

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
7 June 2007

VOICE TO CHOICE

Purpose of Report

1. To provide a progress report on the voice to choice project.

Background

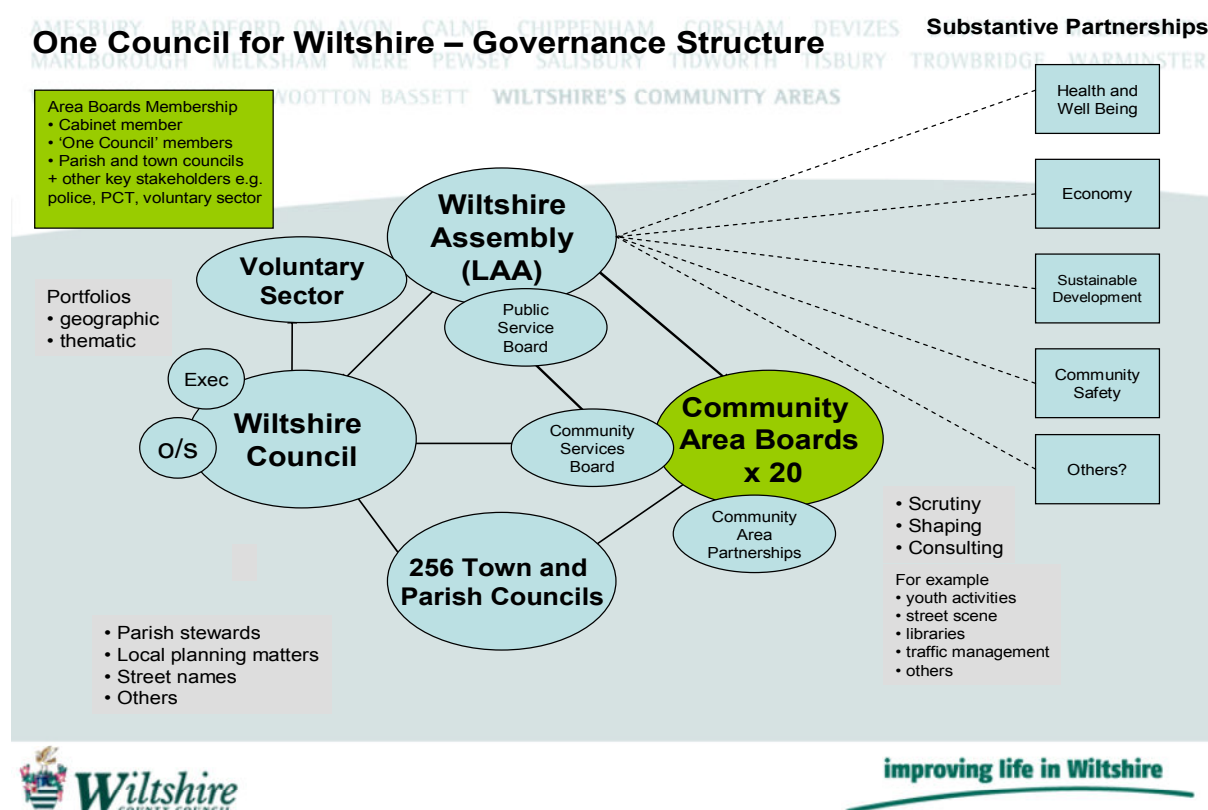
2. On 15 March 2006, the Management Committee considered a report on voice to choice, including possible options for establishing community area boards. The resolutions from that meeting were reported to Cabinet Liaison on 17 March 2006 and to Cabinet on 21 April 2006. The Committee's comment in its resolutions on the very ambitious nature of the project and the following observations made during its debate on voice to choice have turned out to be particularly prescient in the light of work in this area over the past fifteen months:
 - we should be mindful of the potential impact of the then-awaited white paper on local government reorganisation
 - the project would only succeed if local members were supportive and more empowered to deliver at the local level
 - problems have been created where community areas are not coterminous with electoral divisions
 - parity for the villages should be assured
 - good community engagement will depend on whether decision-making is delegated and existing area committees should be seriously considered in the proposed structure
 - we should invest in supporting town and parish councils in this process
 - the approach should be flexible in each area and pilots should be spread across the four districts
 - some potential participants would not volunteer if unpaid
 - partnership between the three tiers of local government is the right way forward

Progress Report

3. Progress has been slow but steady in developing the voice to choice project mainly due to our partners wanting to wait for the publication of the white paper on 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' which was not finally published until October 2006. Following full Council's decision in January 2007 to make a submission to the Department of Communities and Local Government that one Council should be established for Wiltshire in place of the County and four District Councils, only North Wiltshire District Council agreed to work with us further at this time in developing the way forward, particularly around the idea of greater devolution and the concept of community area boards.
4. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of work was carried out in the period from March to December 2006 prior to the publication of the white paper in presenting and discussing the voice to choice concept and principles and working out the way forward with our partners, service providers, community area partnerships, the town and parish councils

and through the corporate listening to communities board. Two research projects were also carried out by the Young Foundation in the Malmesbury and Trowbridge community areas during March and December 2006 as part of our arrangement with them on the consortium for 'Transforming Neighbourhoods' and their findings were presented back to the two community area partnerships involved. This work proved timely and invaluable to draw on for inclusion in section 3 of the submission to government concerning 'neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment', particularly in terms of our focus on supporting frontline councillors as community champions, establishing community area boards, developing greater responsiveness and more local decision-making.

