



## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**DEPUTY MAYOR**

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**Date: TBC**

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### **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To consider proposals which take forward a number of decisions taken by the Executive following consideration of the Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel's final report on Community Engagement.

### **BACKGROUND AND CONSULTATION**

2. A number of the proposals contained within this report originate from the work undertaken by the Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel. The Panel examined community engagement issues ranging from public consultation through to backbench Member engagement. Arising from that work, the Panel produced an action plan which was subsequently submitted to the Executive for consideration.
3. Following consideration of the Panel's report, the Executive agreed to:
  - (i) a review of the Community Council Cluster arrangements with a view to increasing their effectiveness and the level of councillor and community engagement;
  - (ii) further consider other mechanisms for supporting and encouraging non-Executive councillors to discharge their champion role;
  - (iii) carry forward those approved actions contained within the action plan; and
  - (iv) a further report being produced on the outcomes of (i) and (ii) which would also be referred to Scrutiny for comment.

4. The purpose of this report is therefore to update Members on the work that has so far been taken to progress the above decisions and to also submit a number of proposals in order for further work to be undertaken.

## **A REVIEW OF COMMUNITY COUNCIL CLUSTER ARRANGEMENTS**

5. Community Council Clusters were established to provide a mechanism for residents to influence the work of the Middlesbrough Partnership and key service providers. Currently each cluster group is represented on the Partnership, with meetings being held on a bi-monthly basis. Ward councillors and service providers for the area also attend meetings. Their current functions are:
  - (i) to provide a link between Community Councils and Middlesbrough Partnership;
  - (ii) to provide a means for service providers to consult local people on service delivery issues; and
  - (iii) a means for local people to provide feedback.
6. Further work has been undertaken to provide a preliminary assessment of issues arising from the current arrangements and a number of key issues have emerged. These include:
  - (i) confusion about the relationship between Cluster roles and the Middlesbrough Community Network (MCN) (i.e. Clusters are not eligible for MCN membership because they are not deemed a voluntary organisation);
  - (ii) strong dependence between Community Councils and the Clusters with members from one feeding into the other;
  - (iii) whilst the MCN can represent the views of the voluntary and community sector, there needs to be further community engagement, involving community development and cluster support officers, with residents through the Clusters and Community Councils; and
  - (iv) the role of the ward councillor is not well-defined.
7. In addressing these issues it is proposed that the review examine: improving the effectiveness of the Cluster-Community Council link; making the bodies more reflective of the profiles of their local communities (i.e. in terms of diversity/age profile); assessing their current role and impact and how this might be made more effective; clarifying the link with MCN and other partners; the role of the ward councillor; and assessing whether the current management arrangements of the Clusters and Community Councils can be made more effective.
8. As part of the review, a key issue will be to develop Clusters that have a more strategic overview and approach to the issues relevant to the neighbourhoods they cover.
9. It is therefore proposed that, using the issues identified in paragraphs 7 and 8 as the review framework, officers from Regeneration and the Middlesbrough Partnership should work jointly in undertaking the review. The process would also

ensure that consultation is undertaken with Councillors, the Partnership, Community Councils, the Clusters, MCN and other key partners.

## **OTHER MECHANISMS FOR SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING THE ROLE OF NON-EXECUTIVE COUNCILLORS**

10. As part of the work in examining potential mechanisms to support Councillors, it was important to establish a base-line of current service provision. Consequently an audit was undertaken and a brief overview of key elements is outlined in appendix 1.
11. The work has shown that a wide range of support services are currently provided to Members. These range from administrative support to development opportunities and include mechanisms such as the one stop shop which aims to assist Members in their community role.
12. Another important consideration in addition to the range of services **offered**, is the level of **take up**. Some services are well used such as the one stop shop. Here, for example, during the period October to December 2006, 95 complaints, 111 information requests and 327 service requests were made; giving a total of 560. In 2006, the average number of monthly requests totalled 300. However other options are less well used and include, for example, the take up of personal development plans by Members which has been lower than hoped.
13. It is clearly important to ensure that Members are fully aware of the provision available and this is considered a particularly timely issue in view of the local elections in May 2007. It is therefore proposed to produce an IT-based guide outlining the nature of those services provided, how they can be accessed and who the key contacts are.
14. Whilst this seeks to address corporate organisational support to Members, work has also been undertaken to look at strengthening the support for and role of councillors in fulfilling their community champion role within the ward. The following developments all offer potential opportunities to strengthen this role.

