

**Cabinet**

**16 March 2022**

**Review of Community Engagement  
and Funding Processes**

**Ordinary Decision**



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## **Report of Corporate Management Team**

**Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and  
Climate Change**

**Councillor Elizabeth Scott, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for  
Economy and Partnerships**

**Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide

### **Purpose of the Report**

- 1 To provide Cabinet with an outline of a planned review of the community engagement and funding processes currently provided by our Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) and to set out the scope of the review, governance arrangement and proposed timescales for its completion.

### **Report Summary**

- 2 The Council carries out a number of community engagement functions across its services. One of the vehicles that is used to engage with the public is through Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). AAPs have been in operation since 2009 when the new Unitary County Council was established. AAPs have been a key way of engaging on a more local level across a large Council area comprising over 530,000 people.
- 3 Since then, the Council's community engagement work has constantly evolved in terms of new work areas, management of budgets and new approaches to engage with the community, including providing a local response to the COVID pandemic and local resilience support to Storm Arwen and Storm Malik.
- 4 There is a need for the Council to ensure it effectively discharges its duty to consult with the public on important local decisions and also

there is the opportunity to enhance the support provided to local Elected Members in their community champion role.

- 5 Over recent years national and local agendas have changed and innovation needs to continue. We need to ensure that our community engagement mechanisms are fit for the future and that they continue to meet the corporate needs of the Council and our key partners and deliver outcomes for our communities and Councillors. For example, there is an exciting opportunity to look at how we could potentially enhance more 'area based' delivery across our communities. This review will look at a series of issues and key questions to ensure that we can respond appropriately.

### **Recommendation**

- 6 Cabinet is recommended to note the content of this report and agree:
- (a) the principle of undertaking a review of the Council's community engagement functions, including the work of AAPs;
  - (b) the scope of the review set out in paragraphs 29 – 31;
  - (c) the proposed review timescales set out in paragraph 44;
  - (d) the review governance arrangements set out in paragraphs 38 – 41.

## Background

- 7 After 12 full years of operation since becoming a new Unitary Council, it is appropriate that the Council conduct an independent review of its community engagement processes. The review will provide an opportunity to examine a range of issues and ensure the service continues to deliver quality outcomes for the people of County Durham. The review will look at what changes are required to support a range of new emerging agendas to ensure Durham's is known as a listening and engaging Council.
- 8 Currently our principal structures for community engagement are Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). AAPs were a fundamental part of Durham County Council's bid for Unitary Council status. They became operational in Spring 2009 with work focused around 4 key aims: Engagement, Empowerment, Local Action and Performance Review.
- 9 County Durham is served by 14 AAPs based around local geography, with boundaries agreed through extensive local consultation. While the size of population covered by AAPs differs, the structure of the AAP Board remains the same with 21 Board members representing 3 different groupings, members of the public, elected members and partner representative covering the following sectors; Police, Fire, Health, Housing, Voluntary Sector, Business Sector and a DCC Head of Service.
- 10 Through the work of the AAPs the Council has allocated £59.5 million to over 10,000 community-based projects, leveraging in £69.7 million of external matched funding. Resulting in a funding return ratio of £1.29 for every £1 of DCC investment.
- 11 In July 2011 Overview and Scrutiny Management Board undertook a Review of AAPs entitled 'Fit for the Present, Fit for the Future'. This review made a series of recommendations which were acted on and implemented at the time.
- 12 Although AAPs have continued to evolve over the last 12 years in terms of adjusting to new policy areas and funding allocations, no fundamental review has been conducted that considers how AAPs are placed to support the new corporate priorities of the Council and the wider needs of the County Durham Partnership.

## **Initial Engagement with Elected Councillors**

- 14 May 2021 Local Government Election's saw 58 new Councillors join Durham County Council. This was felt to be a good opportunity to obtain some initial views on the Council's community engagement work and feedback on how the AAPs are currently operating.
- 15 From the overall feedback received from the 61 returns, there was clear recognition for the need for countywide engagement of communities. There was strong support for both the presence of locality staff bases and the impact of having delegated locality budgets. The need for AAPs to focus on delivering local action was also a key finding from the survey.
- 16 However, the feedback identified a number of areas that a review should consider, including the reach of our AAPs, how consultation is conducted with AAPs, Board structures and decision-making processes to ensure speedier decision making to deliver more immediate impact on the ground.
- 17 After 12 years it was recognised that many AAPs have developed different processes as the Board culture has evolved. An evaluation of this to identify any areas of good practice and learning was seen as a positive aspect to a future review, whilst at the same time identifying areas for improvement.
- 18 The initial feedback received from the Councillors has been built into the review scope outlined in paragraph 33 of the report.

