REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting	**31st August 2006**
Title of Report	**Review of Area Committees**
Portfolio	**Partnership Working**
Link to Corporate Priorities	Partnership Working
Key Decision	YES ~ The decision will be significant in terms of its effects on communities living or working in an area encompassing two or more wards within the district of North Wiltshire.
Executive Workplan Ref	B266
Public Report	YES

Summary of Report

This report examines the work of the Area Committees in response to a Notice of Motion at Council. The report takes into consideration the present Government drive promoting community leadership and local transparent decision making and the Council's relationships with local partners.

The report considers the wider, relevant discussion informing the forthcoming Local Government White Paper, including community engagement, double devolution and neighbourhood working.

It is clear from research and comparative evidence that North Wiltshire District Council is among those councils to operate Area Committees with some success. However, this success has been limited and there are clearly more opportunities for improvement and wider community involvement.

Consultation respondents indicated that Area Committees could be improved by giving them more influence over decision making, more devolved budgets and power to the Committee, more interactive items, a less formal environment and an annual programme of meetings.

Officer Recommendations

It is recommended that Members approve Option Four

That Members of the Executive approve the Short Term Recommendations in this report and agree to review the Medium / Long Term Recommendations informed by the publication of the Local Government White Paper; and

That the Executive Recommend to Council that the Area Committees are retained and developed in line with the recommendations in the report.

Please see recommendations overleaf

Other than those implications agreed with the relevant Officers and referred to below, there are no other implications associated with this report.

Financial Implications	Legal Implications	Community & Environmental Implications	Human Resources Implications	Equality & Diversity Implications
YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

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Short Term Recommendations (until April 2007)
These recommendations could start to be implemented immediately

- That meetings are made more inclusive and everyone is given an opportunity to debate issues and indicate their opinion. This opinion could be subsequently used to inform District Councillors decisions
- To improve publicity and pubic awareness of Area Committees
- That communication bulletins are developed jointly between the Democratic Services Policy Team and Community Partnerships Team to promote Area Committees (an example is shown in Appendix 4)
- Seating arrangements and room lay out to be made more inclusive
- That a 12 month schedule of meetings is developed
- That a revised guide to participation in Area Committee is sent to Parish & Town Councils, Community Area Partnerships, Police, Primary Care Trusts and other partners with a view to increasing the participation and the shaping of agendas and debate
- Parish and Town Council and Community Area Partnership representatives are invited to provide updates as a standing item on all Area Committee agendas
- That the Policy and Democratic Services Team and Community Partnership Team continue to work with Wiltshire County Council to develop practical joint working options
- That the Policy and Democratic Services Team and Community Partnerships Team work with Community Area Partnerships to investigate options for further co-operation with Area Committees
- That the Executive considers requests from the Area Committee to devote officer time to projects identified by that Committee
- To introduce a recognised mechanism to inform or refer issues from the Area Committees to Executive to ensure that they are considered
- That officers work with the Police to develop ways of supporting the Neighbourhood Policing agenda
- That officers develop options for seminar/surgery meetings prior to the start of Area Committees where local people could discuss matters with their local Member or officers.

Medium - Long Term Recommendations
Medium-term recommendations require ongoing development and would be subject of a further report to identify the implications for the Council.

- A parallel debate should take place to consider how the frameworks for community engagement and partnership working should be developed further to avoid duplication and improve delivery of outcomes.
- Officers present a report following the publication of the Local Government White Paper in the autumn detailing the implications and possible development options for the Council's democratic arrangements
- Parish/Town Council and local fora are established 1-2 per year to inform the Area Committee schedule of meetings
- To encourage the involvement of hard to reach groups including young people in Area Committees/partnership working
- That a community "call-in" mechanism be developed to allow Area Committees to request a response to issues raised by the local community
- That officers work with the Executive to consider areas for devolution to Area Committees
- Devolution to Area Committees of decision making powers including budget.
- Constitutional Changes

Review of Area Committees

1.   Introduction

1.1.   This report, supported by evidence, takes a fresh look at the work of the Area
         Committees and explores their link to other stakeholders including the relationship to
         the North Wiltshire Partnership (the Local Strategic Partnership for North Wiltshire),
         and local Community Area Partnerships. It considers the wider, relevant discussion
         informing the forthcoming Local Government White Paper. This includes community
         engagement, double devolution and neighbourhood working.

2.   Options and Options Appraisal

2.1.   **Option 1**

2.1.1. Members of the Executive recommend to Council that Area Committees be
         abolished

2.1.2. Key Considerations

         • Loss of community based decision making
         • Reduced transparency in decision making
         • Reduced level of community engagement and consultation
         • A loss of local grant allocation
         • Minimal cost cutting
         • Against national and local drive to promote community based decision making
           and community leadership
         • Negative impact on partnership working. Elected Members and the District
           Council
         • Lost opportunity for local community engagement

2.2.   **Option 2**

2.2.1. Members of the Executive recommend to Council that Area Committees remain
         unchanged

2.2.2. Key Considerations

         • Lost opportunity to improve community engagement
         • Lost opportunity to improve relationships with community partners
         • Potentially a negative impact on partners, elected Members and the District
         • Potential malaise

2.3.   **Option 3**

2.3.1. Members of the Executive recommend to Council that Area Committees remain
         unchanged until the implications of the White Paper can be incorporated into
         proposals for the future.

