

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leader and Cabinet
AUTHOR/S: Chief Executive / Partnerships Manager

12 March 2009

NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to
 - (a) note the County Council's General Operating Principles for Neighbourhood Panels,
 - (b) provide Members with options and a recommendation regarding Cambridgeshire Constabulary and Cambridgeshire County Council's suggestion to broaden the remit of panel meetings,
 - (c) provide Members with options and a recommendation regarding the Council's proposal to introduce a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel by May 2009.

Background

2. There are seven neighbourhood panels in South Cambridgeshire, covering five police neighbourhoods. The first South Cambridgeshire panel meeting took place in early 2006 in the Histon neighbourhood and all panels are now well established. The seven panels are:
 - Histon
 - Sawston
 - Linton
 - Swavesey
 - Comberton
 - Gamlingay
 - Bassingbourn & Melbourn
3. The panels cover a wide range of issues, which require action from various agencies. The South Cambridgeshire panels have predominantly been police led both during meetings and in taking forward actions, stemming from the Government's requirement on the police to set up panels and involve the public in setting priorities for their area. As a responsible authority under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 the Council is required to do all that it reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder in its area and therefore should participate in addressing actions arising out of panel meetings where it is able to contribute.
4. A new 'Duty to Involve' for local authorities comes into place on 1 April 2009. Neighbourhood panels provide one forum for elected members from all three tiers of local government to come together with the local community to set short-term priorities for the area and work together to implement change.
5. The Council has demonstrated its commitment to community engagement by supporting the inclusion of new national indicators for local authority performance

related to engagement within Cambridgeshire's Local Area Agreement (LAA). In particular, NI 4, which will set targets for increasing the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality, has been selected as a Local Area Agreement (LAA) priority for Cambridgeshire and will be subject to Corporate Area Assessment (CAA) inspection in 2009.

Considerations

6. Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) has recently given a commitment to engage more fully in neighbourhood panels across the county. Officers have been nominated to each of the neighbourhood panels in the district; they will be required to represent the whole council rather than their specific team. The County Council's Cabinet has also recently agreed a basic set of minimum principles that it would like panels to be governed by:
 - (a) A primary role for locally elected members from all tiers of local government;
 - (b) Substantial time allowed for open questioning from the public;
 - (c) Time set aside for Neighbourhood Policing issues; and
 - (d) 'Bottom-up' agenda setting.
7. The principle of 'bottom-up' agenda setting is in line with discussions at the South Cambridgeshire In Your Patch meetings held on the 24 September 2008 and 10 December 2008, where elected members from both CCC and South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) were present. SCDC's Scrutiny and Overview Committee also discussed the principles at its meeting on the 8 January.
8. In order to strengthen Cambridgeshire's compliance with the new 'duty to involve', the County Council and Cambridgeshire Constabulary have both indicated that they would like for panel meetings to be broadened to discuss issues over and above those relating to community safety. This is reflected in the County Council's operating principles. Community safety issues would remain the key focus for panel meetings.
9. The County Council has also agreed officer representation for each of the panel meetings and will be playing a more active role.
10. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee minutes state that the Committee supports the proposals, allowing each panel to make local decisions, considered that Local Members should be champions for their areas and advised that it therefore considered the nomination of Member Champions as inappropriate.

Options

11. Noting the Council's responsibilities under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Cabinet has the following options with regard to broadening the remit of neighbourhood panels:

Option 1:

Work with partners to broaden the remit of neighbourhood panel to include issues over and above those relating to community safety.

Option 2:

Consult each panel as to whether or not they would like to broaden the remit of panel meetings.

Option 3:

Opt to continue with current arrangements and produce a position statement to be passed to the County Council.

12. With regard to the proposal to introduce a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel by May 2009, as per the Council's Aims, Approaches and Action, Cabinet has the following options:

Option 1:

Nominate a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel by May 2009.

Option 2:

Drop its proposal for a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel, as per the recommendation by Scrutiny and Overview.

Option 3:

Drop its proposal for a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel, as per the recommendation by Scrutiny and Overview and request that Ward Members:

- (a) note district council issues relating to their ward and actions arising out of panel meetings, and bring them back to the council to ensure that they are considered; and/or
- (b) seek progress information prior to panel meetings, where an issue or action relating to their ward has previously been raised.

Implications

13. Financial	The only financial implication relates to staffing (see below).
Legal	The proposed new arrangements will assist the Council in meeting the new Duty to Involve from April 2009 (Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007). The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 states that "Without prejudice to any other obligation imposed upon it, it shall be the duty of each authority... to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area".
Staffing	Relevant officers will continue to need to be available to attend panel meetings to update on progress made against priorities set by the panel. The level of officer representation at panel meetings needs to be discussed.
Risk Management	None.
Equal Opportunities	Work is ongoing to ensure that venues are Disability Discrimination Act compliant.

Consultations

- 14. Elected members were consulted regarding the future direction of neighbourhood panels at the In Your Patch meetings on the 24 September 2008 and 10 December 2008.
- 15. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered this report on the 8 January 2009.
- 16. Cambridgeshire County Council's director lead for community engagement and Community Engagement Programme Manager were consulted in December 2008 and February 2009. The County Council would like to broaden the scope of panel

meetings to allow residents to raise issues other than those relating to community safety, in line with their operating principles. Community safety issues would remain the key focus of panel meetings.

17. The Community Engagement Manager at Cambridgeshire Constabulary was consulted in December 2008 and February 2009. The Constabulary would like to broaden the scope of panel meetings to allow residents to raise issues other than those relating to community safety and would like the district council to play a greater role in both panel meetings and problem solving thereafter. Community safety issues would remain the key focus of panel meetings.

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

18.	<p>Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future</p> <p>Should the Cabinet decide to support the broadening of panel meetings, people attending panel meetings could raise issues relating to this priority.</p>
	<p>Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community</p> <p>Helping citizens engage with and influence public service delivery should increase customer satisfaction with our services.</p>
	<p>Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work</p> <p>Neighbourhood Panels are one forum where the District Council can listen to and engage with the local community and work with parish councils to improve services. Existing Neighbourhood Panels primarily focus on issues relating to reducing crime and disorder and this will continue to be the main focus even if their remit is broadened in the future.</p>

Recommendations

19. It is recommended that Cabinet:
- (a) note the County Council’s General Operating Principles for Neighbourhood Panels (paragraph 6),
 - (b) consults each panel as to whether or not they would like to broaden the remit of panel meetings (Option 2, paragraph 11).
 - (c) drops its proposal for a Member Champion for each Neighbourhood Panel, as per the recommendation by Scrutiny and Overview and request that Ward Members (Option 3, paragraph 12):
 - (i) note district council issues relating to their ward and actions arising out of panel meetings, and bring them back to the council to ensure that they are considered; and/or
 - (ii) seek progress information prior to panel meetings, where an issue or action relating to their ward has previously been raised.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- Neighbourhood Panels report to Cambridgeshire County Council’s Cabinet on 2 December 2008.
- Local Area Agreement report to Cabinet on 8 May 2008.
- Scrutiny and Overview Committee Minutes, Thursday 8 January 2009.

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