## **Engagement with Partners**

- 19 A key strength of the current structure is the regular engagement from a range of partners and also the wider public through the local Boards, Task and Finish Groups and the AAP Forum process.
- 20 In developing the suggested scope of the review, initial engagement has taken place with key partners from the County Durham Partnership, who occupy AAP Board positions to ensure that the overall objectives and themes of the review can capture their potential future engagement needs moving forward. It is also proposed that a member of the County Durham Partnership sit on the Review Steering Group to ensure their involvement throughout this process. Further details are contained in paragraph 41.
- 21 Information outlining the main principles of the review and its suggested draft scope has also been shared with the 14 AAP Boards. This will be confirmed following consideration of the proposed review scope by Cabinet.

## Changes in the Community Engagement Environment

- 22 One area that the review needs an active focus on is the national context emerging from Government on how communities could influence decision making in the future. For example the new Levelling Up white paper outlines a desire to *“Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost”*. One of the 12 Levelling Up ‘Missions’ is - *Pride in place, such as people’s satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community*. We need to consider what structures could support that work.
- 23 Also the Procurement Social Value agenda is one where local engagement could play a more significant role in determining local needs and aspirations that could be supported by the wider spending power of the Council through our procurement processes.
- 24 Councils from across the country have visited us to learn from our approach, but it is felt that we now also need to reflect more on national best practice, as it has developed since 2009, that would further enhance our own service delivery.

## AAP Funding and local delivery

- 25 Since 2009, the budgets aligned to AAPs have constantly evolved. As AAPs have cemented their place at the forefront of local engagement, many other funding streams from across the Council and of other organisations have been devolved down to the local level for locally based allocation.
- 26 In 2021/2022 AAPs have the following budgets aligned to them;
- AAP Area Budget (DCC) £100,000;
  - Older People Social Isolation Fund £25,000;
  - Youth Grant £9,902;
  - Welfare Assistance Grant £10,000;
  - COVID Restoration Grant £100,000;
  - Towns & Villages Funding £210,000.
- 27 Whilst the existence of these budget has been positive in terms of grant giving to deliver local action, the capacity of local Teams (most with only 2.5 FTE staff) has been stretched and a balance has had to be struck between the project development, application and grant

monitoring processes and the opportunity to undertake more grass roots community development work. This needs to be examined further through the proposed review.

- 28 Through the initial feedback on the Storm Arwen response, it is clear that our AAPs played a critical role in connecting with many community and voluntary sector groups which stepped up to provide support to our communities. This therefore provides us with a potential opportunity to build on that work and consider how community structures are placed to support future emergency resilience situations.

## **Review Scope**

- 29 The review will focus on assessing our current structures and governance with a view to ensuring the Council has a community engagement mechanism that provides support for our communities in line with the Council's future vision and priorities and also reflects the needs of the wider County Durham Partnership.
- 30 As highlighted above, there are a range of ideas that will be built into the review to establish what opportunities exist to transform aspects of the AAPs work.
- 31 The Review will focus on the following key themes:
- reflect on what we do well and look at opportunities for future development backed by national good practice;
  - review of governance and decision-making processes;
  - to consider local Board membership and remit;
  - to review if the AAP geography is still appropriate after 12 years of operation
  - management of funding vs capacity to support more grass roots Community Development work;
  - funding arrangements and timescales for funding awards;
  - how do we adapt so that we improve local delivery of wider Council priorities?;
  - how can local structures best provide effective support to Councillors?;

- to review the developing national picture and how community engagement will inform government strategies such as Levelling Up and Left Behind Neighbourhoods etc;
- Local Area Delivery & Resilience;
- review opportunities for local engagement to influence social value;
- Local Economic Development & links with the Inclusive Economic Strategy;
- Our Council Vision includes 'Connected Communities' engagement will be key to this – what form should that take and how should AAPs be involved.

## **Review Methodology**

- 32 The intention is to appoint a third-party independent specialist to carry out the review. Therefore, the exact methodology used to gain feedback to inform the review will be influenced by the organisation which is appointed to undertake the review. As a key point of principle, we would expect the review to include dedicated engagement with the people who make up the AAP Board structure. This would include face to face or virtual interviews and focus groups with AAP Boards and also engagement with a sample of representatives who have previously held an AAP Board position over the past 12 years of operation. This will ensure that the review is balanced, and we involve the people who are critical to the current work of the AAPs.
- 33 The review will also look at our current decision making and funding processes to look for any efficiencies and improvements to ensure better and quicker outcomes for our communities.

## **Stakeholder Mapping**

- 34 The review will look to seek opinion and views from a wide range of stakeholders including:
- Key Partner Organisations;
  - Elected Members;
  - Town and Parish Councils;

- Voluntary Sector Organisations including those who have received funding support from AAPs;
- The wider public (including those not previously engaged in AAP activity) to assess the current reach of the AAPs;
- AAP Chairs (Past and Present);
- AAP Board and Forum Members including Public & Partner Representatives;
- DCC Heads of Service who sit on AAP Boards;
- AAP Staff;
- Local Voluntary Groups/Organisations;
- Other Council departments;
- Comparator/visiting Local Authorities.

