

# MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

## EXECUTIVE REPORT

**Report Title:** Community Councils: Proposals for Future Support and Development

**Deputy Mayor:** Councillor D Budd

**Date:** TBC

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### PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. This report identifies proposals arising from recent discussions initiated by the Mayor regarding the effectiveness and operation of the town's Community Councils.

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2. There are a number of recommendations primarily about strengthening support to and links with the Community Councils.

### IF THIS IS A KEY DECISION WHICH KEY DECISION TEST APPLIES?

3. It is over the financial threshold (£75,000)   
It has a significant impact on 2 or more wards   
Non Key

### DECISION IMPLEMENTATION DEADLINE

4. For the purposes of the scrutiny call in procedure this report is

Non-urgent   
Urgent report

If urgent please give full reasons

## **BACKGROUND AND EXTERNAL CONSULTATION**

### **Background**

5. There are 25 Community Councils in Middlesbrough, one for each Ward, with two in Brambles Farm / North Ormesby ward and an additional one for Berwick Hills which is not a ward in itself, but part of both Park End and Pallister wards.
6. All have the same basic constitution, detailing membership, meeting and management details.
7. Each Community Council has an elected Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary & Treasurer (known as the officers of the Community Council) – who are all community volunteers. This group plus Ward Members form an Executive, which usually meets prior to Community Council meetings, sets agendas, etc.
8. Each Community Council receives an annual grant from the Council which is based on population. This averages £3,004 per Community Council. The total budget for 09/10 is £75,118.
9. Community Councils sign up to Terms and Conditions with the Council, regarding spending and management of the grant.
10. Community Councils allocate the funding on receipt of applications from local community groups etc.
11. In addition to grant funding, the Council's Community Regeneration Service provides practical support i.e. typing, printing, leaflet distribution – paid for by the Community Councils from their grant – as well as advice, development support and training for the Community Councils officers. The level of support varies greatly between Community Councils – some are well organised and self-sufficient (which is the ultimate aim for all Community Councils) while others require a much greater level of sustained involvement from Community Regeneration staff.
12. Attendance levels also vary, some regularly achieve attendance of 30-40 residents, others struggle to achieve double figures.
13. Each Community Council nominates four representatives to the local Area Cluster. There are Clusters for East, South, West and North Middlesbrough, and Clusters provide a means of representation and communication between the Local Strategic Partnership and Community Councils / the community.

### **Typical agenda items and activities at Community Council meetings**

14. Standing / Regular Items
  - Apologies, Minutes, Matters Arising, Correspondence;
  - Police Report;
  - Street Warden Report;
  - Ward Councillor's Report;
  - Planning issues;
  - LSP / Cluster report;
  - Grant Applications.

15. Other Items / Presentations / Activities

- Recycling;
- Local interest issues (eg Acklam Hall, Marton Shops, Hemlington Lake);
- Neighbourhood Watch;
- The Mayor;
- Transport;
- Policy Consultations for Council Services & external agencies.

**Issues arising from recent consultation**

16. Various stakeholders have been consulted since April this year, including: Community Council Chairs / Vice Chairs, elected members, Police, Neighbourhood Crime & Justice, Safer Neighbourhoods Steering Group. This process revealed strong support for Community Councils. It is also accepted that there are some issues and considerable scope to improve how Community Councils currently function. The following paragraphs summarise benefits and issues around Community Council.
17. Community Councils are generally seen as a valuable structure with a number of benefits:
- a) well known, well established residents' engagement forum;
  - b) opportunity for residents to influence services;
  - c) useful consultation structure for Council Services and external agencies;
  - d) ready-made 'access' route to residents for partners from all sectors;
  - e) attended and supported by experienced community activists and members;
  - f) personal development opportunities for individual community members;
  - g) commitment, funding and support from the Council;
  - h) strong and self-sufficient Community Councils can develop;
  - i) some consistency across all 25 Community Councils – constitution, grant etc;
  - j) neighbourhood Policing has adopted Community Councils as vehicle for its regular statutory consultation – resulted in regular attendance from Police.
18. There are though some issues which need to be clarified/resolved:
- a) the 'value', interest and appeal to various stakeholders of Community Councils varies greatly - some Community Councils lack purpose or clarity about their function, and can become 'complaining shops';
  - b) meeting culture of some Community Councils can be off-putting to residents and agencies: formal / intimidating, unfocussed, internal personality disputes & tensions, bad behaviour at meetings – all can lead residents and agencies to disengage;
  - c) apparent 'detachment' of Council from Community Councils process;
  - d) lack of clarity about role and value of Area Clusters;
  - e) some Community Councils have severe problems recruiting volunteers to take on roles of Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary and Treasurer - some individuals end up taking on more than one / all of these tasks, others are not properly equipped and supported to take on these demanding roles;

- f) lack of 'fit' with other engagement and neighbourhood structures;
- g) involvement of Elected Members is inconsistent across the town, some Community Councils are strongly supported by Ward Members, others not.

