

Cabinet

12 July 2023

Community Engagement Review

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods & Climate Change

Councillor Elizabeth Scott, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy & Partnerships

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the report

- 1 To provide Cabinet with an update on the findings from the countywide public consultation on ERS consultant's proposals for the council's community engagement function and to agree the recommendations for a revised function.

Executive summary

- 2 Following agreement by Cabinet in March 2022, consultant ERS were appointed to undertake an impartial and unbiased review of the council's community engagement function i.e. primarily the work of the Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). The consultant's report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving our focus on community development and enhancing the capacity of local communities and individuals to become more involved in improving their area.
- 3 These recommendations were the subject of a countywide consultation exercise during the period 13 March to 23 April 2023. The council consulted with staff, elected members, AAP Board and Forum members, key partners, residents and other interested parties. Responses included: 188 survey responses; multiple online consultation sessions were held and presentations delivered as agenda items at various partner and key stakeholder meetings where participants

comments were noted for inclusion as consultation feedback; and 41 consultation responses were submitted via a dedicated consultation email address from a wide range of stakeholders.

- 4 Analysis of the consultation survey responses and other feedback shows that AAPs evoke a diverse range of opinions and that the review is a welcomed and timely opportunity to provide a natural progression from the existing AAP model.
- 5 In general, levels of satisfaction and support for the principles and functioning of AAPs are high. Most respondents are more supportive of incremental rather than whole scale change, with the preference to adopt some, not all the consultant's recommendations, building on the significant strengths of the current AAP model. Where the consultation analysis demonstrates broad agreement for the consultant's proposals, these have been included in the design of the new model.
- 6 The new model will deliver Local Networks which will primarily be based on the current AAP boundaries. Subject to outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review, Local Networks will have the potential to align current AAP boundaries to the new electoral wards. Local Network boundary alignment will be reviewed following the outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review (consultation closes 10 July 2023 and the final recommendations are due to be published 28 November 2023).
- 7 Local Networks will aim to attract involvement of a greater number, and a broader range of residents and local stakeholders through increased use and the relaunch of the current AAP Forum and its 15,000 members to form a County Durham Community Network. Opportunities will be enhanced to use new and traditional engagement tools and activities to improve local residents and partners engagement with Local Networks, and attendance at meetings and events is increased.
- 8 Local Network Panels will govern and manage the affairs of Local Networks in ways that are clear and transparent and demonstrate proper accountability to the County Council, partner organisations, stakeholders and the wider community.
- 9 Local Networks will adopt a more strategic approach to their work and outcomes through focussed Local Network meetings (reduced number per year) and the development of an individual local network plan in consultation with the County Durham Partnership and its thematic partnerships. Local network plans will help inform strategic priorities and identify opportunities for increased joined up working between Local Networks, partners and other Durham County Council (DCC) services.

- 10 Local network plans will be informed by: community views (residents and partners) facilitated by Local Network meetings and locality events; consultation and engagement with the County Durham Community Network and County Durham Partnership and its' thematic partnership sub groups; and utilising greater use of empirical data via a unique local profile (e.g. robust and detailed view on the profile and demographics of the Local Network area).
- 11 New governance including Terms of Reference (ToR) will clearly define the purpose, structure and functions of the Local Networks. It will provide in detail eligibility criteria, roles and responsibilities of Panel members and robust processes around recruitment and selection of Panel members to deliver improved assurance that Local Network Panels will be non-political.
- 12 Local decision making and transparency will be maintained with the AAP Board being replaced by a Local Network Panel and financial accountability will be improved with new funding guidelines and criteria and increased transparency on funding applications.
- 13 Application and funding processes will be streamlined to deliver improved efficiencies for applicants, elected members and Local Network staff. Improved processes and reduced formal Local Network meetings will ensure Local Networks have enhanced opportunities to carry out focussed engagement/neighbourhood planning type activities in particular with communities identified in the local network plan.
- 14 Following Cabinet agreement, the existing project group, sponsored by the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy & Partnerships and led by the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods & Climate Change, will deliver the next phase of this project to implement the new model. A detailed project and communications plan will be initiated in August 2023 with key milestones monitored against delivery.
- 15 AAPs will continue to operate as Area Action Partnerships until 31 March 2025, and on 1 April 2025 they will assume their new identity as Local Networks.
- 16 Where practically possible, and where it will cause no interruption to service delivery, improved/new processes and procedures will be implemented prior to April 2025. This will help test processes and to then embed improvements at the earliest opportunities and ensure efficiencies are realised promptly. This will also include the development and delivery of training and briefings for relevant stakeholders where necessary during the transition period, and for the April 2025 'go live', including working with the County Durham Partnership Board and

thematic partnerships to design and agree their role in the development and delivery of local network plans.

