AGENDA ITEM 7

REVIEW OF MIDDLESBROUGH PARTNERSHIP CLUSTER GROUPS

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

KAREN ROBINSON CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGER

23 SEPTEMBER, 2008

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1   To consult on a proposed review of the role and remit of Middlesbrough Partnership Cluster Groups and the involvement of ward councillors in the Groups.

BACKGROUND AND EXTERNAL CONSULTATION

2   Following a wide ranging Scrutiny investigation relating to community engagement, the Executive, in supporting a majority of the recommendations, also agreed a number of other measures including a review of the Cluster arrangements. The main aims of the review were to seek an increase in their effectiveness and the level of councillor and community engagement.

3   This report therefore outlines a range of proposals arising from that review and for ease of reference they have been grouped into the sections shown below.

The Aims, Role and Work of Clusters

4   The Clusters were established in 2004 to provide a mechanism for residents to influence Middlesbrough Partnership and the work of key service providers. Their aims, as defined in their constitutions, are:

- to enable Community Councils to influence the work of the Middlesbrough Partnership and facilitate a two-way communication process between

Middlesbrough Partnership and the Community Councils within the Cluster area; and

- to encourage Community Councils to work collectively for the good of their neighbourhood and their town, and to contribute to achieving the vision in the Middlesbrough Community Strategy.

5   Their objectives are:

- to elect a community representative and a named substitute to sit on the Middlesbrough Partnership Board;

- to ensure that Community Councils are involved in consultation about issues that affect their communities;

- where appropriate, to make recommendations that reflect the views of their Community Councils on the delivery of services in their area;

- to discuss and comment on issues on the Middlesbrough Partnership agenda and, through the elected representative, submit a view to the Partnership;

- to ensure that decisions made and views expressed at the Cluster Group and at the Middlesbrough Partnership, which concern the specific community, are reported back to the Community Councils;

- at the request of the Middlesbrough Partnership, to recommend residents for appointment to the Middlesbrough Partnership Action Groups, sub-groups and other external bodies; and

- to become involved in any other projects that benefit their local area, as the Cluster Group see fit.

6   These aims and objectives are however quite broad, which can lead to confusion about the role and operation of the clusters and the nature of their relationship with other bodies. It is therefore proposed that they be clarified and set out in more specific terms with additional guidance being provided where necessary.

7   In order to further help clarify the role of clusters, three other areas for consideration are also proposed:

- whether Clusters should have two types of meetings: those that focussed on local service delivery related issues relevant to the Cluster areas and those that were more strategic which addressed, for example, the formal LSP agenda including the Sustainable Community Strategy; the Local Area Agreement; and other key strategic documents. Details of the issues currently considered by the Clusters are included at Appendix 1;
- Clusters agreeing at the beginning of each year, a formal annual work programme which could include a review process so that in year assessments could be made as to progress and achievements made. It might also be advisable to produce action plans which, amongst other things, identified lead Cluster members responsible for carrying projects forward; and

- the production of a framework that identified how the Clusters linked into other key structures (eg the LSP and Council) and the nature of those links (eg consultative, informing etc).

8   Meetings with Cluster representatives have shown support for clarifying their role, as well as identifying areas where the support available to them can help them to function appropriately as members of the Partnership. This second issue is addressed later in the report.

9   It has also been noted that Cluster representation on the Partnership (including the Action Groups) might not always express the wider view. This may be due to a number of factors such as the lack of experience/knowledge of LSP structures and individual training needs. There are therefore a number of proposals within this report that seek to address these issues.

Membership Issues

General Membership

10   Cluster groups consist of Community Council representatives and Ward Councillors. Each Community Council is allocated four places on the relevant Cluster (North, South, East or West). Ward Councillors are automatically members of their relevant Cluster.

11   The recent review of the Partnership arrangements has changed representation within the Partnership. There will now be an open-access Partnership Forum (meeting quarterly) that any interested Cluster member can attend. There will now be two Cluster representatives on the Partnership Executive Board.

12   As the Clusters rely entirely on their membership from Community Councils and Ward Councillors, the Partnership has recognised that the groups may not be fully representative of the communities they cover. The LSP therefore engages with other networks such as the BME Network, Middlesbrough Community Network, and Council of Faiths as well as the Clusters.

13   It has been suggested that Cluster membership should be made more representative and be opened up to include other resident/community groups and therefore include people who might not attend Community Council meetings. This could be achieved in several ways. This includes making the meetings more accessible so that local residents could attend with speaking rights and/or giving Clusters the ability to co-opt members to represent local organisations or residents with specific knowledge or expertise. Co-option could either be time-limited to cover a particular area of work or ongoing. This could also be with or without voting rights.

Councillor Membership and Attendance

14   Whilst a number of Councillors attend regularly and they are very supportive of the work of Clusters, overall the attendance levels are very variable. Details of recent attendance figures are included in Appendix 2.

