

Community Engagement Review

Feedback Analysis (non survey)

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Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Management Board

Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting on 3 April 2023 considered a report and presentation which detailed the key findings from ERS Consultants on the review of the Council's community engagement function/Area Action Partnerships and approach to a planned public countywide consultation. The comments noted at this meeting relating to the consultant's report and proposals have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report
- Opportunity to review and improve
- Critical of the case for change
- Perceived lack of engagement in the original review
- Decision should be taken to Full Council

Model

Case for change: It is noted that report acknowledges the strengths of the AAPs and the general positive regard in which they are held, but recommendations are being made to deconstruct the existing model. It was generally considered that the review was timely.

Board: There is some disagreement with the statement within the review report that AAP boards were not representative of the county's demographics and not truly diverse. Whilst some state that some AAP boards whilst working well did not always reflect or represent local community views, priorities or aspirations.

Local decision making: It is acknowledged that local communities feel part of any decision making arrangements in relation to the size of the county and any agreed devolution deal.

Politics: Concerns are expressed at the reference to political conflict impacting on the effectiveness of AAPs with not clarification on how deep seated this is.

Communication: There is concern that there are still lots of people throughout the county who are aware of AAPs and AAP communications need to be improved and engagement increased in particular with younger people.

Alignment with strategic priorities: It is suggested that at its core cooperating model should be work to deliver against the council's and County Durham Partnership's declared climate and ecological emergency priorities.

Funding

Local decision making: It is hoped that review would address the perceived/evidenced disconnect between AAPs, community groups and council services groupings when considering AAP funded projects. There is concern that the County Durham Partnership's role within the recommended funding model appears to remove the ability or local determination of grant application and allocations.

Repeat Applicants: There is concern at the inference that repeat recipients of funding is a negative outcome and disregards positive outcomes these projects deliver. It is suggested that the new model should work with organisations to support the potential sourcing of alternative funding mechanisms which could free up resource for new initiatives.

Flexible and responsive: It is acknowledged the need for a balance between ensuring that projects are delivering agreed outputs are sustained whilst providing flexibility to fund new initiatives.

Simplified processes: There is general support for streamlining and simplifying grant application and approval processes whilst acknowledging the need for appropriate transparency, accountability and assurance.

Time: It is hoped that review would address the time taken from project inception, funding approval and project delivery.

Community development

Staff: Clarification is needed around the reference to a reduced community engagement role being evident within AAPs due to resource pressures. Roles should be developed to support groups and organisations in delivering projects locally.

Elected Members: There are concerns that the review does not reflect the role of elected councillors in supporting community development work and associated projects.

Partners: It is noted that community development work is undertaken by a range of organisations and partners.

AAP Boards

Three AAP Boards submitted formal responses to the report, with a further five submitting detailed notes of separate sessions/sections of their Board meetings where the content of the report was discussed. The notes of these formal submissions and discussions have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report
- Critical of the case for change
- Not enough detail in the report and lacks content/context
- Questioning the need/rationale for substantial change
- Concern that the report moves away from local influence, decision making and openness/transparency

- Perceived lack of engagement in the original review

Model

There is a lot of concern in relation to removing the input and local decision making from locality areas, along with the openness and transparency that this brings. The report lacks any detail on how the proposed Community Networks would work, what their structure would be and the governance that would sit behind them. It is generally stated that the openness and lack of structure would be a problem. Lack of interest within localities and partners is also highlighted as a concern. The need for independence is stressed as well with regards to locality partnerships not being chaired by officers.

Boundaries

Generally, it is viewed that, if any of the options had to be chosen, option one would be the preferred route. Not moving away from the current model with the potential to be aligned more closely to electoral wards were also expressed.

Funding

Trying to simplify the processes that are currently in place was welcomed, as is the ability to be able to be more flexible over a four-year period. There were however other major concerns raised. The potential impact on local VCS organisations, particularly those smaller groups, is a major worry with the proposals in the report. Moving away from local decision making, at a local level, is viewed as a negative and backward step. There is a distinct lack of detail in the report but not having the ability to spend in year one, as an example, is a concern. There are major reservations over the £300 Community Chest recommendation, this is mainly due to the size of the grant, the fact that a large number of groups will be ineligible and the decision-making process that goes with it.

Openness and transparency were also raised as a major issue with regards the proposed funding changes, alongside the current valued support that Elected Members and local VCS groups receive via the current structure.

Delays with regards current funding were also recognised as being an issue that falls outside the control of AAPs. These delays invariably sit with deliverers/applicants and not AAPs, therefore any changes will not help with this issue.

Community Development

Although the move to doing more community development was welcomed, there was a clear message stating that the AAPs already carry-out a lot of this work that was simply not picked up in the report. If further community development works needs carrying out then this would need to be appropriately resourced.

General Comments

It was generally acknowledged that AAPs may need a few tweaks and changes. It was commented that AAPs were a flagship model that is held in high regard nationally and therefore wholesale change is not required. A number of comments were raised suggesting that, if there are specific issues with specific AAPs, then those problems need resolving, not the whole countywide structure. Once again, it

was noted that there is a general lack of detail in the report and lots of content missing with regards the work that AAPs currently carry-out.