- 17 A launch campaign to set in motion, raise awareness and promote the New Local Networks will commence in January 2025 with Local Networks and their elected members delivering enhanced promotional and community engagement activities to attract new participants prior to an official 'go live' in April 2025.
- 18 A programme of tailored briefing and training sessions will be delivered for relevant stakeholders where necessary during the transition period, April 2025 'go live', and the appointment of new Panel members in May 2025. This will include: working with the County Durham Partnership Board and thematic partnerships to design and agree their role in the development and delivery of local network plans; governance and ToR protocols for Panel members; funding guidelines and criteria; and process arrangements for all relevant key stakeholders.
- 19 The new Local Network model is based on the existing funding and staffing team complement and staff are currently based within their geographic AAP boundaries. Within the current council staff hybrid working arrangements staff will have greater flexibility to identify days and locations where they can temporarily be based in buildings within the community to work more closely with the specific community groups/organisations they are currently supporting etc.
- 20 An equalities impact assessment screening details the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups for the implementation of the new model. In summary the recommendations for the new community engagement model do not disproportionately impact (both negatively and positively) the protected characteristics. The model is designed to be as inclusive as possible, with reasonable adjustments made where necessary in order to ensure the participation of people with disabilities.
- 21 In consulting and listening to the voices of our current AAP members, residents, partners and elected members etc. we intend to implement a new and improved community engagement model building on strengths of the current model and opportunities presented through the review and consultation phases. The new Local Networks will help the council, with our partners, to better engage, consult with and develop our communities so we can tackle the challenges that we face more effectively and help build more resilient communities.

Recommendation(s)

22 Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) note the outcomes from the countywide consultation exercise;

- (b) agree the proposed new Local Network model as the council's main community engagement function;
- (c) agree the proposed timescales for phased implementation and transitional arrangements; and
- (d) agree to receive an update on delivery progress including new governance arrangements and terms of reference in September 2024.

Background

- 23 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 over 2,600 groups/organisations deliver over 10,000 community-based projects as well as helping new groups with advice and support to become established organisations and they have assisted a range of council services, partners and agencies to carry out a plethora of consultations.
- 24 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. focussing primarily on the work of AAPs as the first phase one of a new transformation project. The consultant's review commenced in June 2022 and concluded in January 2023.
- 25 The consultant's report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving our focus on community development and enhancing the capacity of local communities and individuals to become more involved in improving their area.
- 26 Phase two commenced with the recommendations from this impartial and unbiased review of the council's community engagement function being the subject of a countywide consultation exercise during 13 March to 23 April 2023. The council consulted with staff, elected members, AAP Board and Forum members, key partners, residents and other interested parties on the changes proposed in this independent review to our current approach.

Consultation

- 27 The consultation was delivered in accordance with the council's Consultation Statement and Consultation Protocol (March 2019) and complied with statutory and government guidance, as well as the general requirements of public law. The consultation 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 and sought feedback on the consultants four areas of recommendations detailed below.

Model

- 28 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

29 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

30 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

- 31 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 and community sector organisations (VCS);
 - 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 VCS 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.

Response to consultation

32 The consultation provided an opportunity to seek feedback from a wide range of stakeholders via various methods and channels as detailed in the table below.

Activity	No. responses
Survey	
Residents	83
AAP Board & Forum members	26
County Councillors	11
Durham County Council Employees	24
Voluntary & Community Sector	27
Youth Council	8
Other	9
Submissions via email	
AAP Boards & Public Reps	12
AAP Teams	6
MP	1
Partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County Durham & Darlington Local Resilience Forum • Durham Constabulary • Durham University • Durham Police & Crime Commissioners Office • NHS • Environment & Climate Change Partnership 	6
Residents	3
Town & Parish Councils / Councillors	8
Durham County Council Public Health	1
Voluntary & Community Sector	4
Notes/comments received at meetings/presentations	
AAP Boards	4
Overview & Scrutiny	1
Partners	5

Town & Parish Councils / Councillors	1
Comments received via social media	
Other	1

