

LOCAL AUTHORITY VISIT TO BO CITY COUNCIL - NOVEMBER 2007

By Cllr. Jane Knight.

INTRODUCTION

A visit of a Warwickshire and Warwick District party of officers to Bo in Sierra Leone took place from the 12th to the 23rd of November 2007. The partnership between the councils was part of the One World Link friendship programme and the background to the visit is described in Appendix 1.

Exchange visits between council personnel had been discussed and slowly taken place since 2001, but by 2006 the idea was accelerated into action when Clive Harridge, President of the RTPI for 2006, offered to travel to Bo. He was Leamington based and wanted to find out what he and the Institute could offer and gain from the experience as part of extending the RTPI international programme. After some delays and some efforts to obtain funding, it was finally agreed that a party of 4, led by Councillor J. Knight (WDC) would travel to Bo in November 2007.

Prior to the visit funding was made available by the British High Commission in Freetown to pay for an initial 3 week visit from Bo City Council to Warwick District in October 2007. The visit was made by Melvin Caulker, the Chief Administrator of Bo City Council to give him exposure to UK local government practice and to enable him to understand the background of the officers visiting his council.

These officers in addition to Clive Harridge, were: Richard Hall - Head of Environmental Health at WDC; Glenn Fleet - Sustainable Waste Manager WCC; and Phil Triggs - Group Financial Manager WCC. They did not know each other very well and none of them had African experience apart from holiday trips to Kenya and Tanzania.

Preparation

It was felt that the change of environment likely to be experienced by a visit to Sierra Leone required some preparation, not only practicalities like visa and medical requirements and lists of what to take, but also some sensitisation for working in a different cultural context. Maria Franchi from Mosaic Consult led a day of exploration of the team's motivations, expectations, and likely reactions to Bo and its people. They also worked out how they would approach formulating a plan of action with Bo City Council. This would be strongly based on listening to and learning from Bo Council, and jointly planning with them.

Everyone was very pleased with the preparation day and thanked Ms Franchi for a job well done.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Consultations, Site Visits and Outcomes

The first day started with protocol visits to the Kakua Paramount Chief, Deputy Provincial Secretary and the Police. Finally they were received by the Mayor, Dr Wusu Sannoh. He gave a very interesting introduction to the issues facing Bo City Council. These included big waste problems, lack of adequate revenue, deferred government grants and disposal of dead bodies. He then introduced the team to the Chairpersons of the various council committees who presented the work they were trying to do in their wards, from health and markets to global warming and environmental problems.



Dr. Wusu Sannoh

Most councillors compared well with those met before the 2004 elections and seemed very dedicated.



The next day was taken up with visits to numerous waste sites and markets. The Central Market is hard to describe. It was so tightly occupied with so many market stalls selling everything from fresh fish to palm oil, from meat cubes to clothes and minced cassava leaves. The smell and bustle were palpable but there was a surprising standard of cleanliness. Richard Hall was somewhat taken aback by the sight of some stalls erected on top of old gravestones.

One of the visits was to the central waste dump a smouldering heap which has grown over a period of 30 years. Local inhabitants spontaneously danced and sang to the team and told them their dreams of removing the dump and replacing it with new developments which would benefit the local business and the community. As the 2 weeks progressed Phil Triggs conducted training with the finance staff and the whole team started the task of building a 3 year action plan to share with Bo City Council. Cllr. Knight conducted brief interviews with councillors re. governance. They started looking at issues and actions required to address them, and then at possible means of implementing them within a realistic timeline. Some short term changes in financial sanitation and waste



Phil and accounts staff

practices were suggested which would be of minimum cost.



A visit to Kenema City Council for a few hours and to the Bo District Council Offices helped to put the Bo City experiences into context. A lively discussion between Kenema, Bo and WCC teams, hosted by the Bishop of Kenema added to the value of this exercise.

Meanwhile, Councillor Knight spent 24 hours in Freetown visiting the Country Director for the World Bank, Emmanuel Gaima, Director of Institutional Reform and Capacity Building Programme (IRCBP) - the Decentralisation Secretariat, the British High Commissioner and staff, and the Head of DFID and staff. This visit was to find out if there were possibilities for financial support for the action plan.

While at the High Commission, Cllr. Knight also raised the issue of visa applications which were becoming problematic for Bo OWL visitors to the UK. The High Commissioner (Sarah MacIntosh) advised that generally many of the visa applications they received had several internal discrepancies and those applicants with correctly completed forms and robust backing documents were always successful.

She and the Head of DFID (Richard Hogg) seemed impressed with the proposed programme for Bo City Council. Later on, news from Emmanuel Gaima suggested that if the team focused on funding one aspect of the plan to start with and had it implemented, then more funding for the rest of the proposal might be easier to access.

