

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

23 MARCH 2010

Subject: AREA BOARDS IN WILTSHIRE LEADER'S REVIEW

Cabinet member: Councillor John Thomson – Community Services

Executive Summary

Wiltshire's Area Boards were launched in June 2009. Over the intervening eight months, 86 Area Board meetings have been held across Wiltshire taking local democracy out of the council chamber and into the heart of the local community. By the end of February 2010, 5,547 local people had attended meetings of the Boards and a further 10,000 residents have signed up to be kept informed and involved. When setting up the Area Boards, the Leader of the Council gave a commitment to review progress after six months. Accordingly, a review was launched in December 2009 that has involved councillors, parish councils, officers, partners and the general public. Over 1,200 responses have been received to a survey conducted between January and March 2010 (over 500 of which had attended Area Boards). In addition over 120 delegates attended a workshop at the Corn Exchange in Devizes on 8th March to consider how the Area Boards may be further improved. This report sets out the findings of the review and presents recommendations for consideration by the Cabinet.

Proposals

People

- 1) That Area Boards and Community Area Managers be encouraged to work with Council services, parish councils and partners such as health services, housing associations, schools, voluntary sector organisations and neighbourhood groups to engage with and document the needs, aspirations and stories of people from different walks of life and backgrounds in the area.
- 2) To facilitate the above, during 2010/2011 each Area Board is challenged to experiment with new ways of broadening public participation and a bid be prepared for LPSA funding to achieve this.
- 3) The new Community Area Networks should be used for regular consultation to help inform agenda preparation and to gain feedback on the local Forward Plan.
- 4) Parish council forums and alliances should be encouraged in each area to discuss and agree items for consideration by the Area Boards.
- 5) Area Boards are encouraged to hold informal or consultative meetings around subjects or themes of particular local concern and to facilitate this new approach the number of informal meetings permitted per Area Board be increased to 4 in any year.

Powers

- 6) That the Area Boards are the main mechanism for consulting communities at local level and to facilitate this, services are requested to provide good notice of consultations in order to give Area Boards adequate time to programme and deliver consultation activity in the locality.
- 7) That the scheme of delegation to officers be amended to require the use of the decision checklist attached as Appendix 3
- 8) That Cabinet members be requested to encourage officers to refer matters of only local impact to the Area Boards and town and parish councils so that they can be more fully involved in the decision making process.
- 9) That the Community Issue System be reviewed with a view to achieving better response times and greater clarity regarding outcomes delivered

Partnership

- 10) That the revised community area partnership agreement and funding arrangements (Appendix 4) be adopted for 2010/11.
- 11) That negotiation is continued with the Wiltshire Forum of Community Area Partnerships (WfCAP) to develop and support flexible partnership arrangements that best suit local circumstances.
- 12) That the Council agrees to negotiate a new three year service level agreement with WfCAP to secure its funding and develop and strengthen the support it provides to partnerships in Wiltshire.
- 13) That the Resilient Communities Partnership be invited to develop ways of supporting and strengthening community planning in Wiltshire including commissioning further improvements to the community area profiles.

Publicity

- 14) That Area Boards be encouraged to develop closer relationships with the local newspapers by providing copy and news stories in order to raise awareness and encourage participation.
- 15) That Area Boards be encouraged to provide copy for local parish magazines and other community newsletters
- 16) That an Annual Report be produced each year detailing the successes of the Boards involving people who have benefited from the outcomes
- 17) That all Area Boards communications be written in plain language avoiding jargon and acronyms.

Parishes

- 18) That parishes be encouraged to form clusters, forums and alliances within (and across) community areas to share knowledge, experience and concerns and to put forward items for consideration by the Area Boards.

- 19) That Area Boards communications be sent by email to all parish councillors through the community area network.
- 20) That examples of successful collaborations between parish councils and area boards be promoted to demonstrate the successful outcomes that the new arrangements are delivering
- 21) That Area Boards are expected to meet at a range of urban and rural venues
- 22) That the Area Boards Handbook is revised to set out more clearly the role, rights and responsibilities of parish representatives upon the Area Boards and that this is circulated as a separate information sheet for parish and town councillors.
- 23) That Community Area Managers will offer to give presentations and host discussions about the local Area Boards for parish and town councils in the area.

Implementation of recommendations

- 24) That the Director Community, Libraries, Heritage & Arts in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Communities, be authorised to:
 - (a) revise the Area Boards Handbook to accommodate the outcome of the Leaders' review and the decisions here adopted;
 - (b) ensure that all necessary arrangements are made to implement these recommendations;
 - (c) undertake a further review in 12 months to assess how far these recommendations have addressed the concerns raised during the review; and
 - (d) produce an annual report setting out the achievements of the Area Boards during 2009/10.

