

CABINET
21 April 2006

A TRANSPARENT AND LOCAL COUNCIL
TAKING FORWARD THE VOICE TO CHOICE PROJECT
THE NEXT STEPS

Purpose of Report

1. To agree the next steps to take the voice to choice project further forward.

Background

2. The simple, clear vision underpinning this project is that people will know within each community area exactly when local issues are being discussed. They will know the best place they can put local issues on the agenda or into the forward plan. They will know where to sort out any problems for the local community both swiftly and efficiently.
3. From the perspective of being a transparent and local council, the project is about making strong connections between the local councils in the area and the communities they serve. It is about ensuring transparency so that people know how they might influence the provision of local services. When strategic decisions are made, people know who made them and why. And it is about achieving a high level of engagement with a wide range of local people, which will involve devolving some powers and decisions to local communities. It also means better supporting councillors, as community leaders, to deliver on the local priorities and projects identified in the community area plans.
4. This project has evolved from an initial idea which the Leader of the Council sounded out with Wiltshire's Town and Parish Councils at the 'Parish Meet & Greet' evenings held in June 2005. Over the past 10 months, many different views have been taken on board in shaping the project. The scope of the discussions to date can be seen in the chronology presented in Appendix A.
5. What sort of feedback has come out of these discussions? The key themes are:
 - There are many shortcomings about the current system including the amount of duplication and time needed to support numerous meetings, partnerships and groups, many of which are talking about the same things. We should streamline the complex and inefficient web that exists at present
 - Consultation across all agencies in Wiltshire could be more efficient, more cost effective, more coordinated and more joined up.
 - Nobody wants another layer of bureaucracy or a talking shop.
 - Under any new arrangements the meetings must be well run, well marketed, widely publicised and made very accessible to local people in the widest sense.
 - New arrangements will need the support of all the major interests in order to succeed.
 - Special interest groups must not dominate new arrangements.

- The challenge also is to engage better with the silent majority
- We must be realistic and manage expectations about what can and cannot be delivered.
- Councillors need the right tools and greater powers to make a difference.
- This project may be a way of defending democracy or even a vehicle to re-educate communities about politics.

Main Considerations for the Council

Proposal

6. It is proposed that from June 2006, pilots are undertaken in 2 community areas, building on any existing arrangements in those areas, to create an extended role where representatives of Councils from all three tiers can come together with other statutory and voluntary bodies, and the wider community to debate, influence and determine local matters. Depending upon the outcome of the pilots, the longer-term aim would be to develop a strong institution of governance in each of Wiltshire's 20 community areas across the 3 tiers of local government in the County. This body will act as the focal point for decision-making in the community area.
7. There will also be agreed processes to promote wider inclusiveness and the engagement of local people in decision-making for their local community area. The idea is to improve existing arrangements and definitely not to create another tier, another meeting, another group or partnership, or another layer of bureaucracy. As part of the approach therefore, we all need to identify what we can stop doing.

Building blocks

8. In North and South Wiltshire, the proposed building blocks would be the existing area committees. Following recent presentations and debate, North Wiltshire's Area Committees 1 and 3 (the Malmesbury and Chippenham community areas) voted that they would like to be pilots for the voice to choice project. A further meeting with North Wiltshire District Council officers, their Leader and officers from the County Council and our portfolio holder for Staffing and Community is planned for 11 April. North Wiltshire District Council deferred any decision on the voice to choice project until 11 May when their executive will meet to decide on the way forward with a report assessing the implications of their involvement in the pilot project. They have advised us that it this report to the County Council's Cabinet will be crucial to their decision, particularly in enabling them to assess the legal, financial and human resources implications of their participation in the proposed pilot/s.
9. Salisbury District Council has advised that they will take a comprehensive plan to their Cabinet on the neighbourhood agenda in May or June and that establishing a pilot may form part of their action plan. Further discussion has recently been invited by Salisbury District Council. In West Wiltshire the building block would be the existing area seminars. West Wiltshire Local Strategic Partnership has requested a presentation on the project. In Kennet the building blocks would be the community area partnerships, or, in some areas, the community area forum. No further discussions have yet taken place with Kennet District Council.