AAP Board Member Consultation Sessions

AAP Board members were invited to attend one of four sessions which took place virtually on 22 March, 28 March, 29 March and 13 April 2023. A total of 33 Board members took part in the discussions. The notes of the discussions have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report
- Critical of the case for change
- Not enough detail in recommendations
- Perceived lack of engagement in the original review

Model

Case for change: People do not feel as though the case for change is strong enough. People feel as though the recommendations do not build on the existing strengths of the Area Action Partnerships. People would be supportive of incremental rather than whole scale change.

Retain a Board: People feel as though there is need to retain a Board as, without a core membership, there is a feeling that these networks will become “talking shops” with little action or accountability. People feel the removal of a Board could have a detrimental effect on attendance levels.

Politics: People feel that with the proposals of removing the Board, there will be more opportunity for area networks to be politicised rather than focusing on the locality and what is best for the community.

Relationships: There is a recognition that relationships between partners including the VCS is key to community development, engagement and good partnership working. There is a concern that relationships would be lost with the proposed changes.

Partners: The recommendations are not clear on how partners will fit with the proposed changes and whether there is potential for duplication.

Led by local concerns: There is concern that imposing themes on the new networks will dissolve local input. If themes were imposed, they need to be flexible to meet the needs of communities at the time. There is a feeling that if themes are not relevant to the local communities this could have a detrimental effect on engagement and attendance at meetings. Community priorities are paramount.

Diversity of voices: To gain greater diversity in voices, people identified the need to have meetings on days, at times and in venues that work for community members. There is a recognition that community networks could provide an opportunity to engage with a wider audience than current, but they need to advocate on community needs and wants, be accessible for all and have visible action and outcomes as well as a focus on the involvement of young people.

Engagement: There is concern that the proposals set out in the consultation will not have the desired effect in increasing engagement and that the recommendations will continue to facilitate the same people attending meetings.

Disempowerment: There is a feeling that the proposals seek to withdraw power, control and decision making away from local areas to more centralised structures.

Boundaries

Need for change: People are unsure of the rationale behind proposed boundary changes and feel the current boundaries work.

Timing: People identified that the time to talk about changing boundaries was ill-conceived as the outcome of the review of the ward boundaries is many months away.

Size: Concerns are raised about making boundaries any bigger. Moving to 7 networks would make decision making and local voice more difficult.

Alignment with strategic partners: Whilst there is some support for alignment with PCN Boundaries many people were unsure of the rationale behind this proposal. People queried whether police boundaries could also be reflected.

Funding

Small Grants: There is general support for a small grants fund, however, people repeatedly identified that £300 was not realistic and would advocate increasing the amount. There was concern raised that these pots of funding could duplicate other small grant schemes that are already in existence. There was some concern that there would be more to administer with small grant schemes than current larger funding schemes and also queries over the accountability for these funds.

Local decision making: There is concern that the proposals for decision making around funding are being removed from local communities and are disempowering local communities and represent a move towards centralisation. Many people are concerned that moving decision making to County Durham Partnership will favour larger, less local organisations who have experience of writing bids and will also mean decisions are taken without context or understanding of local areas.

Flexible and responsive: People are concerned that moving to longer term funding will inhibit the ability to be flexible and responsive to local needs and concerns as they arise. People are concerned about the potential funding gap in 2024-25 and have queried whether there would be a gap every 4 years to accommodate the election cycle. People feel the proposals will deter partners from engaging if funding cycles and processes change.

Simplified processes: People recognise the need for simplified funding processes especially where funding is repeat. A single process for applications over a cluster of AAPs would be advantageous. A simplified process would still need governance, accountability and transparency at a local level including for elected member budgets.

Economic development: People identified that more information was needed about the amount “top sliced” for economic development.

Timeliness of projects: Concern was raised about the length of time it takes for DCC delivered projects to come to fruition and the time and support required by AAP staff to navigate bureaucracy. It has been queried why the position is to use DCC services rather than other local services for contracting/using Neighbourhood Budgets.

Funding for community development: There is some recognition that officer time needs to be freed up from funding to undertake more community development, while others feel that current funding processes do not prohibit community development. There is acknowledgement, however, that community development and funding are not mutually exclusive and need to be considered together.

Community development

Staff: Staff were praised for the fantastic work they do, their work ethic, knowledge and dedication. Board members who attended the sessions were keen to ensure that staff are seen as integral to any changes that may occur and they should not be removed from the decision-making process.

Time: It was recognised that the capacity of staff for community development work was limited. People recognised that there is more community development and engagement work that can be done such as identifying and supporting newer groups/ organisations if time is freed up to undertake such activity.

Adverse impact of other proposals: People felt that other recommendations, particularly in relation to funding, within the report do not support/is at odds with the aims and objectives of community development.

Location: People feel that AAP staff are already visible and accessible within communities.

Duplication: There is an air of caution in ensuring that community development work via networks does not duplicate work being delivered in communities by partners including the VCS. Sharing good practice across the AAPs was identified as useful.

