

**LOCALITY WORKING
LOCAL JOINT COMMITTEES ANNUAL REPORT AND LOOKING FORWARD****Portfolio Holder** Cllr Gwilym Butler**Responsible Officer** Samantha Hine

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Summary

The Implementation Executive (IE) approved the way forward for locality working in unitary Shropshire at its meeting in March 2009, and made a commitment to review local partnership working and the effectiveness of the new Local Joint Committees within the first twelve to eighteen months of the new Council.

An evaluation has been undertaken of the Local Joint Committees (LJCs) and an Annual LJC Summit took place at the end of April which was very well attended and demonstrated strong commitment to retaining and further developing the LJC locality working approach.

The new Coalition Government has made it clear that devolution of powers to communities and neighbourhoods, and giving local people more control over key decisions, are central to its vision of a Big Society. Supporting active citizens and communities, better able to identify, articulate and meet their needs locally is a centrepiece of future public policy. The LJCs are well placed to rapidly evolve to be the ideal means of helping the Council translate this vision quickly into practical action in Shropshire.

This report presents the findings of the LJC evaluation, together with annual reports from each Committee, and proposes recommendations on the way forward over the next twelve months. It proposes an enhanced way of working, and running further pilots as exemplars of better practice for wider adoption across Shropshire over the next two years, and seeks Members' approval for this approach.

Recommendations

That Cabinet confirm that

- A. LJCs be re-named **Community Action Meetings** and confirmed as the key local involvement, empowerment, and governance mechanism for the Council across Shropshire.

- B. LJC's be recognised as key influencers in the Council's decision making and that increased delegation of responsibility and resources to more local control be investigated and implemented over the next two years
- C. options for rapid devolution of appropriate current centrally held budgets to local decision making by elected members, in consultation with LJC's, be investigated as a priority
- D. LJC's feed in to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny system, as set out in section 8 of this report
- E. grant funding procedures, appraisal processes and eligibility criteria be reviewed and streamlined and any necessary amendments to the Financial Regulations be implemented
- F. Changes to the Council's Constitution be made where necessary to reflect decisions made on this report, including changes to enable more flexibility on substitutions for parish representatives
- G. a Communications and Involvement Plan be developed, with increased publicity and regular promotion of LJC's through all Council communications
- H. direct support from senior management officers be phased out over the next six months and this be replaced with an "area sponsor" support role
- I. the function of the Community Working Team be reviewed in line with the Council's Transformation Programme and the outcomes of the current review of Councillors community leadership role in Shropshire
- J. an Annual Summit and twice yearly Chairman's meetings be held to share best practice and learning points as part of ongoing evaluation and improvement of LJC effectiveness
- K. further pilots be undertaken to assess the viability for a more enhanced role for LJC's, including for example:
 - liaison with market towns that want to engage more effectively on local regeneration activities, linked to the Market Town Revitalisation Programme
 - community safety and crime and disorder reduction in more vulnerable localities
 - building social capital and delivering community action in support of the transformation of social care and roll out of personalised budgets
- L. Moreton Say Parish and Adderley Parish join the Market Drayton Area LJC with immediate effect
- M. Brown Clee and Highley divisions work together as one LJC from 1st April 2011

- N. Broseley and Much Wenlock divisions work together as one LJC from 1st April 2011
- O. Shifnal and Albrighton divisions work together as one LJC from 1st April 2011
- P. the six Shrewsbury LJCs be discontinued from 1st April 2011 and a single LJC for the county town be created, supported by an appropriate number of neighbourhood forums
- Q. Bayston Hill as a single parish LJC be discontinued from 1st April 2011 and that discussions take place with local Members on options to join with either Shrewsbury (see P above) or Severn Valley and Burnell LJCs
- R. Oswestry as a single parish LJC be discontinued from 1st April 2011 and that discussions take place with adjoining divisions such as St Oswald and Whittington to create a new LJC for the area
- S. the boundaries of each market town LJC be reviewed to see whether alterations should be made that better reflect the town and its “natural” hinterland

