

Response to questions poised following the presentation on the “Voice to Choice” project at Chippenham Area Committee, April 3rd 2006.

A full and frank discussion took place following the presentation made by Niki Lewis and Julie Martin from Wiltshire County Council. This note seeks to respond to questions and comments from Councillors and to augment the note set out in a “question/answer” style circulated at the meeting.

Cllr. Coleman

Cllr. Coleman asked whether the public actually realise that they're having any influence on public services?

The challenge is to design a transparent process where the public can see they are having an influence on public services and to market this process well in order to encourage people to participate.

Cllr. Coleman expressed concern that some of our community groups are lacking in accountability at the moment.

This is a shared concern.

Cllr. Coleman stated that people would need accurate information if we are to be confident that engagement with the public can make a difference.

We all agree on this point.

Cllr. Rooke

Cllr. Rooke expressed concern that unless real powers were delegated the committees would only be a talking shop – and that it wasn't satisfactory to rely on delegated powers to officers. Cllr Rooke also expressed concern that meetings would become too large and impractical.

Real powers need to be delegated and nobody wants a talking shop. At present, until the legislation allows it, we have to rely upon the powers delegated to officers. We will have to learn to manage large meetings in a practical way and the County and District Councils have had experience of doing this well in some community areas to date.

Cllr. Green

Cllr. Green commented on the limitation of current powers of elected representatives and therefore it was very important to have a positive statement of exactly what you can influence and what you can't.

This is very much part of the proposed project in terms of working out the details.

Cllr. Phillips

Cllr. Phillips raised her concern about the lack of accountability of community interest groups and whether devolved ownership and responsibility might lead to even more unaccountability. She used the need for public agencies to comply with DDA regulations as an example of how community groups are not required to meet certain standards in the same way.

The whole point of the proposed project is to reinforce the transparency of decision making and local accountability. It is agreed that some groups are not held accountable in the same way as statutory organisations and this is an issue which the project seeks to redress.

Cllr. Henning

Cllr. Henning asked about how community ownership of public assets might work and how an “influencing” rather than decision making role might work.

Detail of how community ownership of public assets might work is to be presented in the White Paper in 2006 which is likely to introduce legislation which will give local communities the right to buy. The level of influence which is offered to local people will depend upon the issue being addressed. At the outset, we will need to take care to let people know the exact scope for influence.

Cllr. Noblet

Cllr. Noblet made several comments:

Currently the time-frame for decision making seems to get longer and decisions get “put off” – process needs to be speeded up and acted upon far more quickly.

This project aims to help speed up the process of decision making where and if at all possible.

Cllr. Noblet pointed out that people get fed up of not being listened to and that we need to be very specific about “what’s on the table”.

This links to the point above about being absolutely clear with people at the outset about the scope for their influence and also to close the loop in terms of showing how people’s views have been taken into account in decision making.

Cllr. Palmer

Cllr. Palmer expressed concerns about the following:

The idea of devolving services and who they would be devolved to - about the "tyranny of the minority" and how community does not always want to act to benefit everyone; a lack of service response to individual and public concerns and the need for a cultural shift away from "it's not my job" attitude.

There are many different sides to community which we need to be very aware about – see below for some examples.

"Community, let's face it, can have a dark side. Communities may be selfish. They may also be discriminatory and conceal all kinds of disharmony. A white working class community might be racist; an ethnic minority enclave might insist on its own definitions of good behaviour... what if community turns out to be a bigger version of a gang led by the neighbourhood bully, cracking down on what they consider anti social behaviour?" (Walker 2005)

"...in any modern, urban, British setting, there'll be large numbers of people who want absolutely nothing to do with deciding on what happens to how their streets are cleaned or how they're policed and so on and they essentially want to be quite anonymous, have their own networks of friendship, don't feel any particular imperative to get out to know their neighbours and really resent any intrusion into their lives. And that would be a significant number of people that need to be allowed in a sense to opt out." (Mulgan 2005)

We need to design processes of engagement which are inclusive and fair. We also need to help to promote a cultural shift within services. If all parties can see a benefit in any new arrangements, particularly in being more cost efficient, then this will help to promote a cultural shift.