AAP Public Representatives

Three AAP Board Public reps submitted formal responses to the report. These have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report
- Critical of the case for change
- Not enough detail in the report and lacks content/context
- Concern that the report moves away from local influence, decision making and openness/transparency

Model

Strategic priorities: There is general agreement in the potential to better support community input into strategic priorities for DCC and partners, and that this is not solely be the responsibility of AAPs and rely on commitment from DCC and partners.

Formal structure: There was general agreement that the removal of a formal structure e.g. the Board and governance arrangements, would result in reduced engagement and prove difficult to adequately deliver and track agreed actions.

Centralisation: It was noted that centrally imposed themed meetings and decision making would reduce continuity and engagement and meetings would be unproductive/'talking shops'

Engagement: There was general agreement that engagement opportunities and activities are delivered successfully at present and funding activities are also important to engagement and developing local resilience.

Current strengths: It was noted that the review and recommendations does not take into account the individual strengths of each AAP to use these in the existing structure to spread good practice.

Politicisation: It was noted that there has been no evidence of political conflict.

Boundaries

Need for change: There is uncertainty of the rationale behind proposed boundary changes and a general feeling that the current boundaries work and any changes would be to the detriment of existing relationships and community cohesion.

Timing: People identified that the time to talk about changing boundaries was ill-conceived as the outcome of the review of the ward boundaries is many months away.

Alignment using other datasets: It was suggested that additional datasets should be considered when determining any changes to boundaries, such as travel-to-work, travel-to-learn areas.

Funding

Local decision making: There is concern that the proposals for decision making around funding are being removed from local communities and are disempowering local communities and represent a move towards centralisation.

Economic development: It was noted that opportunities to increase match funding for economic development activities in communities should be identified.

Flexible and responsive: There was general agreement that a small fund budget may provide benefit, £300 is not sufficient and multi-year strategic budget should be considered for long-term opportunities with communities contributing to the design and deployment. There was concern that the proposed 4year funding cycle leaves funding gaps and will not be responsive.

Simplified processes: People recognise the need for simplified funding processes. A simplified process would still need governance, accountability and transparency at a local level including for elected member budgets.

Transparency: there are concerns that the removal of reporting for Neighbourhood Budgets would remove transparency and small grant budget approval should not sit with officers.

Funding for community development: There is some recognition that officer time needs to be freed up from funding to undertake more community development, while others feel that current funding processes do not prohibit community development. There is acknowledgement, however, that community development and funding are not mutually exclusive and need to be considered together.

Community development

Staff: Staff were praised for the fantastic work they do, their work ethic, knowledge and dedication.

Time: It was recognised that the capacity of staff for community development work was limited. People recognised that there is more community development and engagement work that can be done such as identifying and supporting newer groups/ organisations if time is freed up to undertake such activity with the introduction of new processes and new technologies.

Adverse impact of other proposals: People felt that other recommendations, particularly in relation to funding, within the report do not support/is at odds with the aims and objectives of community development.

Location: People feel that AAP staff are already visible and accessible within communities and not all community buildings will deliver effective engagement compare to 'pop-up' activities on weekends and evenings etc.

AAP Teams

Six AAP Teams submitted formal responses to the report. There were numerous suggestions for change which can be seen in detail within the documented responses but in terms of general comments the following provides a comprehensive overview.

General comments

Although some points within the report were highlighted as positive, the general feedback was critical of the report and its' proposals due to a number of reasons including:

- Factual inaccuracies
- Sole focus on AAPs being a missed opportunity to rationalise authority wide community engagement
- No visible evidence/appendices to support the report claims
- Contradictory elements throughout the report
- Distinct lack of detail on the operation and role of community networks, the actual governance and staff's roles and structure
- Recommendations not following the reports' findings

Model

There was general concern about the move to Community Networks for several reasons including the potential for low attendance, the disengagement of partners, the proposal for DCC officers chairing being disempowering to communities and the potential for network meetings to become "talking shops".

There was some favour for having meeting "themes", however this was not linked to CDP thematic groups but more about bringing themes into the current agenda framework and ensuring local people had the opportunity to decide on what themes were relevant to them.

Based on some of the earlier comments in the ERS report it was generally felt that due to the high regard for AAPs and their staff, a suggestion for refreshing and reviewing the current model would have made more sense, especially considering the lack of evidence from the community for a network approach. Staff acknowledged and were supportive of change, however they felt that the model was not building on the good work and years of engagement that had been developed in the County via AAPs.

A common point was that ERS had not reflected the true nature of how the current AAP teams work. There was a suggestion within the report for teams to be more visible within their community, however no acknowledgement that all teams are already locally based and that the ERS suggestion of co-location in community centres, libraries etc was not suited to business or communities' needs and had the potential to put staff at risk due to lone working and non-adherence to individuals' health and safety requirements i.e. adapted working environments/essential support adaptations.

There was also a general concern that ERS had not reflected the range of community development and engagement that is currently practised through AAPs and little reference to how much is delivered by staff in their communities already.

Boundaries

There was no support for aligning with PCN boundaries. Instead, there was widespread support for keeping remaining boundaries as they are for the current time until the boundary review in 2025. Staff were not adverse to change but felt that the rationale needed to make sense to all.

Funding

Staff supported the proposal of a more simplified funding process but questioned whether audit had been consulted on this - the general view was that public money needs to be accountable. There was no support for the £300 community chest proposal which was seen to be of little use to limited groups and already provided via several other avenues (including our own Elected Members small grants process).

