

Meeting of the Council – 23rd February 2009

Report of the Cabinet

Updating the Community Strategy and Engagement framework and Local Area Agreement

Purpose of Report

1. To receive an update on a range of linked developments being undertaken by the Council to provide effective community leadership, promote local community engagement and progress the implementation of the Local Area Agreement and to consider the recommendations of the Cabinet thereon.

Background

2. As identified by the Audit Commission evaluation of the Authority, the Council has a sustained record of promoting effective local partnerships, and developing its community leadership role. This report provides an update on three areas of development arising from this area:-
 - The update of the Sustainable Community Strategy
 - The development of the Community engagement strategy
 - The review of the Local Area Agreement

Review of the Borough's Community Strategy

3. The Community Strategy provides the overarching forward plan for the Borough that sets out and works toward a vision encapsulating the expressed views and priorities of the Borough's communities. It was compiled as a result of listening to the views of 5,000+ individuals and 40+ community groups. The vision takes us to the year 2020, and sets out six key partnership priorities, each with a set of objectives. These act as a statement of action for the Dudley Community Partnership, with the Council acting as the lead partner.
4. The Community Strategy was approved in December 2005 and publicly launched in March 2006. It is vital that it continues to reflect the issues facing the Borough, as these will shift their relative priority over time, and be joined by new challenges. So the review is being undertaken for these reasons:

- To take stock of what has been achieved over the last 3 years, and to understand what remain as priority issues and what, through tackling them successfully, may be of less concern; it is important to communicate this to the public;
 - We now have a Local Area Agreement (LAA), developed after the Strategy. The LAA is designed to encapsulate those priorities that can be tackled in the shorter term and therefore the Community Strategy needs to be reassessed to reflect this;
 - The current Strategy does not fully pass the test of “sustainability”. It needs to do so as well as be able to reflect today rather than yesterday, as it will become a key focus for the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).
 - The current strategy is light on the spatial dimension, especially this borough’s expression of the Black Country Core Strategy. It is intended that the new document will incorporate more significantly that and specific actions under the Local Development Framework;
5. A Project Group coordinated from the Chief Executives Directorate is project managing the review process. Following the evaluation of a comprehensive intelligence update a revised set of key priorities will be developed through dialogue with key stakeholders and then subject to review with local stakeholders, and endorsed by the Council. The newly shaped priorities, and the achievements made, will be communicated to the public via “Dudley Together”.
 6. The timeframe will deliver a revised, Sustainable Community Strategy alongside the CAA Area Self-Assessment, and due for Full Council approval by November 2009.

Development of the Council Community Engagement Strategy

7. The work on the review of the Community Strategy takes place in parallel with the developments being led by the Council and partners on the Borough’s community engagement strategy. In turn this activity forms the Council’s response to new national challenges as outlined in the Government White Paper, “Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power”. Community empowerment is the central theme of the White Paper, which sets out to give local people and communities more influence and power to improve their lives. This involves more people being able to define the problems they face and being supported to tackle them in partnership with public bodies. The proposed framework of this report therefore supports the fundamental aim of Communities in Control; however we recognise that several key elements of the Government’s proposals are still subject to formal consultation and agreement as and when the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill is agreed by Parliament.
8. The basis for the Dudley Community Partnership (DCP) approach to community engagement is set out in the “In It Together” document. It

identifies five areas where those involved in the DCP will focus improvement. DCP will work together to be a partnership which:

- better co-ordinates engagement activity;
- is open, supportive and accessible;
- plans well and gives adequate time to community engagement;
- feeds back the outcomes of engagement to the public and partners alike;
- continually engages a larger number and more diverse reach of people in its work

9. The principles and activities arising from the In it Together initiative are strongly supportive of the overall Council Plan vision - Local people matter. In the Council Plan the Authority makes the commitment that it will:-

- Listen to what local people say
- Respond to what local people tell us
- Be accountable for our performance
- Provide value for money

10. The purpose of the new framework is to coordinate the Council's approach to community engagement together with its partners. A draft action plan has been prepared by the Authority to enhance the approach to community engagement. It is based on two key themes. The first theme concerns the consultation and engagement of local people on the local needs and issues facing a community. This focus emphasises those matters that involve groups of residents and/or service users and the impact and influence they have as a community or user group on the decisions and outcomes that affect them and the areas in which they live. Aspects of the work in promoting engagement around these issues include:

- Consultation on the Sustainable Community Strategy
- Engagement of the voluntary and community sector on the local Compact
- The development of the local area Community Renewal plans

