**JOINT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY TRANSITION BOARD
27 FEBRUARY 2009**

AREA BOARD TASK GROUP
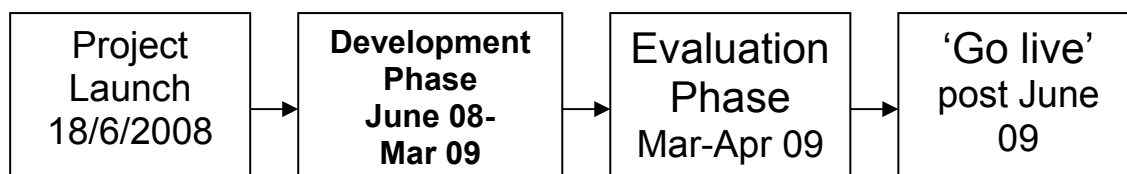
FINAL REPORT

PURPOSE

1.   To present to JOSTB the final report of the Pilot Area Board/Partnership Scrutiny Task Group.

BACKGROUND

2.   A network of Community Area Boards was the new approach to local governance which underpinned the bid for One Council. An opportunity for local decisions to made within the local area.

3.   The Pilot Area Board Scrutiny Task Group reviewed the work undertaken to deliver this goal and consisted of the following members – Mike Hewitt SDC (Chairman), Carolyn Walker WWDC, Ross Henning NWDC, Paula Winchcombe KDC and Steve Oldrieve WCC.

4.   To understand the approach adopted by the Task Group, the major project components have been highlighted below:

Diagram 1 – Key Project Stages

Project Launch 18/6/2008	→	**Development Phase June 08- Mar 09**	→	Evaluation Phase Mar-Apr 09	→	'Go live' post June 09

The focus over the 11 meetings (April 2008-January 2009)   has been towards the work taking place during the 'development phase'.

5.   The members have identified a number of key issues and pursued those in detail. These have been represented under two headings, 'operational' and 'relationship' issues. The majority of these have already been highlighted to JOSTB through the Task Group's monthly updates and its interim report.

FINDINGS – (Operational)

Determination of the Area Board Boundaries

6.   The Task Group has received a number of updates relating to determination of the Area board Boundaries, with the most recent on 22 January 2009. The

1

emphasis has been to retain an overview of the process, members although aware of the challenge in agreeing boundaries in the east and south west of the county have not analysed in detail where the boundaries should be located.

7.   The members felt that if the Boards delivered on their vision then the volume of work being taken at the local level would be intensive. Therefore, the Task Group would support the 23 September 2008 decision of the IE that Area Boards should have a minimum of four members.

The Area Board Handbook

8.   The Draft Area Board Handbook which details the rules and provides guidance on how the Boards will operate has been considered on a number of occasions by the Task Group, the most recent on 9 January 2009.

9.   The Task Group whilst scrutinising this document has had the opportunity to not just challenge but to provide input, in more of a policy development role. Perhaps the best example of this being the contribution the Task Group made towards shaping the role of the Cabinet Member at Area Board meetings.

10.   There has been recognition of the challenges in producing such an all encompassing document and members have discussed whether the handbook is directed to a specific audience.
        .

Staffing

11.   The Task Group is concerned about the pace of the appointments process. The community planners will be critical in determining the success of the boards, but at the moment the staff structure has not been populated for the new council. Members fear that this may dent staff morale and as a consequence impact negatively on the project.

12.   The Area managers will work remotely, which will restrict the face to face contact they have with their line management. Recognising these arrangements, the Task Group has discussed the support framework that would be in place for staff who might feel isolated on occasions.

13.   The Task Group has also looked at the support arrangements that will be provided by Democratic Services. The newly appointed Head of Democratic Services, John Quinton, met with the group on 28 November 2008 and introduced his structure of seven officers. This team as well as supporting the meeting will provide help with casework, such as arranging surgeries for the local member. The Task Group questioned if the support was sufficient and agreed that staffing levels should not restrict Area Board activity. Members also endorsed the recommendation from the Democratic Services rapid scrutiny exercise, to investigate the potential use of the Town and Parish clerks to cover peak periods.

The Role of the Chairman

14.   Throughout the review there has been agreement about the importance of the role of Chairman. In recognition the Task Group has attempted to explore the mechanics of electing the Chairman and has requested further clarification on this process.

15.   The training available for the Chairman was viewed equally as important, although after debate the Task Group felt that this should be strongly encouraged rather than mandatory. The Task Group also believed that as part of the team development the Area Board Chairman and fellow members should all meet with their Area Manager during June 2009.

16.   As well as setting the tempo of the meeting the Chairman will also   ensure that all the witnesses and guests are treated respectfully, including the support staff. The Task Group feared that when considering volatile subjects, people may be exposed to challenging behaviour and encouraged pre-planning with the Chairman to avoid this occurring.

Publicity and Civic Engagement

17.   Public support is essential if the Boards are to be successful. The evidence presented to the Task Group suggested that the level of investment into publicity, correlated to the attendance at the meeting.

