that delivery was closely aligned to the Council strategic priorities.

The challenge for Slough was how to ensure that any new arrangements were politically acceptable to any potential partner as well as Slough's cabinet.

What process is being used to carry out the review?

An initial Berkshire workshop was held on 25 March 2011, facilitated by HOLEX as part of a wider LSIS programme. Representatives from all six Berkshire Unitaries attended with a representative from the local Skills Funding Agency office.

Bracknell Forest, Slough, and Windsor and Maidenhead expressed an interest in exploring new models through which a number of options were considered. Potential partnerships explored were a local college, a national charitable organisation (Workers Education Association) and a County Council.

Soft market testing was carried out with each interested body which included exploring the possible governance arrangements. A further option was to combine the grants of two or more boroughs to develop shared

management arrangements within a local authority structure.

The preferred option was a shared service managed through joint governance with one lead council. This option ensured that the management and strategic direction of the service delivery remained within the control of the local authorities and would be responsive to local needs through democratic controls. Officers were then tasked to develop a business case in order to gain elected members' approval and support.

Bracknell Forest, at this stage, due to local circumstances withdrew from the project leaving two authorities to develop a new integrated service. The initial conclusion reached by officers was reported to Windsor and Maidenhead's cabinet on 24 November 2011 where the authority for final agreement was delegated to the Director of Children's Services in conjunction with the lead elected member for Children's Services.

Slough's cabinet received a report on 14 February 2012 where it was agreed to proceed with the shared service arrangement and seek the formal approval from the Skills Funding Agency who subsequently confirmed their approval on the 16 March 2012.

How have stakeholders been involved in this process?

Within Slough, senior officers and elected members including the Leader of the Council have been fully appraised of progress at each stage of the project. This culminated in the elected members receiving a full business case that identified the specific benefits of a shared service model. The document also illustrated that the model would be more resilient and adaptable given the uncertainty of funding, would achieve reductions in management and lead to some funding being reinvested into additional delivery.

A management committee, with senior officers from both boroughs has been holding monthly meetings since July 2011. This group is responsible for the development and the implementation of the new model, supported by an officers' project group that meets on average twice a month.

Slough's lifelong learning management team have been kept fully informed in each stage of the process and along with senior staff in Windsor and Maidenhead are now taking a lead in a number of task and finish groups to support the development of the new integrated service. Workshops involving core staff from each borough have been held, and regular 'frequently asked questions' sheets are being produced.

Throughout the process the overall intention is that there will not be any direct impact to the customer and that any efficiencies realised would initially be reinvested into additional delivery. It has therefore felt inappropriate at this stage to include any consultation directly with learners.

What questions have arisen for you throughout this process?

When considering alternative models and governance, the ability of the new arrangements to respond to the needs of local and in particular vulnerable and disadvantaged communities remained important as did the keeping of the philosophy of community learning.

The challenges of working across local authority political boundaries required sensitive management. It is crucial that there is a clear understanding of the aspirations of both groups of elected members and past working relationships can also hinder or support progress. Although Windsor and Maidenhead and Slough Councils are represented by different political groups,

their respective views in the development of a shared service met their individual strategic objectives.

Slough took a pragmatic view, wishing to secure adult learning provision for the future. Windsor and Maidenhead elected members took a flexible approach and were happy for Slough to be the accountable body as long as there was a governance structure which ensured that the new service would be able to respond to their own Council strategic priorities.

The impact of the changes on the quality of delivery was a key question raised from Slough's Education and Families Scrutiny Panel. The panel was reassured that Windsor and Maidenhead's service Ofsted grade was currently, 'good', as was Slough's, and the approach by officers would be to combine the best practice from both services into the shared service.

The overriding question for both councils at officer and elected member level was whether efficiencies can be achieved while improving services and maintaining local accountability and responsiveness

What conclusions or decisions have you come to so far?

With political will, supported by senior officer vision and foresight, it is possible through persistence and drive to bring about change, and develop a new delivery model that safeguards the particular needs of residents from more than one local area through a shared service.

Governance arrangements should be simple, but directly accountable, with a clear legal framework to ensure that delivery and resourcing is equitable. The governance model now being developed is through a joint management committee with two senior

officer representatives from each borough, with Slough as the lead accountable body having 51 % voting rights. Responsibilities for reporting to each council respective elected members and cabinet will rest with each of the council respective officers. An annual report will be presented to each council's scrutiny panel.

The current challenge is for both legal teams to use the memorandum of understanding, initially written by officers into a legal agreement that safeguards the interests of each council. This will capture governance arrangements, dispute resolution, performance reporting, commissioning, and use of resources including premises, fee setting, trading, and termination.

How has the changing external environment for FE and Skills influenced this review?

The uncertainty of future minimum level of contracts was the initial driver coupled with the unknown levels of future funding which prompted a more long term look at the future of adult learning in Slough. The results of the national review into 'Informal Adult Learning' highlighted the need to minimise overheads; the new shared service will reduce management costs. The shared service arrangement will also provide a basis from which to explore the development of Community Learning Trusts.

Next steps

The implementation of the shared service will also involve the merging of the employment and enterprise functions of the council into the new structure, thus achieving additional coherence in the delivery of the Skills agenda.

The shared service management committee is working towards a TUPE transfer of Windsor and Maidenhead staff on 1 August 2012 with

a new staffing structure being in place by 1 January 2013.

What lessons learned would you share with other governing bodies considering a similar change process?

1. The need at the onset for clear vision and foresight, supported by strong leadership with a 'can do' approach.
2. The importance of securing a whole organisation approach to support the change process from the leader of the council, chief executive, strategic directors, assistant directors, finance, human resources, procurement and legal teams.
3. To involve staff who will be directly affected by the transition in a timely and constructive way to ensure they feel and are part of the development of the new arrangements.
4. The realisation that planning for a shared service needs to be started at the earliest opportunity and driven at every stage to maintain momentum.



The shared service management committee who have been driving the project.

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