

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
FOR DISTRICT COUNCILS

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

at a

PARLIAMENTARY HEARING

held in

Committee Room 20, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0PW

on

Tuesday 24 January 2017

Before:

Mark Pawsey MP, in the Chair
Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville
Andrew Bingham MP
Professor Colin Copus, De Montfort University
Julie Cooper MP
Robert Courts MP
Mims Davies MP
Matthew Hamilton, District Council's Network
Simon Hoare MP
Nigel Mills MP

(From the Shorthand Notes of:
W B GURNEY & SONS LLP
83 Victoria Street,
London, SW1H 0HW
Telephone Number: 0203 585 4721/22)

Witnesses: CLLR BOB PRICE, Leader of Oxford City Council; DAVID COOK, Chief Executive of Kettering Borough Council; CLLR MARK CRANE, Leader of Selby District Council; PATRICIA HUGHES, Joint Chief Executive of Hart District Council; and ALEX COLYER, Interim Chief Executive, South Cambridgeshire District Council.

THE CHAIRMAN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the very first evidence session of the All-Party Group for District Councils on collaboration between district councils and between district councils and other bodies. My name is Mark Pawsey and along with Graham Jones—who I think is on his way—we have set up a new All-Party Group to represent the interests of district councils, and district councillors, here in Parliament. We have held a couple of meetings and receptions and had discussions, but we thought it would be useful to run a Select Committee-style evidence session on the way forward for district councils and, particularly, on how district councils can work together more effectively and learn from one another. This is our very first session and it is a case of suck it and see. May I express to my parliamentary colleagues around me how we see this going? Many of you will have sat on Select Committees and they are a great way of getting evidence through. We have not had an opportunity of a pre-meeting as parliamentarians, and I suspect not all of you will be able to stay until 4 o'clock, which is the amount of time we have the room for, so if each of you could indicate to me when you wish to ask a question, I will make certain that you get in.

We have selected the five witnesses who are before us as a consequence of the evidence that they sent in, which went to Professor Colin Copus of De Montford University and his team, who are providing us with their secretariat. I think we had something like 75 representations from district councils, so from a very broad spread around the country. Colin and his team have looked at five that we have found to be particularly interesting and that is the basis on which we have asked you to come along this afternoon.

Our first session is really getting the ball rolling on collaboration between councils. We have subsequent sessions when we will be looking at collaboration between district councils and other bodies, particularly in relationship with county councils, the relationship with health, and we are going to do a session on the overseas experience and what happens in other areas. It struck me while I was a councillor that far too often you sit in a council trying to resolve a problem without thinking, “Hold on, somebody else must have done this somewhere else. Why don't we take a look at what they have done”. We have a session that will be revolving around that.

We are starting off looking at the collaboration between councils and I am hoping that we will try and stick to broadly seven areas of interest. I will run through those so that my colleagues know what those are and those of you answering questions will know. We will kick off with general issues. Then we are going to move on to housing. Then we want to deal with different approaches to public service reform, before moving on to functional economic areas. Then we will spend a bit of time on effective working with county councils and then a little time on clustering. I want to leave 15 or 20 minutes at the end for each of our witnesses to make any points that are relevant to their experience that perhaps have not come out in the evidence session.

If we kick off with the broader general area. First, would our witnesses like to give us a minute or two on a little bit about the organisations that you represent. I might add that on the panel here we are quite broadly split between Conservative and Labour. It is mostly Conservative MPs but Julie is a Labour MP and represents Burnley and Graham is a Labour MP representing Hyndburn. We also have Baroness Bakewell from the House of Lords and she is a Lib Dem Peer. We have a fairly even balance. Among our witnesses I know we have both councillors and chief executives of authorities, so if you could tell us a little bit about your authority and where you are from and then we will get started with the first questions.

ALEX COLYER: Alex Colyer from South Cambridgeshire District Council but representing Cambridge City as well so a Conservative council/Labour council. Geographically South Cambridgeshire totally surrounds Cambridge. I think it is the only district in the country that is so configured. That poses a real need to work together on a spatial basis, but the co-operation goes a lot deeper than that. That is enough of an introduction.

CLLR MARK CRANE: Mark Crane, Leader of Selby District Council in North Yorkshire. We abut a number of councils. We just about abut North Yorkshire via a very small patch in Harrogate but we also neighbour Leeds, York, East Riding, Doncaster and Wakefield. We have a population of circa 90,000.

CLLR BOB PRICE: Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council. Oxford, as you probably know, is in the middle of Oxfordshire. We have four other district counties around us and we are part of the County of Oxfordshire. They are all Conservative, we are Labour, but we get on okay.

DAVID COOK: Good afternoon. My name is David Cook. I am Chief Executive at Kettering Borough Council. I guess I am here because we are in a growth-based cluster with three of our neighbour districts—Corby, Wellingborough and East Northants—and we have the county council involved in it. Together we are a population of about 320,000 and we have been doing some apparently interesting work on making sure that we deliver the housing and economic development agenda collectively.

PATRICIA HUGHES: I am Trish Hughes. I am joint Chief Executive at Hart District Council. I am here representing the five councils approach. Unlike my colleagues who seem to relate to each other in terms of geography, that is absolutely the opposite with the five councils. We have a partnership of councils across three different counties across the South East and South West of England.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. Robert wants to declare an interest. I do not know if any other colleagues would like to do so at the same time.

ROBERT COURTS: I remain a district councillor on West Oxfordshire District Council and of course I know Cllr Price from that other life.

CLLR BOB PRICE: And Simon as well.

SIMON HOARE: I am no longer a councillor.

BARONESS BAKEWELL OF HARDINGTON MANDEVILLE: I am a district councillor on South Somerset District Council.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am pretty sure all of us would at one time have been a councillor in one form or another so we are very familiar with the work that you do. I was going to pick up the remark Bob made about being an authority of one political complexion having to work with authorities of a different political complexion. We are quite used to having to work with one another here in Parliament when we are sitting on committees particularly, but how does the political dimension work? Does that present any challenges in your authorities working together?

CLLR BOB PRICE: I guess, Mark, as you would find in Parliament too, what you co-operate on are the areas where you have a common shared ambition, so you do not choose the areas where you are going to be in opposition; you choose the areas where there is a common ambition. Our joint working seriously started in about 2009 as part of the Government's single conversation initiative, which you may recall. We are seeking to bring together funding within local authority areas for more coherent integration. We had been meeting regularly as leaders before that, all the districts and the county, but we thought we would formalise it as a strategic planning infrastructure partnership (SPIP) which then created itself and has a body to integrate planning with structured functions. Its big integration was with the Homes and Communities Agency and with the Environment Agency as part of a general approach to infrastructure in the county. That has moved forward and it was successful subsequently in achieving the City Deal. Then we moved from that into the growth board in 2014. It has been an evolution from SPIP to growth board, and we are now seeking a devolution proposal for the county which would build on that joint working. The answer to the question is that you are focusing on the areas we can agree on—the need for more housing growth, transport infrastructure and a real need to tackle issues around skills—which has given us a lot of integration.

THE CHAIRMAN: Does anybody else wish to comment on any challenges that are currently faced if two authorities of different political complexions are trying to work collaboratively?

DAVID COOK: I would endorse Bob's sentiments. Purpose and place seem, in my experience, to overwhelm any other political considerations. If Kettering's leader were here, and he is Conservative, he would say—whispering it quietly—that he finds it easiest to get along with the leader at Corby, who is Labour, because of the similarities between the towns, similarities of purpose, similarities of ambition, this point about delivering growth. The most important thing about local politics is the "local". I think you can see that when you have got shared ambition. Generally speaking, the politics do not matter that much. Bluntly, in my experience, if people are going to fall out, they

usually fall out worse with somebody from the same party than they do with somebody from the opposite party. You might know more about that than me.