5. As a result, the voice to choice project has evolved into the local governance aspect of the 'one Council for Wiltshire' project and we are continuing to work out how new arrangements might work under a new structure which builds in community area boards. The evaluation criteria agreed by the Committee in the previous report in March 2006 remains valid for this project. However, we have had to be flexible in determining how, for example, community area boards might work and how they would relate to other arrangements such as the new Wiltshire Assembly which is currently being considered by the Wiltshire Strategic Board and also existing community area partnerships, town and parish councils. The diagram below captures present thinking about the proposed structure and relationships.



6. The outcome of the Council's submission will not be announced by government until the end of July 2007, but in the meantime we have continued to explain and discuss proposals and have been influenced by the feedback from such discussions. For example, the relationship between the proposed community area boards and the existing community area partnerships in Wiltshire has been discussed in May 2007 with the community-led Wiltshire Forum of Community Area Partnerships (WFCAP) and a

note has been issued to clarify proposed governance arrangements, attached at Appendix A. We are also following up discussions with other agencies such as Police and Health about how we can work better together through the proposed new arrangements. Following on from presentations in January 2007 to Town and Parish Councillors in each district area, further discussions have been held with the following towns, parishes and groups about the Council's submission, including how new governance arrangements might work:

Fittleton, Braydon, Donhead St. Andrew, Fyfield, West Overton, Urchfont, Stert, Patney, Marden, Beechingstoke, Etchilhampton, Charlton, Wilsford, Focus on Five Group, Chippenham, Wootton Bassett, Purton, Cricklade, Malmesbury, East Knoyle, Bratton, Whiteparish, Calne, Lea, Netheravon, St. Paul's Malmesbury Without, Chapmanslade, Westbury, Bradford-on-Avon, Holt, Poulshot, Wilsford cum Lake, North Wraxall, South Newton, Stoford, Boyton, Ogbourne St. Andrew, Steeple Ashton, West Ashton, Calne Without, Downton, Idmiston, Coombe Bissett, Fyfield & Overton, Pewsey, Marlborough, Chilmark, Corsham, Codford, Ramsbury & Axford, Roundway, West Tisbury, Durrington, Amesbury, Limpley Stoke, Newton Toney, Lydiard Tregoze, Redlynch, Mere, Firsdown, Melksham, Melksham Without, Heywood, Keevil, Broad Chalke, Bromham, Warminster, Ludgershall Residents' Forum, West Wiltshire Community Association

7. Further work has also taken place in developing the way forward in the two pilot areas of Malmesbury and Trowbridge. On 21 March, a joint meeting of the North Wiltshire District Council's Area 1 Committee and the Malmesbury and the Villages Community Area Partnership was held to test out a different style of meeting and to include a discussion on the contentious issue of the temporary closure of Cow Bridge. The Trowbridge Community Area Future Partnership has also agreed to trial new ways of working, promoting more interaction and engagement in an effort to liven up meetings and to attract more people to attend and its steering group is currently considering when to pilot such a meeting, which may cover difficult issues such as cutbacks to hospital services. Officers are developing the operational details of how the community area partnerships and boards will operate so that, following the decision in July, the pilots for the new arrangements can be swiftly rolled out.
8. With the development of community-centred services such as the Local Young People's Issues Groups and Parish Wardens, our services are very much taking action to the concepts underpinning the voice to choice agenda which has always been about transparency, local leadership, greater responsiveness and a visible single point for decision-making. The Listening to Communities Board has recently asked services to identify in more details the sort of issues a community area board could discuss and influence and if there are issues which could be tackled in such a way that it would mean that they could give up doing something (particularly with regard to consultation). Each of the Council's services has also been asked to provide information about issues within the service area which:
 - we have not yet cracked as a council
 - cannot be solved under current arrangements
 - would be better tackled through a more joined-up approach
 - are too strategic to be influenced at the local level
 - would be best tackled at the local level

Main Considerations for the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

South Wiltshire Boundaries

9. On 16 May 2007, a discussion was held with the County Councillors in South Wiltshire about the proposals above and a key outcome of that meeting was that we need to be more flexible in building on the existing boundaries of the area committees of Salisbury

District Council, rather than adopting the boundaries of the community areas as the focus for the community area boards in this part of Wiltshire. The County Councillors have agreed to meet again in September to work out the details of the way forward once we know the outcome of the submission. Other strong local feelings are evident in South Wiltshire about the identity of the community – for example, the Downton community area wants to be known as the Southern Area. We see no reason why we cannot accommodate this way forward if the submission goes ahead and ask Scrutiny to advise on this idea. An independent commission will also carry out a study in the City area to determine how we might best operate there in the future and this is currently being specified.

Devolved Budgets

10. In their report of March 2007 on 'Tools to Support Frontline Councillors in Wiltshire' (Appendix B), the Young Foundation recommend that appropriate expenses for volunteers who are part of the community planning process are met as part of the project budget. They also recommend that we pilot a locally devolved budget. Many Councillors also feel strongly (as evidenced in South Wiltshire for example) that their community leadership role would benefit enormously in terms of being effective from having a small budget available for them to draw on to resolve local issues and develop local projects which have been identified in the community area plans. Such a budget could be allocated through the community area board under delegated powers to the local Councillor. Acting as critical friend, Scrutiny may wish to discuss the level of budget and who this might be devolved to and for what purpose.

Local Scrutiny

11. The powers for local communities to call for action on services and decisions of the Council through their local Councillor were given in the white paper, 'Strong and Prosperous Communities'. A local scrutiny role is also envisaged for the new community area boards. The Committee may have some guidance and views on how this might best operate in the future whether or not the submission is successful.

Recommendation

12. It is recommended that a further report is made to the Committee once we know the outcome of the submission and, whether or not we are successful, we present more details of how this work will be taken forward to achieve effective and more joined-up governance arrangements for the people of Wiltshire.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report: None