### **CIVIL RENEWAL STRATEGY**

15. The Civil Renewal Strategy, approved by the Executive on 13 February 2007, is a cross-sector community engagement strategy. It is effectively a 'plan of plans' that helps to provide a framework for developing linked community engagement strategies at the neighbourhood level. There is an underlying theme running through the Strategy on the role of the councillor and it is considered that the Strategy's action plan could provide a framework from which the councillor's community champion role could be better defined and developed.
16. The action plan, which is attached as appendix 2 to this report, contains a range of initiatives and activities which are of direct relevance at the neighbourhood/ward level. Consequently, it presents a number of opportunities to link those activities with the work of the ward councillor. It is proposed therefore to produce a document which 'signposts' Members to those activities. This will not only help to

raise awareness and access but also present opportunities for greater involvement in engagement activities. By means of illustration, three examples are:

- Youth Opportunities Fund – Whilst the funding is for young people, Councillors will be able to offer advice to both individuals and groups in their ward on the potential funding that might be available and how it can be accessed;
- Voluntary Sector Grants – The Council provides grants to voluntary and community organisations and again Councillors would be able to provide that link in advising individuals and groups in their ward on sources of potential grant aid provided through this means; and
- neighbourhood management plans are currently being developed which will set out the priorities for the neighbourhood. In order to further develop their champion role, it could be appropriate for some of those priorities to be ‘championed’ by the ward councillor in assisting with their implementation.

17. It is therefore proposed to produce a Members’ guide to the opportunities presented by the Civil Renewal Strategy.

#### COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT

18. Arising from the work undertaken on the Civil Renewal Strategy, it was also considered appropriate to examine the link between community workers, such as Neighbourhood Managers and Community Development Workers, with ward councillors.

19. Work in this area has shown that there is a need to promote a greater understanding of respective roles. This is especially true in relation to ensuring that Councillors are better informed of community work activities. One proposal which has been discussed is to establish regular briefings between community workers and ward councillors to cover:

- alerting Members to issues and events – both current and anticipated;
- seeking Member guidance on dealing with local matters; and
- obtaining Member assistance in organising and preparing for events and projects.

20. This work though would have to be carried forward on the understanding that resources in this area are finite and it would not be possible to create a range of new opportunities and expectations for which there is no capacity to deliver. That is not to say however that improvements cannot be made within the resources currently available especially as a key element would be to alert Members to existing opportunities and providing the links where necessary.

21. With this in mind, an officer working group, chaired by the Community Regeneration Manager, will be established to examine the potential improvements to the links between community workers and ward councillors.

22. It is also appropriate make reference to the fact that Environmental frontline services are currently being reconfigured on an Area Care basis which will give local management of resources and increase the engagement of the service

providers with the Clusters and Community Councils. This will also improve the Member's ability to influence the delivery of services at the local level.