2.3.2. Key Considerations

         • Lost opportunity to improve community engagement
         • Lost opportunity to improve relationships with community partners

- Potentially a negative impact on partners, elected Members and the District Council
- May be short sighted as publication of the White Paper is long overdue and there are no guarantees as to when it will be delivered
- Many of the short term recommendations could make a significant impact on Area Committees and engagement of partners without the need for constitutional changes
- Lost opportunity to enhance community leadership
- Potential malaise
- There are resource implications to short term recommendations

2.4. **Option 4**

2.4.1. Members of the Executive approve the Short Term Recommendations in this report and agree to review the Medium / Long Term Recommendations informed by the publication of the Local Government White Paper; and

2.4.2. That the Executive Recommend to Council that the Area Committees are retained and developed in line with the recommendations in the report.

2.4.3. Key Considerations

- This takes advantage of the current opportunities
- Responds positively to the results of the local consultation
- Promotes the District Council's commitment to local democracy and partnership working as set out in the Corporate Plan
- Supports the majority of Members views demonstrated in consultation results
- Enhanced focus for community leadership
- Opportunity to improve community engagement
- Opportunity to improve relationships with community partners
- Many of the short term recommendations could make a significant impact on Area Committees and engagement of partners without the need for constitutional change
- Supports national and local drive to promote community based decision making and community leadership
- Opportunity to enhance community leadership
- Opportunity to consider longer term aspirations in light of the White Paper
- There are resource implications to both short and medium/long term recommendations

3. **Background**

3.1. The review of Area Committees was instigated by a resolution of Council at the Annual meeting on 23 May 2006 following the debate of a Notice of Motion submitted by Councillor P.G. Allnatt. The motion tabled by Councillor Allnatt called for the immediate abolition of Area Committees. The motion was amended and the following resolution passed:

That a report be prepared for a future meeting of Council on the work of each Area Committee and their relationship to the Local Community Area Partnerships and that the Area Committees continue in their current form pending any future decision. (Minute C11 (2) refers)

3.2.   An officer project group was put together following meetings with the Lead Member and CMB.

3.3.   As a result of those meetings it was recognised that there were strong links to Wiltshire County Council's 'Voice for Choice' project considered by Executive on 11 May 2006. At that meeting Members resolved:

The District Council's involvement in one or two pilot projects be agreed in principle pending the publication of the Local Government White Paper in the summer, or receipt of sufficient information to develop proposals which are consistent with that White Paper, and NWDC Officers continue working with Wiltshire County Council to develop options.

NWDC Officers work with local partners to develop the Area Committees link to local stakeholders. (Minute E234 (1& 2) refers)

3.4.   In consultation with the Chairman of Council it was agreed that the future of Area Committees be debated by Council on 5 September 2006.

4.   Methodology

4.1.   Research used to inform this report included a range government publications from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Department for Communities & Local Government(DCLG), other important research documents issued by for example the Rowntree Foundation, IDeA, Local Government Association (LGA). And regional and local data and statistics, workshops and questionnaires.

5.   Area Committees

5.1.   Background

5.1.1.   In May 1999 the Council introduced new arrangements for its decision making processes. This was prompted by an aspiration to take decision making closer to local people and to comply with the Local Government Act 2000.

5.1.2.   Five Area Committees were introduced based on the already identified Community Areas (A Sense of Belonging, J.Chandler 1997). Area Committees were given delegated decision making powers to decide upon any matter that:

• was within Council policy
• was within the Council budget; and
• only affected that particular area (Area Committees are also consulted on matters which overlap Community Area boundaries).

5.1.3.   In addition to these decision making powers Area Committees could determine planning applications and award grants within their respective community areas. Initially, the Area Committees met on a four weekly meeting cycle.

5.1.4.   In June 2000, the Council assessed its new arrangements and agreed changes that were implemented in September 2000. The main principles behind making the changes were to

• improve efficiency and speed of decision making;
• maintain high public accessibility; and

- bring the Council's decision making system more in line with the requirements of the Local Government Act 2000 - aiming for smooth transition to a new constitution.

5.1.5.   In September 2000, two Development Control Committees were constituted to address concerns where the determination of planning applications were dominating Area Committees and to improve quality and efficiency of decision making. This has since evolved into a single central Committee.

5.1.6.   For a period of 2½ years each Area Committee was supported by an Area Co-ordinator. The main purpose of each of the posts was as follows:

- *To work with key officers and elected Members towards the smooth running of Area Committees for North Wiltshire*
- *To forge links and liaise with Town and Parish Councils, other agencies and stakeholders in the relevant Community Area to ensure good communication is achieved and maintained between these bodies and the District Council*
- *To work within the Council and in partnership with others to achieve a co-ordinated and, where appropriate, joint approach to community issues, service planning and delivery within the relevant Community Area which improves the quality of life for local people*

5.1.7.   As a result of the posts being deleted in 2001 there was a reduction in community engagement activity at a Community Area level. This impacted on community planning, devolved service planning and the level of support to Area Committees.

5.1.8.   Since 2002 the Area Committees have followed the Terms of Reference included in Appendix 1.

5.2.   **Estimated Annual Cost**

5.2.1.   A direct cost attributed to the running of Area Committees are the hiring of the halls, catering and audio equipment costs. The total actual spend in 2005/06 was £3,013.

5.2.2.   Special Responsibility Allowances for Area Chairman and Vice Chairman, £ 1847 and £370 respectively, amount to £11,085 in a Municipal Year.

5.2.3.   Officer resources required to support Area Committees include

- A Committee Administrator for each meeting
- A Strategic Manager for each meeting
- Officers preparing and presenting reports and items for discussion/consultation
- Corporate Admin and Member Services Team providing administrative support for each meetings

5.2.4.   Agenda preparation and postage. Now that Committee reports are available on-line this cost may reduce.

5.3.   **Agenda Items**

5.3.1.   As part of the research and review for this report, officers collated information relating to the Area Committees from the past two years to identify current areas of work. This information is included in Appendix 2.