- 33 The survey contained mainly open questions with multiple choice for the 'community development' section and was duplicated across both the written and online forms; including areas for respondents to expand upon their answers and provide additional context to their responses. A total of 188 responses were received.
- 34 Survey feedback was broken down into agreement (positive), disagreement (negative), and neither agreement or disagreement (neutral). Where the respondent provided additional feedback, these comments have been coded against common areas/themes. These themes have been quantified to provide a numerical output relating to frequency of response. Analysis of the consultation survey responses is attached at appendix 2.
- 35 Multiple online consultation sessions were held and presentations delivered as agenda items at various partner and key stakeholder meetings where participants comments were noted for inclusion as consultation feedback (see appendix 3).
- 36 41 consultation responses were submitted via a dedicated consultation email address from a wide range of stakeholders.

Consultation outcomes

Analysis

- 37 Analysis of the consultation survey responses and other feedback shows that AAPs evoke a diverse range of opinions and that the review is a welcomed timely opportunity to provide a natural progression from the existing AAP model. The key points from the consultation outcome analysis for each of the four consultation areas are summarised below.

Model

- 38 The majority of responses (survey 42.4% and other submissions) indicated a majority disagreement for replacing AAP boards with community networks with no core board membership. Common themes around concerns for loss of structure, commitment and attendance, and current AAPs working well were frequently referenced.
- 39 Whilst 46.9% of survey respondents were in agreement to base community network meetings around specific themes, other submissions generally disagreed with this proposal, with common

themes from both survey and other submissions around concerns for hampering commitment and engagement and, loss of locally agreed priorities.

- 40 There was strong agreement from both survey respondents and other submissions for the proposal to host additional and varied engagement methods. This was also the case for the proposal for network teams to increase visibility by being based in community type buildings, however, other submissions in general did recognise current AAP staff are already based in their communities and 'outreach' type activities may be more beneficial than permanent work bases.

Boundaries

- 41 The majority of survey respondents were neutral to the proposals around changing boundaries (44.7%). This is in contrast to other submissions where there was strong agreement to maintain the existing boundaries. Common themes from both sets of responses were around: existing boundaries working and people knowing these boundaries; PCN boundaries are not set boundaries and change frequently; and concerns around proposing any changes to align to electoral wards prior to the outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review for County Durham being known.

Funding

- 42 59.8% of survey respondents were in agreement with the proposal to introduce a new £300 Community Chest grant fund. Common themes from other submissions were not as supportive e.g.: duplicates other small grant funding groups/organisations across the county; £300 is a very small amount and concerns around the positive impacts it could achieve; and concerns around centralisation if Durham County Council (DCC) staff are making funding decisions, and the administrative burden may not best offer value for money.
- 43 There was general agreement with the proposal to replace the current annual Area Budget with Strategic Grants by other submissions however there were concerns around moving to a four-year funding allocation. Survey respondents were in the majority either neutral (38.2%) or in disagreement (34.7%). Common themes raised by survey respondents included the loss of flexibility to deal with emerging issues and opportunities to adapt and limiting opportunities some projects/organisations may have to access funding. Similar themes were highlighted via other submissions with an acknowledgement a four-year funding allocation may create other opportunities e.g.: increased assurance for longer term projects; more opportunities to link

to strategic planning; and increased opportunities for enhanced community development activities within communities.

- 44 There was general agreement from both survey respondents and other submissions on the sentiment of community networks developing a strategic programme. However, there was widespread disagreement from other submissions that strategic programmes would be approved by the County Durham Partnership with loss of local decision making and centralisation being the strongest theme. Survey respondents were in the majority neutral (43.6%) with 39.7% also in disagreement with this proposal.
- 45 Survey respondents were mainly neutral (43%) or in agreement (40.6%) for the proposal around set amounts of funding for each community network with extra funding based on other factors with common themes referenced around: funding being based on need and agreed criteria; population size may disguise actual need; rural communities have different needs and hidden poverty; and the approach would be fair and help level up areas. This proposal was not hugely referenced in other submissions but of those that did, it was noted that existing funding amounts vary due to the different number of elected members and Neighbourhood Budgets for each AAP.
- 46 There was general disagreement from other submissions around the proposal to focus grant funding during the transition period on 'cost-of-living' pressures whilst most survey respondents were either neutral (42.1%) or in agreement (34%). Common themes from other submissions were around the concern of centralisation and removing local decision making and determining what local priorities are.
- 47 There was general disagreement from other submissions for the proposal to ring-fence funding for economic development projects. This was mirrored by survey respondents where 40.6% of respondents were neutral and 33.1% were in disagreement. The main theme was concern around centralisation and removal of local communities determining their own proposals and needs.
- 48 There was widespread agreement from both survey respondents and other submissions around proposals to streamline/simplify funding processes. With widespread disagreement from both around the removal of the need for county councillors to report back to their community network their Neighbourhood Budgets, with common themes including concerns around: lack of transparency; removal of community oversight; and reduced ability to align county councillors community development work to that of their community networks.