Reason for Proposal

These proposals address the Leader's desire to further strengthen Wiltshire's Community Area Governance arrangements.

Report Prepared by

Councillor John Thomson, Cabinet Member for Communities
Councillor Christopher Williams, Portfolio Holder for Communities
Corporate Director, Department of Community Services: Sue Redmond
Service Director, Community, Libraries, Heritage & Arts: Niki Lewis
Head of Community Governance: Steve Milton

Contact Details: Tel: 01722 434255 Email: steve.milton@wiltshire.gov.uk

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Purpose of Report

1. Wiltshire's Area Boards were launched in June 2009. Over the intervening eight months, 86 Area Board meetings have been held across Wiltshire taking local democracy out of the council chamber and into the community. By the end of February 2010, 5,547 local people had attended meetings of the Boards and a further 10,000 residents had signed to their local community area network. When setting up the Area Boards, the Leader of the Council gave a commitment to review progress after six months. Accordingly, a review was launched in December 2009 that has involved all councillors, all parish councils, officers, partners and the general public. Over 1,200 individual responses (of which over 500 had attended Area Board meetings) have been received to a survey conducted between January and March 2010. In addition over 120 delegates attended a workshop at the Corn Exchange in Devizes on 8th March to consider how the Area Boards may be further improved. This report sets out the findings of the review and presents recommendations for consideration by the Cabinet.

Background

2. Wiltshire's Area Boards represent a fundamental shift towards a new form of grass-roots democracy. As interest and trust in national politics has declined, Wiltshire Council has sought to plug local people back into power by involving them in decisions that most directly affect them in the places where they live.
3. So far, 86 Area Board meetings have been held across Wiltshire taking local democracy out of the council chamber and into the heart of the Wiltshire's local communities. 5,547 local people have attended and participated at the meetings¹ - an average of 65 people at every meeting with over 160 local people turning out for one meeting in Corsham. But this new way of working is not simply about meetings, the aim is to get more people involved in the decisions that affect them and that has meant taking consultations out into the community.
4. Over 10,000 people have so far signed up to their local community area network, so that they can be informed, consulted and involved by the Boards. Regular information now flows across this network, both out into and back from the communities. The benefit of this is clear. 1,200 people have taken part in the Area Boards Review between January and February this year; 1,161 people took part in the 2010/11 Budget consultation events; 1,800 people took part in the Local Development Framework consultations in the Autumn of 2009 and so far 1,020 people have taken part in the JSNA Health and Wellbeing Fairs, workshops and presentations. This represents very significant and sustained levels of participation in local democracy. The Area Board Team is continuing to

¹ As at 1st March 2010

experiment with new and innovative ways of getting more people involved, including social networking, podcasts and webcasting.

5. The Area Boards have so far committed £549,000 to support 253 community projects through the Community Area Grants Scheme. This funding has generated an additional £3.1m of external funding delivering a total community benefit to Wiltshire of £3.6m in the year so far. Every £1 spent by the Areas Boards helps to lever £5.60 of external funding. But it is not simply about the money - an amazing diversity of projects have been supported, from arts and allotments to bird keeping and village shops and from cricket and climate change to film clubs and playgroups. This represents a very significant investment in Wiltshire's social fabric supporting the continued wellbeing of many thousands of local people.
6. Minor changes and improvements to the Community Area Grants scheme have been adopted by the Council (delegated decision number) and are not covered in this report.
7. Area Boards have also been working hard to sort out local issues. Not just simple things, but complex issues that cut across service and agency boundaries. The Council's unique Community Issues System was launched in September 2009 and so far 715 sticky issues have been referred to the Boards – over 100 every month. By bringing together council services, public agencies such as the Police and NHS Wiltshire, Councillors, parish and town councils and the public over 50% of these issues have been resolved so far. Bus stops have been relocated, canal towpaths renovated, ditches cleared, allotments provided, community centres opened and much more. And this is where the Community Area Managers are really making a big difference coordinating and facilitating local action on behalf of the Boards, the Council and our partners.
8. Finally, one of the real success stories of the Area Boards so far has been the Community Speedwatch scheme. The idea emerged after the Area Boards Team realised that speeding issues were cropping up at every Area Board. A bid for LPSA Reward Scheme funds was approved and now volunteers from 46 villages are assisting the Police to monitor speeds and identify offenders right across Wiltshire. This shows how communities can provide the 'social capital' to extend and improve existing services and 'co-produce' solutions to their local concerns.