5.3.2.   About a quarter of all substantive items on agendas are for decision by the Area Committee. The most regular items include Community Area Awards and the allocation of the Streetworks budget. Area Committees are requested to determine Conservation Area Boundaries, street naming, small asset and property issues, appointments to outside bodies and charities, some community safety issues such as alcohol designation orders, and economic regeneration issues.

5.4.   **Items for Consultation**

5.4.1.   Approximately a fifth of all agenda items are for formal consultation with the Area Committee and its attendees. Historically, these have included Primary Care Trust (PCT) consultation, budget consultation, car parking and Spatial Planning issues. Outcomes of these consultations can influence the decision making of the Council and its partners.

5.5.   **Items for Information**

5.5.1.   On average, half of all agenda items are to inform the Committee. Examples include District Council projects such as the North Wiltshire Festival and local issues including anti-social behaviour and the Local Development Framework. Local community groups and partnerships have the opportunity to provide updates to the Area Committee. Examples include Great Western Community Forest and Community Area Planning Partnerships.

5.6.   **Wider Involvement in Area Committees**

5.6.1.   Attendance by people other than District Councillors is highest on occasions when an issue of significant local interest, sometimes of a contentious nature, is being discussed. General attendance figures are often lower with fewer than ten members of the public attending.

5.6.2.   Those County Councillors whose wards fall within an Area Committee boundary are invited to attend each of the Area Committee meetings and are invited to participate in discussion and debate with a view to contributing a County Council perspective.

5.6.3.   Similarly, Parish & Town Councils are invited to send a representative to their local Area Committee and are invited by the Chairman to contribute to the debate.

5.6.4.   Some of the Area Committees have extended their support to the Community Planning process by inviting the local Community Area Planning Partnership to provide regular community updates. This presents further opportunities for local issues to be discussed.

5.6.5.   Area Committees have recently encouraged recipients of Community Area Awards to attend and provide feedback about their projects.

6.   **Research and Best Practice**

6.1.   **National Context ~ Local Government White Paper: Neighbourhoods, Devolution and Communities**

6.1.1.   The Local Government White Paper, due in autumn 2006, will include "immediate moves that will result in a concrete shift of power and responsibilities" as outlined by Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. It is likely to

bring together a number of policy areas including local leadership, neighbourhoods, a new performance framework and local government efficiency.

6.1.2.   Wide consultation and discussion informing the forthcoming White Paper includes

- an expectation that all areas, through the LSP and council, will develop a strategy for devolution and community engagement
- a national neighbourhoods agreement which may set out shared commitments on devolution and empowerment
- proposals to introduce 'community calls for action' (call-ins) in response to failure or under-performance in local services
- encouragement for neighbourhood charters or plans setting out service standards
- new rights for communities to take ownership and management of public or community assets
- extra anti-social behaviour powers for parishes and accredited neighbourhood bodies
- powers to enable delegated budgets
- improved access to information on council performance

6.1.3.   The key issue for improving local democratic engagement is showing that public service providers are responsive to the need of their communities and that local people can influence decisions. Many local councils already have some form of neighbourhood working in place. Key findings nationally (taken from LGA's 'Making decisions locally' report of 2004) include

- A majority of councils have some sub-local authority level arrangements
- 54 per cent of councils have area fora
- 26 percent of councils have area decision making committees and 90 per cent see devolved decision making committees as successful
- 70 percent of councils consult using interactive websites, focus groups and citizens' panels.

6.1.4.   If councils are to be more responsive to the diverse needs of their local communities they need to offer opportunities for local people to request action. One such mechanism is the idea of neighbourhood arrangements providing mechanisms where people and/or groups could 'trigger' remedial action when the quality, accessibility and standards of public services in the neighbourhood falls below he level they have a right to expect.

6.1.5.   'Double devolution' refers to the Government's commitment that it will devolve to local government and councils will seek to devolve to, and engage with neighbourhoods and communities. According to the IDeA, few councils or LSPs have developed a locality-wide strategy for devolution. Initiatives have developed independently and are not joined-up or co-ordinated with other tiers of government. Taking stock of current arrangements is a good place to start.

6.2.   **Regional Examples**

6.2.1.   Officers have undertaken research throughout the South West Region to look at area working practices of other District, Borough and County Councils.

6.2.2.   Findings show that most local authorities in the South West do not operate formal Area Committees. District Councils currently administering these are:

- Mendip District Council
- North Devon District Council
- North Wiltshire District Council
- Restormel District Council
- Salisbury District Council
- South Somerset District Council

6.2.3.   This list may seem short. However, some councils have not established Area Committees because the democratic process in place does not allow for them or there has been insufficient political support to drive them forward. In some cases a geographical area does not lend itself to this type of committee working. For example Gloucester City Council where the boundaries are tight or there can be problems where local communities are spread sparsely across a rural area such as Caradon District Council in Cornwall.

6.2.4.   While there have been clear strengths in the work of Area Committees especially in the provision of fora for public consultation and where locality budgets add value, some councils previously administering them have made decisions (generally in the last two years) to disband them. This has been due to a number of key weaknesses.

