

Area Committees and the Voice to Choice Project

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To seek a decision about the District Council's involvement in the pilot of the Voice to Choice Project.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 **Option One - That the Executive agree in principle the District Council involvement in one OR two pilot project/s, subject to confirmation from Wiltshire County Council that sufficient resources will be forthcoming.**

OR

- 2.2 **Option Two – That the Executive agree in principle the District Council involvement in one OR two pilot project/s, pending the publication of the Local Government White Paper in the Summer and ask officers to continue working with Wiltshire County Council to develop options**

OR

- 2.3 **Option Three – That the Executive do not agree to the District Council involvement in the pilot**

OR

- 2.4 **Option Four - That NWDC officers work with local partners to develop the Area Committees link to local stakeholders.**

3. Links to the Corporate Business Plan

- 3.1 The pilot project has the strongest links to the Corporate Priority of Partnership Working.
- 3.2 The pilot project also links to the 2020 Vision identified in the Corporate Plan under the heading “for the Council Itself:” which can be best paraphrased as bringing the Council closer to the Community.

4. Background

- 4.1 WCC has Beacon Status in the category – Getting Closer to Communities and through this has levered in research support from the Young Foundation and the opened up lines of communication with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- 4.2 Since June 2004 the ODPM has published a series of papers debating the future of local government under the banner Local:Vision. The project has more recently moved into the portfolio of Government Minister David Milliband - Minister of Communities and Local Government. He is to produce a Local Government White paper this Summer. The Local:Vision debate embraced a wide range of policy issues including citizen engagement, vibrant local leadership and performance management.
- 4.3 *“The key theme of the Local Government White Paper is about how to make devolution work, whether in cities or rural areas, whether for local government services or wider issues.” D. Milliband (March – 2006) www.odpm.gov.uk*

- 4.4 Key to this vision is the devolution of power to community leaders. However without the ability for local elected members to make single member decisions, it is hard to see how this ambition will be delivered. It is anticipated that this will be addressed in the White Paper.
- 4.5 WCC have scoped a project called Voice to Choice which aims to set up new arrangements that will bring WCC decision making closer to the community, improve joint working between the 3 tiers and support the delivery of community priorities identified in the local area community plans. One of the methods proposed in the project is to develop meetings where a wide range of stakeholders can participate in the decision making process. Although a name for the meeting has not been decided for ease of reference it will be referred to as the Forum in the remainder of this report.
- 4.6 WCC Cabinet Member for Community, Cllr J.P.S.S. Thomson presented an outline of the Voice to Choice project to Senior Officers and Area Committee Chairmen & Vice Chairman on the 10th January. The District Council has been asked to work in partnership with WCC to pilot the new arrangements at one or more Area Committees. The response of the Area Chairmen present was generally positive.
- 4.7 WCC and NWDC officers and Lead Members have met regularly since the presentation, to discuss the timetable for implementation and some of the practicalities that will need to be addressed.
- 4.8 Presentations have since been made to the Malmesbury Area and Chippenham Area Committee following which both Committees indicated some level of interest for partaking in a pilot. It is the officer view that resources are available to support one pilot area.
- 4.9 Under new Neighbourhood Policing arrangements Wiltshire Constabulary will have to establish meeting to consult with the local community. This could be achieved through the current or proposed Area arrangements.
- 4.10 The WCC Cabinet report included here as Appendix One, explores these issues but does not provide a crystal clear picture of exactly how it will all work. This is perhaps to be expected in the piloting of new arrangements as the details of how the Forum will work will be dependent on ground level circumstances and an element of local choice.
- 4.11 Regardless of the Council's direct involvement in the pilot project it is possible to develop stronger links between the Area Committees and the Area Partnerships across the district. Many Area Committees already invite the Chairman of Area Partnerships to attend meetings to provide written and verbal updates. NWDC officers could facilitate workshops between the Area Committees, Local Council's and Area Partnerships to explore ways of developing stronger links.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 WCC has not yet identified the financial implications of the Project. This project is not presently included within the NWDC's Corporate Plan. At present there is no indication that the District Council will have to allocate any extra financial resource for this project. However there will be obvious human resource implications and workplans will need to be reviewed.

- 5.2 The Section 151 officer has advised that until there is clarity around the resource implications of this project the Council should not give a firm undertaking that it will participate.
- 5.3 Mention is made in the WCC Cabinet report to future grant funding that could be used to support the pilot (para 22.) but not specifically what will be funded.
- 5.4 Some funding to support a pilot may be available from the Wiltshire Capacity Building Programme as no decision has been made under the auspices of the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership no commitment can be made as to what specifically will be funded.

6. Community & Environment Implications

- 6.1 WCC has realigned some officer resources from direct support for Local Community Partnerships to supporting Members in their Community Leadership role.
- 6.2 Community Partnerships including local Community Safety groups would be invited to participate in the pilot and it is envisaged that the Forum would keep an overview of progress made in delivery of the local community plan.
- 6.3 It is not clear how this will differ from the approach taken by some Area Committees were representatives from the Local Community Partnership are invited to update the meeting on progress made against their plans. Care must be taken to ensure that the new arrangements do not take the place of Partnerships. There is a danger that rather than empowering Partnerships, our Partners could be drowned in a sea of voices.

7. Human Resource Implications

- 7.1 It is likely that to accommodate the work devolved from WCC, the pilot Area Committee would be required to meet once every 6 weeks. WCC officers have indicated that additional officer support for the meetings will be forthcoming, refocusing some officer resources away from the support of local community partnerships towards the project. To date no confirmation has been received regarding the allocation of officer time. Mention has been made of reducing the number of meetings resourced and attended by WCC officers but as yet no mention has been made of committee officer support being allocated to the pilot.
- 7.2 The effective organisation of the meetings as envisaged would be time consuming and it is unclear at this point how WCC and NWDC officers will work in practice together to meet the requirements of the pilot. Particularly if a large proportion of the meeting is to be consultative and featuring inclusive and facilitated discussions. Some the assumptions made by WCC regarding the organisation of meetings, timing, debate and conflict resolution and may require further investigation into the practical implications. NWDC officers will continue to work closely with the project as a critical friend and partner.
- 7.3 Notwithstanding the Council's involvement in the pilot, any further development of the Area Committees including expanding the involvement in partners would require workplans to be reviewed.

8. Equality & Diversity Implications

- 8.1 There is a steer from WCC that the pilot should be from a rural Community Area as there is already a large Town likely to be included in another District Area. The project provides an opportunity to test a devolution project in a rural setting.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1 The model proposed by the Wiltshire County Council is an 'informal' meeting with the decision making powers residing in the hands of the officers. This compromise solution was reached to enable a wide range of elected and non-elected representatives to participate. The business of the District Council's Area Committee in the pilot area will continue and as a consequence the participation of the District Council will not require any Constitution amendments
- 9.2 The decision as to the Council's involvement is ostensibly one of resources and is therefore an Executive decision. It is felt by the officers that any decision on which Area should become the pilot should be made by a meeting of Full Council.

Documents Used in writing this report:

Constitution of the Council

Information from the ODPM website - <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/>

North Wiltshire District Council Executive 9/3/06 – Report 18

Wiltshire County Council Cabinet 16/2/06 - Report 9

Wiltshire County Council Cabinet 21/4/06 - Report 8

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE SERVICES STRATEGIC MANAGER TO THE EXECUTIVE – 11th MAY 2006

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