The Findings of the Review

9. Over 1200 responses were received to the survey (of which around 500 had attended one or more Area Board meeting) many of which contained suggestions and detailed comments that have been analysed as part of this review and incorporated into the conclusions of this report. A full schedule of the comments received is available from the Head of Community Governance.
10. Overall the findings of the review have been positive. Of the 23 areas examined by the recent survey 17 received an overall positive endorsement from respondents. The findings of the survey are attached as Appendix 1. There is broad satisfaction with the following:
 - Public participation

- Accessibility of meetings
- The ability to raise issues at meetings
- Just a Minute' (newsletter style version of minutes)
- Internet and email communications
- The Community Issue System
- Involvement of Councillors

11. However there is overall dissatisfaction with the following areas:

- Public awareness of the Area Boards and press coverage
- The lack of broad cross section of the community at meetings
- Awareness of the role of the Community Area Partnerships (CAPs)
- The relationship between the Boards and the CAPs
- The effectiveness of CAPs

12. Other areas, that generate relatively weak satisfaction include:

- Delegated powers and decision making
- Consultation
- Parish Council involvement
- Community planning

13. These findings were discussed at a workshop held at the Corn Exchange in Devizes on 8th March. 122 delegates attended the workshop including councillors, parish councils, officers, partners and the general public. The idea of the workshop was to focus on the areas requiring improvement. A summary of the main areas of agreement from the Workshop are attached at Appendix 2. The findings have informed the recommendations in this report.

Conclusions and Recommendations

14. The conclusions and recommendations set out in this report are divided into the 5 themes considered at the Workshop:

- People ▪ Power ▪ Partnerships ▪ Parishes ▪ Publicity ▪

15. People

The Council needs to do more to ensure that a representative cross section of the community is engaged at local level. This is a conclusion supported by the Area Board Chairman and the Communities Steering Group. This presents two challenges:

- Attracting a broader cross section of people to Area Board meetings; and
- Ensuring that the Area Boards are going out into the community to listen to the voices of all those who live in the area.

These challenges were considered at the workshop and the following solutions were proposed:

- Area Boards should be given the powers they need to resolve local issues – people want to see immediate results²

² This is considered under recommendation 6-9 above

- Meetings and agendas should focus on things that really matter to local communities and we should ask local people and parish councils what they want on the agenda
 - We should get out and talk to different people, in their places and on their terms capturing the conversations and bringing them into the decision making process
 - People need to feel confident that the Boards are listening and that something will happen
 - We should be working to connect more local community groups into the Boards, partnerships and networks.
 - Young people should be recognised as equal partners,
 - To overcome apathy, we must find new ways to motivate engagement.
16. Many of these issues also arose during the pilots and there are now many positive examples of Area Boards effectively responding to these challenges. In Warminster, the local radio station is interviewing local people about Area Board agenda items in the streets and shopping arcades before meetings. In Devizes, the Board has helped local young people to produce a DVD setting out their aspirations and to come along to the Board to talk about the issues. In Amesbury, one meeting was given over to discuss the challenges faced by some of the most disadvantaged people in the community area. In Bradford on Avon boat-dwellers were invited to talk to the Board about the special needs of the boating community. There are many, many similar examples now across Wiltshire. It is early days and it will take time to spread these positive messages and build confidence in the Boards. But this should not hinder the Council's desire to respond positively to the challenges, and for that reason the following recommendations are proposed.

Recommended

- 1) That Area Boards and Community Area Managers be encouraged to work with Council services, parish councils and partners such as health services, housing associations, schools, voluntary sector organisations and neighbourhood groups to engage with and document the needs, aspirations and stories of people from different walks of life and backgrounds in the area.
- 2) To facilitate the above, during 2010/2011 each Area Board is challenged to experiment with new ways of broadening public participation and a bid be prepared for LPSA funding to achieve this.
- 3) The new Community Area Networks should be used for regular consultation to help inform agenda preparation and to gain feedback on the local Forward Plan.
- 4) Parish council forums and alliances should be encouraged in each area to discuss and agree items for consideration by the Area Boards.
- 5) Area Boards are encouraged to hold informal or consultative meetings around subjects or themes of particular local concern and to facilitate this new approach the number of informal meetings permitted per Area Board be increased to 4 in any year.

17. Powers

The research that has informed this paper suggests that the Council needs to enhance the Area Boards' decision making role. We have seen above how this can encourage attendance and engagement. This was considered at the Workshop on 8th March and has featured in the survey and other consultations. The following observations have been made:

- Area Boards need to take more decisions, influence more budgets and have a bigger say about local service provision.
- Area Board powers should be more clearly explained, with examples.
- Cabinet should focus on strategic management and encourage Area Boards to exercise more control over local decisions
- The scheme of delegation to officers should be examined to identify those decisions that would benefit from greater public involvement.