- Their role had become unclear over time with a lack of specific outputs
- Resource implications and value for money
- Poor attendance by the public and other major partners
- Membership was not inclusive of all local stakeholders
- The link between Area Committees and the Local Strategic Partnership was unclear
- Area Committees were reactive to current local issues rather than proactive to long term development
- Lack of real devolved power and influence with poor follow-up practice
- Although, public attendance was greater where planning applications were decided locally, interpretation of planning law was not always consistent across a district and planning matters dominated meetings designed for a range of local issues

6.2.5.   Research has shown that many unitary and non-unitary local authorities in the South West are now looking to review or expand current area working practices to enhance community engagement. This is particularly true of county councils and unitary authorities. For example, Bath and North East Somerset is running a pilot committee, Bath South Local Committee. Devon County Council is proposing to extend the role of its 8 County Committees. Central government policy proposals on Neighbourhoods and Local Leadership and the imminent Local Government White Paper will also influence change. A small number of councils have recruited consultants to undertake reviews. Others are looking to establish community fora outside of the formal committee process through consultative panels that do not have decison making powers. Innovation at one District Council in Gloucestershire includes the possible piloting of a webcast where committee meetings are filmed and put on the Council website alongside formal minutes.

6.2.6.   Nationally, there are a number of District Councils where Area Committees work well and are effective. This seems to be where there is a clear remit to improve the flow of information and communication with the public and provide better access to and monitoring of services. They help to develop plans for the local community, working

with Area Community Partnerships and feed into the LSP as well as contributing to the performance management of the Council. There is a sharp focus on:

- Engagement of all relevant partners and the general public
- Clear links to the LSP and Area Community Partnerships with representatives from both
- Devolved decison making powers and budgets or clear mechanisms for recommendations to influence Cabinet decisions
- Forward Plans
- An evolving scrutiny role
- Agendas more specific to local issues
- More informal style of meetings with greater public participation and venues throughout an area
- Good publicity ahead of meetings
- Involvement of Town and Parish Councils in agenda setting with a 6 monthly Parish Forum to inform forward planning
- A Lead Officer with Community Area responsibilities working closely with the Democratic Services Team

6.2.7. Examples of best practice include:

- South Somerset District Council
- East Hampshire District Council

6.2.8. Full details of the work of this best practice can be found at Appendix 3.

6.3. **The Local Picture in Wiltshire**

6.3.1. Salisbury is the only other District Council in Wiltshire presently running Area Committees. Salisbury has 4 committees that meet monthly which do not exactly correspond to the community area boundaries. Their membership is made up from District, County, Town and Parish Councillors, with District Councillors voting only and Parishes/Town Councillors no longer sitting at the table. They differ from North Wiltshire in that they consider planning applications related to their geographical area, including related issues such as planning gain. Like NWDC they also approve grants, amounting to £27,500 per Committee per annum. They act as a consultation forum, receive community planning reports and Parish Plans.

6.3.2. The relationship between the Area Committees and the community planning process and implementation of the Parish Plans does not currently appear to be well integrated, although there are plans to revisit the Area Committee arrangements. This review will consider devolution of decision making, securing closer working between the Committee and the local community, a more inclusive membership reflecting other community partners and strengthening the role of district councillors.

6.3.3. At present West Wiltshire operates five Area Seminars which meet 2-4 times a year and have an advisory role only, referring issues to Cabinet. In addition to District, County, Town and Parish Councillors, a representative from each of the corresponding Community Area Partnerships sit on the Seminars. In addition to these Seminars, the Community Area Partnerships meet, sometimes either directly before the seminar meetings (resulting in back to back meetings lasting 4 hours) or a week or so later. Community Area Partnership members see the seminars as a route by which issues can be addressed.

6.3.4. Like Salisbury, West Wiltshire has future aspirations to improve community engagement and community leadership, with the possibility of closer working with the Community Area Partnerships and with a timetable of agenda items.

6.3.5. Under the Local Government Act 2000 Kennet District Council is a forth Option Authority that has carried on with service committees. In Kennet arrangements are more variable with Community Planning Partnerships in each of 4 community areas, being in some respects equivalent to area committees elsewhere. Membership includes all District Councillors and partner organisations such as Police and PCT. Parishes usually send a representative from a cluster of parishes. The Community Planning Partnerships each receive £20,000 per annum for distribution to local projects, which relate to the community plans.

6.3.6. In addition, prior to these meetings there are Forums in 3 of the 4 community areas that have representation from District, County, Town and Parish Councillors. The Forums have no powers but all members vote in response to matters including consultation.
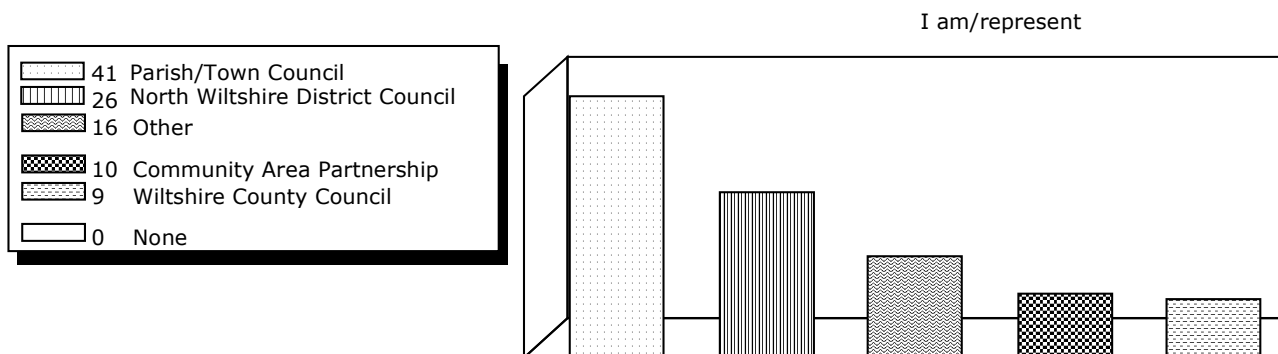
7. Results of Consultation

