

AGENDA ITEM:

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD
FINAL REPORT
Of**

AD HOC PANEL ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

29th MARCH 2006

**INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEVELOPMENT
AND ENHANCEMENT OF
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLESBROUGH**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1 The purpose of this report is to outline the investigation undertaken by the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel into Community Engagement and to present the Panel's conclusions and recommendations for the future development of Community Engagement in Middlesbrough.

OVERALL AIM OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 2 The overall aim of the Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel was to examine the level of Community Engagement undertaken by a range of agencies, the benefit derived by the local community and to then identify areas for enhancement and future development.
- 3 To present the findings of the Scrutiny Investigation to the Executive for their consideration.

TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION

- 4 The Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel met in October 2004 and determined that it would be addressing Community Engagement as its subject of enquiry.
- 5 The following Terms of Reference were agreed at the start of the Panel's Investigation:
 - (a) What is Middlesbrough Council required to do in terms of Consultation?
 - (b) What does Middlesbrough Council want to do?
 - (c) What is the role of Elected Members?
 - (d) What mechanisms of consultation are currently used?
 - (e) What is the role of Stakeholders in consultation?
 - (f) What is the role of 'Community Representatives' and the general public?
 - (g) What do we understand as representativeness in theory and in practice?
 - (h) How representative are the various methods and forums for consultation?
 - (i) What better methods might be employed?

MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL

- 6 The membership of the Panel was as detailed below:

Councillor Mike Carr (Chair), Councillors Bloundele, Booth, Elder, Ferrier, Mawston and T Ward.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 7 **Scrutiny Panel Programme** - The Overview and Scrutiny Board established an Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel in 2004 and agreed its Terms of Reference. The Panel considered the issues it wanted to address and prepared a list of agencies it considered would provide information to benefit this scrutiny. These included :

- Mayor of Middlesbrough
- Council Corporate Services
- Council – Planning Service
- Community Councils

- Voluntary Sector including Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency
- West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust
- BME Network

PANEL'S FINDINGS

WHAT IS MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL REQUIRED TO DO IN TERMS OF CONSULTATION?

- 8 The Panel clearly established its Terms of Reference and identified the programme of witnesses and information it required to address the subject. To commence the exercise, the Panel deemed that some background information was required which would form a foundation for the Panel to undertake its examination. The outline would be a "Setting the Scene" presentation which illustrated the Council's statutory responsibilities and which would also expand into the discretionary role the Council undertook in the areas of communication and consultation with the residential, commercial and industrial communities of Middlesbrough.
- 9 Councils have always been required, through legislation, to consult the public on a number of issues. These requirements have generally related to specific decisions, plans or arrangements, relating to proposals that affect local people either living in a specific area or participating in particular services.
- 10 Some examples of statutory consultation requirements are
- Changes to Schools
 - Local Transport Plans
 - Public Entertainment Licences
- 11 In the late 1990s, following a drive to engage with the public more effectively, the White Paper 'Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People' set out, amongst other things, to improve local democracy and promote the well being of communities. The government saw public consultation and engagement as central to the delivery of this modernisation and improvement programme.
- 12 The Local Government Act 2000 resulted in the introduction of a variety of consultation methods to implement its measures, such as consultation on new executive arrangements. The Act also required Councils to prepare Community Strategies for which a range of consultation techniques have been adopted by local government to develop and deliver this.

Planning Services

- 13 In terms of the Council's statutory planning responsibilities, the panel received evidence from the Council's Planning Service (Development Control and

Urban Policy and Implementation Unit) about how the department engages with Middlesbrough's diverse communities and stakeholders.

Consultation on Planning Applications

- 14 The statutory process (as required by the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act) was outlined to the panel, and is summarised as follows.
- 15 There are a number of types of consultation, statutory, interested parties, press notices and in the near future, under the new Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, developers who are undertaking larger forms of development will be required to consult with the community before submitting their planning application.
- 16 There are also a number of statutory consultees such as the technical agencies including the Environment Agency, English Heritage etc. Most statutory consultees have an advisory capacity only and cannot direct on the determination of an application, but can require referral of the application to the Secretary of State.
- 17 Other consultees include interested parties such as Community Councils, Community Clusters, adjacent landowners/households, interest groups such as Residents Associations, Ward Councillors and the Building Industry Consultative Forum.
- 18 The panel heard that it was standard practice to send ward councillors a letter listing specific applications that were considered to be of particular importance in their ward and a weekly list of applications for their information.
- 19 When this was discussed at the panel, Members felt that they could not endorse this practice as Members' anecdotal evidence suggested the contrary. In some Members' experiences they had heard that Community Councils were getting the information regarding applications that ward councillors did not receive.
- 20 In terms of public consultation, after a planning application is determined, a questionnaire is issued, in order to ascertain the satisfaction of the applicant with the Council's process. The Voiceover survey has also been used in order to obtain the views of the public on the appearance of planned development in the town and the public's views on the planning application process.
- 21 The panel was also given details of some of the major projects the Council was involved with and how public engagement has been undertaken, some examples are as follows:

Project	Engagement Undertaken
Stockton/Middlesbrough Initiative	Joint LSP conference, engagement with stakeholders and community groups
Middlesbrough Town Centre Retail Study	On-street survey, postal survey of businesses, interviews with the Town

	Centre Company
North Ormesby Initiative	High level engagement with LSP, consultants carrying out engagement with local communities, housing associations, exhibitions, seminars, telephone interviews.

