

3 April 2023

Community Engagement Review

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

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

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on the findings from the independent consultant on the review of the council's community engagement function and our approach to a public countywide consultation.

Executive Summary

- 2 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, including reducing inequalities and our continued implementation of the approach to wellbeing to deliver improved outcomes for our communities.
- 3 Following agreement by Cabinet in March 2022, consultants ERS were appointed to undertake an impartial and unbiased review of the council's community engagement function i.e. the work of AAPs. The consultant's review commenced in June 2022 and concluded in January 2023.
- 4 The final report detailing the consultant's findings and recommendations (appendix 2) analyses the data from interactions with hundreds of stakeholders, through interviews, focus groups, surveys and observations etc.

- 5 The consultant's research found that AAPs are well established and provide a focus for informing, enabling, and monitoring activity in response to identified community priorities. The research also identified that AAP capacity is invaluable during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to Storm Arwen. The AAP staff team are exceptionally well regarded and are open to looking at new approaches to delivering positive change for communities.
- 6 However, the consultant's research identified that AAPs evoke a diverse range of opinions. Nevertheless, in general, levels of satisfaction and support for the principles and functioning of AAPs is high, particularly from people engaged with them.
- 7 The review found that the diversity and effectiveness of community outreach and engagement has reduced over recent years, in part due to resource pressures across the team and the impact of COVID-19. Regular and direct community involvement in AAP Boards is limited to a relatively small number of individuals per AAP, although some areas do perform better in this regard. The research identified widespread agreement amongst those engaged that opportunities exist to improve how the community are engaged and funding is prioritised.
- 8 The consultant recommends implementing a 'hyper-local' community engagement network model to further help the council to understand and respond to local needs effectively, and increase involvement of community partners in creating local action e.g. this is especially relevant in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Storm Arwen. To achieve this model of 'Community Networks' the consultant has identified a range of recommendations around four main areas covering: model; boundaries; funding; and community development paragraphs 29-33.
- 9 The council is currently consulting with staff, elected members, AAP Board and Forum members, key partners, residents and other interested parties on the changes that have been proposed in the independent review of our current approach. This consultation commenced on 13 March 2023 and will end 23 April 2023.
- 10 An equalities impact assessment screening has been completed detailing the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups for the consultation process. In summary the proposals for consultation do not disproportionately impact (both negatively and positively) the protected characteristics. This assessment will be updated throughout and following the consultation to assess the impact of the proposed changes.

- 11 The consultation will provide an opportunity to seek feedback from stakeholders in relation to the council's proposals for a future community engagement model with the aim of taking final proposals to Cabinet in June 2023.

Recommendations

- 12 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board is recommended to:
 - (i) note the findings and recommendations of ERS consultants' final report;
 - (ii) note the approach to the countywide consultation and consider what views it may wish to submit to the consultation; and
 - (iii) note the opportunity for all elected members to submit individual views via the online survey.

Background

- 13 The Council carries out a number of community engagement functions across its services. The main vehicle that is used to engage with the public is through Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). Our 14 AAPs have been in operation since 2009 and have helped to fund over 10,000 community-based projects.
- 14 We want to ensure our community engagement continues to meet the future needs of our communities, councillors, and key partners, and we particularly want to understand how communities can be more involved in influencing local decision making by determining needs strengths, and aspirations.
- 15 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, including reducing inequalities and our continued implementation of the approach to wellbeing to deliver improved outcomes for our communities.
- 16 Following agreement by Cabinet in March 2022, consultants ERS were appointed to undertake an impartial and unbiased review of the council's community engagement function i.e. the work of AAPs. The consultant's review commenced in June 2022 and concluded in January 2023.
- 17 Overseen by a member/officer steering group, ERS delivered a robust, open and inclusive consultation and engagement process with a strong focus on engaging stakeholders with an existing appreciation of how AAPs currently operate and how community engagement is currently delivered e.g. including but not exclusive to staff, AAP Board and Forum members, partners and elected members etc.
- 18 The final report detailing the consultant's findings and recommendations (appendix 2) analyses the data from interactions with hundreds of stakeholders, through interviews, focus groups, surveys and observations etc. and identifies that AAPs evoke a diverse range of opinions.
- 19 Against the context of increasing budgetary pressures, the consultant's report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving our focus on community development and enhance the capacity of local communities and individuals to become more involved in improving their area.

