

INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCEMENT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLESBROUGH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE - 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.

FINDINGS – In order to undertake the review the panel received a great deal of information and evidence from a number of sources. Initially the panel considered what the Council's statutory consultation duties were, the panel then went on to consider how the Council and the Middlesbrough Partnership ensured engagement with the town's residents, businesses and key stakeholders etc through their current consultation mechanisms. The panel had discussions with the Mayor to gain his perspective on the topic and then heard how the Mayor consulted with a wide cross section of people and organisations.

The panel also considered the role and involvement of the Community Councils in community engagement and the panel spoke to a number of representatives from Community Councils in Middlesbrough.

The panel received evidence from a number of stakeholders including the BME Network, West Middlesbrough Neighbourhood Trust and Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency.

When exploring the ways of developing community engagement the panel considered the Government proposals, and in particular the document Sustainable Communities – People Places and Prosperity.

CONCLUSIONS - 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 was 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 is 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 - 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.