- 22 The panel noted that through the Planning Service’s consultation the service meets the statutory consultation required and also strives to achieve the next step. The methods of engagement used are in accordance with good practice and the guidelines set out in the Framework for Engaging with Communities, produced by the Middlesbrough Partnership. The service understands the importance of ensuring that engagement is accessible, effective, focussed and that the techniques and timing are fit for purpose in terms of the issues and target groups.

Statement of Community Involvement

- 23 The panel was supplied with information regarding the Council’s statutory duty under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to produce a document called a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The purpose of the SCI is as a framework for public engagement within plan preparation and the planning application process.
- 24 In order to prepare the SCI, the Council is required to consult with communities and stakeholders on two occasions. Over 200 copies of the draft were distributed and the Council received 24 replies. The analysis found that whilst the majority of respondents were satisfied with the content of the draft, suggestions had been made to ensure that groups were fully consulted on future progress of the Local Development Framework and any future development proposals. There should also be an inclusion of other organisations and community groups within the draft SCI.
- 25 It was recognised that to ensure that the SCI consultation process was worthwhile that mechanisms were in place to help secure the involvement of under-represented groups and even the need to pursue alternative consultative methods in certain cases.

The Mayor’s Perspective

- 26 The Panel considered that it was an integral part of the review to speak to the Mayor and gain an understanding of his perspective on this topic.
- 27 During the discussion with the Mayor, the Panel learned that the Mayor considered that there were six levels of consultation: namely Councillors; Council Officers; Workforce; Public; Business Sector; and the Media. In terms of his role, consultation is undertaken on a weekly basis with meetings that could involve around a total of 600 people. These meetings stimulated thought and debate on the important issues regarding the vision for the Town and were always reported back to Members for political direction. In some

cases the outcome of consultation may modify the Council's aspirations and way forward.

- 28 The panel agreed that it was important that the Mayor consulted widely with all Councillors and that this was also an important method of consultation.
- 29 The Mayor considered that it was important to consult with a wide cross-section of people and organisations that have included, amongst others, Community Councils, consultants, political activists, NHS and the independent sector.
- 30 Panel Members were concerned that consultation undertaken at public meetings held by the Council could be dominated by the same individuals who regularly attend such meetings. Members put this concern to the Mayor. The Mayor saw such meetings that, whilst an important tool into gaining an insight into the public's viewpoint, they were just one of a number of mechanisms which could be used to engage with the public. That effectively Chaired public meetings could provide a useful insight into local people's opinion.
- 31 In terms of possible improvements to public consultation the Mayor considered that the Local Strategic Partnership was regarded as an important mechanism for consultation and had the potential for further improvement and development. Appropriate representation from the voluntary sector was also considered to be an important part of the process.

WHAT DOES MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL WANT TO DO?

- 32 The Council's aims for the development of community consultation are contained within the Corporate Consultation Strategy that is examined at paragraph 43.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ELECTED MEMBERS?

- 33 Councillors' roles are noted throughout the body of the report and the Government's proposals for the enhancement of Councillor's roles as local leaders are detailed at paragraph 96.

WHAT MECHANISMS OF CONSULTATION ARE CURRENTLY USED?

Community Engagement and the Middlesbrough Partnership

- 34 The panel learned that community engagement was also undertaken by the Middlesbrough Partnership and therefore the panel sought evidence to assist them to consider how some of the Council's engagement responsibilities were delivered through the Partnership.

- 35 The Local Government Act and relevant Government guidance places a responsibility on Local Strategic Partnerships to engage with local communities. Although it was flexible, the guidance indicated that key interests should be involved, including black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and faith communities.
- 36 The Middlesbrough Partnership Board is made up of a variety of representatives from the community, including: one from each of the four community council clusters; BME Network; faith sector, voluntary sector and young people drawn from the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.
- 37 The Middlesbrough Partnership Executive Board comprises of 14 members, half of which are drawn from the community representatives listed above.
- 38 All of the Partnership's thematic 'Action Groups' have seats made available for representatives from Community Council clusters, the BME network, voluntary and faith sectors. In all cases, representatives are expected to represent the view of their constituency and the groups they represent and not simply their own personal views.
- 39 Those members of the community who are involved in the Local Strategic Partnership also form part of what is known as the Community Network. This Network is funded through the voluntary sector (Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency is the accountable body for the Community Empowerment Fund which funds the Community Network) The Middlesbrough Community Network involves voluntary and community groups across the town. It is intended that the representatives from the community who are on the Partnership also act as representatives of the whole Community Network.

