

PROPOSAL

THE VOICE TO CHOICE PROJECT

NOTE FOR AREA COMMITTEES 1 & 3 IN NORTH WILTSHIRE

What is being proposed?

In North Wiltshire, it is proposed that, ideally, at least 2 community areas are identified as pilots to develop an extended role and responsibilities for the District Council Area Committees, building on the existing arrangements. Depending upon the outcome of the pilots, the longer-term aim would be to develop a strong institution of governance at the local community level in each of Wiltshire's 20 community areas across the 3 tiers of local government in the County. This body will act as the single point for decision-making in the community area. There will also be agreed processes to promote wider inclusiveness and the engagement of local people in decision-making for their local community area. Over the past 6 months, officers from the County and District Councils have been discussing the potential for testing and developing these arrangements across Wiltshire. Further research has also been carried out in the Malmesbury and Trowbridge community areas to capture the perspectives of the Town and Parish Councils about their scope for local influence.

Is the idea to abolish the existing area committees?

No, the idea is to build on the existing arrangements, although these vary from district to district in Wiltshire. The views of other districts are also being sought on this project. It is proposed to work with the existing community area partnerships and other local groups such as the community safety partnerships. At one point, it was suggested that the new style of meetings could be called community area boards and that this would tie in with the countywide local strategic partnership, the Wiltshire Strategic Board, creating a top-down and bottom-up system, but this gave some people the impression that the area committees were being abolished. However, nothing is fixed in stone and the new style arrangements could be called anything, but essentially they will build on existing arrangements. The idea is to improve existing arrangements and certainly **not** to create another tier, another meeting, another group or partnership, or another layer of bureaucracy.

Who will be able to participate?

Elected representatives from the Town and Parish, District and County Councils in the community area will be members with specific voting rights and the chair will be selected from these statutory bodies. Representatives will be invited from the community area planning partnership, other partnerships such as the community safety partnership, key agencies such as the Wiltshire Constabulary and the voluntary sector and from local area democracy arrangements which are being established with young people. The meetings will also be open to the wider local community, but this will depend upon the issues on the agenda and the decisions being made. With some issues it is possible that there could be an open vote to all attending the meeting, or a decision to hold an extended consultation exercise in the local community to gather more evidence and wider views.

What will be on the agenda?

The Councils in North Wiltshire are keen to develop a joined up approach and some areas which will lend themselves very naturally to be on the agenda for such a locally focused group include, for example, a wide range of minor maintenance needs, street scene, neighbourhood policing, provision of youth services and support, bringing the community into extended schools. It is also increasingly clear in today's complex society that there are many issues which require changes in the behaviour of individuals, households and communities rather than expecting solutions to be provided by an overstretched public service; for example, by working together we can do the following better:

- healthy living
- recycling and waste minimisation
- continuous learning and development for personal growth and to improve employment prospects
- care in the community, working alongside the state to care for those who need help and opportunities
- social inclusion, including those in rural areas with difficulties of access
- equality and diversity
- congestion, car sharing, cycling and walking
- community safety, crime watch

To help address these issues within a realistic timeframe of a meeting which might last from 1 to 2½ hours, the idea been put forward of having multiple agendas running at the same time on different issues which people could address in a workshop style, followed by a report back to a plenary session for a decision. The meeting could also be divided into an informal style at the beginning and a more formal style at the end, which would be designed and marketed to attract local people in to participate.

Won't this just be another talking shop?

Within current legislation, one option is that the new arrangements could take the form of being an advisory and consultative body, but many people have responded that this would make it just a talking shop. Yet, if executive powers are to be delegated under these new arrangements, it would mean that a more bureaucratic style of arrangements would need to be put in place. However, it is intended that officers would attend such meetings and would exercise their delegated powers, which can be quite extensive; they would then take into account the advice of the elected members, the local community and its representatives in coming to a decision in a transparent way, depending upon what the local issue might be. Help would be provided to design the appropriate style of facilitated process for officers to explore issues and levels of service provision with local people and to come to a decision. This will be a decision-making body and not a talking shop.

How often will the meetings be held?

It is suggested that meetings are held every 6 weeks which is an increase on the current bi-monthly arrangements. A timetable of the meetings would be agreed at the start of the financial year. At this stage, any critical timescales could be taken into account, for example, if a joint consultation on the budget was planned by the District and County Councils, this would be scheduled at the most appropriate time of the year and, similarly input to the Local Transport Plan and other key strategies could be scheduled well in advance.

Will there be any more money for local projects?

The grants allocation for local community projects and priorities identified in the community plans will continue to be addressed alongside other business of North

Wiltshire District Council which has typically been carried out by the Area Committee in the past. The County Council is also seeking to establish a pot for community projects and bids for these funds would be submitted to the Council's Economic Regeneration and Resources Unit. The achievement of the targets in the community plans will be closely monitored and, where possible, help will be provided for bids for external funding to be put forward, for example to the European Social Fund.

How are the arrangements going to be resourced?

North Wiltshire District Council will continue to put in the same level of resource to the area committee arrangements and some allocation of resource has been made to work on the project team. The County Council has rationalised the resources it puts into community planning and will put support into the project team; it is also currently looking into the resources put into the cabinet advisory panels to see if some of this resource within democratic services might be able to support the new arrangements.

Why are these arrangements being proposed?

In making the business case, the County Council has identified 4 key elements which include more efficient consultation, service specific benefits, a stronger role for local elected members with a stronger local influence on service management and improved performance and public satisfaction. Particular concerns are to simplify current arrangements at the local level where there are multiple groups and meetings, often spending much time trying to address the same issues; to strengthen the role of the elected member as the representative community leader; to ensure transparency of decision-making; and to act swiftly and efficiently to tackle local problems and nip things in the bud.

How will the project be managed and evaluated?

Evaluation criteria have been drafted for the pilots and will be agreed by the participating partners. A joint project team will be established and will be accountable to the executive and cabinets of the statutory bodies. The County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee has identified a role in acting as the channel for the views of non-executive members as the project proceeds; and monitoring and evaluating the outcome of the local pilot arrangements. It is proposed that the pilots be monitored at 6-monthly intervals.