

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

6 September 2010

Report of the Central Services Director

Part 1- Public

Delegated

1 LEGAL SERVICES PARTNERSHIP

1.1 Summary

1.2 On 18 February 2010, Council agreed a proposal to share management of the legal services function with Sevenoaks District Council. It was agreed that this arrangement would run for an initial three year period from 1 March 2010, subject to a six month update report and eighteen month review, both being reported to General Purposes Committee.

1.3 This report summarises the progress to date, and seeks approval to create a joint legal services team between the 2 authorities.

1.4 Progress

1.4.1 The Legal Services Partnership Manager commenced his new role on 1 March 2010, and has divided his time equally between Sevenoaks District Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.

1.4.2 A key focus of this initial period has been to identify common working practices between the 2 teams, with a view to achieving a consistent approach to the delivery of legal services.

1.4.3 A number of measures have been introduced at Tonbridge and Malling which mirror the Lexcel procedures in operation at Sevenoaks. The legal services team at Sevenoaks achieved Lexcel accreditation with the Law Society in July 2009. The objective of Lexcel is to enhance the service given by a legal practice to its clients, to improve the management of the practice and the morale and motivation of its staff. There is an emphasis within the standard on continuous improvement.

1.4.4 The measures introduced at Tonbridge and Malling have included file management procedures, central indexing of all file and key dates procedures. In so far as practicable, it is intended to achieve common working practices throughout the teams by the end of 2010.

1.4.5 Other changes to the legal service at Tonbridge and Malling have included the introduction of a legal services newsletter (which has been jointly produced with Sevenoaks) and the delivery of training sessions on areas such as licensing and the preparation of witness statements. Where possible, these have also been delivered jointly with officers from Sevenoaks.

1.5 **Joint Working**

1.5.1 It is clear that there is scope for closer working between the teams, which would be to the advantage of both authorities. As Members will note from the attached business plan, both teams are of a similar size, and both face pressures common to small District Council teams. Joint working will offer economies of scale to both authorities, with the potential to reduce the overall spend on legal services without a reduction in the level of service.

1.5.2 Attached at **Annex 1** is a business plan for the formation of a joint legal service. In brief, it is proposed that the existing teams would remain at their existing authorities, but officers will deliver legal services to both authorities. This will not impact upon existing budgets, as it is not proposed to cross charge for legal work between the 2 authorities.

1.5.3 It is proposed that the arrangement would run for 5 years, with a review after one year to allow the joint service to bed down.

1.5.4 This report has been approved by management teams at both authorities and staff have been fully consulted on the proposed way forward.

1.6 **Legal Implications**

1.6.1 Not applicable.

1.7 **Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

1.7.1 Joint working between the 2 teams can be delivered within existing budgets. Furthermore, it is expected that the creation of a joint team will deliver savings, through a reduction in external advice, less duplication of work and joint procurement of legal research tools/ training.

1.8 **Risk Assessment**

1.8.1 The proposal to create a joint legal services team carries little or no risk to either authority. Rather, it is expected that the creation of a joint team will improve the level of service to customers of the legal service.

1.9 **Recommendations**

1.9.1 Members are requested to approve the proposal to create a joint legal services team as set out in the attached business plan.

Background papers:

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Nil

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