JULIE COOPER: Following on from that, what sort of public identity do you have? Do you have a combined identity and does that create any problems with the electorate?

ALEX COLYER: In South Cambridgeshire, as we have stated in the evidence pack, we had to create an identity for South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge—and if you can come up with a better title than Greater Cambridge I would be glad to hear it—to identify the geography, the place/area that we are working towards.

To reinforce the points Bob and David have made, place and ambition certainly override politics. We know that because the Conservative administration at South Cambs has worked very closely with the former Lib Dem administration at Cambridge and now with the Labour administration at Cambridge. Both those relationships have been strong and it is the ambition and the place piece that have driven those strong relationships.

The Greater Cambridge title is one of necessity really, for us to be able to talk about the wider area and talk about place in a common way. That has really helped us with the messaging and with telling the narrative of what is going on in the patch rather than just talking about one or other of the districts. The border is very porous and a lot of Cambridge growth is now happening in South Cambridgeshire. That is symptomatic of where we are. Talking about Greater Cambridge is the only way we can make sense of that.

CLLR BOB PRICE: I think the identity of the growth board is slightly particular—that is a good point—because it is a body which people are not familiar with. They are familiar with councils but this notion of a board is a bit more alien. We have sought to align it alongside the Local Enterprise Partnership, with common ambitions. The LEP and the growth board are working together on a series of issues which are, I think, commonly understood around the county. As soon as you get this question of whether it is accountable and who it is accountable to—because it is a secondary body created by the councils, it is a joint statutory committee that does not have direct elections to it, so there is a question mark there which we have sought to overcome largely by reports back to our respective councils telling us to tell the councils what is happening and getting the scrutiny committee to look at it.

SUE COOPER: So communication has got around these problems. In my own area of Lancashire where there is work going on to form a combined authority bringing together 14 district councils, 13 around the table from different parties, the challenge has been persuading councillors that there will be no loss of power and persuading the electorate that there will not be a loss of, for example, Burnley Borough Council's identity in the wider, more powerful group.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think that point illustrates the fact that people look at this type of work through an institutional lens or through a lens which is about place. If we have

been successful in North Northamptonshire it is because folks have recognised that our boundaries are pretty irrelevant and are pretty porous. What we have in common is a road, a college, a railway station and all that sort of stuff. In my experience, if you come across problems it is when folks start putting an institutional hat on and start saying, “Who is going to represent the people of Upper Wallop?” as if somehow the people of Upper Wallop would not be written into some sort of other arrangement. That is one of the pivotal points of success: whether folks approach this through the lens of institution or through the lens of place and purpose. It is the institutional perspective that you are describing, I think.

PATRICIA HUGHES: May I add to that from the five councils’ point of view? It is also around letting go of a certain amount of sovereignty. Something I heard in what you were saying just then was around sovereignty and a feeling of control. For us, because we are in a slightly different dynamic, it is a concentration of outcomes and what it is that our residents really want and making sure that the focus and the shared values is always towards that outcome.

SIMON HOARE: If the legislative requirement, let’s say for example in the duty to co-operate with regards to housing allocation and the sharp and significant reduction in central government funding support for district councils had not happened, do you think you would be doing the joined up and collaborative work you are doing now or is it a by-product of those twin pressures?

CLLR MARK CRANE: I would suggest that we would be doing the work but we would probably have done it quicker because necessity has also played a part. We started partnering with some of our neighbouring organisations before we ever saw a reduction in government grants, et cetera. I think that we have seen some councils being forced—if I could use that word although it is not a good word to use—to look at their bottom line and decide they really need to do something. I think a lot of councils were already on the road to this before it happened, but it has perhaps speeded up the process. That is my take on it. I have only worked with other Conservative councils. That is why I did not give an answer to the previous question, not that I would not work with a Labour or Lib Dem Council, because Leeds is very Labour and we work well with them on the periphery on some things. That was my reluctance to answer the previous question.

SIMON HOARE: It was a good song to sing, but nobody sang it in the public domain, did they? Everybody has talked about joint working and joint commissioning and partnership and collaboration post 2007-08. It is interesting that if there was collaborative work done prior to that I cannot recall, and I sat as a district councillor for 12 years, district councillors saying, “This is a new way of doing things; look at us as an example”.

DAVID COOK: We started in 2004 and got a joint core spatial strategy agreed in 2006 which covered the four local authority areas. That was delivering outcomes before we got to 2007. Sometimes it is important to just get on to do delivery. I think one of the things that district councils, whether they are in clusters or individually, are not so good

at as some other organisations, if I can put it like that, is talking about the things we do. Why did Bucks start doing what they were doing? Because it was about purpose and trying to make a place better; it was not an institutional motive but a community development motive that drove it. We do not tend to talk about that. We just get on and do it because people notice the outcomes not the process.

CLLR BOB PRICE: Simon, the thing which markedly changed was the requirement for housing market assessment, which created areas which then had to think about themselves as a whole area and where the housing was going to go in that area. I think that was a significant new factor which changed the dynamics of the whole situation.

The other thing I would say in Oxfordshire that was different was the LEP. In retrospect, creating the LEP was one of the most important things Keith Mitchell ever did because it really created this notion of an economic plan for the county, which had been there before but not been brought out, and created a private sector/public sector linkage which is now driving forward the City Deal and devolution and so on. It is a really important change.

SIMON HOARE: Can I have a final question? Would you share my presumption, and certainly experience, that in actual fact, picking up on what Julie was saying, there is often a lot of talk among councillors about we must preserve our sovereign independent Grand Duchy of Wherever, when, in actual fact, most residents—not all—really could not give a toss what the Government's processes are as long as there are quality public services delivered at an affordable price. They want to buy a sausage; they do not need to see the sausage being made.

ALEX COLYER: The only thing I would say to that is I think our residents want to be assured that good governance exists however that is structured. My only counter to that would be I think there is a presumption that we do it properly and we do it well in the Government's terms.

SIMON HOARE: There are standards and everything else. Nobody is saying they are frightfully corrupt.

ALEX COLYER: I know but in terms of do they really care; they do care but it is at a level, is it not?

CLLR BOB PRICE: I think that is too simple, Simon. The thing they are looking for very often is identification with the places they live. They want a local authority structure which reflects their priorities and their interests. In West Oxfordshire, as you know, there is a very strong sense of identity which is different from Cherwell, different from South and different from City. People's own psychology of how they feel about an area is very important.

PATRICIA HUGHES: If I could add to that on the Hart side of things, with the exception of those councils which have gone the merged route, Hart is one of probably the most shared local authorities in the country. Sixty per cent of our revenue spend is

currently in shared services and that is moving up to 70% as of next year. Our members have philosophically brought into this idea of the best services to our residents delivered at the best place. Sometimes that will be based well out of sight of the remit of the Hart boundary. Sometimes that will be sharing with our adjacent neighbours because it means professional people on the ground which are close to us. Sometimes it is delivery directly inside the council. They have got to that point of saying actually we are very open to the suggestion of where that delivery should be. I think that reflects the residents' views, to be honest, which is, "We do not mind as long as the quality services are being delivered".

DAVID COOK: I take the initiative to read letters of complaint and compliment that come into our organisation. It is a useful half a day. I have never read one yet about strategy. They are all about delivery. Our phones light up in the customer service centre and the biggest phone lighting up was the day the county council switched off half the streetlights. The second biggest day was when they decided not to grit pavements. The public do not even know who runs the streetlights and who grits the pavements in a two-tier area.

MIMS DAVIES: Or care.