7.1. Officers have summarised the key points of local consultation below. A full break down of the results of this consultation can be seen in Members' party rooms, further copies can be obtained on request.
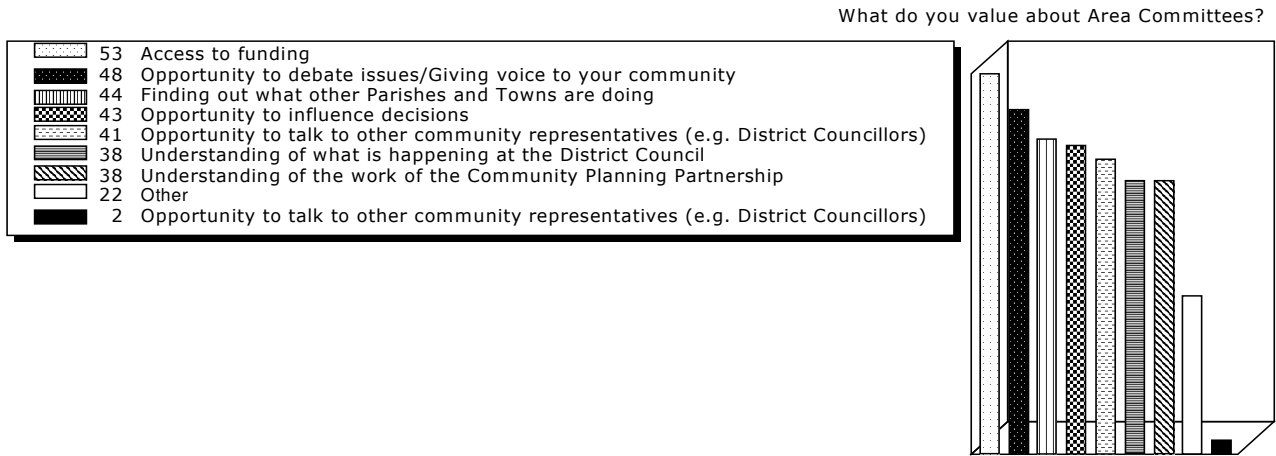
7.2. **Postal Survey**

7.2.1. A total of 144 survey forms were distributed to District, County, Town and Parish Councillors. They were also sent to the 5 Chairs of Community Area Partnerships as well as a selection of individual partnership members. A total of 77 survey forms were returned representing the views of individuals as well as collective views of Community Area Partnerships. The response rate at 53% was excellent for a postal survey. This illustrates the interest those surveyed had in the issue.

7.2.2. The spread of response across the community areas was fairly even, recognising the variation in the geographical size of the areas and numbers of Councillors. Responses were slightly lower than expected from the Calne Community Area.

7.2.3. Proportionally, the response rate from all Councillors was good and while lower from Community Area Partnership members, this was considered unsurprising since to date their engagement with the Area Committees is significantly lower and in one or two cases not a forum they recognise for progressing ideas and projects. See *Graph 1 - Overall Results*.

I am/represent

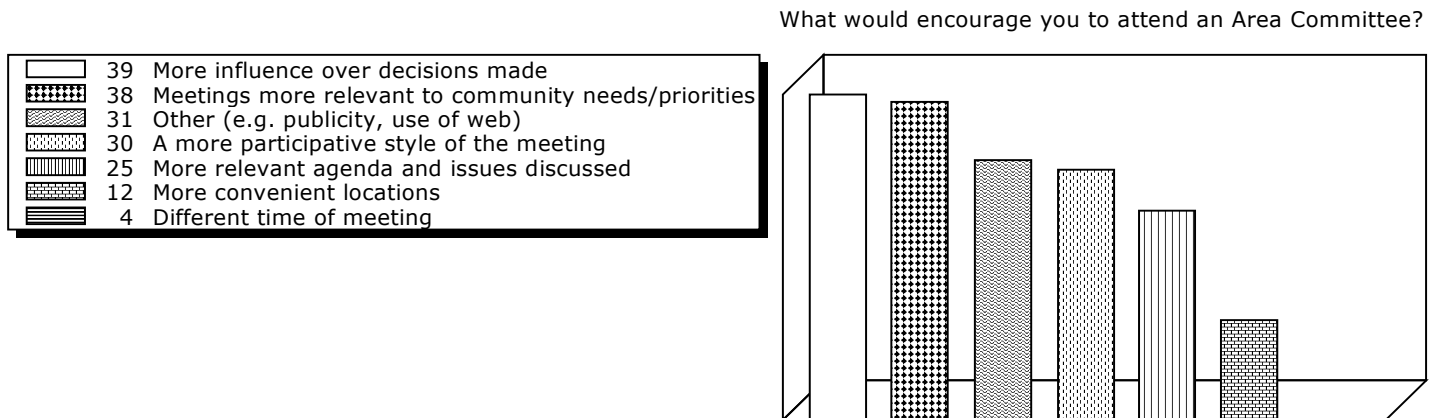|	
41	Parish/Town Council
26	North Wiltshire District Council
16	Other
10	Community Area Partnership
9	Wiltshire County Council
0	None

7.2.4. Graph 2 (below) - *What do you value most about Area Committees* shows that the most valued aspect of Area Committees is funding, followed by opportunities to debate and have a voice, to find out what other parishes/towns were up to, to influence decisions and talk to District Councillors.

What do you value about Area Committees?