The outcome of subsequent discussions was that a waste management programme based on the provision of approximately 100 skips around Bo, together with a multifunctional vehicle, digger and improved land fill management would be the first programme to be pursued. It will contain an element of financial management capacity to implement the activities with due accountability.

Meanwhile, each member of the team has short and medium term proposals relating to their expertise such as new achievable accounting procedures, making domestic wells less hazardous, setting up a sponsored bin project and enabling training for planning personnel and for councillors. On governance, it was felt that the consultation with ward committees and the communities they represented was more systematic than in the UK. There was however a need for training on financial aspects of the council and how to reach out even more to the community. Something



to be addressed more and more in the UK too.

Throughout the stay the local radio stations followed the team's progress with numerous interviews.

Finally the team were invited as special guests to the official opening of the One World Link Community centre.

Conclusions.

It was very satisfying on the last official day of the team visit to report back to the Mayor and his deputy, the Chief Administrator and some other officers and councillors and to find that they were in broad agreement with the proposed action plan.

The whole team committed themselves to writing full reports around the framework of the action plan. They also planned to promote their findings and experiences through the internal and external networks to which they belong.

Despite the frightening start to the visit, the consensus was that the visit to Bo had been exciting, informative and well worthwhile. Heartfelt gratitude for the warm welcome and excellent arrangements was expressed to Bo City Council, especially its leader and Chief Administrator. Thanks also to the Bo OWL committee and their wonderful care and hospitality.



Markets and dumps



APPENDIX 1

General background to the Warwickshire/Bo District local government partnership with Bo City Council.

Introduction

It all began in 1981, when One World Link was set up to try and foster understanding of life in an African country and of the very different culture and environment in which Africans operate. The emphasis was on individual relationships and practical matters, rather than fund-raising and aid. The initiative was supported and assisted by district councillors, but there was no formal civic link initiated at that stage. The informal relationship has continued ever since. However, until 2004 the local council in Bo was composed of central government appointees and they were not very interested in the link.

In 2001, after the Civil War ceasefire, the Mayor of Leamington took the initiative of finding out if the OWL partnership could be restarted and whether the local councils could play a stronger role. Then with support from the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), the deputy town clerk of Bo visited Warwick. He met officers from the district and town and county councils. This opened up fruitful contacts in Warwickshire County Council (WCC), which later employed an officer of Sierra Leonean origin to explore potential partnerships.

The partnership develops

In 2004, Warwick District Councillor Knight participated in a CLGF workshop in Freetown, which was organised to enable Sierra Leone's new local council mayors and administrators to work out plans for the future and develop the resources needed to implement those plans. This was followed by the county council approving a policy to explore a development partnership with Bo. Warwick District Council also agreed (across the parties) in principle to Cllr. Knight taking up and promoting their partnership with Bo council as long as external funding was used and there would be no cost to council tax payers.

Further visits were made to Bo to investigate possibilities for co-operation. Water and waste management and financial management were identified as themes for action. As a result, a survey of Bo's water needs has been carried out by one of the Warwickshire County Council's partners (ARUP) and a waste management audit has been done by a Bo City Council staff member. Both showed that any development work will be starting nearly from scratch. There are two vehicles plus a lot of workers with shovels to collect rubbish in Bo, a town of 170,000 people, and water has to come to town in a tanker from a river seven miles away or from wells. It is also evident that not many people in Bo are willing to pay local council tax. Staff members in Bo City Council are

barely trained in financial management. Electricity supply is irregular and IT is very limited. Only mobile telephones work; landlines are virtually defunct. Roads are poor and only a few main streets are paved. Wages are sometimes not paid to council workers for two months at a time.

So would it be possible for a partnership with council officers from UK to really make a difference?

Warwickshire based council members and officers recognised that such a partnership might be able to offer appropriate support to Bo City Council, but would it also provide potential professional and personal development for WCC and WDC officers?

APPENDIX 2

Issues arising from the visit.

It is worth noting the following issues which may help when contemplating further visits within this partnership.

- It was a brand new team of people not well known to each other and preparation was essential
- Methodology of building up a 3 year plan started in UK team building session and continued at the end of each day when in Bo. A whole day was put aside mid visit to start to bring the plan together. The building blocks for the plan were issues, action to address issues, implementation possibilities and time lines under each specialised theme. The themes were finance, environmental health, waste management, planning and governance was touched on.
- Development of team working together was quite exceptional providing mutual support, respect and appreciation.
- TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS must be worked on to avoid disruption of future activities in the partnership.
- The officers agreed that local government issues are the same all over the world and they found they had to go back to the basics in their professions and this was a very worthwhile exercise to enhance their skills.