

## **Local Service Review Scrutiny Task Group**

### **Purpose of report**

1. To present Cabinet with a summary of the views expressed by the Local Service Review Scrutiny Task Group in respect of the Area Boards in Wiltshire - Leader's Review.

### **Background**

2. The Task Group was commissioned to develop a protocol that helps to define the working relationship between area boards and the council's Overview & Scrutiny function.
3. The remit of the Task Group was extended in order to engage with the Area Board review in two ways:
  - a) To comment on proposals for the review including the scope, methodology, timetable and key lines of investigation.
  - b) To comment on and consider the Area Board – Leader's Review report.
4. A meeting to consider the Leader's Review report was held on Tuesday 16 March 2010 and was attended by the following:

Cllr Desna Allen (Chairman)  
Cllr Bill Douglas  
Cllr Howard Marshall  
Cllr Bill Roberts  
Steve Milton (Head of Community Governance)  
Marie Todd (Area Board and Member Support Manager)  
Cllr Chris Williams (Portfolio Holder for Communities)
5. Discussion at the meeting focused on the specific areas summarised below:

### **Area Board Review Survey**

6. The Task Group sought clarification on the level of consultation that had taken place with people who have not yet attended Area Boards. Councillors raised concern that of the 1200 survey responses received, 700 were received from people who had not yet attended an Area Board meeting (paragraph 1 of review report) and the survey did not provide respondents with an opportunity to clarify why.

7. The Task Group felt that such information would have been valuable in order to seek improvements to participation levels from a wider cross section of the community.
8. Councillors also asked how many of the 5547 local people who had attended meetings (paragraph 3) were of the general public and non affiliated to town and parish councils or interest groups. The Task Group was informed that this information was not available at the meeting but could be provided.
9. The Task Group was reassured to see that recommendations 1) and 2) will encourage Area Boards to engage with people from different walks of life and backgrounds in the area and to experiment with new ways of broadening public participation.

### Community Issue System

10. The Task Group explored the statement in the report which confirms that around 50% of the issues submitted through the system have been resolved (paragraph 7). Councillors questioned whether this figure also represented issues which had been closed following referral to the appropriate person or group for action but were actually still awaiting resolution.
11. The Task Group felt that there is inconsistency in the way the issues log is updated and questioned the reliability of the data being extracted. Councillors also expressed the view that further clarity is needed on those 'issues' which constitute a councillor's casework and should be resolved through other channels rather than being submitted to the Issue System.
12. Task Group members therefore welcomed the recommendation that the Issue System be reviewed with a view to achieving better response times and greater clarity regarding outcomes delivered.
13. Councillors also expressed the view that any such review should provide greater clarity on the process for Area Boards to refer unresolved issues to formal Overview & Scrutiny where appropriate.

### Devolution of Power

14. The Task Group welcomed the recommendation that the scheme of delegation to officers be amended to require the use of the decision checklist (recommendation 7) and explored how it would be introduced should the proposal be adopted.
15. It was clarified that that there would be an expectation for officers exercising delegated powers to engage with councillors and Area Boards in respect of significant decisions about local services. The message would be re-enforced at a number of workshops for officers and the necessary guidelines provided.

## Consultation

16. In respect of the following sentence in paragraph 4 which relates to the flow of information across the Community Area Network and the consultation events which have taken place:

“This represents very significant and sustained levels of participation in local democracy.” ....

Task Group members asked whether the level of participation had been benchmarked bearing in mind that consultation was confirmed in paragraph 12 as being an area generating relatively weak satisfaction.

17. It was explained that the statement referred to the totality of the level of involvement with the public and stakeholder groups since the Area Boards were launched. Whilst the statement had not been benchmarked it was felt that the attendance numbers at the various consultation or workshop events (5000+) in addition to the people who have signed up to the community area networks (10,000+) represent significant levels of engagement across a broad section of the community.

## Publicity

18. As Area Board meetings are held at a number of different venues throughout an area Task Group members felt that an effective way to publicise meetings is to target the specific locality in which the Area Board meeting is due to take place using mail shots for example.
19. Councillors also felt that a further focus is needed on seeking attendance from leaders of small harder to reach groups within the community.
20. The Task Group fully supported recommendations 14) and 15) which encourage Area Boards to develop closer relationships with the local newspapers and to provide copy for local parish magazines.
21. Councillors did feel however that the role of the Communication Team in terms of providing support to Area Boards needs to be clarified and enhanced to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted.

## Roles and Responsibilities

22. Task Group members felt that a number of issues arising from the survey, workshop and consultation are the result of general confusion which appears to exist over the demarcation lines between Area Boards, Town and Parish Councils and the Community Area Partnerships.
23. The Task Group was pleased to see that a number of recommendations seek to address this confusion including the revision of the Area Boards Handbook to set out more clearly the role, rights and responsibilities of parish representatives

on the Area Boards and the recommendation that Community Area Managers will offer to give presentations and host discussions about the local Area Boards for parish and town councils.

24. The Task Group also welcomed the revised agreement to clarify and promote the role of the Community Area Partnerships since the survey, workshop and consultation revealed a number of concerns about the operation of this system.

### **Conclusion**

25. In conclusion the Task Group was supportive of the recommendations listed in the report as a way of seeking improvement and continuing development of Area Boards and thanked the Head of Community Governance and Portfolio Holder for responding to a number of questions.

### **Recommendation**

26. That Cabinet note the matters considered by the Task Group and its overall support for the recommendations in the report.
27. That Overview and Scrutiny be involved in the further review in 12 months time should this be agreed by Cabinet.

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