35 How these stakeholders are engaged with will be determined by the Team undertaking the review.

## **Procurement**

36 The Review will be carried out by an independent body, and as such, a detailed procurement process will be carried out to appoint a suitable organisation to undertake the review. Desktop research is currently being undertaken to establish a long list of possible consultants and the Head of Procurement, Sales and Business Services has been contacted to support this process. The appointment will be conducted through the 'Bloom' procurement process.

37 The cost of the review will be met from within the Neighbourhoods and Climate Change service budget.

## **Governance of the Review**

38 A single officer Point of Responsibility will be aligned to the review process. This role will be responsible for communication with, and direction of the appointed consultants. They will act as a bridge between the consultants and elected members, staff and



stakeholders. They will deliver regular feedback to all interested parties.

39 A Review Steering Group will also be created to act as the interface with the independent consultants undertaking the review.

40 The Review Steering Group will include a mix of Council officers. Proposed membership includes the following representatives:

- Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships;
- Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change;
- Head of Service for Partnerships and Community Engagement;
- Chair of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board;
- Member of the County Durham Partnership;
- Head of Strategy and Transformation;
- Single officer Point of Responsibility.

41 The Review Steering Group will agree the overall methodology with the appointed consultants and also review its work plan to discharge the completion of the review. It will be used to test out initial feedback and agree any additional items of scope / investigation.

### **Engagement with Staff**

42 The dedicated staff aligned to AAPs have been so critical to the work done over the past 12 years. They have had to adapt to many different demands placed upon their work and they remain a critical resource to ensure both the success of the review and also in supporting any findings and recommendations that emerge from the completed review process.

43 A staff briefing session has been held prior to Cabinet receiving this report to ensure staff are aware of the wider principles of the review. Initial engagement has also taken place with Trade Unions to make them aware of the proposed review.

### **Proposed Review Timeline**

44 An envisaged timeline was shared at the Cabinet Transformation. This will be subject to review throughout the review process and will be governed by the Review Steering Group.

## **February (Activity already undertaken)**

- Held Staff Briefing Session
- Communication to AAP Boards on the proposed scope of the review prior to the Cabinet Report being published.
- Engagement with key partners on the scope of the Review.
- Engagement with DCC Procurement to soft market test the Review and develop the Bloom invitation to tender.

## **March**

- Report to 16 March Cabinet
- Start the appointment process for the consultants to undertake the Review

## **April – May**

- Commence Review (subject to selected consultants' ability to hit that start date)

## **Autumn 2022**

- Initial review findings received
- Report back to Cabinet on the implementation of the findings and a timeframe for their implementation

## **Conclusion**

- 45 After over 12 years of operation, it is appropriate to conduct a review of our community engagement and funding processes, to ensure the Council's community engagement mechanisms to provide the support and investment for our communities in line with our future vision and priorities.
- 46 By having an independent organisation conduct the review we can obtain an unbiased view on any improvements that may be required to ensure the Council engages with communities in a meaningful way that ensures residents feel empowered and able to influence service provision and support community action in the coming years.

## **Other useful documents**

- None

**Author(s)**

Alan Patrickson

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

The review team will need to be aware of the AAP Terms of Reference and the delegated authorities originally signed off by Cabinet.

### **Finance**

A detailed procurement process will be undertaken to select an organisation to undertake the review. A budget has been identified to meet the costs of the review.

### **Consultation**

The planned AAP review will consult with many different stakeholders as identified in the report before any recommendations and findings come forward.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

There is a need to make sure that engagement is inclusive and includes hard to reach audiences. Any revised engagement arrangements will need to take account of and discharge the Council's public sector equality duty. As the review reports any key findings with respect to this area, it may be necessary to conduct an EIA and the implications fed into the outcome report which will be brought back to Cabinet in due course.

### **Climate change**

None identified.

### **Human Rights**

None identified.

### **Crime and Disorder**

None identified.

### **Staffing**

There is a need to engage with all AAP staff to ensure they are aware of the aims of the review and the timescales we are working to.

### **Accommodation**

None identified.

### **Risk**

A number of risks exist that could impact on the delivery of this proposal. This includes not being able to recruit a suitable organisation to undertake the review, or not being able to hit our envisaged timeline. Risks also exist

in terms of ensuring appropriate engagement with stakeholders and this will be tested during the selection phase for the organisation who will conduct the review.

### **Procurement**

A full procurement process will need to take place and work is ongoing to commence that following this decision.