SIMON HOARE: Or care.

DAVID COOK: I have sympathy—so forgive me for disagreeing with some of my colleagues—with the notion that what people do care about is they want to see something which they feel is grounded in their place. They want a phone number or a walk-in facility that is close to them and they want to know that the people making decisions know something about Corby and its heritage. They want to know that people know something about Kettering and its heritage and they have been there and that they live there. There is something about being of a place that people care about. In terms of the functionality of it, I am with you, but I think they want to feel like these people who are making decisions are of this place and not too many miles away somewhere else.

SUE COOPER: I accept the point about people not minding who is doing the job as long as it is being done well and I think when it comes to accountability they want to know who they go and shout at and where they are; are they miles away the other side of the county or are they accessible?

ANDREW BINGHAM: I think in some respects you have dealt with it but when I was on High Peak Borough Council we did a strategic alliance where we shared a chief executive with Staffordshire Moorlands, which was cross-county and across region, so it was quite unusual. As I said, to a degree you have answered it, but a lot of people were concerned that High Peak was being taken over by Staffordshire Moorlands and so on. Have you found that with your joint way of working: "My council is being taken over by another one"? We will not use the M word—the merger word—but as it went through it came back to what the alliance called barns(?) and bins: as long as they were being emptied and cleaned they did not mind. Do any of you have any experience of the public body being taken over by another council?

DAVID COOK: I think that is more of a worry for chief executives and councillors than it is for the public.

ALEX COLYER: I think it is a concern for councillors to a degree but not for residents.

ANDREW BINGHAM: The main difficulty for us was it was a different county and Staffordshire not Derbyshire.

CLLR BOB PRICE: Cherwell are sharing officers with South Northants, and West Oxfordshire with Cotswold. I do not think there is a worry about it because you have got your local councillors; in West, Cherwell Cotswold and South Northants. You have your local councillors and local representation.

NIGEL MILLS: Can I just ask where you perceive the functions and services you are sharing are the most important aspects of what your council do? Are you sharing the least important ones that people do not care about so much? Mr Colyer?

ALEX COLYER: We share a planning director and head of finance. We are going to be sharing a director of housing. We have an integrated ICT team. They are all pretty fundamental to our core business. It is probably the most important thing that we are looking to share, not the least important. I think we see that as a key way of recognising the place issues and co-operating where we need to to get better outcomes.

NIGEL MILLS: What I was thinking is if the aim of co-operation is economic growth and development and employment and fundamentally important things, whereas I think that is very different to sharing who does the payrolls which, fundamentally, is a back office thing people do not care too much about. Ideally, you want to have your accountability at a level where the most important decisions are being taken so you can understand who is doing what and how they change it if they do not like it. I suppose there is the question Ms Hughes was saying about losing sovereignty. I want my residents to think if they do not like what is being done, their vote can change it, whereas if I can change one of the district councillors but the other five are going to do the same thing anyway and they are obviously very happy with that, I am not voting for the right thing. I am voting at a level too low and maybe we should be having a vote at the combined authority level and then having local area committees or something doing the less important stuff. How do you square that feeling so that the people who vote have some ownership of this? You have given away some sovereignty as Ms Hughes said.

PATRICIA HUGHES: If I start with myself as I am being referenced, we have a joint committee which has representatives from each of the cabinets so we have a direct line through our democratic processes. We have a joint overview in scrutiny which also has members of each overview and scrutiny committees from each of the councils. I think we have quite a strong, visible and clearly transparent accountability so people can see that straight back down to their own local authorities.

NIGEL MILLS: We need to ask the councillors this rather than the chief executives, but do people campaign for election on these joint issues or do they campaign on all the issues they have not merged and go off and do what they like on the other stuff?

CLLR MARK CRANE: I have to say that since I have been leader and we have got closer to one or two councils next door, the opposition have never campaigned on those issues. They would never say, "It's an outrage: Mark Crane is working too closely with Harrogate", or whoever it is. They are more likely to go out and say, "We should have our bins emptied weekly rather than fortnightly", or whatever the local issue is they feel will have some impetus. I have never seen anybody campaign on the back of we are working too closely with North Yorkshire or we are working too closely with Harrogate, East Riding or whoever it is. Fundamentally, we often find ourselves at election time dealing with some very small issues. Dog mess is the one I know my chief exec keeps bringing to my mind. If it is not picked up—and it does not matter if my council picks it up, Harrogate picks it up or Burnley pick it up—as long as people see dog mess being picked up, they are happy with it and if it is not being picked up correctly then that is a reason for the opposition to man the barricades and go out with leaflets saying, "It's an outrage; they are not doing what they have been paid to do".

NIGEL MILLS: It is all right saying you have the democratic structures on these joint committees but if no-one is going out there and saying, "Vote for me and when I attend this joint committee I will do A, B and C", and if all they are saying is, "Vote for me and I will make sure the dog mess is picked up and, by the way, we will do some complicated joint planning and plonk 3,000 houses around the area in a majority decision being taken by people you do not have any chance of influencing, I sense you are divorcing it but maybe I am unduly harsh there.

CLLR MARK CRANE: What I would say is I think there is some truth in that. One of the things we are thinking of doing, this is not really joint working, is building a new town in the district, and Leeds and York have housing issues and we might share some of those numbers with York and Leeds. I can absolutely assure you people are manning the barricades over that issue.

NIGEL MILLS: Can I ask about the governance of these things in terms of how you take important decisions when you are collaborating? Presumably, an ideal decision-making process is not to have four leaders plus four chief executives trying to work out what they think they might be able to get through their groups and then through their councils and then have every decision taken and be subject to subsequent ratification by four different councils a few weeks later and see if it all turns out okay and then one says, "No", and you all come back and have another go? Do you have a sense that just never happens in any of your experience? Is that not a recipe for a rather slow and lowest common denominator way of taking quite difficult decisions?

ALEX COLYER: I think you have raised a really good challenge. Probably the best example I can give is in terms of addressing congestion in Cambridge. Should the City Deal impose congestion charging on Cambridge. South Cambridgeshire Council is

resolutely opposed to that. They see it as affecting their residents more than Cambridge City's residents who have a higher propensity to use bicycles and walk than use public transport so they see it as an attack on their residents. That has been recognised as an issue that South Cambridgeshire councillors have campaigned on and will continue to campaign on and will continue to oppose. There is a bit of ambivalence on the City side of that, but as long as there is an alternative that can work. That has been a clear political distinction between the two councils, but there is still an ambition to work together to make it work. That has probably been the most significant political division I can think of where councillors have been really clear about which side of the line they stand on that. That has been the distinction, I think, when they have stood for election.

NIGEL MILLS: The question about how you take decisions. Have you had any experience of it being quite protracted and cumbersome?

CLLR BOB PRICE: Co-operation is built incrementally over time. It does not just happen on one issue. We started in 2009. We have had eight years now of building and badging. We know the areas of disagreement. We know that we have officer groups that meet as Sherpas working around that as well so by the time you get to the leaders GBS meeting you know broadly what the issues are and you can thrash out several on which you can agree. That produces incremental growth and then you gain trust in in each other and you work to a position where you can move forward together and you can challenge things. Obviously there will still be disagreement. SODC and ourselves are in dispute about the site to the south of city which we own but is in SODC's area. We would like to build on it; it is in the green belt so there is a big argument about that that should go to the local planning inquiry. We cannot get away from that. It has been there for ten years and we are very open about it. John Cotton and I get on very well, but we disagree on this. It is not something we are avoiding. We are just saying we will park that issue and work on the things we can work together on.

DAVID COOK: In terms of our experience in North Northamptonshire, a lot depends on the constitution of the body and whether they have a joint statutory committee or not?

