Wiltshire Council
Where everybody matters

Marlborough Area Board & the Parishes
'Finding New Ways of Working'
A Summary of Discussions

Why are we doing this?

During the winter 2009/10, a comprehensive review of the area boards was undertaken that examined the first 6 months of their operation. This data was subsequently used to inform a report to Cabinet on 23 March 2010. A copy of this report is available from the Council's website: http://cms.wiltshire.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=3434. One of the recommendations of this report was that community area managers would offer to host discussions about the area board for parish and town councils in the area.

It has been recognised that, generally, parish councils in the Marlborough community area are substantially disengaged from the processes of the area board. Meeting attendance records a very low turn-out from the community area's 15 parish councils.

Parish and town councils seek to represent the views of their community and, as such, have an important role to play in the community governance arrangements of Wiltshire Council, playing a valuable role in promoting involvement in local democracy.

What can be done to change this?

The community area manager invited all the parish chairmen to meetings held across the community area to discuss the issues. These informal events sought to cover the following topics, but allowed digression and wanted to accommodate all issues:

- How are area boards working for you?
- Communications – including Community Area Network (CAN) sign up for all parish councillors
- Would a parish council forum be useful?
- The role of the partnership

What did we learn?

Parish councillors are voluntary contributors to the well-being of their parishes and frequently have to balance the needs of their working lives with their aspirations for their communities. Parish councillors need to consider 'what can I get out of an area board meeting for my community'.

Parish councillors are democratically elected and, as such, wish to influence decisions that affect their communities. Currently, many parish councillors believe themselves to have been disempowered by the unitary process. This is reflected both in terms of their disengagement at area board meetings but also by the reduced support they sometimes feel they receive at the parish level. It was noted that the mood from the floor at area board meetings was now being considered more frequently.

Parish councillors that engaged with the parish engagement meetings mostly felt that the partnership, through whom they had previously discussed their issues, did not adequately respond to the needs of the parishes and was too town-centric in its interests. As elected members, they wished to engage directly with the area board and not through the partnership.

Some parishes had very small populations and consequently did not generate enough activity/interest to engage with the area board; however, they also found themselves isolated when seeking support and/or expertise.

Area board meetings did not include items of interest to parishes, were too corporate-led and did not facilitate lively, constructive debate. The balance between the presentation and the discussion at area board meetings needs to be tipped in favour of much shorter presentations and more time given to debate (the suggestion of 20% presentation time and 80% discussion time was made). It was noted that agenda documents often duplicated the discussion at the meeting leading to some comments that there was little point attending the meeting when one could read the minutes afterwards.

Area board agenda items should be issue-driven and reflect local interest rather than a collection of general updates and department overviews. Presentations were not cleverly prepared and more training should be given to council officers about designing and giving presentations. Agendas sometimes risked being over-long. Partner updates should be distributed with the agenda and not repeated at the meeting. A more comprehensive record of the item in the minutes was requested along with more accurate agenda descriptions. Not all parish councillors were receiving the Just-a-Minute newsletter summary of the minutes.

Parish councils wanted more timely local information sent via the community area network. They would like to be kept up to date about local issues. Consultation documents were too lengthy. Communications (e-newsletters) should include abstracts with website links allowing readers the option of accessing the document in detail. Better signposting would be beneficial.

The role of the visiting cabinet representative should be better presented. People were unclear about the types of decisions cabinet members could take and therefore the types of questions that can be asked of them.

Themed meetings were requested, particularly around the issues of planning and speeding. Some requested that more meetings be held during the day while others requested that meetings be held later in the evenings. A parish forum would be an ideal vehicle through wish to address collective local issues and share expertise.

The area board's community issues process was not always known about or understood. Parish councillors did not know what they could expect once an issue had been reported. The importance of parishes reporting issues was considered key to ensuring that reported problems are supported by the parish council.

What will we do?

Officers recommend that:

1. The mood of the meeting to be considered by the divisional member and if a divisional member chooses to vote against the mood of the meeting their reason should be given and minuted.

2. The area board supports the formation of a parish forum.

3. Agendas should be balanced in favour of local issues rather than corporate items.

4. The area board consider limiting the number of items on future agendas to ensure local interest and greater input from attendees.

5. The Chairman and Community Area Manager to work with council officers to ensure that presentations are shorter and better prepared.

6. The Democratic Services Officer to note the requests for more comprehensive minutes and better agenda descriptions.

7. Parish councils to be invited to ask their councillors to sign up individually to the Community Area Network (CAN) to ensure the speedy delivery of Marlborough Area Board information.

8. The community area manager to work towards better formats for the distribution of information via e-newsletters.

9. Information about the Community Issues process and how issues are handled is sent to parish councils so that their views are recorded.

10. These meetings to better engage the parishes to be repeated in one year to gauge their success and to make further recommendations.

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