	53	Access to funding
	48	Opportunity to debate issues/Giving voice to your community
	44	Finding out what other Parishes and Towns are doing
	43	Opportunity to influence decisions
	41	Opportunity to talk to other community representatives (e.g. District Councillors)
	38	Understanding of what is happening at the District Council
	38	Understanding of the work of the Community Planning Partnership
	22	Other
	2	Opportunity to talk to other community representatives (e.g. District Councillors)

7.2.5. More influence over decisions, making meetings more relevant to community needs and priorities would encourage respondents to attend Area Committees.

7.2.6 Graph 3 (below), *How could Area Committees be improved* shows that Area Committees could be improved by giving them more influence over decision making, more devolved budgets and power to the Committee, more interactive items, a less formal environment and an annual programme of meetings. Other issues included improving publicity, better use of IT and the website.

What would encourage you to attend an Area Committee?

	39	More influence over decisions made
	38	Meetings more relevant to community needs/priorities
	31	Other (e.g. publicity, use of web)
	30	A more participative style of the meeting
	25	More relevant agenda and issues discussed
	12	More convenient locations
	4	Different time of meeting

7.2.7 Making meetings more relevant to community priorities and needs would be the most important thing to encourage current non-attenders to attend Area Committees.

7.2.8 When the opinions of District Councillors and Parish/Town Councillors were compared, Town/Parish Councillors rated funding as the most valuable thing about Area Committees while District Councillors saw them as an opportunity to influence decisions. It is interesting to note that District Councillors did not see the meetings as an opportunity to talk to other community representatives.

7.2.9   Parish/Town Councillors would be more encouraged to attend if they had increased influence over decision making and said this was the most important way in which Area Committees could be improved. By comparison, District Councillors rated making meetings more relevant to community needs and priorities the most important thing to encourage their attendance and devolving powers and budgets to the Committee as the most important way of improving meetings.

7.3.   **Committee Workshops**

7.3.1   The purpose of running the workshops at each of the 5 Area Committees during July 2006 was to enable qualitative data to be obtained to support the quantitative date provided through the postal surveys, in other words it allowed issues to be fleshed out and explored in more depth.

7.3.2   The same emphasis gleaned from the postal surveys came through at the workshops. Decisions made at an Area level should address delivering of the Community Plans and Community Partnership priorities. Budgets should be devolved with powers to make more local decisions (including those related to economic regeneration and how Section 106 funding is used). Distribution of Community Area Awards should also take place.

7.3.3   Respondents wanted Committees to be more integrated with Community Area Partnerships, Primary Care Trusts and Wiltshire County Council. Plain English should be used so everyone can understand and the room layout of the meetings should be more inclusive. An annual consultation timetable was suggested. Informal sessions before meetings to enable Councillors to talk to partners and the public was suggested, as was an annual, social meeting to enable all partners to share their annual plans and achievements.

7.3.4   Area Committees could help deliver the actions in Community Plans by creating a forum for all tiers of local government, Community Area Partnerships and local people. It should offer expertise, advise and funding to community groups and projects. The emphasis should be on local involvement and communications between all levels. Voting rights for Parish Councillors was suggested, as was the idea of Executive powers residing with officers in consultation with a wider forum.

7.3.5   If Area Committees were to be abolished, a range of suggestions were made to keep the work locally focussed. These included merging Area Committees with the Community Area Partnerships or giving the Community Area Partnerships the funding for distribution. Devolution to Town/Parish Councils was suggested with funding being bought back to the centre. A new three tier Committee with devolved powers was as another option, while local accountability was seen as important as was the need for local Councillors to be more proactive.

7.3.6   At the workshops participants were given an opportunity to voice an opinion in respects of a number of statements on the Area Committee theme. One of the most contentious issues was about having a voice and having a vote. Many District Councillors felt that only they as elected District Councillors should have a vote.

7.3.7   When asked whether Area Committees should be abolished, the response was no.

8. **Discussion**

8.1. Research by the project group has identified that there is a national trend towards the promotion of transparent local decision making involving local communities. This is supported both locally and regionally by the level of activity focussed on improving local democracy.

8.2. The results of the consultation in North Wiltshire clearly demonstrate widespread support for the Area Committees and a strong desire to see more opportunities developed.

8.3. In preparing recommendations for the future of Area Committees the project group has considered a number of other areas of work within the County, particularly where there is potential overlap and scope for shared working.

8.4. There are 5 Community Area Partnerships in North Wiltshire which have each evolved according to the nature and inclination of the local community they reflect and engage with. Anybody from the local community, who has wanted to help develop the Community Plan and thereafter been involved in addressing issues and actions identified in the Plan, form the membership of the Community Area Partnerships. They may include members of the public, representatives from voluntary, community and statutory groups, including Councillors from Town, Parish, District and County Councils.

8.5. While each of the Partnerships have Terms of Reference (and there is a good deal of similarity between the five), they are entirely independent of local government and decide their own level of interaction with their local Area Committees.

8.6. The Area Committees recognise their ability to support the Community Area Partnerships and other community groups to achieve their community aspirations and goals. To this end they have all agreed to award at least 75% of their annual budget (currently amounting to £40,000 capital and £8,000 revenue), towards projects that support priorities identified in the Community Plans.

8.7. There could well be potential for a more symbiotic relationship between Area Committees and Community Area Partnerships. This, on the one hand, could enhance the community leadership role of Councillors, while on the other, enable issues that come to the forefront to be collectively addressed to best effect.

8.8. This issue of mutual co-operation is not a simple one, since it raises the delicate relationship between an independent community based group or groups of people and a locally elected statutory organisation, both of whom are seeking to address the needs, aspirations and vision of local people.