Community development

- 49 Both survey respondents and other submissions were in widespread agreement to increase/enhance community development activities. There was widespread recognition from both that AAPs currently deliver most if not all of the activities within the proposals and that enhanced capacity from the implementation of proposals around simplifying funding and holding less formal meetings will lead to enhanced staff capacity to carry out increased activities. Common themes from both included: ability to react quickly; improve engagement with local communities to understand their needs and help inform planning; and to identify and support new groups/organisations with community development activities.

Partners & key stakeholders

- 50 In general, levels of satisfaction and support for the principles and functioning of AAPs are high amongst the partners and key stakeholders who responded to the consultation including: Durham Constabulary; Durham Police & Crime Commissioners Officer; County Durham & Darlington Local Resilience Forum; County Durham Partnership; County Durham Association of Local Councils; Durham University; Public Health; Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Management Board; and Mary Kelly Foy MP.
- 51 Most respondents would be more supportive of incremental rather than whole scale change, with the preference to adopt some, not all of the consultant's recommendations.
- 52 Some stakeholders including current AAP Boards, Board members and Forum members reflected concerns around the lack of detail in the consultant's recommendations and lack of evidence to support the case for widespread change.
- 53 It is broadly accepted that not all the consultant's recommendations build on the strengths of the APPs and it is felt by most that implementation of all recommendations would deconstruct the existing model, losing best practice and experience built up within AAP teams, boards and communities.
- 54 Some respondents feel that the term 'network' sounds more engaging than [AAP] 'board' and there is widespread agreement to make improvements and make AAPs even more efficient and effective.
- 55 Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Management Board made the recommendation that that Cabinet agree the final decision in respect of the community engagement review be referred to full council for determination. However, the implementation of the community

engagement arrangements are an executive matter and therefore it falls to Cabinet rather than Council to determine what the arrangements are.

Key Principles of the new model

- 56 Comments and suggestions from the consultation have been recorded and considered to inform the design going forward for the council's main community engagement function.
- 57 Where the consultation analysis demonstrates broad agreement for the consultant's proposals, these have been included in the design of the new model, including:
- maintaining a hyper local network of engagement mechanisms, following the local government boundary review outcomes;
 - enhanced capacity for community development support;
 - greater use of a wider range of engagement methods over and above Board meetings;
 - the development of a strategic plan to shape the allocation of funds including wider consultation and engagement with the County Durham Partnership and greater use of data and intelligence;
 - a costed plan based on four-year funding (with annual funding during transition year 2024/25);
 - simplified funding and application processes;
 - simplified councillor Neighbourhood Budget process including DCC project catalogue and dedicated contact within the funding team;
 - implementation of new grant application and funding system (subject to budget approval); and
 - review of AAP staff bases and opportunities identified for staff to work flexibly within their communities.

Proposed community engagement model

- 58 With the adoption of the above consultant's proposals and listening to other comments and feedback received during the consultation around the effectiveness and performance of the current AAP model, it is proposed to implement a rebranded community engagement model of

local networks. Appendix 4 details the Local Network model in diagram format.

- 59 Subject to outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review, Local Networks will have the potential to align current boundaries to the new electoral wards. Local Network boundary alignment will be reviewed following the outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review (consultation closes 10 July 2023 and the final recommendations are due to be published 28 November 2023).
- 60 Local Networks will maintain individual geographic names e.g., 3 Towns Local Network, 4 Together and will support communities at a time of increased pressures on residents and decreasing public resources.
- 61 Local Networks will aim to attract involvement of a greater number, and a broader range of residents and local stakeholders through increased use and the repurpose of the current AAP Forum and its 15,000 members, relaunched as the County Durham Community Network. Opportunities will be enhanced to use new and traditional engagement tools and activities to ensure local residents and partners engagement with Local Networks, and attendance to meetings and events are increased.
- 62 Local Networks Panels will govern and manage the affairs of local networks in ways that are clear and transparent and demonstrate proper accountability to the County Council, partner organisations, stakeholders and the wider community.