Middlesbrough Partnership Consultation Mechanisms

- 40 There are a number of consultation mechanisms that have been created by the Middlesbrough Partnership:
- BME Network
 - Community Council Clusters – with representatives on the Board
 - Stakeholder Conferences – held about 4 times a year, to share ideas and listen to community concern
 - Ad hoc mechanisms – focus groups, use of the Council's Voiceover panel, taking displays around town, etc.
- 41 There is an agreed framework for engaging with communities, adopted by full council, the framework sets out the principles of good practice for community engagement as well as a toolkit approach to aid practitioners in the preparations for, and carrying out of, community engagement roles.
- 42 The Council has a duty to prepare a Community Strategy and does this through the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). In Middlesbrough, the Community Strategy forms part of the Council's Policy Framework. The preparation benefits from the engagement of the various communities

contained within the Action Groups, through which the sections of the strategy are developed, owned and implemented.

- 43 Individual services of Middlesbrough Council, have from time to time, used the Middlesbrough Partnership to carry out community engagement tasks. Examples of these include: the development of a BME Housing Strategy; consultation with Community Council clusters on the Council's budget; and a range of presentations on key strategic issues to the Board.
- 44 Members recognised council officers' commitment in seeking improvements to community engagement practices. However there was an acknowledgement that it was important that officers were explicit throughout the consultation process to ensure people knew what they were being consulted upon and why.
- 45 With regard to ensuring that 'representatives' represent the views of their group, currently there were no specific measures to ensure that this was achieved. Consideration was given to the introduction of job descriptions. In order to help facilitate this information should be sought from other local strategic partnerships as to their practices in this regard.
- 46 In terms of the two seats earmarked for young people on the Middlesbrough Partnership Board, the Panel acknowledged that there was a need to examine more innovative and effective ways of engaging with young people.

Public Consultation Tools Used by the Council

- 47 The panel received evidence from the Corporate Policy Manager on the wide variety of mechanisms the Council used to ensure that all citizens and stakeholders in Middlesbrough can influence the development of policies and inform the way in which services are delivered.
- 48 This process is managed through the Corporate Consultation Strategy to ensure that it is consistent with Council corporate objectives, the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy and the Framework for Engaging with Communities. The strategy sets out the guiding principles for consultation and the key features of the strategic approach are as follows:
 - i. **A Corporate Team** has been established to manage the approach, provide advice, technical support and training across the council.
 - ii. **The Consultation Network** – which will consist of officers with responsibility for consultation, providing a focus for continuous improvement, reinforcing the culture of information sharing, evaluation and feedback to the community on the outcome of consultation activities.
 - iii. **Consultation Programme** – effective planning of consultation activities is the key to joining up all the individual consultation activities to avoid duplication and consultation overload. A year long

programme is produced and will be published on the Council's website.

- iv. **Best Practice Toolkit** – the toolkit is contained within the Middlesbrough Partnership's Framework for Engaging with Communities and provides guidance for the Council and other key partners in the application of consultation methods and techniques.
- v. **Consultation Database and E-Library** – consultation data, reports and information will be stored on a Council database which is accessible to Consultation Network representatives to assist with research, avoid duplication and provide opportunities for joint consultation activities.
- vi. **Database of Consultation Forums** - this will hold information of residents, community groups, public meetings etc.
- vii. **Consultation News in Middlesbrough News** – which will inform residents of the outcomes of public consultation.
- viii. **Consultation Section of the Council's Website** – which will include e-surveys, feedback, contact information etc.

49 Some of the key consultation methods are listed below:

- i. **Elected Members** – Members attend Community Council meetings, hold ward surgeries, meet with concerned groups and individuals and assist in revising or setting new policies through the Council's scrutiny process.
- ii. **Surveys** - Conducted throughout the year using various techniques, from large-scale surveys to focus groups and forums.
- iii. **Voiceover** – surveys conducted with 1,200 residents about 4 times a year and information is fed back into the decision making process.
- iv. **Public Meetings** - for example the Mayor's series of meetings covering transport and law and order issues.
- v. **Contact Centre** - front line of the Council's information and communication interface with the community.
- vi. **Website** – the website has undergone a refresh that will enable it to have the capacity to undertake on-line consultations.
- vii. **Partnerships** – effective partnership working through extensive consultation between partners to deliver shared goals.
- viii. **Community Councils** – provision of a forum for residents to discuss and debate issues at a local level.

- 50 Following receipt of this information Members suggested that there was a need to develop the support for Community Councils to ensure their effectiveness in carrying out their current role. It was also considered that the role of Community Councils should also be further clarified. Members were also keen to see the development of a central database that would identify key officers and co-ordinators of certain information that would help in identifying the most appropriate methods of consultation.
- 51 Panel members considered that the Voiceover survey was potentially effective when an appropriate cross section of the population was achieved and that careful consideration was given to the compilation of questions on suitable topics. The possibility of circulating the results of the Voiceover surveys to all Members of the Council was suggested.