The idea of a 4-year funding cycle was welcomed in terms of allowing more time for research and planning with the caveat that any future structure still needs to be responsive to local community needs, emerging issues and emergency situations – would a more strategic approach still allow for these eventualities?

There was blanket concern for elected members to have direct support only from funding officers due to a number of reasons:

- Capacity of such a small team to respond to all members
- Change of roles, responsibilities and job descriptions to allow staff to do this.
- It could potentially lead to a loss of valuable community insight
- As it was a suggested change to job descriptions it was felt that this should be discussed only as a management decision and not wider.

Also, it was felt that decision making should remain at a local level and not a strategic body and a concern that moving to a more strategic grant would disadvantage those most vulnerable in our communities.

No support for the idea of budget top slicing for economic development.

No support for a transition year focusing on cost of living – a general feeling that the theme should be locally chosen.

Community development

There was general agreement that ERS' perception and acknowledgement of current AAP involvement in Community Development was factually incorrect. The view represented was that AAPs needed to be freed from funding burdens to allow them to undertake community development work when in fact, AAPs all deliver community development albeit at varying levels and that this support was not recognised or fed into the report by the consultants.

General comments

The general overview from staff was positive with regards to AAPs requiring review as there were numerous examples of where they themselves can see improvements.

It was felt however, that the current positive aspects of AAPs were not expanded upon within the report. The consultants' recommendations proposed a very different model with no great detail to be confident of its' operational success, no factual evidence to support the recommendations for change and, due to the numerous inaccuracies, no confidence in the consultants' understanding of what AAPs and the staff currently do. Generally, there was confusion about why we weren't building on our model as the proposed model would create a lack of transparency, accountability, engagement and action.

County Durham Partnership Forum (pre consultation feedback)

County Durham Partnership Forum members were invited to take part in a pre-consultation activity which took place on 14 February 2023. The notes of the discussions have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the case for change
- Not enough detail in the report and lacks context and detail
- Concern that the report moves away from local influence, decision making and openness/transparency
- AAPS work well, but could be improved

Model

Case for change: People did not feel as though the case for change is strong enough. People feel as though the recommendations do not build on the existing strengths of the AAPs. People would be supportive of incremental rather than whole scale change.

Terminology: People feel that 'Community Network' sounds more engaging than 'Board' and may increase participation and engagement.

Retain a board: People feel as though there is need to retain a 'board' as, without a core membership, there is a feeling that these networks will become "talking shops" with little action or accountability. People feel the removal of a board could have a detrimental effect on attendance levels and would prove difficult for an officer to chair effectively.

Strategic priorities: There is general agreement in the potential to better support community input into strategic priorities for DCC and partners, and that this is not solely be the responsibility of AAPs and will require commitment from DCC and partners.

Politics: People feel that with the proposals of removing the Board, there will be more opportunity for area networks to be politicised rather than focusing on the locality and what is best for the community.

Relationships: There is a recognition that relationships between partners including the VCS is key to community development, engagement and good partnership working. There is a concern that relationships would be lost with the proposed changes.

Partners: The recommendations are not clear on how partners will fit with the proposed changes and without a formal 'board' and guaranteed regular attendance by partners residents' engagement will decrease.

Led by local concerns: There is concern that imposing themes on the new networks will dissolve local input. There is a feeling that if themes are not relevant to the local communities this could have a detrimental effect on engagement and attendance at meetings which could become unproductive. Community priorities need to be area based.

Disempowerment: There is a feeling that the proposals seek to withdraw power, control and decision making away from local areas to more centralised structures.

Boundaries

Need for change: People were unsure of the rationale behind proposed boundary changes and feel the current boundaries work and the option to split the larger AAP area of East Durham into two should be considered – residents and communities should design any boundary change.

Timing: People identified that the time to talk about changing boundaries was ill-conceived as the outcome of the review of the ward boundaries is many months away.

Size: There was some agreement to creating more evenly sized geographical boundaries.

Alignment with strategic partners: Whilst there is some support for alignment with PCN Boundaries many people were unsure of the rationale behind this proposal. People queried whether police boundaries could also be reflected or if boundaries could be flexible and be determined by project/scheme initiatives.

Funding

Local decision making: There is concern that the proposals for decision making around funding are being removed from local communities and are disempowering local communities and represent a move towards centralisation. It was generally agreed that approval by the County Durham Partnership would remove any conflicts of interest but this process would remove local decision making.

Economic development: It was noted that opportunities to increase match funding for economic development activities in communities should be identified.

Small funding budget: There was general agreement that a small fund budget may provide benefit, £300 is not sufficient and duplicates other funding streams.

Long term funding: People feel that multi-year strategic budget should be considered for long-term opportunities with communities contributing to the design and deployment and may attract more match funding opportunities. There was concern that the proposed 4year funding cycle leaves funding gaps and will not be responsive.

Simplified processes: People recognise the need for simplified funding processes. Simplified processes would reduce bureaucracy but still need governance, accountability and transparency at a local level including Neighbourhood Budgets.