REPORT

1. The Local Joint Committees have now been meeting across Shropshire for twelve months. Most have proved successful with good public attendance and a variety of local issues discussed and resolved. All Shropshire Councillors are playing an active role in their LJCs.
2. Whilst some progress has been made, such as input from communities in to the Council’s response to the recession, the full potential of the LJCs to shape and influence Council policy and local delivery of key services has yet to be realised.
3. A thorough evaluation of the LJCs has taken place over the last six months and the main findings are detailed in Appendix A. Various methods of gathering data have been employed including surveys, feedback at meetings, and discussion groups at the Annual Summit. **A summary of the evaluation findings** is shown below:
 - Public attendance is generally increasing, but widespread engagement, particularly from the harder to hear in our communities, is not yet happening.
 - There is no strong brand for the LJCs and promotion needs to improve to make it clearer how people can get involved and what the main purpose and benefits of the LJCs is.
 - The delegated budget is supporting significant amounts of small scale local community activity and is well received, but there are some concerns about consistency of approach and long term value for money.
 - The role LJCs play in scrutiny needs clarifying.
 - There is good partner involvement, particularly from the Local Policing Teams.

- The majority of parish councils are taking an active part in the committees.
 - The majority of people attending find the meetings to be worthwhile and repeat attendance is high.
4. The creation of Local Joint Committees and locality working was a key part of the business case for Shropshire Council. Similar arrangements have been established in most of the other new unitaries. Wiltshire obtained CAA Green Flag status for its Area Boards that work in much the same way as our LJCs. The new Coalition Government has signalled its strong commitment to more devolution of power and influence to communities from across the public sector.

Experience already in Shropshire demonstrates that such an objective needs to be supported by capacity building within our communities. The Community Leadership element of the Council's Transformation Programme is seeking to explore how this can most effectively and efficiently be achieved. LJCs provide Shropshire with an excellent basis to implement the civil society policies of the new Government, but to be effective they must be promoted, supported and encouraged to evolve quickly.

5. **Annual Reports**

Each LJC has produced a brief Annual Report, considering their main achievements and areas for improvement. These are shown at Appendix B. The budget commitments made by each committee in 2009/10 are shown as Appendix C.

6. **Geographies**

The LJC evaluation highlighted some concerns around whether the current geographies of the 28 committees are right and sustainable. The geographies were determined in 2009 following two years of pilots, the findings of the Electoral Boundaries Committee, and a period of consultation with town and parish councils.

Original principles applied in the determination of LJC geographies included:

- Retention of parish boundaries
- Reflection of natural communities of place, ie market towns and their hinterlands
- Shropshire Councillors to sit on no more than two LJCs
- LJCs be based on more than one electoral division and/or consist of more than one Shropshire Council elected Member

Due to some unresolved concerns at the time, and recognition that it is difficult to get this right when constrained by electoral boundaries and the balance between scale and manageability, the IE concluded that LJC geographies would be reviewed within the first 12-18 months of the new Council.

During the recent evaluation some specific issues around geographies have been identified, together with questions about the longer term sustainability of supporting 28 committees. Addressing this has become increasingly pertinent given the growing squeeze on public sector resources.

Achieving a balance between LJCs being large enough to have an impact and local enough to maximise community involvement is not easy.

It is proposed to reduce the overall number of LJCs, particularly in the county town of Shrewsbury, and to increase the coverage of the smallest committees. With slightly larger committees, covering more than one key settlement, the Council will need to be seen to be actively listening at the most local level. A key role for Local Members, and the parish and town council representatives, will be to ensure the most local issues are brought to the table and action is taken to resolve them.

An effective way to achieve this will be through further development of community led plans across the county and action focussed neighbourhood working in Shrewsbury.

The recommendations in this report would reduce the number of LJCs to 21.

7. Governance

The evaluation highlighted concerns from parish councils on the current procedure for substitutions. The Constitution states:

“Parish and Town Council substitutes at meetings will be allowed provided the represented body informs the Chair and Secretary 3 days prior to a meeting.”

It is accepted that this is too inflexible and, provided named substitutes are confirmed to the Committee Officer at the beginning of the year, then no further notice in advance of meetings should be required. The Council’s Constitution will need to be amended accordingly.

8. Scrutiny role of LJCs

Evaluation findings suggest LJCs could play a stronger role in scrutiny. LJCs should provide a powerful opportunity for communities to raise concerns about how council services are delivered in their patch. They should therefore have a direct line of input into the Council Overview and Scrutiny system, requesting the commissioning of reviews and enabling the relevant panel to consider whether issues of wider geographical significance are raised.