8.9. Wiltshire County Council are exploring an initiative called 'Voice to Choice' which aims to set up new arrangements that will bring Wiltshire County Council decision making closer to the community, improve joint working between the 3 tiers and support the delivery of community priorities identified in local Community Area Plans.

8.10. As part of the development of the project a report was commissioned from the Young Foundation on how to strengthen Town and Parish Council involvement in Community Planning and identifying them as a key stakeholder in taking the localism agenda forward.

8.11.   The recommendations of that report suggested that, *"Wiltshire County Council works with town and parish councils to create open and inclusive meetings, perhaps allowing time for parish issues at each session"*. The findings in this report could be applied to the future development of Area Committees.

8.12.   There is genuine opportunity for the District and County Councils to look at a shared approach to local decision making. It may be possible for NWDC Area Committees to evolve in the longer term (1-2 years) to meet the aspirations of the 'Voice for Choice' initiative and include County Council decision making.

8.13.   Wiltshire Police, as part of the implementation of Neighbourhood Policing Teams, is required to hold regular community meetings to identify and explore local issues. The concept behind Neighbourhood Policing is to bring policing closer to the community and includes a shared approach to problem solving particularly in areas related to community safety and anti-social behaviour. There is a willingness amongst local Neighbourhood Policing Teams and the district-wide Steering Group to work closely with the District Council and its partners at Community Area level. The rationale is to ensure best use of resources and to work together to meet community need.

9.   Conclusions

9.1.   Research and comparative evidence confirms that North Wiltshire District Council is among those councils to operate Area Committees with some success. In doing so, it has demonstrated that it is willing to work in partnership with local communities. However, this success has been limited and there are clearly more opportunities for wider community involvement. Initial consultation on improvements to the working practices of these committees has given local people a chance to shape them further. Most of the suggested changes listed below are taken from feedback from questionnaires and workshops and from examples of best practice. Although there are resource implications, officers believe that most could be implemented almost immediately.

9.2.   **A more innovative approach to publicity and improved public awareness to encourage greater participation**
There is a need to engage with a wider cross section of the community and become more inclusive reflecting the needs of the local area. To this end, a more innovative approach to publicity is required. It could be a vehicle to illustrate that the meeting is responding to local issues and encouraging involvement in future meetings. Appendix 4 provides a design of how this might look.

9.3.   **Informal and inclusive style of meetings**
There should be a cross party approach to the meetings with improvements to the room layout and seating arrangements, making the meeting more inclusive. This may help to dispel any pre-conceived ideas of what can otherwise be a daunting arena in which to speak. Procedures must enable local people to properly voice their opinion. Some interactive approaches might also help this. A greater effort should be made to use a variety of venues to reach all parts of the community. Further options include the development of seminars/surgery sessions prior to the start of Area Committees where local issues can be discussed with elected Members, partners and other service providers.

9.4.   **A 12-month schedule of meetings**
        Best practice shows that participation is improved where there is a forecast of core
        agenda items. Additionally, County/Town/Parish Councils and other community
        partners could be invited to further shape the schedule through a 6-monthly forum.
        This approach for example, would enable Area Committees to work with the police to
        develop ways of supporting the Neighbourhood Policing Agenda. The inclusion of a
        timetable for local consultation would be part of this schedule.

9.5.   **Links to the NWP and Community Area Partnerships/Plans**
        Consultation showed that local decison making at Area Committees should be
        associated with addressing the priorities identified in the Community Plans. Local
        people saw Community Area Award funding as one of the most important aspects of
        the Area Committees. A minimum of 75% of this funding is directed towards issues
        listed in the Community Plans. Evidence confirms that good links with local
        Community Partnerships and the overarching Local Strategic Partnerships broadens
        the work of Area Committees and improves community engagement.

9.6.   **Introduction of clear mechanisms to influence Executive decisions**
        There should be a pathway for referral of issues to the Executive with provision for
        recommendations from Area Committees in the Executive Work Plan. This might
        include a request for officer time to be allocated to address Area Committee projects
        which, in turn, might impact on officer workplans.

9.7.   **Lead Officer with Community Area responsibilities working closely with the
        Policy and Democratic Services Team**
        Research indicates that where an officer is given specific responsibilities for a
        Community Area (similar to those held by NWDC's Area Co-ordinators see para
        5.1.6) it provides more cohesive and comprehensive support for Members,
        Committee Administrators and the wider community.

9.8.   As District Councils are subject to regular audit and inspection, NWDC must
        evaluate the implementation of any changes on continuous improvement and
        performance, with respect to Area Committees and delivery or Corporate Priorities.

9.9.   There will be a need to consider additional resources to implement some of the
        short- term options. Following the publication of the White Paper, Members may
        wish to consider the longer term issues related to devolution of power and
        constitutional changes, which will undoubtedly attract the need for greater resources.

9.10.   A parallel debate should take place to consider how the frameworks for community
        engagement and partnership working should be developed further to avoid
        duplication and improve delivery of outcomes. This debate will probably involve
        consideration of the Council's relationship with Community Area Partnerships, the
        Voice 2 Choice Project, North Wiltshire Partnership, Wiltshire Strategic Board and
        Community Policing Arrangements.

10.   Recommendations for improvements to Area Committees

10.1.   Recommendations have been developed by the project group drawing on research
        into best practise and consultation outcomes. The Council's commitment to
        Partnership working and Customer Focus within the Corporate Plan has also been
        taken into consideration.