Funding for community development: There is some recognition that officer time needs to be freed up from funding to undertake more community development, while others feel that current funding processes do not prohibit community development. There is acknowledgement, however, that community development and funding are not mutually exclusive and need to be considered together.

Transparency: There is agreement that removal of Neighbourhood Budget reporting may lead to disengagement by residents if they are unable to see how this budget is allocated and its outputs.

Community development

Staff: Staff were praised for the fantastic work they do, their work ethic, knowledge and dedication.

Time: It is recognised that the capacity of staff for community development work was limited. People recognise that there is more community development and engagement work that can be done such as identifying and supporting newer groups/ organisations if time is freed up to undertake such activity with the introduction of new processes and new technologies.

Attracting new participation: People feel that a large number of residents and some communities still do not know much about how AAPs work and increased promotional activities are required to make the new delivery model successful.

Location: People feel that AAP staff are already visible and accessible within communities and not all community buildings will deliver effective engagement compared to 'pop-up' activities on weekends and evenings etc.

Environment & Climate Change Partnership Board

County Durham Environment & Climate Change Partnership Board formally responded to the consultation. The submission has been thematically analysed and are presented below.

Model

There is support for themed meetings with caution that the thematic partnership board would only be able to support meetings on strategic issues, not local operational issues and consideration would need to be given on capacity/resourcing of the thematic partnership when supporting multiple meetings countywide.

Boundaries

There is no preference on boundary options.

Funding

The partnership feels that multi-year strategic budget should be considered for long-term projects and would provide partners with opportunities to access funding which previously wasn't suitable for large scale countywide projects.

The partnership would be open to having a role in assessing the Strategic Grants funding applications but would need to understand the capacity/resource implications.

The partnership also supports the proposal to allocate a proportion of the Strategic Grant specifically to economic development projects, with the ask that this includes investment in 'green economy' projects.

Community development

The proposals are supported to build upon the community engagement work already delivered with the ask for an emphasis on climate action goals.

Town & Parish Councils/Councillors

A total of six emails from Town & Parish Councils or individual councillors were received within the consultation period, and a virtual session was held on 30 March for Town & Parish councillors and staff with 17 in attendance. The comments and feedback from these emails and notes from this session have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report – the report acknowledges the strengths and successes of the AAPs yet recommends radical change

- Critical of the case for change - full scale review is not necessary, tackle individual AAPs and learn from the better ones
- Not enough detail in recommendations
- Recognition that there is room for strategic and structural improvements and a rebrand
- Existing AAPs are non-political and successfully deliver community development

Model

Centralisation: There are concerns around the proposed model and removal of the boards. It is felt this would create a centralised decision making system with DCC staff making decisions and engagement from local people would be seen as a 'token opportunities'.

Public involvement: It is recognised that increased activities and opportunities for public engagement and community development were needed.

Increased involvement by T&PCs: – It is suggested that increased public engagement could be achieved by increasing the involvement and role of T&PCs.

Themes: It is felt that centrally imposed themes would reduce engagement if not relevant and themes should be agreed at a local level.

Capacity: It is felt that the removal of a board would create capacity issues for staff to effectively chair network meetings

Politics: There are concerns that removing the Board, would increase opportunities for area networks to be politicised rather than focusing on the locality and what is best for the community.

Boundaries

Need for change: There is uncertainty around the rationale behind proposed boundary changes and feel the current boundaries work.

Timing: There is general uncertainty on how boundary changes could be considered due to not knowing how the electoral boundaries will be changed.

Funding

Local decision making: There is concern that the proposals for decision making around funding are being removed from local communities and represent a move towards centralisation. It was felt that the County Durham Partnership is a strategic group and not focussed on individual community involvement. There are concerns that this will result in the needs of larger towns taking precedence over smaller villages and rural areas.

Flexible and responsive: It is acknowledged there were merits in moving to a four-year funding cycle for larger projects but committing funding longer term will reduce engagement with local communities and smaller groups. It was felt that moving to the proposed four-year funding cycle is not agile and leaves no flexibility to respond to emerging issues during year one.

Simplified processes: It is acknowledged that the current funding processes are robust, transparent and accountable and it was felt the current processes could be simplified.

Monitoring: There is concerns around the lack of clarity around monitoring and reporting requirements within the proposals and if County Councillors are no longer required to report back Neighbourhood Budget spend they would disengage with the Network.

Community development

Staff: Staff is praised for their invaluable work and their work ethic. It was acknowledge that AAPs have developed extremely positive relationships with their T&PCs.

Time: It is recognised that the demands on staff has increased over time with additional funding grants to administer, and it was felt that the support staff provide to councillors and local groups works effectively and productively and should be retained.

Location: It is felt that AAP staff are already visible and accessible within communities and there could be more use of T&PC buildings.

Activities: It is felt that the suggested proposals in relation to community development activities are already functions of, or undertaken by the current AAPs.

Public Health

Public Health provided a comprehensive response to the survey questions and made numerous suggestions for additional functions for DCCS Community Engagement function.

General comments

Although some points within the report were highlighted as positive, Public Health questioned how progressive some of the suggestions would actually be.

Model

The addition of more community centred approaches as suggested in the report are welcomed, however the name “Community Networks” is not new or innovative with the suggestion for co-production of the name with communities.