SIMON HOARE: There is a division being called.

THE CHAIRMAN: One or two our colleagues are going to move to vote. Some of us I think will stay.

Division in the House of Commons

SIMON HOARE: Can I ask Councillor Price a question which I think I know the answer to. What you are saying about the evolving co-operation of the councils in Oxfordshire I readily understand. That has got to be assisted, has it not, by a commonplace view amongst the districts and the city council with regards to—I am choosing my language carefully—the robustness of the county council. That is something that unites the five of you, which acts as a great spur to set aside party political differences, to work in a collaborative way.

CLLR BOB PRICE: I do not think we are the only county where that would be the case, but you are absolutely right.

DAVID COOK: Although in North Northamptonshire, of course, the county council are on the joint committee.

CLLR BOB PRICE: And in Oxfordshire the county sits on the growth board with us. Obviously that is an area where there have been, particularly in recent times, differences of opinion about the devolution debate which you know about.

MIMS DAVIES: I am Mims Davies. I was a parish councillor and district councillor before this and probably one of the most difficult votes that we were involved in was reducing our allowances by 5% and, believe me, there was a lot of haranguing over that. Speaking about IT and finance and all the easy back office shared services—picking up on Nigel’s point—that was very easy to do. One of the things I have found in my new role with the local growth funds, devolution, LEPs and the legislative changes that we are seeing in different shapes and sizes and schemes across the country is an opportunity for people to blame central Government particularly if they have an MP of a different persuasion in a “hands off the tiller” and “it’s not me gov” attitude. Looking at the Local Government Finance Bill, do you think within the opportunities for further shared services and also to be more dynamic and economically exciting as councils, there are enough checks and balances there, scrutiny, so people are not hiding behind exempt business and taking risky deals in the way that you are and apparently just going to be saving taxpayers’ money, because the accountability may not be there? I understand that is a very broad question, so good luck!

SIMON HOARE: Plead the Fifth!

THE CHAIRMAN: Who would like to start on that one?

PATRICIA HUGHES: I would probably throw it the other way round and say my experience of local government is that it tends to be slightly risk averse and that, not surprisingly, when we are spending the public pound and our councillors are there scrutinising exactly what we are doing and why we are doing it and where we can prove it is best value, sometimes it is more to the opposite side where we struggle to get through the inertia and get things moving. That is my experience of working with a range of different local authorities—not 5Cs I hasten to add—but in some other places where there has been inertia around it. It is not a burning platform so if you do have a significant financial issue or development issues then the issues around loss of sovereignty, potentially loss of staff and a range of other matters become the greater barriers to try and get over.

Going back to the earlier point about the political element of that, I do not think politics play into that. That is around the culture of the organisations that you are talking to and the organisations that we are talking to and that goes across the political divide

completely.

DAVID COOK: I would endorse that. That is a cultural map and then there is a political map. To be honest, one will never please the cynics. There is always somebody willing to turn up at a committee and invent a conspiracy that has existed for some considerable time and is being played out here and now. One will only get around that by having quite open conversations with the opposition as well as our neighbours about what we are trying to do and where do we agree and where do we disagree. There are occasions where four or five authorities are trying to find an area together and we will all shrug our shoulders and say the inspector will have to decide and let us leave it at that. When the inspector has made his decision we will get on with it. The impediments that get in the way in my experience are not mechanical; they are cultural and behavioural.

MIMS DAVIES: As a chief executive in terms of your deficit and balancing it, where, hopefully, you are going to get a bigger council tax base because housing is going to come on stream, et cetera, do you have a number where you cannot sleep at night on? Is there a level that you know that if you took on a risky venture that may or may not work out for Kettering that you would feel comfortable with? You are having to get councillors, as we have heard, who are risk averse to go with that. Do you have a number you would feel comfortable taking on?

DAVID COOK: No. Funnily enough, forgive me for saying it in these terms, last week we were sat with Sajid Javid trying to persuade him to allow us to invest millions of pounds in acquiring land in and around our area because we wanted to have a say in it and we wanted to take that risk at that return and at that leverage. At a political leadership level or professional leadership level, I do not think that is a problem. It might be a bit scary in one or two back-bench conversations, but I do not think the risk appetite is as big a problem as it was. I agree with you that local authorities tend to be too conservative, not too bold in terms of what their investment opportunities might be.

THE CHAIRMAN: That is the officers' view; we now need the councillors' view.

CLLR BOB PRICE: I think it depends a bit on how your scrutiny function works because I know that in the city the scrutiny function is very intense and very well managed and that means that they will look in detail at any kind of financial deal that is undertaken. As part of the City Deal we have bought a bit of land near the station together with Nuffield College, which is a significant site for the future of the city centre, and that was subject to a very heavy degree of scrutiny before we actually went down that track. The scrutiny function is under-estimated as a check and balance on the way in which councillors work.

CLLR MARK CRANE: It was a very wide question.

MIMS DAVIES: Apologies for that.

CLLR MARK CRANE: I will probably only answer a small part of it. We are lucky—or

unlucky depending which way you look at it –that we are cash rich and revenue poor in Selby at the moment, so the problems are not as great because we sit on some assets. I will not be telling Mr Javid this because I do not want him to try to get his hands on it. Those assets allow us to smooth over some of the figures we have dealt with in recent years. I absolutely agree with the chief execs around the table who said the councils are generally risk averse. I would like to think that a number of councils have become a lot less so in recent years. We have certainly purchased a couple of large tracts of land in Selby which we think long term we might make a significant profit on and, let's be honest, it gives the community a stake in the area where they live. It is nothing but a good thing. I do not know if when I was first leader I would have been as keen on doing it, candidly, as I am today because time has moved on and maybe I have moved on a bit as well. We are a lot less risk averse. I notice that in surrounding councils as well, certainly not just Selby.

MIMS DAVIES: Am I being risk averse where I look at my council deficit of nearly £200 million and I think that is quite concerning? I could not sleep at night if that was my balance sheet.

CLLR MARK CRANE: It depends what the £200 million relates to. Every council with housing has taken on housing debt recently. We have fairly significant debts on our books as well as some of the assets we have. I can sleep at night, and I think my treasurer can, largely because we think we have the assets which, if push came to shove, we could sell or do something with in order to pay those back. Having £200 million sounds an eye-watering sum of money to have as debt but it depends what that £200 million represents. If I gave you the option today of buying 10,000 houses and somebody would lend you the £200 million, you could probably do it depending exactly where you are in the country. My maths is now letting me down.

THE CHAIRMAN: Okay. And Mr Colyer?

ALEX COLYER: As Mark was saying, we have debts of around £200 million but it is on our housing stock and it is £30,000-odd a unit if we do that maths. That feels comfortable to me and certainly as an asset that generates rent, it is a reasonable proportion. You say about risky decisions being taken in closed session. Other than out and out commercial decisions about whether we should be buying a piece of land and there is a commercial negotiation taking place, we do not take those sorts of decisions in private. In fact we try and keep as much of the debate in the open session. The principle of should we buy that land, as opposed to the detailed negotiation position of the council, we would try and keep in the public domain as far as we can. I think that enables us to take as many people with us as we can.

MIMS DAVIES: Thank you.

ROBERT COURTS: I think the conversation has moved on a little in my absence. I wanted to come back to the collaboration point. I am still a member of West Oxfordshire District Council so the shared services point is something I am very familiar with. All

those of you who are involved in sharing services agree that what we are looking at is a fundamental re-evaluation of the way that services are provided. Is this the way you square the circle between democratic accountability and the provision of very good public services, which of course are primarily what the public are concerned with rather than a label? Do we need to divorce in our minds the idea that services have to be owned and provided by the government structure and instead see the government structure, be it the district council or A N Other, as the commissioners of services that may be provided out of area or may be provided by an alternative body? Do you agree that is a different way of looking at service provision which needs to be considered, and until we adopt that different mind-set it is going to be difficult to provide the efficiencies and the excellent services that people quite rightly demand.