The Area Boards Handbook sets out very clearly the very significant powers that the Leader has delegated to the Boards (Page 31)). This suggests that the problem may not lie with the extent of the Boards' powers. The Council also empowers its officers to make local operational decisions to ensure that services remain efficient and responsive. It would be unnecessary, inappropriate and practically impossible for all these decisions to be referred to the Area Boards. However, this means there is less public participation in or public scrutiny of these decisions, some of which might benefit from the wider public involvement that the Boards provide. An alternative approach might operate along similar lines to the planning process where around 93% of decisions are delegated to officers with only the controversial issues referred to members. This would require no change to the existing scheme of delegation to officers, other than the introduction of a simple decision checklist for officers.

The new Community Issues System (CiS) introduced in September, 2009 enables local people to submit issues to the Board for consideration. The issues are logged and forwarded to the relevant service providers, local councillor and the local parish council for response. The Community Area Manager (CAM) coordinates the response and updates the Issues Log to keep the public informed of progress. The CAM reviews the responses in consultation with the Area Board Chairman to determine whether further action is needed – such as roundtables, task groups, research, consultation etc. Over 100 issues per month are submitted using the system and around 50% of the issues have so far been resolved.

Recommended

1. That the Area Boards are the main mechanism for consulting communities at local level and to facilitate this, services are requested to provide good notice of consultations in order to give Area Boards adequate time to programme and deliver consultation activity in the locality.
2. That the scheme of delegation to officers be amended to require the use of the decision checklist attached as Appendix 3

3. That Cabinet members be requested to encourage officers to refer matters of only local impact to the Area Boards and town and parish councils so that they can be more fully involved in the decision making process.
4. That the Community Issue System be reviewed with a view to achieving better response times and greater clarity regarding outcomes delivered

18. **Partnership**

One of the distinctive features of the Council's local governance arrangements is the role of the community area partnerships. Under this approach, the Area Boards operate as local multi-agency executive bodies while the partnerships facilitate community planning, public engagement, consultation and participation - with strong links maintained between the two. In some areas this arrangement works very effectively, in others it has been less successful and in some it has not yet established. The survey, workshop and consultation have revealed some concerns about the operation of this system.

- There is a need to clarify and promote the role of the community area partnerships(CAPs)
- The Council should avoid being overly prescriptive and allow arrangements to evolve in ways that best suit each area.
- The legitimate democratic role of parish and town councils needs to be emphasised more clearly
- Funding for partnerships should be continued and consistently applied across the County
- CAPs should report regularly to the Area Boards on their activities.
- CAPs should maintain good communications with the community
- Wiltshire Councillors should avoid becoming involved with the management of CAPs in order to avoid any possible conflict of interest.
- Community plans need to be robust and representative of the needs of the wider community in order to influence Board decisions.

19. Clearly the community area partnership approach is working well in some areas and should continue. In others there is a need to take stock and review whether variations might be encouraged. In three areas there has been local discussion about introducing more flexible models that focus on facilitating community engagement, participation and networking rather than establishing formal organisational arrangements.

Recommended

- 1) That the revised community area partnership agreement and funding arrangements (attached as 4) be adopted for 2010/11.
- 2) That negotiation is continued with the Wiltshire Forum of

Community Area Partnerships (WfCAP) to develop and support flexible partnership arrangements that best suit local circumstances.

- 3) That the Council agrees to negotiate a new three year service level agreement with WfCAP to secure its funding and develop and strengthen the support it provides to partnerships in Wiltshire.
- 4) That the Resilient Communities Partnership be invited to develop ways of supporting and strengthening community planning in Wiltshire including commissioning further improvements to the community area profiles.

20. **Publicity**

One of the most serious concerns raised by respondents to the recent survey relates to the lack of public awareness of the Area Boards. A lot of work has been put into raising the profile of the Boards including a mailshot to every household, advertising in local newspapers, radio interviews, articles in the Wiltshire magazine, press releases, leaflets and posters. In addition, 10,000 people have signed up to their local community area networks and now regularly receive information about the Boards by post and email including a simple, readable version of the minutes – ‘Just a Minute.’ Social networks have been tested in several areas and displays and information stands have been developed for libraries. One other measure under consideration is the use of plaques to promote the support of Area Boards for grant aided projects. Clearly there is more to do, suggestions have included:

- Ensuring agenda items capture public interest and having themed meetings that focus on hot local topics
- Purchasing advertising space in local newspapers to promote meetings and events
- Providing copy for parish and community magazines
- Promoting successes and inviting local people to tell their own stories to make news relevant, personal and credible.
- Keeping language simple and free of jargon

Recommended

- 1) That Area Boards be encouraged to develop closer relationships with the local newspapers by providing copy and news stories in order to raise awareness and encourage participation.
- 2) That Area Boards be encouraged to provide copy for local parish magazines and other community newsletters
- 3) That an Annual Report be produced each year detailing the successes of the Boards involving people who have benefited from the outcomes
- 4) That all Area Boards communications be written in plain

language avoiding jargon and acronyms.