The Council's Engagement with Children and Young People

- 52 The Panel heard evidence from the Head of Community Education who outlined how engagement was undertaken with children and young people.
- 53 There were a number of categories of age groups and as such those categories were consulted in various ways, as follows:
- i. **Pre School** – through Sure Start Programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries, Support to Child Minders, Information and guidance through the Childcare Plus shop. For example a group of pre-school children were consulted as service users using games and interviews to seek the information.
 - ii. **5-8 and 8-13 year olds** – through Children's Centres, the Children's Fund which has a Board of Young People who uses the services administered by National Children's Homes, and through assistance from MVDA.
 - iii. **14 to 19 years old** – the Youth Service has 9 outlets and significant progress has been made in consulting service users in developing projects at Youth Centres in consultation with service users, through the Youth Parliament, youth workers and street wardens, and through schools (consulting young people in complementary education on the Behaviour Support Plan)

- 54 It was acknowledged that there were a variety of consultative mechanisms that would be used depending on the purpose of the consultation exercise.
- 55 However the panel were concerned that there were not enough effective methods of engagement with young people by the Council in general.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN CONSULTATION?

- 56 The panel heard evidence from the Chief Executive Officer from Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA). MVDA provides a range of infrastructure support services to voluntary and community groups in Middlesbrough. The panel heard that the absence of a local generic Voluntary

and Community Sector (VCS) co-ordination and development agency had impacted on the ability of the sector to contribute to planning and regeneration agencies to engage with communities in a strategic way. However MVDA had started to build its capacity to deliver the services expected of a local development agency.

- 57 MVDA had been approved by Government Office as the local responsible body for the Community Empowerment Fund, the national programme to enable VCS engagement in Local Strategic Partnerships through Community Networks. The panel learned that this had been slow to develop in Middlesbrough due to structural difficulties arising from the way in which membership of the local network was originally constituted (prior to MVDA becoming the responsible body). These difficulties were now on the way to being resolved in consultation with partners. The Community Participation Team at MVDA had been expanded to take the Network forward by diversifying its membership and engaging with both geographical communities at a neighbourhood level and communities of interest (particularly faith communities, disabled people, lesbian and gay groups and young people)
- 58 MVDA presented the panel with a list of the types of service development and community engagement activities they were involved in which included:
- Linking with a wide range of VCS organisations
 - Developing mechanisms for effective VCS communication with public bodies (including a Voluntary Sector Forum)
 - Resources and information for new and existing VCS
 - Identifying local needs and developing local action
- 59 MVDA considered that there were a number of issues with regard to community engagement that the panel needed to consider.
- 60 Firstly, clarity was needed about what is meant by the term community engagement, what it is hoped to achieve and what the benefits are. MVDA believe that Middlesbrough would benefit from a clear strategy for community engagement that would encompass those questions.
- 61 Secondly, that it was important to recognise that ranges of mechanisms are needed to achieve engagement at different levels and among different sections of the community. The voluntary and community sector can be particularly useful in engaging with hard to reach and marginalised groups.
- 62 Finally, that Middlesbrough has limited community development resources and MVDA is working with the Council to identify collaborative ways of maximising the effectiveness of existing resources.

The Role of the Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer and the Development of the Middlesbrough Compact

- 63 The Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer has a corporate role in facilitating and developing the Council's relationship with the voluntary and community sector. Within the specific duties of the job, and relating directly to the

engagement of the community, is the responsibility to foster and develop a positive relationship between the Council and the Voluntary Sector, developing corporate strategies, codes and protocols for effective working relationships.

- 64 A Compact was established in 1998 to provide a framework for the complex relationship between the Government and the National Voluntary Sector. In 2001 the Council and the local Voluntary and Community Sector developed a Compact based upon the national format. No procedures for implementation or evaluation were put in place and the panel learned that as a result of this the Compact had never become the tool for partnership working that it was intended to be. At the time of the scrutiny investigation, a review of the Compact was about to begin.
- 65 It was noted that a strong relationship with the VCS was essential for the effective discharge of Council duties. Increasingly Government guidance is stressing the importance of VCS involvement in the development and delivery of public services as an equal partner. An effective Compact will provide a clear framework for such partnership working.

How the West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust engages with the local community

- 66 The Panel learned that vision of the Trust was to create a community where residents are actively involved and the Trust have developed a model of management which allows residents to have a significant influence on their neighbourhood and residents are engaged at all levels possible, for example:
- Board Level
 - Board Sub Groups
 - Neighbourhood Trust Development Group (where work has been undertaken to review community involvement to help inform the future direction of community involvement work)
 - Theme Groups (chaired by residents)
 - People's Forum and Project Presentation Evenings
 - A Community Involvement Officer to promote and support community activity
 - Residents Panel – to communicate with residents who are hard to reach, it successfully engages with 200 residents who represent a cross section of the community. They participate through completing a questionnaire on 'hot topics' about 4-6 times per year.
 - Young People's Development Team – to engage and involve young people
 - Fundays and Community Awards
 - Quarterly Newsletter
- 67 The Trust's representative noted that the engagement of local people was at the heart of everything the Trust does. The success of the Trust was dependent on how they were perceived by local people and stakeholders and it was the Trust's intention to be as open and as accessible as possible. The

Trust's achievements in engaging with local people had recently been banded as excellent by Government Office.