PATRICIA HUGHES: I would certainly agree with the commissioning approach. We have certainly done that at Hart. We have lots of different commissioned services across the piece. Some of them are within the five councils and some of them are not. We have recently been through a review of all of those shared services, which is about to go to our audit committee so we can show an ongoing governance structure which is showing them to be continuing good value. The people you see before you today are probably those people who are at one end of the spectrum in terms of really agreeing with that philosophy and there are some people who are not in the room today who are probably still on that journey to reach that point. Certainly, yes, Hart is very much living that in real terms.

DAVID COOK: I am not sure I would be quite as in step with that analysis. For me it does not go quite far enough. I understand the point and the philosophical position of it, but if you think of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, it deals with how cheap you buy in. It does not deal with whether or not it is effective in delivering customer needs and wants at the other end of the spectrum. As a sector, we have become obsessed with how cheap we buy things and not with how well they meet customer needs and wants. You only have to look at healthcare and adult social care. In Kettering there are three wards of people who are healthy but cannot go home because there are no facilities in the community so we are keeping them in a hospital, which is dearer than putting them up in the Savoy, but maybe we are procuring the occupational therapy service really cheaply. For me what we are chasing in our collaboration is a stronger economy, so it is about growth and all the rest of it, and, you know what, if we are going to build 30,000 houses which we have permission for across our patch, then those 30,000 houses need to have a different health and social care model than the one they have. That is why we have the CCGs and the hospital on the growth board on the committee. I think there is a risk, if I may say so, Sir, that we spend too much time talking about clever procurement and economies of scale and not enough time focusing on economies of scope and working out where the system is broken. Sometimes when you go for those scale-type debates, the logical conclusion of that debate is one local authority procuring the adult social care for the country procuring refuse collection for the country. That is the logical conclusion of that.

ROBERT COURTS: You do not lose any local accountability then, do you?

DAVID COOK: Exactly. For us the challenge is how do you find the scale that is appropriate that keeps it nimble and connected.

THE CHAIRMAN: That model you have just given means you need to have consistency of standards. One of the questions I have is can authorities collaborate if they have a different standard? Let us say you are collaborating on bin collections, what if one collects weekly and the other fortnightly; can collaboration still work? The other bit about your common board is that councillors are going to get together and talk about what happens. Is there a drive down to the common denominator or can it still exist with local variation?

PATRICIA HUGHES: Can I pick up on that because I have two wonderful examples. You referred to bins and we have a joint waste service with our adjacent local authority and we are on AWC and they are on weekly collections. Very much where local democratic decisions have been taken you can still have shared services which provide good-quality services to the residents in the way they want them. Then you have the ones such as the five councils where we looked right the way across the piece. Coming back to your point about the commissioning of the right service, not just a quality service for the residents, we looked across the five councils and said, “Okay, who has the best quality? Let’s sense-check that and ask is that what he need? Yes or no?” When we assessed that it was, the five councils committed to it across the piece. All of us were coming up to the same standard. So I have two good examples, one saying you do not need to be standard at all and the other one saying there might be some real positives about exactly taking that route.

BARONESS BAKEWELL OF HARDINGTON MANDEVILLE: Just on the waste issue, in Somerset the six councils—the county and the five districts—have an excellent joint waste contract and a joint waste board on which they are all represented and it works perfectly. The pilot varies different things in different areas and then rolls it out across the rest of the county. They are about to move to three-weekly collections for residual waste. At the moment everybody seems really happy about that because the putrescent and the recyclables will still be collected every week. That is all good.

I wanted to go back to the comment that Bob made and this is around economic development investment and activity and what a marvellous thing the LEP was. Is that the case everywhere, because in our neck of the woods it very definitely is not? The LEP area covers the counties of Devon and Somerset, seven districts in Devon, five in Somerset and the unitaries of Torbay and Plymouth and yet there is only one seat for a district councillor on that LEP. Those people in Somerset do feel that because the LEP meets in Devon and the business reps are very Devon-centric that we lose out on investment because of that. However, you seem to think that it is a good thing?

CLLR BOB PRICE: Can I comment on that before my colleagues come in? The reason why our LEP has been a success is because it is coterminous with the county and all the district council leaders sit on it.

BARONESS BAKEWELL OF MANDEVILLE: It is a different model

CLLR BOB PRICE: We have a significant local authority presence together with the private sector and the universities and Harwell and Culham, so it is a real gathering of the economic and political powers in the county.

CLLR MARK CRANE: We are a member of two LEPs and, in my opinion, it has been one of the issues with the LEPs. We are in the Leeds LEP, which is very much a West Yorkshire LEP and is a very dynamic LEP which does a very good job. There are three districts that sit within that area and we have one seat on it between the three of us. My colleague from Craven represents me on that but keeps me up to speed with what they are doing. If they are looking to do anything in Selby or we want them to do anything, they are very good at coming out and seeing me and speaking to me. We also have a foot in the North Yorkshire, York and East Riding LEP and, again, the three districts that sit on that and also in the Leeds region have one seat on it and my colleague from Harrogate represents me on that one. I do not have a seat on either LEP but have good input via those two people and, a decent working relationship. They are both the same political colours. Not that that is the be-all-and-end-all of interest but given earlier questions I will say that. The issue I have with LEPs really has been because we sit between two, so if we are bidding for money for anything in the area in Selby, we have to bid to both LEPs and look to get some amount of money from both LEPs to make it happen. We have never yet bid and one of the LEPs has said yes and one has said no, but, clearly, we would have an issue if that were ever the case.

DAVID COOK: We were in two LEPs. Northamptonshire had a LEP and the South East Midlands has a LEP. The Northamptonshire has just collapsed and been folded into the South East Midlands LEP. What you are describing is what we have seen as practitioners across the country. Some LEPs are about purpose and place and some are tactical positioning vehicles for organisations to pursue their ambitions. If you have a LEP that is about place and all the rest of it, it is fine and dandy. If it is about, “How many seats can we get for us and not let the other lot have”, then it ends up not working so well.

JULIE COOPER: That reminds me of an issue. I used to be council leader and I represented the discount council leaders on the LEP board at Lancashire LEP, which is a very successful LEP, and there was always an issue of competition between the different authorities on there about who got the most bids in there and which were the most successful. This is an issue going forward now as Lancashire moves to a combined authority. Is that something that you have come across within your LEPs and within your authorities in terms of bids. If one particular project has got the benefit—Burnley for example—at the expense of another area of Lancashire, is that an issue for any of you?

CLLR BOB PRICE: It has been. Going right to the beginning you may recall that the LEPs were asked to identify enterprise zones and we had a competition in the Oxfordshire LEP between Harwell and Abingdon or Didcot in the south and Bicester in the north. It was obviously a choice between one or the other. You could only put one

EZ proposal forward and it was pretty bitter at that stage. We chose the southern one, which I think was the right choice, and Bicester has been able to get money from different sources, but that was an issue that divided people. Every time there is a Local Growth Fund allocation, there is a question about where it goes in the county. That is why it is important to have an economic plan that you are signed up to and you can prioritise within that plan the key things. There are disagreements and arguments but, generally speaking, it has worked out so far without too much of a dispute.

DAVID COOK: In any environment where ambition exceeds resource, and given the current resource envelope that is almost everywhere, even if people do not have much ambition, it creates that sort of competitive tension and competitive proposition. If the relationships and lineage Bob was talking about earlier is in place and it has been built slowly and built strongly, you will get through all of that because you have agreed a plan and Luton needs to grow and then Milton Keynes needs to grow and you have some sort of sense of everybody understanding place and their role in it.