15   In attempting to seek the reasons for non-attendance, informal discussions with Councillors have raised the following issues:

- emphasis can be on local rather than wider issues;
- differences in the quality of chairing of meetings;
- poor links between Community Councils and Clusters;
- lack of common understanding of the roles of the different structures; and
- differences in the quality of reporting back from Partnership Board and Action Group meetings by representatives.

16   Indeed the overall attendance at Cluster meetings is variable and there could be many factors affecting this, some of which, in respect of Councillors, are touched upon above. It is proposed therefore to undertake further work in this area.

17   Councillors are also not entitled to be elected as either the chair or vice chair of Clusters. Consequently, if any Cluster felt that the best representation through such a role, might be from the local Councillor, the current constitution would not allow that option to be considered.

18   Councillors have though also acknowledged the benefits of dealing with some issues at this level and the opportunity for service providers to work with the Clusters. There was also recognition that in the development stage, Councillors may have had negative experiences with Clusters and might not be aware of positive changes, such as a better understanding of roles and responsibilities, better conduct at meetings and the links to service providers and the LSP.

19   There are several measures that might assist in addressing attendance issues:

- clarify the role of Councillors;
- explore the possibility of Councillors being allowed to stand for election as either Cluster chairs and/or vice chairs;
- an ongoing training programme be developed for all Cluster members;
- examine in more detail the possible reasons behind current attendance levels;
- formal briefing sessions be held for all Councillors in respect of their roles on Community Councils and Clusters and focusing particularly on how they can get involved; and
- strengthen the role of the lead Executive Member (currently the Deputy Mayor) in acting as the link between Councillors and the Executive over issues raised at Cluster meetings.

Officer Support

20   Two officers currently provide direct officer support from the Partnership Team located within the Council's Performance and Policy Service Area. Their main roles include supporting Cluster members in their roles on the LSP, administration of meetings, disseminating information, organising training and developing links with service providers.

21   There have been no formal arrangements for liaison between Cluster support workers and the Community Development Team and neighbourhood managers, located with Regeneration. Some problems have therefore arisen because of lack of communication or understanding between the two areas. As a consequence regular

meetings between the teams have now been introduced to alleviate problems. This will also allow the development of a shared action plan and agreement of working protocols.

22   The promotion of closer working between the Community Development Team, Neighbourhood Managers and the Cluster Workers is an important aspect of enhancing the service. To assist in further developing that closer working, it is proposed to develop protocols and shared action plans between the Community Development Team, Neighbourhood Managers and Cluster Workers.

The Way Forward

23   This report includes a number of proposals some of which are matters that fall to the Council such as the better co-ordination of services. However those proposals focussing on changes to the constitution of the Clusters would need the agreement of the Partnership. They would also have to be considered by the Clusters.

24   This report has been considered and approved, for consultation purposes, by the Deputy Mayor on 11 September. It is proposed that as part of a subsequent consultation process, that the views of the Board, the Partnership and Clusters are also sought. The feedback received would then be feed back to the Deputy Mayor.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

25   There are no financial implications arising from this report. Its content is of interest to all Members. There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

26   That the views of the Board are requested on the proposals contained in the report and including:

a) Council related issues

1.   Clarify the role of the Councillor as a Cluster member;
2.   Formal briefing session be held for all Councillors in respect of their roles on Community Councils and Clusters and focusing particularly on how they can get involved;
3.   The role of the lead Executive portfolio holder (currently the Deputy Mayor) be clarified and strengthened in acting as the link between backbench Councillors and the Executive over issues raised by the Clusters.;
4.   Protocols and shared action plans be developed by the Community Development Team, Neighbourhood Managers and Cluster Workers;

b) Partnership related issues

5.   The aims and objectives of the Clusters be reviewed and clarified and where necessary, set out in more specific terms. Additional guidance would also be provided where necessary;

6. Separate Cluster meetings be held for local service delivery related issues and for strategic LSP issues and seek to avoid significantly increasing the overall number of meetings held in any one year;

7. That Cluster Groups look to agreeing their annual work programme including a review process so that in year assessments can be made on progress and achievements. This also include the production of suitable actions plans that, amongst other things, detailed lead Cluster members responsible for carrying their identified project forward;

8. An ongoing training programme be developed to support all Cluster members;

9. Produce a framework that identifies how Clusters linked to other key structures (such as the LSP and the Council) and the nature of that link (e.g. consultative or informing);

10. Allow the option of Councillors being able to stand for election as either Cluster Chairs and/or Vice Chairs;

11. Consider making Cluster meetings more accessible to all local residents and widening the cluster membership, for example, the ability to co-opt representatives of local organisations or people with a key role in the local community; and

12. Undertake further work on the variable attendance levels at Cluster meetings.

c) The Way Forward

13. That matters be progressed in accordance with the proposed direction as detailed in paragraphs 23 to 24 above.

REASONS

27 These recommendations will help to clarify the role and remit of the Cluster groups and strengthen the role of ward Councillors within the groups.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

Community Council constitution
Middlesbrough Partnership Cluster Groups constitution

AUTHORS: BREN MCGOWAN / NIGEL SAYER
TEL NO: 729235 / 729233
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