Rather than being “encouraged” to attend as suggested in the report, public health recommended that elected members should be “actively encouraged”.

There was concern over accountability if no board was in place and a desire to see the Chair rotate when the networks mature, rather than having sole responsibility on council officers.

There was some favour for having meeting “themes”, but with a recommendation that officer expertise was brought in to inform discussions. Alongside the themes it was felt that meeting content should be community led with the ability to influence policy and strategy at an early stage.

There was a desire for more hyper local engagement with marginalised groups backed by a workforce development plan to ensure staff have appropriate skills and expertise.

Support was expressed for staff to have a base within neighbourhoods but to undertake more work in communities whilst also maintaining an online presence and engagement through a range of methods.

Boundaries

The response proposed that geographies should be based on consistent statistical boundaries with a preference for MSOAs due to the availability of data. A closer alignment with health care services would be welcomed but there was no appetite for aligning with PCN boundaries.

Funding

There was support for the idea of discretionary grants for capacity building but with suggestions for criteria to target these grants and ensuring that work funded is health promoting.

A more strategic grant process was seen as positive but with the acknowledgement that this would need to be flexible to changing needs and pressures with an approach that would not see smaller VCS organisations missing out.

Aligning to the electoral cycle was queried as the networks would not be political so why was there a need to do this?

Public health agreed that the strategic grant programme needed to be led by DCC staff but that it should be developed in co-production with communities. There was a recommendation to seek specialist advice in advance of formal adoption of the strategic grant programme with recognition that there needs to be professional commissioning support, strong governance, and accountability.

There was support for networks with more inequalities receiving greater allocations with the JSNAA being used to allocate funding proportionately.

During the transition year it was felt helpful for AAPs to continue with projects that are working well and focus on cost of living as purely focusing on cost of living could lead to a change of approach for one year followed by another change when moving to strategic grants. Recommendation for a transition plan to be developed for the new arrangements from 2025 which should include evaluation of AAP work to inform future developments.

There was disagreement for ringfencing funds for any specific area of work not just economic development.

The suggestion for a simpler funding process and a funding team resource to support councillors was supported as long as the funding team minimised duplication by having an understanding of what is already being commissioned.

Rather than removing Neighbourhood budgets (NBs) from the reporting process to networks, Public Health advocated that NBs should be developed alongside community networks.

Community development

There was agreement that staff time should be freed up to allow more time for community development.

Within the function list of Q17, the public health opinion was that all but one of the functions were either “important” or “extremely important”. The only function which differed was “Produce a directory of community buildings, contact details and timetables for activities”, and this was ranked as “Not important at all”.

General comments

The general comments from Public Health were positive towards the review and they view it as a significant opportunity to accelerate the County Durham Together programme.

A number of other functions were suggested that DCC could provide including social value and community wealth building, evaluation and contribution to research and making sure countywide plans are being appropriately implemented in network areas. The potential remit suggested for community networks was much wider than suggested within the review with a strong focus on measuring success (e.g. through the development of a local community life survey), impact and evaluation and input to the “County Durham Book” rather than the development of 14 different directories.

Voluntary & Community Sector

A total of four emails from Voluntary & Community Sector organisations or representatives were received within the consultation period. The comments and feedback from these emails and notes from this session have been thematically analysed and are presented below.

General comments

- Critical of the report
- Not enough detail in recommendations
- Critical of the case for change

Model

It is noted by respondents that there is insufficient detail for the proposals, with three out of four respondents generally opposed to the changes proposed on the grounds

that the current AAP model works efficiently and guarantees value for money and professional accountability. One respondent feels the current AAP model does not work and has never been fit for purpose.

Boundaries

It is noted by respondents that there is insufficient detail on the proposals with three out of four respondents generally opposed to all changes and making no comments on the proposed boundary changes. One respondent feels that changing boundaries to electoral wards would fit well and increase County Councillor involvement but only to a limited degree.

Funding

It is noted by respondents that there is insufficient detail on the proposals with all respondents generally opposed to the proposals. One respondent is in agreement for revised funding procedures and light touch options.

Community development

Three respondents are generally opposed to all proposals and made no specific comments on the proposed changes, with two respondents praising staff for their invaluable work and work ethic. One respondent stated AAPs rely on the VCS for intel and local knowledge and one respondent suggested increased involvement by County Councillors.

Durham Constabulary

Durham Constabulary's East NPT Inspectors submitted a formal response to the report on behalf of Durham Constabulary. The following is a summary of the comments received.

General comments

It was commented that AAPs are a great platform for engagement with partners and communities and as a partnership they have achieved and delivered projects that have significantly benefitted communities.

There is a fear that they will lose this crucial engagement paradigm under the new proposed model and query why there is a need to change a model that is already embedded and works effectively.

There is concern regarding the new proposed funding structure of strategic grants being allocated on a 4-year basis. It is stated that the proposals will remove the flexibility and ability to respond and provide grant funding quickly to emerging issues or community needs.

Finally, it is commented that locality Inspectors have close working relationships with their AAP Co-ordinators and by attending meetings and participating as Board

Members, are able to directly address emerging trends and concerns from the key community contacts, which can then be addressed by partnership working and funding from the AAP. It is felt that, whilst some of the processes could be streamlined, the local board process with regular meetings and follow-up actions works well and should remain in its current format.