Boundaries

- 63 Local Networks will launch in April 2025 and subject to outcomes of the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review and a subsequent review by the council of current AAP boundaries, will have the potential to align Local Network boundaries to the new electoral wards whilst continuing to promote residents' affinity and cohesion in their communities, and maintaining stability and familiarity for partners and stakeholders.

Membership

- 64 The AAP Board will be replaced by a Local Network Panel and will maintain a non-political nature. The Panel will consist of a maximum of 21 members serving a four-year term. This will comprise of seven elected members (six county councillors and one Town & Parish councillor); seven partner representatives and seven community representatives. Revised open and transparent processes for the selection of Local Network Panel members will be included in the new

Terms of Reference (ToR) including guidance for elected member selection and term (including Town & Parish councillors).

- 65 To help ensure political neutrality neither county councillors and/or Town & Parish councillors nor anyone who holds office in a political party will be eligible to take up the position of community representatives.
- 66 Community representatives will be selected following an open and transparent recruitment process which will include the requirement to declare any conflicts of interest (financial and/or political). Selection will be determined by a selection panel (made up of a smaller group of Local Network Panel members) and will be endorsed by the full Local Network Panel. Community representatives will serve a maximum of a four-year term and cannot hold the position of community representative within 12 months of a previous term. All Panel members will be required to complete a register of interest and abide by a code of conduct that will be presented alongside ToR in a future report.
- 67 Partner representatives will consist of one representative from: Durham Constabulary; Durham & Darlington Fire & Rescue; health partners; registered social landlords; VCS organisations; and a local business. Local Networks will have the flexibility to reflect the individuality of their area on their membership Panel by offering the seventh partner representative position to an organisation or statutory body that has prevalence and significance in their local area (or they may choose to maintain a senior officer from Durham County Council as their seventh partner representative).
- 68 Each group (elected members, partners and community representatives) will elect a vice chair on an annual basis with the anticipation that the position of chair will revolve on an annual basis (e.g. be held by one of the vice chairs). Each chair must have a 12 month break between each term. If deemed appropriate by the Panel and agreement reached by a vote, chairs may continue for a maximum of a two-year term.

Governance

- 69 To ensure operational and decision making consistency across all Local Networks, and promote accountability and transparency, governance documentation and processes including new ToR will be developed. In consultation with a selection of representatives from each of the three Local Network Panel membership groups, all governance will reflect the Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles) and will outline the ethical standards Local Network Panel members are expected to adhere to. These will be approved by Cabinet prior to the launch in April

2025 and will be reviewed every 12 months to ensure they remain relevant and fit for purpose, or sooner if a need is identified and agreement from the relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holder is received.

- 70 The new ToR will clearly define the purpose, structure and functions of the Local Networks, promoting consistent common practices which are easily enforced across all Networks. This will also include clear guidelines for the effective and efficient operation of 'project task and finish groups' and 'Panel sub groups'.
- 71 The ToR will provide in detail eligibility criteria, roles and responsibilities of Panel members and robust processes around recruitment and selection of Panel members to deliver improved assurance that Local Network Panels will be non-political.
- 72 The ToR will strengthen protocols on decision making to ensure clear and concise guidance is adhered to in relation to the declaration of all prejudicial interests and Local Panel meetings will be formatted to provide a protocol reminder at the start of each meeting.
- 73 Financial accountability will be improved with increased transparency on funding processes with introduction of new funding guidelines and criteria, developed in consultation with the council's Section 151 Officer.

Decision making

- 74 Local decision making and transparency will be maintained. All Local Network decisions will be made by the Local Network Panel with the aim that this is achieved by consensus. To ensure clarity that this can be achieved, in particular, on funding decisions, Panels will be required to hold a vote. The voting arrangements will form part of the procedure rules to be developed alongside the governance and ToR in consultation with the Head of Legal & Democratic Services.
- 75 New funding guidelines and criteria will be further developed to ensure all direct and indirect relationships with Panel members are declared.

Approach to enhanced community engagement and development

- 76 Local Networks will adopt a more strategic approach to their work and outcomes through focussed Local Network meetings (reduced number per year) and the development of an individual local network plan in consultation with the County Durham Partnership and its thematic partnerships. Local network plans will help inform strategic priorities and identify opportunities for increased joined up working between Local Networks, partners and other DCC services.