JULIE COOPER: So it is planning?

DAVID COOK: Yes.

SIMON HOARE: We are still on the general discussion.

THE CHAIRMAN: My six headings have gone out the window.

SIMON HOARE: We are having a discursive conversation. It is great to hear from somebody who has done it well with joint working and collaboration involving the LEPs and all the rest of it. Clearly everything has been scaled up and while some of the stuff was going on prior to financial constraints, I think financial constraints have expedited it across the country. The clear direction of travel from the Government is that while they are not seeking to impose or enforce local government reorganisation from the centre, do you agree that almost by natural evolution, as a result of that scaling up and merging of function and control and resource and commissioning, et cetera, it takes you inexorably to a bottom-up decision to have a unitary solution and, effectively, the demise of all but probably one or two rather Luddite districts, which are probably still out there and which will either wither and die and bubonic plague will break out in their jurisdictions, or they will see the light and reform? In essence, the days of district councils as we knew them and loved them are very clearly numbered.

THE CHAIRMAN: Can I add to that? Cllr Crane, you spoke about the financial imperative being a driver which accelerated the collaborative working. If money became no object would we undo the collaborative working and go back to the way we were?

MARK CRANE: I honestly do not think we would. I do not think we are going to be in a position where money is no object for the next 20 years or so, so I am fairly safe in making that pitch. I do not think we are because generally councillors and chief execs and officer leads on those councils can see the huge benefits we have gained from

working more closely with other people. If tomorrow you said to me, “You can have an extra £10 million a month to spend, Cllr Crane”, I would not be saying, “North Yorkshire are no longer going to do my HR function; I am going to employ a fleet of people to sit in a room thinking about nothing but HR for ever more”. I would more likely be thinking about what I could do to increase economic growth within the district, and what land I could buy to bring businesses to Selby, to increase the wealth of Selby. I would like to think that the majority of my fellow leaders would feel in a very similar vein, so while it has been a spark to make it happen more quickly than may have happened otherwise, I do not think if you said tomorrow councils could have unlimited access to funds we would all stop working together in the five districts, with the excellent example at the end there, and would say we were not going to have anything to do with each other anymore. That will continue.

Does it automatically mean that we are going to finish up in local government reorganisation? I am not entirely sure about that because it does come, as we have discovered in North Yorkshire in the past, with a number of problems. Whilst some people may think districts are small, I also think the reason districts were set up in the first place is there is not always an easy alternative. North Yorkshire at one time, for example, were going to create a county council, under the previous chief executive to the one at the moment, and I have to say that while, generally, people are happy for their services to be carried out, parts of Selby are 65 miles from North Allerton and people in Selby, not just councillors and myself, were against it because it was too big. A lot of people in Selby said, “That is no longer local government; it is just too far from me”. One issue we always face with local government reorganisation is finding those areas that work for connectivity, for economic development, et cetera, but also people want to feel that the local set-up of government is at least relatively close to where they are, in my view.

SIMON HOARE: Mark, I think that is probably quite a good analysis and certainly the geographies must play a part in these things, and the broad county unitary will fit some, but not very many models. If the directors of central government funding, let us say for example on roads infrastructure, and money to be directed towards LEPs, is in some way tied into a willingness to move towards a unitary status, would you predict that residents would turn around and say, “If this means getting more cash into our area”—and define “our area”—that is a pill we are prepared to swallow”, or do you think some would just sit back and say, “No, close geographical proximity trumps the cash”?

CLLR MARK CRANE: I think a number of people would still think close geographical proximity would trump cash, but I am not daft enough to think that everybody would think like that. Rather like the recent vote we had on whether to come or go from the European Union, I think you would find it would be fairly close.

CLLR BOB PRICE: I think the model in a way is rather different. If you take the basis of people’s identity with place and wanting to be represented in a place they identify with, then the model which we are moving toward logically is to build combinations of those places, whether they are districts or joint districts—South for example—into

combined authorities. The combined authority has certain limited functions, primarily transport, economic development, skills, where the scale on which they can then operate is much more effective than at the district level. I would keep your core services very much linked to place and then use your building blocks of place to create those to which government can then devolve economic development money, transport money and so on.

DAVID COOK: We already have an architecture in the LEPs, like it or loath it, for whatever purpose it is being used at the moment. We already have an architecture there where Government can pass out its largesse in any case. The issue becomes about what sits under that? For me, the bottom-up point is the critical one. What is really important for me, at least in North Northamptonshire, is that we have a history that goes back to 2004. We have got a real place that shares a road, a railway line, a college, a newspaper, and people identify. If a business opens in Corby, 25% of the employees come from Kettering. It is one economic area. It is one housing market area. That is a place. You can demonstrate that you have a place, you have been working as a place and you have achieved some results. There is a place in North Northamptonshire which had five times the national average business rates increase. If it were a city, everybody would be writing articles about that. Because it is a district, nobody notices it. If you have that sort of history and you have some competence and some coherence as a place, then come the day when someone decides, you know what, we have a different view about scale right now, for me and all of us in local government, it is far more important that we argue that around places. In Northamptonshire, in Kettering, you can get to De Montford University and Bedford University on the railway line a damn sight easier than you can get to Northampton University. Incidentally, they are higher up the league tables as well. The boundaries of the districts are five decades out of date and the boundaries of counties are five centuries out of date. I do not think people are worried about them.

THE CHAIRMAN: Sometimes those functional economic areas are obvious and in other areas they are not quite so obvious. You are lucky they are. Can we create them? Can we bolt things together? What happens, perhaps Patricia in your case, if we try to bolt together authorities that are not in a functional economic area? That is the driver David is talking about. If it is not there, where does the driver come from?

PATRICIA HUGHES: We have the functional economic area at Hart. I think it is probably not as clear-cut as has been alluded to in some of the others. We share with two adjacent local authorities, one of which is in a different county council area, albeit we are all within the same LEP. Yes, we are working together and we are having those conversations and we are due to collaborate. We are still trying to work through our local plan so you can imagine we are still doing quite a lot of the leg work with them. It is about place. Coming back to something that was alluded to earlier about technical things which cause us problems—and I cannot recall who raised it—some of those technical problems are really very nuts and bolts. We have a special protection area which cuts across the three districts for the Dartford warbler which really constrains where building can go. We also have a large swathe of green belt in one of the local authority areas so we have to have that conversation in the round around how we are going to deliver against that backdrop, recognising that Hart is essentially a fairly rural area which is

servicing the more urbanised areas around us. We have to have those conversations. When we have that conversation with the LEP about where that money is going, the money is not going to come to Hart: we are realistic about that. It is a “for the greater good” argument. If we can see the growth coming somewhere else, we know that there will be the outwash from that across the whole of the LEP and the value attributed across to all of us. Even where there is not the same really quite obvious settlement boundaries from which you can use economic areas, there is still the benefit to be garnered.

CLLR BOB PRICE: The notion of functional economic areas is an interesting one. In the papers somewhere there is reference to the fact that West Oxfordshire had an Oxfordshire/Cotswolds tourism strategy and for the rest of Oxfordshire there is a DMO for Oxford and Oxfordshire. They can co-exist very happily because Oxford goes into Cotswold, goes in Gloucestershire, whereas the Oxford tourism focus is very much on the centre to Bicester Village, Woodstock, Blenheim and Oxford City. For that particular purpose, for tourism in particular, you can have two different functional economic areas from the rest of the county. You have to be a bit careful about overlapping geographies in the context of functional economic areas and be a bit more flexible in terms of the permeabilities of boundaries and that kind of thing rather than saying there is just one functional economic area.