## **Areas for Improving Support to Community Councils**

19. The Community Regeneration Service has recently been restructured, fully effective from April 2009. Neighbourhood Management teams are now operational in specific geographical areas, of highest priority/highest disadvantage, but with a remit to provide a limited level of support to Community Councils across the whole town. The local teams now have responsibility for supporting and developing the work of Community Councils in their areas, and are beginning work on the following measures set out below. It is recommended that Executive endorse the approach being taken.
- i. **Review of the Community Council Constitution.** Proposed amendments to include a Code of Conduct and Equal Opportunities statement, to address issues of behaviour and culture at meetings and ensure consistent practices, procedures and protocols.
  - ii. **Strengthen the support and training** provision for Community Council volunteer officers – not only formal training courses e.g. the role of treasurer, but also sustained, informal, support programmes for individuals, and development of a wider support network / good-practice sharing between Community Councils.
  - iii. **Review / reinforce Terms & Conditions of the grants**, to ensure adherence to conduct standards, administrative requirements etc. This to include new requirements to prevent risk of grant allocation being distorted by attendance at individual meetings by requiring clearer prioritisation and stronger decision making powers by Community Council Executives.
  - iv. **Where poor attendance levels** exist, these could be addressed by 're-focussing' Community Councils as to their purpose, and consideration should be given to making Community Councils more interesting, meaningful and appealing to a wider section of the local population. This work can be led by Community Regeneration, with the involvement of various stakeholders, including; Community Council/s officers, Council Officers, Neighbourhood Crime & Justice, Police, key Council services, etc.
20. However, a number of other issues have been identified which fall outside of the Community Regeneration Service and need to be addressed by the Council more broadly. It is recommended that the following actions be approved:
- i. **Council involvement with Community Councils should be reinforced.** It is desirable for a variety of reasons that structured links be reintroduced between the Council and Community Councils. Historically, Community Councils each had a nominated Council 'Lead Officer' - who attended Executive and Community Council meetings, became acquainted with local issues, and formed a communication point between council services

and the Community Council. They would also take issues back to services between Community Council meetings as necessary, and request attendance at Community Council of appropriate service representatives to discuss specific issues when required.

There were many benefits to this approach, however this was in place at a time when there were only 11 Community Councils in total, and a large Community Development Service which could support this structure. Re-introducing the same system now is no longer appropriate.

However it is proposed in those wards where Neighbourhood Management is in place the 'Lead Officer' for each Community Council will be the local Neighbourhood Manager (or member of their team). This would cover 15 Community Councils (list attached at Appendix 1). For the remaining 10 Community Councils a Lead Officer (and deputy) should be designated, drawn from various Council Services. The role and expectations of the Lead Officer will be clearly defined and will include attendance at all meetings as representative of the Council (– NB **not** as representative of their service area, although knowledge of their own and other services will of course be beneficial).

In terms of which officers could take this role it is considered that it should not be at Head of Service or Service Managers level, but at senior officer level below this. At this level it is felt that officers would have sufficient seniority/experience, whilst at the same time being able to take advantage of the development opportunities working with a Community Councils would provide. Regeneration Department would be happy to provide Lead Officers to take these roles, but it is felt that it may be appropriate to share the roles with other Departments.

Training for Lead Officers regarding the background to and role of Community Councils can be provided by Community Regeneration.

- ii. **Strengthen linkage with and local decision making about Environment Department issues.** Many of the issues discussed at Community Councils are environmental issues. Mechanisms which enable Community Councils and the Council's Environment Department to respond to issues and problems closest to the ground could be highly beneficial by being able to respond quickly to residents' priorities. The Environment Department will therefore provide officers to link specifically from the Department to each Community Council (they may also take the Lead Officer role as above, or may be in addition to the designated Lead Officer). The Environment link officer will be able to identify priorities up to the value of £3,000 for each Community Council to respond quickly to small-scale issues identified in each neighbourhood. These costs will be met from within existing Environment Department budgets, The link officer will also report back to Community Councils on environmental performance indicators relating to each ward.
- iii. **Ward Councillor roles.** Strong and effective working between Community Councils and ward members exists in many wards and is to be supported

and encouraged. However, it is felt that ward councillors chairing Community Councils ought to be an exceptional situation, and where possible residents should be encouraged and supported to take on this role from the ward councillor.