- 77 Local network plans will be informed by: community views (residents and partners) facilitated by Local Network meetings and locality events; consultation and engagement with the County Durham Community Network and County Durham Partnership and its thematic partnership sub groups; and utilising greater use of empirical data via a unique local profile (e.g. robust and detailed view on the profile and demographics of the Local Network area).
- 78 Improved processes and reduced formal Local Network meetings will ensure Local Networks have enhanced opportunities to carry out focussed engagement/neighbourhood planning type activities in particular with communities identified in the local network plan.
- 79 Existing community engagement and development activities will be improved for example: promoting the work of the Local Network and attracting new participation; support for groups/organisations in sourcing and attracting alternative sources of funding; continued support for administering and delivering activities funded by external budgets e.g. Holiday Activities with Healthy Food (HAWF); and identifying opportunities and working with new residents/community groups to support them in becoming formally constituted groups.
- 80 The current AAP Forum will be repurposed with a new identity. This will be relaunched as the County Durham Community Network and will increase opportunities for its 15,000 members to engage in local network plan development and delivery including the option to introduce a new online consultation and engagement platform. There will be an increased focus on Local Network consultation activities whilst also enhancing Local Network delivery of those consultation activities delivered on behalf of DCC and partners.

Funding

- 81 Strategic Grant funding will replace Area Budgets. Local Network Strategic Grant funding will commence in May 2025 and funding applications will be approved by the Local Network Panel.
- 82 Local Networks will have the opportunity to allocate funding more flexibly over a four-year period to provide the means for more strategic action aligned to the local network plan e.g. four-year costed plans. It will provide increased flexibility and improved opportunities to identify and respond to emerging community needs e.g. spend allowed in year one whilst local network plans are being developed, whilst also providing longer term funding assurance for some applicants and increase opportunities for attracting match funding etc.

- 83 The ability to allocate funding flexibly over the four-year period will also allow for more time and opportunity for Local Networks to explore and identify new options which will help deliver the outcomes of their local network plan. This will include increased funding opportunities for new groups/organisations as opposed to working with the same partners repeatedly because current annual funding timescales reduce the amount of time which can be spent on developing new and existing community groups/organisations.
- 84 New funding guidelines and criteria will ensure Local Network funding is allocated prudently throughout the four-year local network planning cycle to local projects/initiatives, to effectively deliver the local network plan and provide positive outcomes for local residents and communities throughout the four-year planning cycle.
- 85 The funding guidelines and criteria will be developed in consultation with the council's internal audit team to mitigate and manage the level of risk associated with any changes to financial processes.

Elected Members' Neighbourhood Budgets

- 86 Elected members' Neighbourhood Budgets will continue to be allocated on an annual cycle with streamlined processes to help elected members carry out their community development work e.g.: no Neighbourhood Budget decisions taken by the Local Panel; single points of contact within the funding team; and access to indicative costs, specifications and timescales for DCC frequently delivered projects by means of a 'catalogue' of common schemes.

Improved processes

- 87 Application and funding processes will be streamlined to deliver improved efficiencies for applicants, elected members and Local Network staff, including (but not limited to): streamlined application form for repeat applicants and statutory partners; projects delivered by DCC will only require Network Panel approval; stipulation that any relevant permissions required to deliver a project must be in place prior to application being submitted; financial monitoring will be streamlined (projects with a declaration of interest will be prioritised); increased access/visibility to the funding team for elected members and applicants; and the option to introduce a new online grant application and management system. Appendix 5 provides more detail on the specific process improvements which will be implemented in consultation with the council's internal audit team to mitigate and manage the level of risk associated with any changes to financial processes.

Performance management

- 88 A new efficient and user-friendly performance management framework and system will be developed to effectively monitor activities/projects delivered via the local network plan to determine impact and value for money. The new performance management framework and system will be considered as part of the option to introduce a new online grant application and funding system.
- 89 Local Network Panel members will be required to complement the performance management framework by assisting with some qualitative monitoring. By undertaking a 'project champion' role and visiting projects/initiatives to witness their delivery and outcomes etc. Local Network Panel members will also help share learning and promote best practice.
- 90 Fit for purpose monitoring will also feed into strategic countywide key performance indicators where appropriate and can be used to help inform strategic priorities set by DCC, County Durham Partnership and key partners.