THE CHAIRMAN: Does that provide some tensions? Do some say, “One trumps the other”? How do you reconcile that?

CLLR BOB PRICE: They market themselves separately. The Oxfordshire LEP markets Oxfordshire/Cotswolds as a separate brand and creates opportunities for that as well. You recognise it as two different brands and different functional areas for that particular purpose.

MIMS DAVIES: I want to ask about the local plan in terms of housing and collaboration. I say this as someone who was part of the start of the neighbourhood plan and part of the local plans, which is “hair pulling out” territory. How as a group are you finding working alongside local plans and having shared policies, because I think that is important as well as the duty to co-operate, particularly when you are looking at LEPs and also trying to find a shared common ambition? How is that actually working alongside neighbourhood plans because it is a jigsaw puzzle at the very least or best. Everyone is nodding. Alex, do you want to start?

ALEX COLYER: Locally we played down neighbourhood plans at the start of the local plan process very much with a view to getting local communities involved in our local plan process. That worked really well at the time and there is some really good neighbourhood input into the current local plans. The local plan is very much a joint endeavour with Cambridge, and the county council come to that. It is based on a common research base with a joint strategic planning unit.

THE CHAIRMAN: Can I come in there? There is a tension there because the neighbourhood plans are devolving down.

ALEX COLYER: I was going to come to that.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are talking about areas coming together in a bigger unit.

MIMS DAVIES: As someone who was a district councillor and a parish councillor that is the bit I found really frustrating. There was meant to be a level of control and opportunity for a parish or town councillor that you have these larger groups. When we are doing the local plan you do not need to get involved.

ALEX COLYER: We very much got that local committee involved in the initial stages. If we go back to 2014, you will see some really strong local input into our local plan.

MIMS DAVIES: That is nice to hear.

ALEX COLYER: Our position, as we stated in the evidence pack we have given you, is around the length of time the ERP has taken, and that has not been helped by almost a year's adjournment in that process as well. Although we have had local input into the local plan, we have now had to beef up the neighbourhood plan piece of work. There are about 14 areas looking to submit neighbourhood plans and we are very much supporting that process as well. That is partly out of frustration of the local planning process. We are committed through the City Deal to start a review of the local plan, believe it or not, in 2019. There is a real risk it still might not be through the ERP by that time. That is a really frustrating piece. It is difficult for me to say, "Can you do something about it", because I do not want to put pressure on the inspector because she needs to complete the work she needs to complete in her space. That has been really frustrating.

MIMS DAVIES: Whereas residents and communities are living with hostile developments and unplanned development infrastructure and it drives a coach and horses through that hard work.

ALEX COLYER: It is not a nice place for councillors being on a planning committee at the moment. That is really frustrating to me.

DAVID COOK: We have done two joint local plans. The first was the first joint local plan in the country. It was done in a hot housing market so the local authorities were getting together in 2004/2005/2006 and saying, "It's a really hot housing market; we really need to think about how we are managing this, where the development is going, et cetera". The second one was done in a dysfunctional housing market, like we have now, and how are we going to deliver all these consents against an oligopoly of supply and small and medium enterprises in the market-place and the large house builders pretty much having it all their own way. Neighbourhood plans are probably oversold, in my opinion, in terms of what they can do. They are subordinates of the local plans so you need to get people engaged with the local plan. In North Northants we agreed a joint statement of community involvement. Right at the start of the process we said how are we going to connect right across these four local authority areas with all the populous to

make sure that we are getting the bottom-up perceptions gets fed into this thing, because the risk of doing this as a four authority thing on this scale is we lose some of the sensitivity to the locality? We agreed that right from the get go and said—whisper it quietly—that the neighbourhood has probably been oversold as giving people control that they do not really have, and we needed to put that local energy into informing this plan.

ALEX COLYER: Yes.

DAVID COOK: I think the difficulty that you describe in terms of the planning and where we are now, which, if we are into housing and planning, is a real problem, particularly for districts. They need to cluster to fix this. We have a situation where we cannot deliver the consents that we have. Local councillors throughout North Northamptonshire stood in high streets and shop units saying, “Here is why we need a sustainable urban extension in Corby, we need one in Kettering, two in Wellingborough and we have to have one in East Northants, because we need these houses for our kids, et cetera, et cetera”, and they were told, “Do not worry, they will be sustainably built because there is a sustainable house-building code; there will be some affordable local housing in that deal as well; there is a section 106 agreement and you are going to get this thing called the new homes bonus.

We now have to engage with that second round of urban extensions and they say, “By the way, we have not got the sustainable homes programme anymore; it has been scrapped; you will have to renegotiate the section 106s and the SILs to a fraction of what it was; the new homes bonus has two-thirds gone; and you are not getting that affordable housing stuff we promised you either”. For politicians—forgive me for speaking for them—to make the case to a community now that, “You know what, we need to start thinking about the next tranche of housing delivery”, they are going to turn round and say, “You know that stuff you promised us on the last round of housing delivery, which you have not delivered yet because of problems with the housing supply market, you cannot even promise us that stuff”.

THE CHAIRMAN: What pressure does that put on the appetite for collaboration? In an ideal world, everybody agrees with this process and it is very easy for politicians to say, “It is probably better if it is in next-door area rather than in ours”. How does that affect your collaborative working?

DAVID COOK: What we discovered in North Northants is when four separate local authorities went to Government to help us and said, “We have 4,500 houses we are trying to get away and we are having difficulty”, nobody heard us. When all four local authorities went to the Government and said, “You know what, we have 20,000 houses between us”, they were interested then. I think the reason the collaboration helps is you can work together.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is the scale?

DAVID COOK: You can work together on your lobby with government. You can work

together in presenting a united front to the house builders and you can work together in terms of your narrative with your communities. If you are going to be in a fair fight with the house builders you need a bit of muscle. If you are going to get Government's attention and support for an area then you need to have size. North Northamptonshire is the single largest planned area outside of the GLA. Only when you say that to Ministers and officials can you get their attention. Then you get their attention and then you might get some help.

JULIE COOPER: What you just said fits in with what I wanted to say very well. I wondered what the rest of the panel think about that. When you mentioned City Deals, thinking about the motivation for wanting to join together, in whatever form that takes, I would mention the desire in Lancashire to create a combined authority, where part of that has been in response to the economic environment and the desire to deliver excellent services within an ever-reducing budget. The other part of it is to create a strong binding force sandwiched between Manchester and Liverpool cities, city funding, City Deals. Burnley Borough for example thought their voice would be a lot stronger as part of a combined authority. That seemed to be what you were saying. That is speaking from a borough council point of view. Do you all agree? Some of you are obviously representing cities so it is a little different, but in terms of the borough districts, has that been a conscious motivating factor to make a louder voice?

ALEX COLYER: I think it has and I think we have utilised that where and as often as we can. It has made the voice stronger, absolutely I agree with David wholeheartedly on that; the fact you can talk about scale and the number of jobs coming and housing delivery as well really helps. I think it changes the narrative absolutely. I totally endorse that.

CLLR BOB PRICE: From our point of view I think the local plan has been right at the heart of co-operation from the start, because although the NPPF has many faults, and it is a slow and clunky process, the fact that it starts the process of saying where is your housing market area what is the housing need there, forces you to think through those things on a co-operative basis. We are now some years down the track and we are discussing in detail with Cherwell and West and with Vale and South about where the housing unmet need for Oxford is going to go and, as part of that, talking to the county about the transport infrastructure. That is the basis for the devolution process. I think that local planning can be very constructive as a means of getting you to think collectively. What we are working on now with Charwell and West is a corridor to the north of the city, so we plan housing, infrastructure, education, health, transport, cycling and so on, on a collective basis for that particular section. It has about 15,000 to 20,000 houses in by the end of the next decade.