Consultant's findings

- 20 The consultant's research found that AAPs are well established and provide a focus for informing, enabling, and monitoring activity in response to identified community priorities. AAP Board meetings largely operate well in prioritising and managing a range of funding streams and the process for developing, appraising and agreeing projects is robust.
- 21 AAP Boards provide a space for the council and partners to consult on key strategies and task and finish groups are effective in developing ideas and solutions to local issues.
- 22 The research also identified that AAP capacity is invaluable during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to Storm Arwen. The AAP staff team are exceptionally well regarded and are open to looking at new approaches to delivering positive change for communities.
- 23 However, the consultant's research identified that AAPs evoke a diverse range of opinions. Nevertheless, in general, levels of satisfaction and support for the principles and functioning of AAPs is high, particularly from people engaged with them.
- 24 The review found that the diversity and effectiveness of community outreach and engagement has reduced over recent years, in part due to resource pressures across the team and the impact of COVID-19. Regular and direct community involvement in AAP Boards is limited to a relatively small number of individuals per AAP, although some areas do perform better in this regard. The research identified widespread agreement amongst those engaged that opportunities exist to improve how the community are engaged and funding is prioritised.
- 25 The AAP approach was found to have become too focussed upon managing funding and not sufficiently focussed on the wider initial AAP objectives of engagement, empowerment and performance review. Significant potential exists to involve many more people via enhanced community engagement and community development.
- 26 Opportunities to shape policy or include the voice of diverse communities in partner consultations channelled via the AAP Board are limited. AAP Board meetings routinely spend too much time discussing and agreeing funding proposals rather than enabling open and meaningful consideration of community issues. It is not always clear how the AAPs' identification of local needs is considered in the development of wider strategy and policy by wider partners. There is a requirement to consider how to better inform strategic priorities with local needs assessments and how to respond collectively and efficiently to those needs. Similarly, it is not always clear how the

strategies in turn support or impact local decision making by AAP Boards on funding. Funding priorities are driven by community priorities and not sufficiently informed by quantitative data.

- 27 Whilst the process of agreeing individual projects is robust, it draws considerable staff resource that should be utilised engaging directly with communities. The funding approval process is intensive for applicants, especially those repeating the process year on year for the same type of intervention. Some organisations do not apply for funding due to process barriers.
- 28 There are inconsistencies in how some AAPs operate and some AAP Boards do not function consistently well. The potential for political conflict in some AAPs reduces the effectiveness of partnership working by making board meetings more combative in tone. This can act as a disincentive for non-politically motivated people to participate.

Consultant's recommendations

- 29 The consultant recommends implementing a 'hyper-local' community engagement network model to further help the council to understand and respond to local needs effectively, and increase involvement of community partners in creating local action e.g. this is especially relevant in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Storm Arwen. To achieve this model of 'Community Networks' the consultant has identified a range of recommendations around four main areas covering: model; boundaries; funding; and community development.

Model

- 30 The consultant recommends that we take steps to further enhance community engagement by improving our extensive local networks so that they can better understand the strengths of our communities, involve more and a wider range of participants, respond to local needs effectively and involve partners in achieving solutions together. Key proposals are:
- replace AAP Boards with community networks. AAP Board meetings would be replaced with community network meetings, meeting every two months, open to all, not have a core Board membership and be chaired by a senior community coordinator (i.e. member of staff);
 - base our community network meetings around a new theme at each meeting e.g. environment and climate change, economy, safer communities, health and wellbeing, and children and young people etc.;

- ensure staff spend less time on managing budgets in order that, in addition to network meetings, they use other methods to engage with communities; and
- work more closely with our communities by being more visible. This could include community network teams working in community centres, libraries and/or family hubs etc.

Boundaries

- 31 The consultant recommends the introduction of more evenly sized geographical community network areas based on population and proposes three options to consider:
- keep our current existing geographical boundaries but split East Durham AAP into two or three community networks;
 - align our boundaries with new electoral wards (following the ongoing Boundary Commission Review) and divide into seven community networks which would be introduced following the May 2025 local election; or
 - align with the 13 NHS Primary Care Network (PCN) boundaries but create 14 community networks by splitting Derwentside PCN into two areas given its large size.

Funding

- 32 The consultant recommends streamlining the project approval process to enable staff to allocate more time to working in, and with, communities. Recommendations include:
- introduce a small Community Chest fund where discretionary grants of up to £300 could be awarded by community development workers to support new and/or small-scale activity with a more straightforward and simple approval process;
 - replace the current Area Budget with Strategic Grants which are allocated on a four-year funding cycle, in line with the election cycle. Funding proposals would be developed by co-ordinators during year one in consultation with their Community Network and local councillors. Approvals would be given by the County Durham Partnership at the end of year one providing projects up to three years assured funding i.e. from April 2026.
 - in advance of the new four-year system being introduced, funding is focussed on tackling the cost of living crisis; and
 - create a simpler approach to consider and approve County Councillors' Neighbourhood Budgets, especially where we have requests from repeat applicants. Also, the need to report back to the community networks regarding the Neighbourhood Budget would be removed.