10. A letter from the Leader of the Council has been sent to all of the District Councils outlining the proposal and offering them the opportunity to build a strong alliance in working on the voice to choice project to further develop the approach. The way in which this project is currently framed depends upon the engagement of at least one

District Council in the process in order to pilot at least 1 or 2 community areas within the district. If no District Council takes up this opportunity at this time, the contingency plan for the County Council could be either:

- (a) that the Council would hold 4 major meetings a year (one in each district area) which will really engage local people to see what services are being delivered in their area, to influence delivery where they can and to raise the level of awareness of the Council's work
- (b) that the Council would wait until the White Paper is published later in the year before proceeding further with this project or in developing further its corporate commitment to work in a way which is even more local and transparent

Key questions

11. To help further develop this project, further discussions have been held, particularly between North Wiltshire District Council officers and officers from the County Council and within the County Council with services such as Environmental Services and through discussions at Cabinet Liaison. As a result, the following answers are given to some of the key questions identified below.

What do people want to influence locally?

12. The pilot should focus on those issues and services which most interest local people. The 'People's Voice' survey (January 2006) indicates that these include: maintenance of roads and pavements (67%); building new roads and road improvements (61%); town centre improvements (57%); social services for the elderly (53%); traffic management and safety (50%). There are also other services which the County, District and Town Councils currently provide and which lend themselves well to local influence, including youth services, extended schools, the improvement of the street or lane scene and a more joined up approach towards local minor maintenance issues.
13. People were also asked which method they felt would be the best way for local people to involve themselves in local decisions and most respondents (46%) indicated that they would prefer to have a local newsletter on key local matters. Different levels of engagement and influence are proposed under these new arrangements, partly because there is a continuum of community engagement, ranging from very passive to very active. In addition, there are different types of influencing and decision making within local government.

Are we proposing different levels of engagement and influence?

14. The role of the new local bodies will vary between different services and issues. At one extreme, some services are well suited to local decisions. For example, the County Council has operated a parish lengthsman scheme for 4 years. During this summer the scheme will be altered, so that it can operate within a group of Parish Councils on a more flexible timetable to respond to local influence on a wide range of minor maintenance needs. The new scheme will form a portal to a far greater

number of powerful mechanised resources, such as the multi-purpose UniMog machine, gully tanker and high pressure drain cleansing machines.

15. At the other extreme, a local body cannot determine a major road building scheme (e.g. the A303 at Stonehenge); but it could form a powerful local forum which could lobby and promote a particular solution which had the support of all local interests. Other services and issues might fall at various points on this range. For example, eligibility for the Council's social services must be determined at the County level so that there is equity throughout the County; but within this arrangement the proposed local body could provide a valuable forum for discussion with the voluntary sector and user groups as well as local Councils, about local needs and a co-ordinated response. The local body would provide an opportunity for Councillors to discuss with the youth service and other local services and young people themselves, how young people can be fully included within the local community and make a positive contribution.

16. Wiltshire Police have also signalled their interest in working with the project as part of the Wiltshire neighbourhood policing project. Neighbourhood policing would be a key item for a local agenda to resolve problems in the community, to make it a safer place, and a stronger place. This might include working on issues which cannot be delivered by the public service alone, but which involve individuals, households and communities changing their behaviour, for example, by working together it might be possible to 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 and crime watch

Would these new arrangements have any real influence?

17. 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 commented that this would make it just a talking shop. Another option is to delegate executive powers, but this would mean that a more bureaucratic style of arrangements would have to be developed and it would mean that membership would be restricted or constrained. Another more satisfactory option is that Cabinet members could exercise their delegated powers at the local level. Officers could also exercise their extensive delegated powers. Councillors and officers would take into account the advice of the local community in coming to a local decision. Help would be provided by community planners to facilitate the meetings and to design the best way for officers and elected members to explore issues with local people to reach a decision.

What would be the membership?

18. These bodies must be representative, inclusive, but not so large as to be unwieldy. Members will include representatives of the Town and Parish, District and County Councils in the community area. These Councillors will have specific voting rights, and the chair will be elected from their number. Representatives will be invited from relevant local partnerships such as the community area planning partnership and the community safety partnership where necessary in order to ensure that these partnerships have a voice on the body. Local arrangements to represent young people should also be reflected in the membership. So too should statutory bodies (such as the Wiltshire Constabulary) and the voluntary sector. The meetings will be open to the wider local community. 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.

How would the meetings be organised?

19. It is suggested that meetings are held, most likely in the evenings, either (a) every 6 weeks or (b) on a bi-monthly basis. The frequency of the meetings will have an impact on the level of resources required to administer and run the meetings. A timetable of the meetings would be agreed at the start of the financial year when 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.
20. The meeting would last from 1 to 2½ hours and the idea has 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.

How would the meetings be resourced?