The Role of the BME Network

- 68 The Chair of the BME Network addressed the panel and outlined the Network's current position and aspirations. The Network was a constituted body in the process of development with support from the Council. The Network was embedded into the Middlesbrough Partnership and representation was included on the partnership's themed groups.
- 69 The Network's main objective was to be an umbrella organisation and the main vehicle by which views could be channelled to and from the BME community. Work was ongoing to establish links with an increasing number of organisations, thus emphasising the importance of involvement in service provision. Representation on the Network covered a wide spectrum that included faith groups and community groups. Although the network was in its initial stages, it had representation from 50 different organisations and its existing relationship with Middlesbrough Partnership was seen as positive, as was the Partnership's commitment to ensuring the links with the various BME organisations were developed further.
- 70 The panel recognised that there needed to be an independent body that dealt with a variety of organisations that could then engage with the Council. The panel were encouraged to learn that this was the objective of the Network.
- 71 Members were invited to attend a meeting of the BME Network Management Committee. In feeding their experience back to the panel it was noted that an indication had been given that the Network had difficulties in obtaining sufficient information regarding Community Councils and Members' Ward Surgeries. Whilst it had been acknowledged that the Group was in the early stages of establishment there was a commitment to ensure that the links between the Council, the Network and other organisations (including other BME groups) were developed.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF 'COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES' AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC? AND WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND AS REPRESENTATIVENESS IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE?

- 72 The panel discussed the role of 'Community 'Representatives', the main area of that discussion centred on the extent to which Community Councils were regarded as being representative. Reference was made to previous planning consultation exercises that had involved Community Councils, of which the outcome had informed the Planning and Development Committee. However the panel wanted to exercise caution as to the representativeness of that consultation. It was thought that some groups which were attended by few people from the community were not necessarily representative of that community. It was also acknowledged that there may be a whole range of competing interests and views within any one group.

73 The issues regarding Community Councils are explored in further detail in the following paragraphs.

HOW REPRESENTATIVE ARE THE VARIOUS METHODS AND FORUMS FOR CONSULTATION?

Role of Community Councils

74 In order to assist Members in their evidence gathering with regard to Community Councils, the Panel received background details regarding the Council's financial support to Community Councils, how they are structured, how they operate, and the level of support provided from the Community Regeneration Manager.

75 The panel learned that the current Community Council initiative was implemented in 1984/85 with the remit of improving decision making, promoting self help initiatives, as a way of agencies being able to consult with the community and to reinforce the value of local government. At that time the Council was pushing ahead with an ambitious agenda of devolution and developing tenant participation. The Council gained a national reputation for its work. By 1997 there was a Community Council in each ward in Middlesbrough.

76 The panel heard that in order to make Community Councils work, resources were needed to build the capacity of each organisation. Community Development Staff were deployed to support the network, however this has become increasingly more difficult to do as resources have been reduced.

77 A review of the role of Community Councils was undertaken in 2003. This resulted in the emphasis being placed on electing a local resident as the Chair of Community Councils rather than a ward councillor. A new constitution for Community Councils was signed up to across the town. However the panel learned that this was a sensitive issue and subject to further review (a commitment was given by the Mayor to do so).

78 The current position with regards to Community Councils is as follows:

- a comprehensive constitution and terms and conditions for the disposal of grants
- More 'arms length' from the Council's substructures
- Community Development Staff still provide some direct servicing and support
- Recommendations made to improve the structural and operational difficulties – Community Councils functions are as a co-ordinating body rather than a delivery mechanism and as such they are not a 'community group'.

79 The panel learned that Community Councils are not autonomous bodies, they cannot independently amend their own constitutions without reference to the Council. The degree to which Community Councils can be said to be representative is limited to the nature of the attendance at meetings. This can vary depending on time, venue and issue.

- 80 It was considered that an evaluation framework would also enable a formal assessment of Community Councils which could analyse what they set out to do, whether or not they achieve it, did it add value to the democratic process etc.
- 81 The next significant factor was the Government's introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP). The mechanism that engages Community Councils with the LSP is the Cluster Groups, of which there are 4 groups in Middlesbrough. The Cluster Groups nominate a representative from each of the 4 clusters to sit on the partnership board, it is considered that this provides a mechanism for residents to influence to work of the Partnership and key service providers.
- 82 There was a concern amongst Members that because there is only 1 nominated representative from each of the clusters that each of the community councils are not represented individually. The panel thought that whilst outside the remit of this particular review, that the representativeness of the clusters should be examined and that there may be an opportunity for the partnership to consider this issue if they so wished.

Views from Community Council Members

- 83 Four representatives from the Community Councils in Middlesbrough attended a meeting of the panel. A number of areas were considered and discussed, the details of which are follows:
- i. **Attendance** – In discussions with the representatives from the Community Councils it was their experience that attendance at meetings varied but that typically about 20 people attended meetings and not necessarily the same people, it was dependent on time and issue. There were difficulties in motivating and encouraging a more diverse attendance and 'word of mouth' was seen as one of the most effective means by which to encourage further attendance. It was thought that low attendance levels and the formal setting of meetings were likely deterrents to some people attending. It was recognised that not all residents have access to a computer, although it was acknowledged that the use of email and web site facilities could help publicise meetings in addition to printed leaflets and press notices. Despite low attendance at some meetings this does not detract from the hard work undertaken by such people to raise issues and seek improvements for the community. Members took this opportunity to reiterate the point that officers should not solely rely on Community Councils as a means of communication and that there were a number of consultative mechanisms that could be used.
 - ii. **Involvement of Ward Members** – examples were given which demonstrated that Community Councils were regularly attended by Councillors and an indication given of the extent of their involvement in disseminating information and pursuing issues raised. There were good lines of communication with Councillors however there was a

view expressed by the representatives who attended from the Community Council that there was a feeling of isolation from the decision making process.