Community development

- 33 The consultant recommends an improved focus on community development to enhance the capacity of local communities and increase the number of individuals who become more involved in improving their area. Staff are recommended to carry out the following activities to engage with more people so they understand objectives of community networks, understand how to engage and appreciate the value generated:
- build on community engagement within local areas and ensure people continue to be involved in development, changes and decisions that affect them;
 - support partners including residents and voluntary community sector organisations;
 - help local people to develop new projects and get their initiatives up and running;
 - help organisations to secure funding for the first time;
 - identify gaps in local voluntary and community sector provisions;
 - be visible in our communities and more able to react to changing priorities. especially in areas where they need this the most;
 - support intelligence and knowledge gathering on local priorities;
 - manage the new Community Chest process; and
 - work closely with councillors to share local information that will help inform decision making.

Consultation approach and timeline

- 34 A consultation working group has been established to enable the project team to work with the council's consultation officer group, equalities team and corporate communications team to develop the consultation plan and ensure that the key messages are effectively conveyed to all stakeholders involved in a timely manner.
- 35 The consultation plan and activities are built on the pre-consultation information and engagement work which was undertaken with the County Durham Partnership Forum on 14 February 2023 and the County Durham Together Partnership on 3 March 2023 which helped us develop the consultation approach.
- 36 The council is consulting with staff, elected members, AAP Board and Forum members, key partners, residents and other interested parties on the changes that have been proposed in the independent review of our current approach. This consultation will take place between 13 March 2023 and 23 April 2023. The consultation will seek feedback on

their views of the four areas of recommendations from the consultant detailed in paragraphs 29-33.

37 The consultation has been planned and will be implemented in accordance with the council's Consultation Statement and Consultation Protocol (March 2019) and will be undertaken to comply with statutory and government guidance, as well as the general requirements of public law.

38 Consultation activities and methods include:

- attendance and discussion at staff briefing sessions;
- briefing/summary document for key stakeholders including elected members;
- online/paper survey form seeking feedback on the key proposals;
- attendance and discussion at key stakeholder meetings;
- series of online briefings for AAP Board and Forum members;
- a web page outlining the consultation with links to the consultant's report, online survey and dedicated email address for feedback and questions;
- social media signposting to the web page and online survey; and
- County Durham News article signposting to the web page and online survey.

39 The consultation process will be undertaken in accordance with the timeline below:

Activity	Start	End
Consultation period (6 weeks)	13 March 2023	23 April 2023
Analysis of feedback and preparation of report for Cabinet	24 April 2023	30 May 2023
Report to Cabinet with outcome of consultation and proposals	14 June 2033	14 June 2023

Equalities impact assessment

40 An equalities impact assessment screening detailing the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups for the consultation process has been completed. This assessment will be updated throughout and following the consultation to assess the impact of the proposed changes.

- 41 In summary the proposals for consultation do not disproportionately impact (both negatively and positively) the protected characteristics. The consultation is designed to be as inclusive as possible, engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including listening to the views of young people and people with a disability. The impacts on groups of people with protected characteristics will continue to be reviewed as the protect and proposals progress and the council will work with partners to identify and evaluation any mitigations to address adviser impacts.

Conclusion

- 42 We are aware that AAPs have been operating for 14 years and it is appropriate that we received independent advice to determine if they are still fit for purpose given the many changes the council, communities and partners have witnessed and been part of since AAPs were first established in 2009.
- 43 Having completed their review, the consultant has now provided a range of proposals for us to consider. The consultant believes that by making these changes we will increase the effectiveness and consistency of community engagement across the county, provide opportunities for more people to shape policy and include the voices of diverse communities. It will also make it more clear how local needs are identified and considered in the development of wider policies and allow for more meaningful discussion around community issues instead of being often funding focused. Importantly at the heart of this it will mean that community staff are able to spend more time in communities and be responsive to local needs.
- 44 The consultation will provide various opportunities to seek feedback from stakeholders in relation to the council's proposals for a future community engagement model, including opportunities for elected members to submit views.

Other useful documents

- [Cabinet Report, Review of Community Engagement and Funding Processes – 16 March 2022](#)

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The project team is aware of the current AAP Terms of Reference and the delegated authorities originally signed off by Cabinet.

Finance

The cost of the consultation will be met from Neighbourhood and Climate Change reserves.

Staffing

There is a need to engage with all AAP staff and other DCC teams working with AAPs e.g. business support, finance and members support etc. to ensure they are aware of the consultation and the timescales we are working to.

Risk

There is a risk of challenge if the consultation and equalities impact are not undertaken in accordance with legislative requirements. A number of risks exist that could impact on the delivery and the effectiveness of the consultation which are detailed in the project initiation documentation and will be regularly monitored, and mitigating actions identified where necessary.

Equality and Diversity/Public Sector Equality Duty

An equalities impact assessment screening has been completed detailing the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups for the consultation process. This assessment will be updated throughout and following the consultation to assess the impact of the proposed changes.

Climate Change

N/A

Accommodation

N/A

Crime and Disorder

N/A

Human Rights

N/A

Procurement

N/A

Disability Issues

N/A

Consultation

Detail of the consultation plan is included in the main report.