11. The second major theme addresses engagement with individuals who require or receive services provided through the Council. This more personal aspect of consultation includes:-

- Developing a customer charter
- Reviewing the customer feedback system
- Undertaking customer satisfaction reviews

12. In order to support the development and implementation of the Community Engagement Strategy a series of corporate actions have been developed including:-

- A review of Directorate Engagement activities to help identify best practice and corporate improvement priorities.
- Enhancement of a Council Community Engagement Database to record all engagement activity involving the Council,
- Preparation of a local Community Engagement Toolkit as an online resource to help Council officers undertake community engagement. It provides a range of tools to aid officer's understanding, highlighting good practice and promoting shared learning.
- A Training & Support package will be developed by the Council in conjunction with public agency partners (such as the PCT) and the community & voluntary sector. This support package will provide staff with the skills, knowledge and behaviours they need to successfully plan, conduct and evaluate engagement with the community.
- Using employee review meetings to identify training & support needs of officers involved in community engagement.
- Developing a clear outline of the key roles and responsibilities within the Council relating to community engagement.

13. There are a number of high level performance indicators which are available to support the judgement on the effectiveness of the local community engagement arrangements. These are outlined below, and will be incorporated within the corporate performance management framework and reported back to members.

LAA	Baseline
NI 1 % people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together	To be established (Feb 09)
NI 7 Environment for a thriving third sector	To be established
National Indicators Additional to Council	Baseline
NI 3 Civic participation in the local area	To be established
NI 4 % people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality	To be established
NI 6 Participation in regular volunteering	To be established
NI 14 Reducing avoidable contact	To be established
NI 35 Building resilience to violent extremism (rating: poor 0 – good 5)	1.75 (2007/08)
NI 140 Fair treatment by local services	To be established
Best Value Performance Indicators	Baseline
BV 003 Overall satisfaction with the Council	60% (Source: LGUSS, 2006/07)
BV 004 Satisfaction with complaints handling	50% (Source: LGUSS, 2006/07)
Local Compact	Baseline
12 weeks allocated for consultation period	To be established

Local Area Agreement Refresh 2009/10

14. Members will be aware that the current Local Area Agreement was approved by the Council with effect from April 2008, and is a three year commitment entered into by the Council and its partners with the Government. As part of the national process for the management of Local Area Agreements, there is a requirement to undertake an annual refresh of the Agreement at the start of the year, in order that any revisions can be implemented with effect from April 2009. At the current time, representatives of the Council and partner agencies are involved in discussion with government contacts over the current levels of targets set for the key local priorities in our LAA. It is anticipated that these discussions will continue into February, and the Authority will need to approve the final outcome of these discussions by the end of that month. At this stage it is felt unlikely that there are any significant variations in target outcomes or emerging priorities which will affect the current Agreement. Accordingly it is requested that the Leader and Interim Chief Executive be authorised to approve the final version of the LAA for 2009/10 subject to a report on the outcome of this process to the next full Council.
15. As part of this refresh, the LAA will reflect the outcome of the consideration of the Transitional Grant programme. Members will be aware that in the report on Transitional Funding made to the Cabinet in June 2008, the balance of the unallocated Transitional Grant was to be determined in consultation with partners in the Dudley Community Partnership. At the meeting in November 2008, it was recommended that this funding be allocated to reducing worklessness and will be used to help people gain sustainable employment.
16. On consideration of the information contained in this report the Cabinet at its meeting held on 11th February 2009 resolved to recommend the Council as set out in paragraph 20 below.

Finance

17. There are no specific financial implications of this report.

Law

18. Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000, enables the Council to do any thing which it considers likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the borough, or any part of it.

Equality Impact

19. The issue of equalities has been integrated throughout all elements of this report, for example the review of the Community Strategy has been undertaken so as to ensure the engagement of local people from all communities, including BME; children and young people; people with disabilities. The community engagement strategy proposed in this report also contains a number of improvements designed to enhance the inclusion of all priority communities.

Recommendation

20. It is recommended that:-

- That the work on the review of the Community Strategy to ensure that it is updated to become a fully sustainable local community strategy be approved, and subject to a future adoption by full Council.
- That the proposed framework for the development of a Dudley Council Community Engagement Strategy as outlined above be approved.
- That the Interim Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, be authorised to approve and submit the Local Area Agreement refresh to Government at the end of February 2009.

David Caunt

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Leader of the Council