## **THE GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER – 'STRONG AND PROSPEROUS COMMUNITIES'**

23. The Government produced its White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' in October 2006. Whilst it addresses a range of issues, it contains specific proposals on the role of the councillor relevant to this report. These include:
- the introduction of 'Community Calls for Action'. Citizens will be able to seek action, through their local councillor, on persistent or serious problems with local services. Councillors will also have the right to raise issues across all local services with either the Executive or the Scrutiny Committee. Legislative safeguards will however be introduced to cover vexatious complaints;
  - an independent review of incentives and barriers to people serving as councillors to consider: existing councillor commitments, the time needed to be an effective councillor, time-off arrangements and remuneration;
  - working with the LGA, IDeA, the Leadership Centre and Regional Improvement Partnerships to: develop a clear definition of the councillor's role as a community champion; encourage greater diversity among those who serve as councillors; and develop capacity building to support their enhanced role (i.e. new powers through Community Calls for Action and 'a strengthening of their influence'). In terms of defining the role of the councillor, the Government has indicated that it will build on the role devised by the LGA developed as part of its 'Closer to the People Campaign', details of which are included at appendix 3; and
  - widening and strengthening the role of scrutiny in legislation to include: the power to consider specific matters regarding the actions of local public service providers; require service providers, covered by a duty to cooperate (e.g. the Police Authority, the PCT, the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive), to appear or provide information; and require those providers to have due regard to scrutiny recommendations.
24. The White Paper also identifies the possibility of allocating a small budget to individual councillors as an option which councils may wish to consider. The scrutiny of community engagement did suggest that 'ward-based community decision-making bodies should be established' together with 'area management committees..... coterminous with the area clusters', the former to be given delegated budgets. This would effectively establish an additional 27 administrative structures.
25. This was not supported by the Executive on the basis that it would be administratively costly and potentially confusing given the existing community council and cluster arrangements, whereby community councils already have small budgets allocated. The view was taken by the Executive that a more appropriate and cost effective approach would be to build on existing arrangements. The Mayor also expressed the view that ward councillors already had a number of ways of influencing local priorities, although some were more active and successful in doing this than others.

26. In terms of the White Paper, clearly there are implications for the role of the councillor. With regard to the 'next steps' and the Government's timetable, it is a little unclear at the moment. Whilst some legislation is currently being enacted, there is also a commitment to further consultation on the details of the implementation.

## **UPDATE ON THE AGREED ACTION PLAN**

27. Based on a number of recommendations from the Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel, the Executive agreed a service response. An update on the actions taken so far is detailed in Appendix 4. As Members will note, a significant number of the agreed actions have now been implemented and where further work is still required, they are either nearing completion or are part of ongoing processes.

## **FINANCIAL, WARD AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

28. This report is of relevance to all Members as it seeks to address a number of issues in relation to the role of the Member, particularly in terms of their champion role within the community.
29. There are no legal and resource implications arising directly out of the recommendations of this report. However, it is possible, as part of the further work to be undertaken on the proposals, that resourcing implications might arise. These, however, would be fully costed and presented to Members for further consideration.

## **SCRUTINY CONSULTATION**

30. It is proposed that the report should initially be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Board so that any suggestions the Board might have can be fed back to the Executive.

## **PROGRESSING THE PROPOSALS**

31. Although this report contains a range of proposals, it is felt important that any agreed framework should be in place as soon as it is possible following the commencement of the new 2007/08 Municipal Year.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

32. The Executive is asked to agree the following recommendations:
- (a) That the review of the Community Council Cluster arrangements, as detailed in paragraphs 7 to 9, be approved.
  - (b) That an IT-based guide detailing the support services currently available to Members, be produced.

- (c) That an engagement document, based on the Civil Renewal Strategy, be produced to assist Members in identifying engagement opportunities.
- (d) That further work be undertaken in developing the link between community workers and ward councillors.
- (e) That the potential implications on the role of the councillor arising out of the Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' be noted and that further reports be submitted to the Executive as appropriate.
- (f) That the progress made on the implementation of the Executive Service response to the Ad-Hoc Panel's recommendations be noted.
- (g) That, where possible, the proposals contained within this report, be implemented in the new Municipal Year, following the local elections in May 2007.

## **REASONS**

33. The proposals in this report seek to: establish a review framework which would lead to the community council cluster arrangements being more effective and improve the level of councillor and community engagement; direct further work which could result in the identification of new opportunities which will help to support councillors in their community champion role; alert Members to the possible implications on the role of the councillor arising out of the Government White Paper; and inform Members of the work undertaken to implement the Executive action plan arising out of the Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel's recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- (i) Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'
- (ii) Ad-Hoc Scrutiny Panel – Final Report on Community Engagement
- (iii) Report to the Executive in response to the Scrutiny Panel report.

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