- iii. **Relationship with Cluster Groups and the Middlesbrough Partnership Board** – meetings tended to focus attention on day to day issues and difficulties were experienced in generating interest and debate on wider Town issues. However the Cluster Group mechanism was seen as providing an opportunity to share information and identify emerging trends on area based issues.
- iv. **Level of Support from the Council** – it was noted that community development staff had previously been deployed in teams to service and support Community Councils, each one of which also had a Lead Officer. The support provided by community development officers was considered to be very beneficial in enhancing the process. Although additional administrative support would be welcomed, in some cases. However, the current arrangements were considered to be adequate.
- v. **Suggestions for Future Operation** - in order to assist the process it was suggested that role descriptions and person specifications be developed to clarify roles required by community members and help recruit people to volunteer into such roles. Clarification was needed regarding the function between representative (based on traditional elected members) and participative democracies (based on residents becoming more actively involved in addressing local issues). In the wider context it was considered that there could be more opportunity to use the meetings to inform residents of the Council's policy direction. Whilst it was considered useful for Community Councils to establish a clear set of priorities there was a need to be aware that a too structured approach, which did not allow for sufficient participation and innovation, may act as a disincentive to attendance. It was reiterated that good communication channels were of paramount importance, which incorporated an improved reporting mechanism and an adequate feedback process on the key issues raised. In order to assess and strengthen the above process it was suggested that consideration be given to establishing a central point of contact/liaison officer.

Members Views of Community Councils

84 Members were invited to contribute to the review through a questionnaire that asked Members about their experiences of Community Councils. Members' responses are as follows:

- 16 Members responded, representing 33.3% of Council membership and covered 12 wards (which is more than half of all wards)
- Average attendance for the majority of Community Council meetings was about 20 people

- It was usually the same people who attending meetings, sometimes this would change depending on the nature of the agenda
- A lack of diversity was cited
- Regular items included police and councillor reports and subjects such as anti-social behaviour, crime, litter and housing.
- Most Community Councils drew on outside speakers
- It was thought that most issues raised were progressed by Councillors, although no one had been aware of any issues which had been raised at a Community Council meeting that had since become part of Council policy
- Over half of respondents thought that Community Councils enhanced their roles as elected Members
- The majority of respondents thought that the role of Community Councils should be strengthened although 3 Members thought that they should be abandoned.
- There was a varied range of additional comments although the common theme was that there was a need for some degree of change

85 Some strengths and weaknesses were highlighted in the survey as follows

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A forum for dedicated local activists • A forum to raise and discuss local problems • Gave opportunity for outside speakers to talk to local residents • Gave councillors a link to local issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low attendance relative to size of ward populations • Same people attended most meetings • Lack of diversity • No democratic accountability • Limited range of agenda items • Emphasis on complaints • Most public, private and voluntary agencies were not represented

WHAT BETTER METHODS MIGHT BE EMPLOYED?

86 Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity – A Five Year Plan (January 2005) The aim of the plan is to enable local people and communities to drive through improvements to their neighbourhood in partnership with local government. The strategy will address 4 key issues:

- Local Leadership
- Citizen Engagement
- Better Services
- Coherent and Stable Relationship – between national, regional and local government

- 87 Alongside the strategy are two discussion documents ‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter’ and ‘Vibrant Local Leadership’
- 88 The following paragraphs summarise the main direction of the consultation documents. In terms of community engagement the Government are advocating the need for stronger links between public services and the communities they serve. Effective community engagement depends on opportunities for, and capacity within, local communities to become involved in the decisions that affect them. The government set out its framework for community capacity building in ‘Firm Foundations’ in December 2004. Detailing that community engagement should work with the democratic structures of local government and councillors, not be set up in parallel.
- 89 The strategy notes that community engagement brings benefits to individuals and communities, community groups and individuals can often progress from sorting out a specific neighbourhood problem to engagement in a broader set of issues covering a wider area.
- 90 The Government believes that LSPs provide experience and evidence of what is needed for effective community engagement. LSPs will start to influence major local decisions and spending through their new role in pilot Local Area Agreements, where they will work with the local authority on behalf of the local area to get the balance of spending and services they want.
- 91 In terms of putting power into the hands of the community the Government believe that LSPs are not the only way of giving a bigger voice to local people. A number of local authorities have set up area committees or forums that consult local people about the decisions which affect them. The Government intends to make sure that all areas have the chance to have their say, but without imposing a one size fits all model but to develop a framework which sets out the principles for neighbourhood arrangements.

‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter’ and ‘Vibrant Local Leadership’

- 92 Alongside the plan the Government are publishing two discussion documents ‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter’ and ‘Vibrant Local Leadership’ which the ideas from the strategy are explored in further details.
- 93 Panel members had the opportunity to consider those documents as part of the review and a brief summary of each document is detailed below.
- 94 The consultation document ‘Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter’ sets out what the Government wants to see:
- opportunities for people to get involved in their neighbourhood everywhere
 - local government at the heart of devolution to the neighbourhood level
 - continuing variety building on existing neighbourhood arrangements

- The Government wants to empower people through a national neighbourhoods framework, local neighbourhood charters and a menu of options for neighbourhood action.
- 95 The menu could include for example:
- Extra anti-social behaviour-related powers for parish councils
 - the triggers for action in response to under-performance in local services
 - Neighbourhood Improvement Districts (NIDs)
 - Delegation of budgets
 - Neighbourhood contracts with service providers
 - Parish arrangements
 - New rights for communities to assume ownership of community assets
 - Neighbourhood management
 - Introduction of model bye-laws
- 96 Briefly the document ‘Vibrant Local Leadership’ outlines the Government’s strategy on leadership in local communities. The Government wants to create cleaner, safer and greener places where people want to live, work and relax. To achieve that vision, effective local leadership must be at the heart of sustainable communities and ensure that local people work together.
- 97 The Government notes that local councils are central to realising the vision through the local leadership they provide in:
- enabling and empowering local people and acting as their advocate
 - championing the area, formulating community strategy
 - challenging and scrutinising public services
 - decision making – setting priorities for an area
 - shaping services around the needs of the citizen
- 98 This document also outlines the Government’s thoughts on the leadership roles of Councils and Councillors. It argues that one of the key principles for greater neighbourhood engagement is that neighbourhood arrangements must be consistent with a local representative democracy that gives legitimacy to governmental institutions and places elected councillors as the leading advocates for their communities. The Local Government Act 2000 was an attempt to place a greater emphasis on the community role of councillors, however evidence suggests that this role remains relatively under-developed. The challenge is therefore, for councils to support councillors and for Government to create an overall framework that allows councillors to be seen to be playing a clear leadership role in local communities.
- 99 There is evidence that the new governance arrangements are at their most powerful where strong executives are matched by strong scrutiny. The document suggests that engagement in scrutiny process provides an opportunity for influence, considered debate and the development of policy issues, which can deliver real changes and improvements. Councillors do not

always recognise the potential of scrutiny which can complement their representative function and which can be one of the most powerful elements in the local democratic system.

- 100 The document also outlines the issue that the role of the councillor as a community advocate needs greater emphasis, reinforcement and support though clearly defining the leadership role of local councillors, considering the relationship with the scrutiny function, and the provision of appropriate support for councillors in their leadership role.
- 101 Effective representation is seen as involving councillors acting as advocates and as leaders. The Government suggests that ward councillors should be at the heart of neighbourhood arrangements that could also involve the idea of delegated budgets to councillors. They believe the ward councillor is well placed to be champions of their area, setting out the vision in partnership with other agencies, acting as challengers and scrutineers of public services.

CONCLUSIONS

- 102 Based on evidence given throughout the investigation, the Panel made a number of conclusions.
- a) One of the main issues that became apparent during the review is the different interpretation different people place on the words, 'community' and 'engagement'. The term 'community' is used very loosely and should be used more precisely – for example, to refer to communities of place or communities of interest. Engagement is defined as not only the consultation with people in their communities but representation and participation of and by the people who live in them.
 - b) Throughout the review the term 'community representative' was used to define those people who believe they are speaking on behalf of the interests of others at public meetings, for example Community Council meetings. The panel considered a more appropriate term could be 'community activists' as the panel considered the term 'community representative' was more appropriate for elected members. Community activists have an important role in identifying and raising significant local issues, but they are self-appointed and not subject to a democratic election, and so do not have any accountability to the community.
 - c) The panel recognised the strong argument for inclusivity in any engagement process. It was considered important for officers to undertake all possible and practical methods of consultation to ensure a wider spectrum of people are consulted and that a greater emphasis should be placed on including all members of the particular community.
 - d) The panel recognised and were supportive of the good work of the planning department in relation to consultation. However the panel had a concern that there was on occasion an over-reliance on community councils being regarded as the principle source of opinion in any given area.

- e) The panel viewed the Corporate Consultation Strategy as a positive development for the Council. They noted that the strategy presented an over-optimistic view of the current role of members, and the reality of community councils and clusters.
- f) The panel was also supportive of the general consultation undertaken by the Mayor and by all councillors in the course of their representative duties. The panel recognised the importance of this type of consultation. It appreciated the scale and frequency of the Mayor's interaction with the public and the business and community sectors as one of a number of important tools of community engagement. Public engagement by both the Mayor and all councillors should be recognised as an important part of community engagement.
- g) The panel was supportive of the work of community councils and understood that, although they were not a representative assembly, they played a valuable role and were a forum for local activists, which was one of the successful ways of raising local issues. The panel recognised that community councils have strengths and weaknesses and recognised that there was a need to develop the support for community councils in order to build on good practice and to ensure their effectiveness in carrying out their current role.
- h) The panel are supportive of the work of Middlesbrough Partnership and its consultation methods. However, in view of the panel's comments on the nature of community councils, we do question how far members of community councils can be described as 'community representatives' in the Partnership structure.
- i) The panel noted there were seats available on the Partnership Board for young people. However it was felt that, in general, there should be an exploration of an additional mechanism that engages the young people of Middlesbrough with the Council.
- j) The Panel were impressed with the commitment of MVDA to ensuring engagement within the voluntary and community sector and wished to see a closer working relationship between the Council and MVDA and voluntary bodies through the Compact arrangement and at a senior level.
- k) The panel was impressed with the community engagement work undertaken by the WMNT and Members wanted to bring attention to their good practice with regard to community engagement.
- l) The panel also noted the work of the BME Network and recognised that the Network was working hard to encourage and improve links between different minority groups. The panel saw the benefits of the Network operating as an independent body.