Durham Police & Crime Commissioner's Office

Durham Police & Crime Commissioner's Office submitted a formal response to the report. The following is a summary of the comments received.

General comments

AAPs continue to be a great platform for engagement and in partnership with Durham Constabulary have achieved and delivered successful projects that have significantly benefitted our communities across County Durham. This platform has been regularly used by the PCC to consult on issues that matter to local people for example: Policing issues and Precept.

The suggested model to give communities more of a say will be welcomed and valued as it is important to ensure that the diversity and effectiveness of community outreach is maximised to encourage positive engagement, local decision making and prioritisation of funding.

Concerns are noted that they will lose this crucial engagement paradigm under the new proposed model and have particularly highlighted concerns around the funding structure of strategic grants being allocated on a 4-year basis and planned a year in advance. This proposal can potentially remove the flexibility and ability to respond and provide grant funding quickly to emerging issues or community needs.

The view of the OPCC is that all community issues must be considered in a meaningful way to develop wider strategy and policy by wider partners and local decision making and impact should be supported with quantitative data.

There is agreement that some of the processes could be streamlined, and it is vital that the close working relationships with Locality Police Inspectors under any proposed model must not be lost so that any emerging trends and concerns from the key community contacts can be promptly addressed with partners and funding can be collectively agreed and prioritised.

It is noted the opportunity the proposed model gives for communities to have more of a say but a Board model with proper governance and structures in place in favoured so that partnership working can continue and mitigate duplication and join up with existing developments and celebrate collective achievements and successes.

County Durham & Darlington Local Resilience Forum

A response was received on behalf of the County Durham & Darlington Local Resilience Forum. The following is summary of the comments received.

General comments

As an LRF there was a recognition that they have a solid working partnership with the AAPs and would continue to do so in the future.

Model

The LRF felt that AAPs provide valuable insight into local communities, which informs their work on emergency preparedness and building resilience across County Durham and Darlington. As such the AAPs are an integral part of the Community Resilience Standing Group and wider LRF partnerships. They ensure that the LRF has relevant links into communities to give them a voice in the work that they do. The LRF felt that the current model works well and would question what benefits the new models would bring, and perhaps more importantly, how they would benefit the communities themselves.

Boundaries

The current AAP boundaries work well in bringing together local communities, facing similar issues. As such, there are strong community networks already established within the current boundaries. These have taken considerable time to develop. Any changes should be able to provide considerable benefits to local communities. The LRF questioned which of the given options provide local communities the best opportunities and outcomes? What would be lost by changing them?

Funding

AAP teams have a long-established presence within their communities and understand the needs and aspirations of the groups that they work to support. Funding decisions are taken at a local level, based on local knowledge. This is paramount to maintain. The LRF works closely with both AAPs and communities on resilience projects. Local knowledge and local decisions are integral to developing and maintaining community resilience. The LRF expressed concern around the complexity and length of time of the funding process. It was thought that by simplifying the process, this will look to address many of the inefficiencies detailed in the report, such as the time needed to work on community development.

Community development

Currently the AAPs undertake priority setting exercises every year and work to develop community groups based on their substantial knowledge and understanding of the communities that they work within. As detailed above, the LRF feel that giving consideration to simplifying the funding process would create greater scope for enhancing community development.

General comments

The LRF noted that the consultation document and feedback procedure is not user friendly to some of our local communities which they felt might deter some groups

and individuals from providing valuable feedback. CDDLRF value the work of the AAP's and the contribution that they bring to their work on resilience. In addition, the AAPs are integral to giving communities a voice at a grass roots level – something that cannot be underestimated. The LRF requests that any changes to current arrangements and practices, takes into consideration their comments and observations, and seeks to deliver a model that is achievable, adequately resourced and funded, and which provides tangible benefits to the communities within County Durham.

Durham University

Durham University's Pro-Vice Chancellor Global, submitted a formal response to the report on behalf of Durham University. The following is a summary of the comments received.

General comments

There is broad support for the proposals to refresh the current approach to community engagement through the AAPs such as the online application management system, to free up the AAP team's time to work more locally within the Durham AAP area. It was commented that this seems to be a natural progression from the existing model, making the most of the considerable experience of the team in supporting local groups.

The proposal to replace the current funding model with 'Strategic Grants' available over a longer period of time, suggests this could be of benefit to the sustainability of the projects and organisations supported through the funding. There is general support of the proposal for a 'place-based community-focussed approach' to health, wellbeing and economic strategies.

It was noted that the AAP Board has been of great benefit to the University and has connected the University to the wider community of Durham, allowed it to engage with local consultations, strategies and funding reviews, and the University has been able to attend the Board on several occasions to engage members and the public in the University's own consultations and it hopes to see this positive partnership continue.

Member of Parliament

General comments

Mary Kelly Foy, Member of Parliament for the City of Durham, submitted a formal response to the report. The summary of this response is provided below.

There is a recognition that there may be a need for a review of how AAPs operate however the report appears confusing, contradictory and perhaps an overreaction to any perceived problems with the current AAP model.