18.   The project team has a dedicated communications officer and the members have had opportunity to review the literature being produced   to publicise the Area Boards. This has been positively received, although the members have reinforced the need to keep the parish and town councils abreast of the developments.

19.   The project has been supported by a team of academics from the University of Southampton, headed by Professor Gerry Stoker. They have produced a DVD which has captured a series of hard to reach groups and is geared to encouraging public engagement. The DVD has been trialled at half of the pilot boards to measure its impact. The Task Group welcomed the research, whilst challenging the time and resources required in producing such material. The use of the web was also explored especially with the intent to reach younger audiences.

Budget/Section 106 Agreements

20.   The project currently has £1million to allocate across the Area Boards. The Task Group received evidence and accepted the 23 September decision to adopt the principle of an "equity funding model", whilst recognising that any formula can be challenged on the way it is weighted.

21.   The important issue for the Task Group is not the grant; it is the ability of the Board to influence the services within its local area. If the Board has this power then in effect it has millions of pounds at its disposal.

22. The Task Group has, however, explored other opportunities for the Board to increase its budget most notably through section 106 agreements. The Task Group in November received a report from the Service Director, Development which welcomed the involvement of the Boards with section 106 agreements, especially at pre-application stage and whilst determining community spend. It was emphasised that this would need to be policy based and as a consequence should be reflected in the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) being taken to the IE on 1 April 2009.

Performance Measurements

24. The Boards will need to demonstrate their effectiveness. Within the Handbook there are a number of the measurements that could be used for this purpose. The Task Group discussed the list questioning whether it should be broken into statutory and non-statutory.

FINDINGS (Relationships)

Relationships with frontline service and partnerships

25. The key risk identified in the Task Group's interim report was the requirement for Frontline Services to support the model. In response the Task Group questioned the project team on this area and received a positive response. The Service Director, Operations also provided evidence to the group.

26. The evidence suggests that the frontline service teams have been supportive but it is difficult for the services to quantify demand until the boards go live.

27. The handbook has a distinct section where frontline services need to detail how they will work through the boards. At the time of scrutinising, the project team were still awaiting responses.

28. The Task Group met with the Chairman of the Wiltshire Forum of Community Area Partnerships – Mr Len Turner and representation from the Trowbridge Area Partnership. The message to emerge from the Partnerships was very positive and they were ready to embrace the new arrangements because of the influence it will hand down to the locality. But they did argue it was important for the partnerships to retain their independence from the local authority, especially in relation to the role of the area manager.

Conclusions

29. The Task Group has scrutinised the development phase of the project. The aim of which has been to generate evidence to develop an Area Board model for the new council.

30. As in any pilot phase the lessons learnt from the things that have not worked are as important as those that met expectation. This has been at the heart of the project, as new approaches such as community events, participatory budgeting and local challenge have been tested across the pilots. The Task Group has been reassured that the project team have sufficient evidence to support the evaluation phase and to that extent the project is on track.

31.   The evaluation phase will ultimately determine how successful the project has been to date and this is an area the JOSTB may wish to consider in one of its final meetings.

Recommendations

32.   Based on the evidence submitted within the review the Task Group would make the following recommendations:

  a) To request that the IE ensures that each of the frontline services produces a detailed plan outlining how they will work with Area Boards and for this to be submitted to the Corporate Director, Community Services by 31 March 2009 to support the evaluation phase of the Area Boards project.

  b) To communicate to the IE Member with responsibility for the Area Boards that the Task Group supports the IE's September 23, 2008 decision to agree that Area Boards have a minimum of four members.

  c) To congratulate the Project Team on the production of the Area Board Handbook to date and to recommend to the Corporate Director, Community Services that once completed secondary versions are produced specifically for elected members and the public.

  d) In relation to staffing to ask the Corporate Director, Community Services to meet with the Chairman of the Area Board Task group to discuss
     • the proposed team structure for the Area Board team
     • the support network arrangements proposed for the team

  e) To request the Corporate Director, Community Services that the evaluation of the project includes development of a consistent approach towards publicising and marketing to ensure maximum public participation.

  f) To recommend to JOSTB that it may wish to consider the outcome of the evaluation phase of the project at its April 20 meeting.

  g) To request that the Corporate Director, Community Services ensures that the Statement of Community Involvement provides a policy base for the Area Boards to influence some section 106 agreements, before its submission to the IE on 1 April.

  h) To request that the Corporate Director, Community Services works with the Service Director, Performance & Risk to develop:
     • the performance framework for measuring the effectiveness of the Area Boards
     • a generic risk assessment in relation to the Board meetings.

  i) To request the Head of Democratic Services to produce a note outlining the mechanics for electing the Chairman of Area Board; to be incorporated into the Area Board handbook.

j) To request that the Corporate Director, Community Services as part of the Area Board induction programme ensures that a meeting takes place between the Area Board manager and their respective area members during June 2009.

k) To endorse the recommendation from the rapid scrutiny exercise of Electoral/Democratic Services which asked the Head of Democratic Services to investigate the potential of using Town or Parish clerks to cover Area Board peak periods.

Report Author: Ceri Williams, Scrutiny Officer WCC