- m) The panel supported the Government's agenda for the development of citizen engagement and neighbourhood arrangements. The panel noted proposals for an increased emphasis on the role of elected members as advocates and leaders within their local community, and look forward to seeing the appropriate framework being introduced by the Government to support this policy which will help councillors to fulfil this role effectively.
- n) The panel very much concurred with the proposals in the Government's consultation documents that reinforced councillors' roles as being the accountable link between the Council and the community. The panel agreed that a local mechanism for developing Councillors roles within this framework be established which would develop the 'Vibrant Local Leadership' policy. It would provide a vehicle for Councillors to successfully take up the Government's challenge by ensuring Members' authority and status within their ward and enable Councillors to liaise effectively with their local community.
- o) The panel was also supportive of the Government's proposals to devolve some budgets for small-scale projects that they considered would also help councillors to fulfil their role as community leaders. Ward councillors would then be accountable to the people in the neighbourhood as to how the fund would be spent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 103 Based on the evidence received throughout the review, the Ad Hoc Panel recommends to the Executive:
- a) All services departments should be aware of, and utilise, the full range of consultation methods identified in the Corporate Consultation Strategy. Consultation exercises should consider the full range of mechanisms available, and follow the most appropriate. A protocol should be developed in order to ensure that this is achieved.
 - b) That all the Voiceover results are circulated to Members for their information.
 - c) The planning department should use a range of consultation mechanisms in seeking the views of local people, in addition to consulting community councils.
 - d) That both the Council and Middlesbrough Partnership consider developing ways for greater involvement and engagement with young people.
 - e) That the council continues to work closely with MVDA on community engagement issues in order to ensure effective community engagement with the voluntary sector.

- f) That a generic 'job description' and 'person specification' should be developed for officers of Community Councils, to assist those who occupy such roles.
- g) That an evaluation framework for community councils is established by the Council in order to measure their development and performance.
- h) That a review of the support given to Community Councils is undertaken to ensure that there is a consistent approach and to analyse the kind of support that those involved with Community Councils would find beneficial; and that an appropriate training programme is developed for Community Councils.
- i) In order to provide a local mechanism for the development of the Government's agenda, and to assist ward councillors to ensure their place at the heart of their community, a ward-based community decision-making body should be established, to be chaired by a ward councillor. This body should have a delegated budget. Active members of the local community such as representatives of community councils, voluntary bodies, residents associations, the police, housing associations, etc should be involved. The overall decision-making authority would rest with the ward councillors.
- j) If this structure is agreed in principle, detailed proposals should be developed by a working group, which includes frontline councillors to enable the scheme to become operational following the elections of May 2007.
- k) A training programme should be put in place in order to assist Members in this development of their role.
- l) Given the limited role for elected members in the Partnership's area clusters, consideration should be given to the creation of area management committees to oversee Middlesbrough's services on an area basis. Area management committees should be coterminous with the area clusters, and all ward councillors should be members.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

104 The Panel is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our investigation. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular the co-operation we have received from the below-named:

- Ray Mallon, The Mayor of Middlesbrough
- Jan Richmond, Chief Executive
- Sandra Cartlidge, Head of Economic and Community Regeneration
- John Dilworth, Community Regeneration Manager
- Abdul Khan, Community manager

- Colin Wales, Community Worker
- John Polson, Partnership Manager
- Scott Postlethwaite, Corporate Policy Manager
- Charlton Gibben, Planning Officer
- Chris Hawking, Urban Policy and Implementation Manager
- Lorraine McDonald, Community Appraisal Research Officer
- Rob Mitchell, Partnership Manager
- Andy White, Head of Community Education
- Dinah Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency
- Chris Kemp, Community Network Co-ordinator
- B Erbillur, West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust
- Jan Sinclair, West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust
- Tony Hanson, Chair of the BME Network

**COUNCILLOR MICHAEL CARR
CHAIR OF AD HOC PANEL OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

February 2006

Contact	Peter Clark or Senior Scrutiny Officer Performance and Policy Directorate Telephone 01642 729708	Elise Williamson Scrutiny Support Officer Telephone 01642 729711
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BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were consulted or referenced to during this Scrutiny and in the compilation of this report:

- (a) Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity – A Five Year Plan - Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
 - (b) Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
- Vibrant Local Leadership - Office of the Deputy Prime Minister