It is noted that the report states that the effectiveness of community engagement has reduced over recent years and that a “hyper-local” community engagement network would allow the local authority to be more responsive to needs in communities. The report notes that the networks would however have no decision-making powers and therefore this would be a direct move against what AAPs were designed to deliver.

It is stated that the proposed new community networks could potentially jeopardise the current structures in place and therefore potentially reduce community engagement. It is noted that the report makes assumptions that the AAP system discourages people from engaging however caution is highlighted with regards these assumptions and the impact any changes could have. It is highlighted that the report does not acknowledge that, by providing routes and access to funding, that this is a form of community engagement in itself.

A major concern is raised with regards the removal of local-decision making and questions around how the newly proposed framework could possibly succeed. This leads queries on the lack of detail in the report regarding the newly proposed structures and how this could potentially threaten existing funding provided and supported through AAPs.

A lack of detail and confusion is also highlighted in relation to the funding cycle described within the report and the impact that this could have, particularly if there are gaps in funding, within localities.

There is an acknowledgement that there are some suggestions that are worthwhile within the report with regards removing certain potential barriers to engagement and expanding engagement with residents, where possible. Alongside this, there is agreement that steps could be taken to streamline the funding process, whilst acknowledging the need to maintain oversight as to how money is spent.

Finally, there are questions raised with regards the process of consultation that Durham County Council have taken on the Review, with an overall comment that the local authority needs to proceed with caution, based on the fact that the report itself evidences high levels of satisfaction and support for the principles and functions of AAPs but subsequently proposes largely dismantling its structures.

County Durham Care Partnership Executive

At its meeting on 28 March 2023 the County Durham Care Partnership Executive considered a report and presentation which detailed the key findings from ERS Consultants on the review of the Council's community engagement function/Area Action Partnerships and their recommended proposals. The comments noted at this meeting relating to the consultant's report and proposals have been presented below.

General comments

- Welcomes the report
- Welcomes the work of the AAPs
- Critical of the case for change

Model

It is stated that APPs have been effective in Teasdale to join up services but the issue, as usual, is to achieve continuity of services (with short term funding).

Boundaries

It is stated that suggested boundaries should reflect local communities and a linkage to PCN boundaries makes sense, but with a warning that health boundaries are liable to change. A strength of the current AAPs is their independence.

Funding

It is suggested that the allocation of small grants with a very simple process is a good idea (but over time may cost more to administrator). Larger grants, may limit ability to innovate (deter smaller groups from applying) which is a strength of AAPs now.

Youth Council

The Youth Council met on Wednesday 19 April 2023. A presentation was provided on the Community Engagement Review report. The following information is a summary of the comments received at the meeting.

General comments

It is felt that advertising is an issue for AAPs. There should be advertising how young people can get involved. Awareness of what AAPs have done and supported needs to be publicised better.

It is commented that boundaries need to be considered as it should not be a one size fits all approach.

The Youth Council notes that they would like informed and be part of the planning for what AAPs may become moving forward. The Youth Council would like to increase their engagement with AAPs moving forward.

County Durham Health & Care Engagement Forum

The County Durham Health & Care Engagement Forum met on Thursday 22 March 2023. A presentation was provided on the Community Engagement Review report. The following information is a summary of the comments received at the meeting.

General comments

It is felt that there must be accountability within any structure moving forward and that people would need to know who purported to represent them at the meetings. Some concern was expressed that there could be a point where broad membership became 'defuse'.

It is commented that each AAP was naturally different given the demographics of the populations they served. Priorities were different. It was felt that any subsequent model would have to be core to the local areas.

Some concern are raised about the timing of the consultation. It was felt that it might have been better to let the changes within the NHS embed and stabilise before any further changes were made to the engagement model.

Concerns are raised about what was suggested to be a lack of detail in the report to enable an informed decision about some of the recommendations.

It is finally commented that the introduction of a Community Chest could cause confusion with other funding streams e.g. Co-operative Community Chest.

Residents

Three residents submitted formal responses to the report. These have been thematically analysed and are presented below (NB. One response does not comment on any of the recommendations – only the quality of the consultant's report).

General comments

- Critical of the report

Model

It is noted by one respondent that the report's recommendations went against the report findings and the current AAPs are operating in an effective manner. One respondent notes that current 'board' structure is no longer working and engagement is low.

Boundaries

One respondent would support the implementation of moving to seven networks along the lines of the proposed Local Boundary changes.

Funding

One respondent agrees with all the proposals whilst it is noted by one respondent that there is insufficient detail on the proposals and current funding arrangements are effective and robust.

Community development

One respondent agrees with all the proposals whilst one respondent feels the lack of detail in the proposals means it is difficult to see how the proposed changes will bring about the benefits claimed.

Social Media

One comment was received via social media.

General comments

"Not sure why you want our views on system that by your own admission works really well in the main. There are some issues in some areas that I would imagine could be easily addressed, tweaked and improved upon. But to use it as an excuse to add in an extra two layers of bureaucracy, doubling the area sizes and therefore making it less community focused, whilst at the same time selling it as more community focused is quite frankly bonkers. There's always room for improvement but this is terrible, I dare say there's a private enterprise waiting in the wings to take control of community spending..."