- iv. **Consider links between Community Councils and the Clusters / LSP.** The role of Clusters is being separately reviewed by the LSP team, which supports the Clusters. Some issues regarding Clusters which became apparent during the Community Council/s consultations, include; perceived 'detachment' of Clusters from Community Council/s, lack of clarity about the purpose and value of clusters; separate support arrangements for Clusters to those available to Community Councils; lack of 'fit' with other neighbourhood engagement and service structures. The LSP team in conjunction with Community Regeneration Team, are to consider measures to improve links between Community Councils and Clusters, and to ensure that the role and function of Clusters is clear and aligned with the approach to Community Councils.
- v. **Marketing and publicising Community Council/s.** It may be appropriate to introduce for example a town wide leaflet/promotional campaign to highlight the role of Community Council/s and encourage greater community participation.
- vi. **Erimus Housing links.** Attendance at Community Councils from Erimus Officers is patchy across the town. Discussion needs to take place with Erimus to provide a more consistent presence at meetings.
- vii. **Senior Director / CEO attendance annually.** A commitment from the Council of this kind would help to reinforce the importance of the Community to the local authority and provide a line of accountability at a senior level.
- viii. **Relationship Between Community Council and other residents groups.** There can be numbers of different groups operating within any given ward, and this is both appropriate and a sign of healthy community activism. However, sometimes the distinction between Community Councils and other residents groups can be blurred particularly to other agencies. The function of Community Councils as the main mechanism for resident consultation will be clarified and restated to partner agencies to avoid any potential confusion.
- ix. **Feedback on issues.** Inconsistency in terms of feedback from Officers of the Council and other public and voluntary groups was a consistent theme throughout the consultation discussions. It may be that responsibility for achieving a greater level of feedback could fall to the allocated local authority Lead Officer for each Community Council.
- x. **Commitment to regular meetings with Mayor and Deputy Mayor.** The Mayor and Deputy Mayor have committed to regular meetings with Community Councils over the period of time necessary to implement the improvements outlined above, after which they will meet at least annually to receive feedback on general progress/issues.

21. These improvements will be discussed with and offered as a package of support to Community Councils.
22. Arrangements to identify and train Lead Officers will be put in hand on approval of this report.
23. Arrangements with Environment Department to put in place link officers and associated budgets are also in hand.

## **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

24. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken with no adverse consequences identified.

## **OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT**

25. A number of options have been considered and discussed as part of recent consultation. This commenced with the very basic option as to whether Community Councils were useful, valued and still required. It was clear that this option was not supported, and instead options as to how these valued assets can be supported have been focussed on. These are set out below in the recommendations section.

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

26. **Financial** – There are a number of financial implications arising from this report, namely the creation of a budget to support environmental works prioritised by Community Councils. The Director of Environment has been consulted in the discussions and is in agreement with this approach. Other proposals can be resourced within existing budgets.
27. **Ward Implications** – All wards have a Community Council and this matter is therefore of potential interest to all ward members.
28. **Legal Implications** – There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **SCRUTINY CONSULTATION**

29. This report will be forwarded to Scrutiny Panel for comment before being forwarded to the Executive for approval.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

30. It is recommended that the proposed improvements to the support provided to Community Councils set out in paragraphs 19 – 23 above, including:
  - review of the Community Council Constitution;
  - strengthen support and training;
  - review Terms and Conditions of Community Council grants;
  - support Community Councils to improve attendance;
  - improve linkage with Community Councils via Lead Officers;

- improve linkage with the Environment Department in particular via Environment Lead Officers;
- commitment to regular meetings with the Mayor/Deputy Mayor.

## **REASONS**

31. Recent consultation has identified that Community Councils have a valued role in the town, and that improving support to and linkages with Community Councils would be of great benefit.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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**Community Councils Covered by Neighbourhood Management Teams:**

<u>Area</u>	<u>Ward</u>
North Team	Ayresome Gresham Middlehaven University
East Team	Beckfield Berwick Hills Brambles Farm North Ormesby Pallister & Town Farm Park End Thorntree
South Area	Hemlington
West Team	Beechfield Clairville Ladgate

Total: 15

**Community Councils outside NM areas:**

Acklam	Marton
Brookfield	Marton West
Coulby Newham	Nunthorpe
Kader	Park
Linthorpe	Stainton & Thornton

Total: 10