THE CHAIRMAN: Simon has a question and I will ask my colleagues if anybody else wants to come in with a final question and then I will ask each of our witnesses if there are any points they have not the opportunity to make that they think we should be aware of and then we will then try and bring the session to a close.

SIMON HOARE: Mr Cook, just thinking of the muscle you have of the four, before coming here, I spent 20 years in the commercial planning sphere and, whenever a minister got up to say, “We are introducing this policy to make policy easier”, as a consultant you rubbed your hands because you knew it was going to be far more lucrative for you and far more complicated for the local authorities to read and understand all of these detailed submissions and technical reports. A by-product of both the diminishing income of local authorities and the more attractive areas of private sector, I viewed it from both ends of the telescope, as both a consultant and then a district councillor—I hasten to add I do not do any work in my own district—was how very often it was not the developers which were running rings around the local planning authorities but the local planning authorities had not invested in the expertise to evaluate the detailed submissions and the technical reports, particularly, though not exclusively, on viability. Alex, I did one scheme in your area which was Barrington. It was quite interesting because I remember all the residents there saying this is just for wealthy academics in the city who cannot afford to live with the city any more to come and urbanise our rural area of Barrington, but we got consent, and that was all sorted out and it was fine. There was an enormous section 106 agreement, if I remember rightly. Do you see any scope for or have you any plans for using the economies of scale of more joined-up working to make sure that you have robust planning responses to these very technical reports? If not, you are going to continue to be shafted.

CLLR MARK CRANE: In our collaboration with North Yorkshire, one of the things we are doing is collaborating on the planning area. North Yorkshire have access to more staff and more experts than we have. It is an area that we have discussed with them. We do not have a formal agreement in place at the moment, but when the bigger plans come in we have much greater co-operation with our county council colleagues now looking at it and giving us advice and support. In the past they have looked at roads and schools, et cetera. They are giving us more help, but it is not a formal part of the collaboration agreement we have with them at the moment. Clearly, it is one of those areas that we should be taking forward and all seven districts in North Yorkshire should be collaborating when the next Planning Bill or Housing Bill comes through in the very near future.

BARONESS BAKEWELL OF HARDINGTON MANDEVILLE: On the same subject, we have the Neighbourhood Planning Bill going into committee next week. What is your view about planning departments which in order to be properly resourced to respond to these very complex things are setting their fees on a cost recovery basis and these being set locally?

DAVID COOK: Historically, as a finance professional before I became chief executive, this is something I have been aware of for I cannot remember how many years, certainly 10, 15, 20 years. We do not have a free regime which recovers costs. Every three years we have a study done by Arup that says it is miles behind, we need to increase it. Government gets scared by the fact that it is too big a percentage increase at once, promises to do something about it regularly, does something it for a while and then four years later you get another study saying, “No, it is fine”, and so it goes on. From my

experience of the urban extensions in and around North Northamptonshire, developers would have happily paid for a planning officer so that they were always on the case. I just gave up on this debate and thought there is another way of doing. The other way of doing it is to have a plan of performance agreement. We can navigate around this now. You can say to the developer you will submit this document on this day.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is that a joint agreement or a district-by-district agreement?

DAVID COOK: You can have the framework agreement, being a collective on one and then as each developer comes along and says, "This is what my proposition is", you are going to use that framework to come up with a joint framework for that individual developer about their individual application. Yes, it is a long-standing sore, but it is one we have learnt to navigate around some years ago. The debate will never catch up so we will just keep going round with the planning performance agreement.

THE CHAIRMAN: At the moment I am talking about planning and housing and with the new role of district councils that is pretty inevitable with the pressure on development. Are there any points with regard to collaboration that you have not had the opportunity to tell us about that you might want to share with us? Is there anything further anybody would like to give us?

ALEX COLYER: As Government be really anxious about imposing new layers of government bodies or infrastructure or groups over local authorities. I think what you have heard very strongly from colleagues here is that place matters. I think the decision-making in that is really important. Government-imposed new structures to manage X initiative or Y initiative subvert those arrangements and potentially damage them. Just think carefully as a Government, and if you can recommend that to Government I think that will be really helpful. Think carefully about how those are done and implemented.

THE CHAIRMAN: We certainly hope that when we have done our four sessions and pulled together the report, we have fixed a date when we are hoping that Sajid Javid will come along and respond to the report, so hopefully you can come along and join us. Mark, any final points?

CLLR MARK CRANE: It is on a more practical level but our work with North Yorkshire started with us appointing a chief exec to Selby who was assistant chief exec up at North Yorkshire. I have say that drove through more success than if we had put it at any other level. Sadly for us it was so successful she went off to become chief exec of York and we no longer have her. Because it was somebody who was the senior person at Selby and a very senior person (though not the most senior) in North Yorkshire, it drove through, because some of the barriers we found were not at the top level of officers but the level below. Let's be honest some of those officers at the level below were probably looking over their shoulder thinking, "Crumbs, if this goes well, I could be the one out of a job here because they won't need somebody in this position in treasury here and in Selby as well". By having the person in that role—and we now share a chief exec with a

neighbouring district council as well—again that is driving us to partner with them more and more and showing areas that we can improve in that they can improve in as well. One of the things I would say very strongly is sharing that top role has been very beneficial to both authorities.

THE CHAIRMAN: Bob, anything final for us?

CLLR BOB PRICE: The only thing I would say is the combined authority model is very attractive in identifying the scale at which certain things can be done. Because of the nature of the model, you can change it depending on the part of the country, so Lancashire could be bigger than in Oxfordshire, but it would be more effective as a means of going forward as an organisation.

DAVID COOK: There are two really big problems in our economy as far as I can see it. One is the way our housing market is working and one is the way our healthcare system and social care system is working. These are big issues for Government and in the last X number of years we have not seen a great deal of imagination or traction on either of those issues. We have seen a lot of initiatives but not a lot of output. For me the fantastic thing the districts are uniquely positioned to do is to cluster around those housing market areas, hospital patches, hospital services, and to say, “You know what, if there is something that is really important, it is about collectively planning this place so that we can effectively tackle the housing issue and the integration of health and social care”. If you are building communities you can do it, and for me that would allow districts to demonstrate themselves as strategic players but of a scale that was localised and nimble. The districts should engage on that basis, not on the basis of scale. For me if districts really want to position themselves as being about place, that is the way to do it. Whilst I do not denigrate and do take part in all that good stuff about pay roll functions and all the rest of it, it is a blind alley in terms of the point that Simon made about ultimately where is this debate going, if you took it to its structural conclusions.

PATRICIA HUGHES: Probably following up very neatly from that is just to re-emphasise the key point about culture. If you are going to have successful partnerships with whatever form it takes, you need to get the movers and shakers, whoever they are within the organisations, whether that is members, chief executives, whomever, into the room having conversations and building those relationships. That is what we found. As soon as we started down this journey, we got them all into the same room, looked each other in the eye and said, “Just how serious are you about this?” Once you start building those relationships, great things can happen.

THE CHAIRMAN: Finally, can I thank you for preparing your evidence in the first instance that came through to Colin and his team and thank you for taking the trouble to come and join us today? This was a starter for us. This was the first time we have got together as a group. It is the first of four sessions that we are doing. You have got us off to a really brilliant start with lots of very, very interesting ideas. It has been great for us to hear you flesh out the ideas that we saw on bits of paper. Thank you very much for coming down and we look forward to seeing you hopefully when we come to launch the

report. Thank you very much.