This approach to identification of issues for scrutiny to explore will be implemented as part of the wider changes heralded by the recent Council Scrutiny Review. Where a number of local areas are identifying similar or related concerns, this would strengthen the case for commissioning countywide scrutiny activity.

9. Community Involvement

Local Joint Committees offer a genuine opportunity for community involvement in the workings and decision making of the Council and our partners.

Whilst good initial progress has been made, most committees are grappling with how to maximise community involvement and get a more representative group of people through the doors to the meetings. It has been demonstrated over the last few months that, where people are concerned about an issue, they will come out in big numbers. The recent SAMDev consultations, many hosted by LJCs, brought people out in much larger numbers than many local meetings had seen before.

Low turnouts can be a demonstration of a community that is relatively content. However, considerable investment goes in to the LJC meetings and, as their very

purpose is to ensure local engagement, we must find ways to get more people involved.

With the difficult financial decisions the Council faces over the coming months and years, the opportunity for honest discussions with our citizens through the LJC's should be promoted and embraced. The mechanism is in place, and utilising the LJC's for the planned budget consultations through the summer and autumn demonstrates the Council's commitment to listen to and consider carefully the views of local people.

We have learned over the last year, and indeed through the pilots, that the style of meeting is critical to its success in relation to community involvement.

An open and welcoming approach, with discussion items encouraged that directly involve those attending are critical. The evaluation results show that there is a high level of repeat attendance. We need to work hard to ensure those that are engaged continue to come and that new people also get interested enough to want to get involved.

10. Branding and Promotion

Critical to the future success of any locality working is effective engagement of local people. All council services, including the Customer Service Centre should promote opportunities for people to get involved in their community. Voluntary and community organisations which the council already works with should be encouraged to mobilise their membership, as should local business sector networks.

There is clear feedback from the evaluation that the current suite of posters is not effective. Only a very small number of attendees come due to seeing a poster, the majority attend through direct invitation. The balance on the posters between visual image and information is not presently correct. These posters will be discontinued.

The name Local Joint Committee (LJC) is not ideal for attracting community engagement. A "Committee" implies that it is something other people are on, rather than something for all to take part in.

It is proposed that something more user friendly and descriptive of purpose is adopted, whilst the legal entity of a joint committee will remain in force. It should be something simple that explains what it is whilst being inviting for local people to take part.

Options include: Community Action Meetings; Community Boards; Local Area Forums; Local Meetings; Community Voice.

A Communications and Involvement Plan, and an ongoing promotions campaign, will be developed and implemented to improve awareness of what the offer is and to encourage greater attendance from a broader cross section of our communities.

11. Community Budgets

Each LJC has a delegated budget calculated on population, plus a sparsity factor for our most rural areas. No changes are proposed at present to the way the budget allocation is determined.

At the end of March 2010, 82% of the annual budget had been committed,

supporting 470 local community projects (see Appendix C). Many LJCs fully committed their allocation. The greatest area of under commitment was within the Shrewsbury LJCs and Bayston Hill. (Bayston Hill determined not to commit any funding in 2009/10 pending the outcomes of the refresh of their Parish Plan.)

The majority of the funding has been allocated through community chest schemes to local community and voluntary sector groups, with grants ranging from a few hundred to several thousand pounds. There is some inconsistency across the county with some LJCs accepting requests for funding from parish councils and others not, preferring to prioritise projects from organisations without precepting powers. These are local decisions.

Applications from Shropshire Council services are discouraged, unless they are in direct response to clearly demonstrated community need, where the Council is the only appropriate provider and it is to deliver a one off event or activity. There have been some service enhancements funded, mainly around youth provision and activities for young people.

The current process for determining the many requests for Community Chest funding is very time intensive. All committees meet in advance of their public meetings to consider the applications in detail in order that informed recommendations can be made to the main meeting.

It is proposed that the appraisal process be standardised and streamlined, with decision making being made at the meetings, based on a summary of the request and recommendations of an appraising panel.

Value for money from activities supported and positive impacts within communities to improve the local quality of life are essential. Moving forward the Community Chest grant process must ensure clear audit and reporting back of outcomes and these should be reported annually to full Council with effect from 2010/11.