21. **Parishes**

Over 160 parish and town councillors took part in the survey. Overall, parish representatives are less satisfied with the Area Boards than other stakeholder groups including the public. Clearly, this needs to improve because parish and town councils play a crucial democratic role in Wiltshire. Comments from parish councillors reveal concerns about a lack of recognition of their important democratic role, lack of parish influence, overlap of roles with the community area partnerships and lack of input into agendas and meetings. Parish representative also suggest that the Boards lack the powers needed to resolve local issues. Some of the suggestions made at the Workshop include:

- The Area Board handbook should be more explicit about the legitimate democratic role of parish and town councils
- Community area managers should attend parish meetings occasionally to talk to all parish councillors about the Boards.
- Area Boards communications should be sent to all parish councillors and not just the Clerk.
- Parishes need to see tangible outcomes as evidence that the Area Boards are working.
- Parish councils should have their own forum to discuss shared concerns and raise items for consideration by Area Boards
- Area Boards agendas should consider more items of general interest to parish and town councils.
- Boards should on occasion meet at venues outside of the principle towns.
- There should be a clearer description of what Area Board 'membership' entails for parishes including the rights and responsibilities it confers.
- Area Boards should seek to collaborate with parish and town councils outside of meetings to address local concerns.

22. Changes have been made to address some of these concerns. Parishes are now informed about all issues submitted to the Area Boards through the community issues system. Parish councils have also successfully accessed the grants scheme to support their local projects and in some areas parishes have fully engaged with the local community area partnerships to address shared concerns across an area. There are other good examples of local collaboration including the community speedwatch scheme. However, to build strong and resilient communities, the Council must collaborate more effectively with the parish and town councils.

Recommended

- 1) That parishes be encouraged to form clusters, forums and alliances within (and across) community areas to share knowledge, experience and concerns and to put forward items for consideration by the Area Boards.
- 2) That Area Boards communications be sent by email to all parish councillors through the community area network.

- 3) That examples of successful collaborations between parish councils and area boards be promoted to demonstrate the successful outcomes that the new arrangements are delivering
- 4) That Area Boards are expected to meet at a range of urban and rural venues
- 5) That the Area Boards Handbook is revised to set out more clearly the role, rights and responsibilities of parish representatives upon the Area Boards and that this is circulated as a separate information sheet for parish and town councillors.
- 6) That Community Area Managers will offer to give presentations and host discussions about the local Area Boards for parish and town councils in the area.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

The decentralisation of decision making and community governance arrangements is in accordance with the aims of the Sustainable Communities Strategy for Wiltshire 2007-2016.

Equality and Diversity Impact of the Proposal

The decentralisation of decision making and the new community governance arrangements in Wiltshire are aimed to improve access to the Council, its services and the democratic process. These recommendations and the additional arrangements set out in the Area Boards handbook address issues of Equality and Diversity in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

Risk Assessment

This report addresses the reputation risk associated with the failure to deliver robust and effective area governance proposals as set out in the unitary bid.

Financial Implications

The only significant resource implications associated with this report are the servicing of the additional informal meetings permitted under recommendation 5). Potentially, this could add to the workload of Democratic Services Officers and Community Area Managers and will be carefully monitored. To address this, it is suggested that the additional meeting could be of a consultative nature and not require Democratic Services support

Legal Implications

These legal implications associated with recommendation 6 have been discussed and agreed with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services .

Options Considered

A wide range of experimental options were discussed with stakeholders at the Area Boards Review Workshop on 8th March 2010.

Conclusion

The adoption of the recommendations set out in this report will represent a significant step towards achieving the community governance proposals set out in the bid for unitary status and the proposals adopted by the Implementation Executive in May 2009.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Area Boards Review 2010 Survey Results

Appendix 2: Area Boards Review Workshop Results

Appendix 3: Delegated decision checklist for officers.

Appendix 4: CAPA 2010 and funding arrangements for Community Area Partnerships