21. The County Council has rationalised the resources it puts into community planning in order to take forward stronger support for community leadership and local decision making and influence. Across the County, there will be 4 officers employed on a half-time basis and 4 officers employed on a full-time basis to work on community planning and projects which include voice to choice. The Council is also a member of the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership, which was recently successful in securing funding for capacity building within the County and for further work on the voice to choice project.
22. The County Council acts as the accountable body for a number of external funding sources such as Leader +, the Rural Social and Community Programme and shortly Rural Renaissance. The approach to allocating the funds is to re-target them towards a smaller number of priorities approved by the Wiltshire Strategic Board and Rural Executive. Whilst this approach ensures the greatest impact from external funds it reduces opportunities for community initiatives which are worthwhile but not perfectly in line with the agreed priorities. It is proposed therefore that a proportion of the funding is to be put aside into a fund for good ideas to which community organisations can bid directly. Allocation of the funds would remain the responsibility of existing structures. The achievement of the targets in the community plans will also 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 will the project be managed?

23. Joint project team/s would be established within the participating district area or areas and will be accountable to the executive and cabinets of the respective councils. 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 in monitoring and evaluating the outcome of the local pilot arrangements and the Scrutiny functions of the District Councils may choose to monitor the project too. It is proposed that the pilots be monitored at 6-monthly intervals. Evaluation criteria have been drafted for the pilots and will be agreed by the participating partners. A draft of the evaluation criteria is given at Appendix B and draws on the indicators for establishing safer and stronger communities. The evaluation criteria have been revised to take on board comments from Scrutiny.
24. In making its own business case for this project, the County Council has identified 4 key elements which include more efficient consultation, service specific benefits, a stronger role for local elected Members, and improved performance and public satisfaction. The pilot will be managed within existing resources. One of its key objectives will be to identify what, if any, additional resource demands arise from the proposed arrangements.
25. 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. Others who choose to participate in this project will, no doubt, wish to make the individual business case for their own organisations as this may vary from organisation to organisation.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

26. A key concern will be to ensure that the quality of life in the community area and the quality of the local environment is protected and enhanced.

Risk Assessment

27. Key drivers for the future include renewing civil engagement, enhancing the performance of statutory institutions and supporting the voluntary and community sectors. The risk is that there are tensions in the way in which the localism agenda is being rolled out which are increasing: for example, having unaccountable individuals representing the community and the role of representatives who are elected and held to account.

Financial Implications

28. The thrust of this proposal is about community engagement, not devolved financial management. Given the current grant settlement from central government, the County Council has no additional resources to put into the proposed new arrangements. If there are additional demands, they would need to be funded from a re-direction of existing resources and by working in partnership with District Council colleagues to share the cost of supporting meetings. The existing community planning resources will be directed into carrying out the 2 pilots. The evaluation of the pilots will include an assessment of the affordability of rolling out any new arrangements across Wiltshire.

Recommendations

29. Cabinet is recommended:
- To agree the contingency plan of either option 10 (a) or option 10 (b) above in the event that none of the district councils wishes to proceed with a pilot at this stage
 - To agree the next steps to take the voice to choice project further forward including the frequency of the meetings 19 (a) or (b) above. The next steps will include agreeing with the district councils on the pilot areas; continuing to develop the project with the community area partnerships and the Town and Parish Councils; agreeing the time, venue, agenda, format and marketing of the first meetings
 - To comment on the proposed evaluation criteria (Appendix B)

Ray Jones
Director of Adult and Community Services

Report authors: Niki Lewis, Assistant Director: Corporate Services 01225 713180
Julie Martin, Policy and Community Officer 01225 858816