It is proposed that the opportunity to devolve greater influence and decision making to the LJCs on mainstream budgets, and/or ringfencing LJC budgets for key priority themes, such as youth, streetscene, culture be explored as part of the Council's Transformation programme.

12. Delegation and devolution

The level and range of decision making by LJCs beyond that related to the currently delegated budget has been minimal to date. They have the potential, however, to be the platform for more extensive devolution of responsibility for taking decisions about some services at a level which is most directly relevant and accountable to the people who use them.

Local Councillors, working together with town and parish councillors, are uniquely democratically accountable to their electorate. Devolution to local members, through the LJCs, is a powerful way of bringing decision making closer to communities.

To give this opportunity to local people, LJCs need the power to influence and shape how local services are delivered and help the Council respond effectively to local issues and distinctive priorities. To do this effectively, accountability needs to

follow responsibility. Where devolution of decision making occurs, it's critical that accountability for performance rests at the same level.

It is proposed that options be explored to give LJs power to make decisions about a range of service areas, provided such a decision does not:

- have a significant impact outside the area concerned
- impact significantly on the overall resources of the Council
- contradict any policy or service standard set by the Council, defined through the Community Strategy and/or Corporate Plan
- involve the taking of regulatory or quasi-judicial decisions
- relate to the exercise of functions in respect of any particular person.

In addition any key decisions or policy proposals of the Council that has, or is likely to have a **particular and significant** impact in the local area, should first be discussed with the appropriate LJ.

With reference to the Wiltshire model and others, options for possible consideration and exploration of delegated decision making, putting responsibility for taking well informed decisions more directly into the hands of Shropshire Councillors and local council representatives in consultation with local people through LJs, include;

- youth provision – with local devolution dependent upon the LJ being able to demonstrate young people are actively involved in the decision making process,
- local streetscene initiatives – including road safety, street lighting, traffic management, street cleansing schemes
- cultural and leisure services – including support for local facilities, community arts and sports grants
- efficient use of public sector property and assets – engaging local people in decisions about making better use, and promoting community ownership of local resources

Care obviously needs to be taken to ensure that any delegation of such decision making doesn't result in a loss of economies of scale and thus efficiency currently achieved through a countywide approach. A range of options will be explored and piloted over the next twelve months, from full devolution through to the ability to direct priorities.

13. Officer Support

Each Local Joint Committee is supported by a Lead Officer from the Council's Senior Management Team, a Support Officer, a Committee Services Officer and a Community Regeneration Officer. The involvement of senior Council officers in LJs has been beneficial, providing sustained exposure to community issues and to local member priorities across the organisation.

However, this arrangement is unsustainable in the context of the current and projected budget for the council. It's proposed that at the end of this financial year, the Support Officer and Lead Officer role be phased out.

The Community Regeneration Officer (CRO) role will be significantly redefined as

part of the transformation programme and it is proposed that they, together with the Committee Services Officer, provide the main ongoing support to Shropshire Councillors at their LJs.

In addition, and to further embed the importance of locality working within the Council, it is proposed to nominate “area sponsors” from the Council’s second tier of management. These “area sponsors” will retain a link with local community issues and offer senior management input if required whilst taking a less direct role in the workings of the committees.

The Council’s transformation programme is considering how best to achieve effective locality management and the Big Society in Shropshire. Local Members in their role as community leaders are critical. A more focused, clearer role for a restructured Community Working Team can support this by;

- Working with local members to resolve local issues - including those that cut across a range of services or agencies
- Supporting community groups to develop their capacity and capability to take on elements of service delivery through delegation
- Building social capital to enable communities to do more themselves, reducing costs for the council in direct service delivery
- Supporting effective community involvement in service design, delivery and, rationalisation to create more efficient services where they are still needed
- Helping frontline services and partners recruit volunteers, promote services with the community and maximise their impact
- Providing early warning to Local Members, service managers and partners on key local issues of concern – trouble shooting where possible

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)
Human Rights Act Appraisal There are non arising directly from this report
Environmental Appraisal There are non arising directly from this report
Risk Management Appraisal There are non arising directly from this report
Community / Consultations Appraisal Widespread community involvement and consultation and annual evaluation.
Cabinet Member Gwilym Butler
Local Member All

Appendices

Appendix A – LJC Evaluation Summary Findings

Appendix B – Annual Reports

Appendix C – Delegated budget commitments 2009/10