10.2.   The recommendations fall into two categories Short Term and Medium - Long Term.
        Short Term Recommendations are made for implementation

Short Term Recommendations (until April 2007)
These recommendations could start to be implemented immediately

- That meetings are made more inclusive and everyone is given an opportunity to debate issues and indicate their opinion. This opinion could be subsequently used to inform District Councillors decisions
- To improve publicity and pubic awareness of Area Committees
- That communication bulletins are developed jointly between the Democratic Services Policy Team and Community Partnerships Team to promote Area Committees (an example is shown in Appendix 4)
- Seating arrangements and room lay out to be made more inclusive
- That a 12 month schedule of meetings is developed
- That a revised guide to participation in Area Committee is sent to Parish & Town Councils, Community Area Partnerships, Police, Primary Care Trusts and other partners with a view to increasing the participation and the shaping of agendas and debate
- Parish and Town Council and Community Area Partnership representatives are invited to provide updates as a standing item on all Area Committee agendas
- That the Policy and Democratic Services Team and Community Partnership Team continue to work with Wiltshire County Council to develop practical joint working options
- That the Policy and Democratic Services Team and Community Partnerships Team work with Community Area Partnerships to investigate options for further co-operation with Area Committees
- That the Executive considers requests from the Area Committee to devote officer time to projects identified by that Committee
- To introduce a recognised mechanism to inform or refer issues from the Area Committees to Executive to ensure that they are considered
- That officers work with the Police to develop ways of supporting the Neighbourhood Policing agenda
- That officers develop options for seminar/surgery meetings prior to the start of Area Committees where local people could discuss matters with their local Member or officers

Medium - Long Term Recommendations
Medium-term recommendations require ongoing development and would be subject of a further report to identify the implications for the Council.

- A debate should take place to consider how the frameworks for community engagement and partnership working should be developed further to avoid duplication and improve delivery of outcomes.
- Officers present a report following the publication of the Local Government White Paper in the autumn detailing the implications and possible development options for the Council's democratic arrangements
- Parish/Town Council and local fora are established 1-2 per year to inform the Area Committee schedule of meetings
- To encourage the involvement of hard to reach groups including young people in Area Committees/partnership working
- That a community "call-in" mechanism be developed to allow Area Committees to request a response to issues raised by the local community
- That officers work with the Executive to consider areas for devolution to Area Committees
- Devolution to Area Committees of decision making powers including budget.
- Constitutional Changes

11.   Financial Implications

11.1.   The annual expenditure related to the Area Committees is detailed in paragraph 5.2. At present Area Committees run within the Council's allocated budget. Abolishing the Area Committees would save very few direct costs – as little as £14,000 per year.

11.2.   Option One ~ likely financial implications would be a financial saving in the order of £14,000.

11.3.   Option Two ~ a no change option would result in no financial implications.

11.4.   Option Three ~ no financial implications arise from this option. Any outcomes of the Local Government White Paper would be incorporated into proposals for the future and specific financial implications considered at that time.

11.5.   Option Four ~ The cost of better publicity and communications bulletins included within the short term recommendations could be met from the Council's communication and consultation budget. Any outcomes of the Local Government White Paper would be incorporated into proposals for the future and specific financial implications considered at that time.

12.   Legal Implications

12.1.   The legal implications arising from this report relate to the medium / long term recommendations. Specifically, any constitutional change that may be required if the decisions made by the Area Committees change or if further devolution occurs.

12.2.   It is possible that the Local Government White Paper may make recommendations for change that will require legal advice.

13.   Community and Environmental Implications

13.1.   There is a great opportunity for the Area Committees to be developed so that they contribute to many more community focussed agendas. This includes enhanced community engagement, the opportunity to join up with other community based service delivery such as Neighbourhood Policing and the chance to take more decision making to communities.

13.2.   Enhanced Area Committees could positively contribute towards the provision of closer links between Council decision making and the community planning process, promote effective and meaningful partnership working and contribute to key community issues such as crime as disorder.

14.   Human Resource Implications

14.1.   Changes to the Area Committees would require enhanced support from officers that may impact on current workplans. With respect to the short term recommendations officers project that this impact would not be significant. A number of posts within the Policy and Democratic Services Team and the Community Partnerships Team are already championing this type of work within the 2006/07 workplans. Opportunities could be maximised by linking in with projects that are already in the 2006/07 workplans such as links to Neighbourhood Policing.

14.2.	The medium / long term recommendations may have a more significant impact dependant on the outcomes of the Local Government White Paper and any constitutional changes that may take place.

## 15.	Equality and Diversity Implications

15.1.	The abolition of Area Committees would remove local decision making and distance the local community from the District Council and its Members. Not only does this go against current Government thinking which is to take transparent decision making closer to communities but it potentially disadvantages local communities from forming effect working relationships with key service providers such as NWDC.

15.2.	The recommendations to improve the Area Committees serve to support an approach that is more inclusive of individuals and communities in North Wiltshire. Recommended changes could make the meetings more accessible and participative.

15.3.	An Equalities Impact Assessment relating to the Area Committees has now been scheduled for completion by the end of September.

Appendices:	• Appendix 1 ~ Area Committee Terms of Reference • Appendix 2 ~ NWDC Area Committees Current Areas of work • Appendix 3 ~ Examples of best practice • Appendix 4 ~ Example Area 2 Bulletin • Appendix 5 ~ Bibliography
Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:	• Statistical results from consultation • Constitution of the Council • Bibliography included in Appendix Five

Previous Decisions Connected with this Report

Report	Committee & Date	Minute Reference
Appointment of Committees	Council – 23/5/06	C11 (2)
Area Committees and the Voice to Choice Project	Executive – 11/5/06	E234

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