

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (EXTERNAL)

18<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2007

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PRESENT	Councillor Mrs. Lee (Chair) Councillors Anderson, V. Shuttleworth and Mrs. Todd
APOLOGIES	Councillors Buckham, Mrs. Seabury and Ward
ADVISERS	R. Bowman, Scrutiny Manager and Cllr. Neil Stonehouse, Leader, Wear Valley District Council

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**06. TO PROGRESS THE LAA (LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT) REVIEW – INTERVIEW WITH COUNCILLOR NEIL STONEHOUSE, LEADER, WEAR VALLEY DISTRICT COUNCIL**

The Chair welcomed the Leader to the meeting and thanked him for his attendance.

**Q1. What is your role in the LAA?**

The Leader participates in two capacities – as Chair of the Wear Valley LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) and as the Leader of Wear Valley District Council. The primary objective is to monitor the performance of the LAA in terms of its stretch targets and its outcomes.

**Q2. What impact has LAA activity had on Wear Valley?**

The impact of the LAA has not been great, nor has it always been visible to the public. Members stated that the LAA does not seem to be organised well. The Leader responded that some are run well, citing Sheffield LAA as an example. He further described how LAAs may work better in metropolitan or unitary authority areas, as there is less confusion over responsibilities and competencies. Members stated that the LAA did appear bureaucratic, and more top-down than bottom-up.

**Q3. Can you describe Wear Valley District Council's current influence on the LAA? How can Wear Valley District Council improve its influence on the LAA?**

The district council puts some bottom-up influence back into the LAA. The work of the LSP Manager has also been vital in bringing localities into the LAA framework. It was queried whether the Parish Councils have a role in the LAA. The Leader responded that he was not aware that they had a role. He went on to describe how the lack of member influence on the LAA Board rendered it technocratic and relatively opaque, as several County

Council officers monopolised senior positions. It was stated by a member of the committee that the LAA sounded a lot like the Wear Valley LSP in terms of officer dominance of the proceedings. The Leader described how the LSP had evolved differently as the Community Network had gelled strongly with it. In the past there had been mistrust between the Community Network and elected members, although this was now not the case. Despite the influence of the Community Network on the LSP, there is only one community element representative on the LAA Board. It was described by the Leader as very much a top-based arrangement. The committee queried the impact that a County Durham unitary authority would have on the LAA. The Leader responded that the new LAAs that are being introduced predate the inauguration of the new unitary structure by only a short time. The new LAAs have more flexibility in that targets can be picked from a selection offered by the government. Overall numbers of targets have been reduced, and local targets can now be formulated in conjunction with Government Office North East (GONE). The Leader expressed uncertainty as to whether LSPs will continue to exist; under those circumstances there will be a need to incorporate a commitment to locality. The new LAAs may operate better as the bureaucracy should be simpler in the absence of the LSPs, this in turn may promote greater accountability and transparency. Members queried the monitoring by the LAA of voluntary sector funding. The Leader stated that the voluntary sector had not received funding to any great extent. He also pointed out that measurement of performance is done reasonably well. That does not mean that all initiatives are necessarily delivering.

**Q4. To what extent are all partners in the LAA active in it? How do you think that greater involvement of the LAA partners can be promoted?**

Partners do turn up but find it difficult to participate fully because the documentation and discussions are so technical. A small group of officers run proceedings, which can make it very opaque. Partners tend to be more active when LAA activities have an affect on their specific area. There is not a great deal of member involvement as the officers dominate, thanks to their continual professional involvement in the LAA.

**Q5. Please describe the current accountability processes in the LAA. How can they be improved upon?**

The LSP feeds issues into the LAA following debate. Further involvement of councillors would be highly desirable. The LAA prevents this as it is a highly technical exercise. Councillors either don't see the LAA as important or don't feel able to make a contribution. This is mainly because officers dominate the proceedings as they most regularly attend meetings. This is definitely an issue that the new LAAs will have to address. The LSP accountability process is not bad. The best way for members to be able to influence the LAA is through Wear Valley District Council's Policy and Strategic Development Committee or through the Chief Executive. Information on LAA activities could be supplied through the Members' Newsletter.

**Q6. How can local interest in the LAA be improved?**

It needs to be made simpler and less bureaucratic. It also needs to be more mobile and move around to other venues other than its current main venue at Aykley Heads. There needs to be more publicity as its profile is very low among the general public. It was questioned whether a newsletter is produced. The Leader responded that to his knowledge, there was not.

**Q7. How can the LAA itself be improved?**

The Leader reiterated several points. The LAA Board needs to be more accessible and less bureaucratic. Greater involvement by elected members would link the Board more closely to the public. There needs to be more local based input and less emphasis on the core of senior, county-level officers who predominantly steer the Board.

The Chair thanked the Leader for his contribution.

**CHAIR**

Meeting concluded at 6:15pm