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

VOICE TO CHOICE PROJECT: CHRONOLOGY (JUNE 2005/2006) APPENDIX A

Action	Timing
Initial sounding out of parish and town councils at Greet and Meets	23, 29 Jun
Project initiation document (PID) drafted for voice to choice	10 Aug
PID circulated for comment and to the Listening to Communities Board	Aug/Sept
Initial discussions with Kennet DC	24 Oct
Initial discussions with North Wiltshire DC	7 Nov
Corporate Management Board discussion	2 Dec
Listening to Communities Board discussion	2 Dec
Initial discussions with Salisbury DC	12 Dec
Initial report to Cabinet	16 Dec
People's Voice survey including questions on local influence	Jan
Presentation to North Wiltshire DC Councillors	10 Jan
Report to Corporate Management Board	12 Jan
Presentations to the Members' Seminar (preceding Scrutiny)	13 Jan
Report to Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee	13 Jan
Briefing note to the minister on voice to choice and Beacon activity	18 Jan
Update to North Wiltshire Community Planners' Coordination Meeting	19 Jan
Further discussion and development with North Wiltshire DC officers	20 Jan
Discussion with Democratic Services officer	27 Jan
Initial discussions with West Wiltshire DC officers	30 Jan
Listening to Communities Board discussion	7 Feb
Presentation to South Wiltshire Strategic Alliance annual conference	8 Feb
Letter from Wiltshire Police inviting further discussion on the project	10 Feb
Development Services away day discussion	14 Feb
Further discussion with West Wiltshire DC Councillors and officers	23 Feb
Further discussion with Democratic and Legal Services officers	28 Feb
Young Foundation research on Malmesbury and Trowbridge parishes	1 – 31 Mar
Report to Corporate Management Board	6 Mar
Presentation to Transforming Neighbourhoods Consortium in London	9 Mar
Dissemination of information on request to ODPM, LGA etc	10 Mar
North Wiltshire DC report to their Executive (with a deferred decision)	12 Mar
Contribution towards the Council's response to the draft Lyons report	13 Mar
Briefing minister on voice to choice and Beacon activity	14 Mar
Update to North Wiltshire Community Planners' Coordination Meeting	15 Mar
Report to Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee	15 Mar
Presentation to Cabinet Liaison followed by debate	17 Mar
Listening to Communities Board discussion	21 Mar
Update to Development Services officers through team briefing	21 Mar
Meeting with Environmental Services (TC) on the way forward	27 Mar
Meeting with Audit Commission Innovations Unit on our practice	29 Mar
Dissemination of information on request to the Young Foundation	29 Mar
Presentation to Area 1 Committee (Malmesbury area)	29 Mar
Request for information from Crudwell parish council on the project	30 Mar
Further discussion and development with North Wiltshire DC officers	31 Mar
Dissemination of information in response to Beacon requests (see reports)	to 31Mar
Presentation to Area 3 Committee (Chippenham area)	3 Apr
Presentation to the Local Area Partnership in West Wiltshire	10 Apr
Discussion with North Wiltshire DC Leader, officers and WWC portfolio holder	11 Apr
Letter from Leader to Leaders of the District Councils inviting participation	12 Apr
Report to Cabinet	21 Apr
N Wiltshire DC report to their Executive	11 May
Presentation from the Young Foundation on their research findings	16 May
Report to Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee	8 Jun

APPENDIX B

VOICE TO CHOICE PROJECT

EVALUATION CRITERIA (REVISED)

Process

1. Attendance levels at the meetings, compared to historic attendance levels at area committees
2. Successful local improvements achieved through the new arrangements, including against the priorities and projects identified in the community area plan
3. Local public satisfaction ratings with the performance of the local authorities and service provision for the area
4. Local level of performance against the Local Public Service Agreement
5. Assessment of the scope and quality of the new arrangements in influencing and/or decision making, including from those who have presented reports, made presentations and invited decisions from the meetings
6. Feedback at the end of each meeting (initially), plus an annual review of the quality of discussion and impact of workshop style of the meeting- identifying what works well, problem areas, successes etc

Community Engagement, Local Influence and Decision-Making

7. Analysis of the level of inclusiveness of the meetings (in terms of representation)
8. Actual influence of the new arrangements on the work of Local Strategic Partnerships and on Community Strategies
9. % of residents who are aware of the new arrangements and at least one decision made that has improved life in the community area over the past year
10. Level of local engagement with the meetings through question time, written questions and petitions etc
11. Number and type of challenges to the standard of service delivery, such as objection letters, petitions etc, and any resulting service response
12. % of residents who feel that they can influence what is going on in the local area and know how to hold public services to account
13. % residents who feel that local decision making is open and transparent
14. An assessment of the affordability of rolling out the pilots across Wiltshire

Key Outcome Indicators*

The following is adapted from 'Indicators of Strong Communities' (Home Office, 2006) and accords with the indicators being adopted in the Local Area Agreement and other service agreements eg with Community First.

Outcome	Measure
<p>Increase in local participation in governance</p>	<p>% of residents' who feel that they can influence decisions affecting their local area</p> <p>% residents (i) serving or (ii) willing to consider serving in citizen governance roles or as community advocates or representatives</p> <p>% of residents who affirm that they know how to hold to account the public services dealing with health, education, environment, housing, policing, transport etc.</p>
<p>Increase in community cohesion and inclusion</p>	<p>% of residents who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together</p> <p>% of residents who feel involved in the local community</p> <p>Level of score of members of Black and Minority Ethnic communities, people with disabilities, people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, unemployed, young people, elderly and ill, on any of the indicators compared with the average score for the whole population</p>
<p>Increase in key public services delivered by the Councils for Voluntary Service</p>	<p>Proportion of services in selected public service areas delivered by Voluntary and Community Sector organisations on behalf of the local authority</p>