Staffing

- 91 The new Local Network model is based on the current AAP and funding team staffing complement. Staff are currently based within their geographic AAP boundaries and where this is not within council owned buildings, options are currently being considered to re-locate staff to reduce office accommodation costs.
- 92 Within the current council staff hybrid working arrangements, staff will maintain their core base in a council owned building but will have greater flexibility to identify days and locations where they can temporarily be based within buildings in the local community to work more closely with the specific community groups/organisations they are currently supporting etc.

Next steps

- 93 Whilst the independent review and countywide consultation on the council's community engagement function have been crucial first phases, there remains detailed and extensive work to do in fulfilment of the recommendations in this report. Following Cabinet agreement, the existing project group, sponsored by the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy & Partnerships and led by the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods & Climate Change, will deliver the next phase of this project to implement the new model.

Phased implementation delivery plan

- 94 The new Local Network model will be incrementally implemented to mitigate service disruption, with the new Local Network model fully operational in April 2025 in time to prepare for the council elections in May 2025 and the commencement of the four-year network planning cycle, see table below.

Milestone	Delivery
Local Government Boundary Review consultation closes*	July 2023
Project plan including communications plan initiated	August 2023
Funding process improvements & efficiencies including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamlined approval process for lower spend threshold • Streamlined approval process for DCC delivered projects • Streamlined approval for applications pending conditions • New contact processes for funding team & applicants • Establish funding team single points of contact for elected members 	October 2023
Funding process improvements & efficiencies including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamlined process for Neighbourhood Budget (removal of AAP approval) • Revised process for applications requiring external permissions (e.g. planning/licencing etc.) • Streamlined application forms for repeat applicants & statutory partners • Catalogue for frequently delivered DCC projects • Financial monitoring (12 month pilot) 	April 2024
Local Network Governance and ToR (including funding guidelines) working group established	October 2023
Local Government Boundary Review - final recommendations*	November 2023
Potential commencement for review AAP boundaries	January 2024
Feasibility study for online grant application & management system	April 2024
Feasibility study for online consultation & engagement platform**	April 2024

Milestone	Delivery
Local Network Governance & ToR (including funding guidelines) sign off by Cabinet	September 2024
Strategic planning process with County Durham Partnership	December 2024
Local Network branding & communication tools	January 2025
Launch campaign for community & partnership events/activities	January – March 2025
Training	1 April 2025
Local Networks ‘go live’	1 April 2025
Local Network Panels appointed & four-year planning cycle commences	May 2025
Training (new Panel members)	June 2025

* out of scope – dates will be determined by the Local Government Electoral Boundary Review and therefore may be subject to change

** out of scope - will be delivered outside of this project as business as usual

- 95 AAPs will continue to operate as Area Action Partnerships until 31 March 2025, and on 1 April 2025 they will assume their new identity as Local Networks.
- 96 Where practically possible, and where it will cause no interruption to service delivery, improved/new processes and procedures will be implemented under our political management arrangements of chief officer delegated powers. This will help test processes and to then embed improvements at the earliest opportunities and ensure efficiencies are realised promptly.
- 97 A programme of tailored briefing and training sessions will be delivered for relevant stakeholders where necessary during the transition period, April 2025 ‘go live’, and the appointment of new Panel members in May 2025. This will include: working with the County Durham Partnership Board and thematic partnerships to design and agree their role in the development and delivery of local network plans; governance and ToR protocols for Panel members; and funding guidelines and criteria and process arrangements for all relevant key stakeholders.
- 98 A launch campaign to set in motion, raise awareness and promote the New Local Networks will commence in January 2025 with Local Networks and their elected members delivering enhanced promotional and community engagement activities to attract new participants prior to ‘go live’ in April 2025.

2024/25 transition year funding

- 99 It is proposed to continue with the current annual funding allocation arrangements for AAPs and elected members' Neighbourhood Budget for the 2024/25 financial year and commence the four-year local network planning cycle for Strategic Grant funding to align with the local council election in May 2025.
- 100 During this period AAPs will continue to empower boards to determine their local priorities based on local need for their last year for annual Area Budget.

Communications

- 101 An extensive communications plan will be developed and delivered to ensure all key stakeholders and residents are kept up to date on progress during the duration of the project.
- 102 This will include tailored and timely communications for the relevant stakeholders to highlight the implementation of process improvements and new ways of working etc. (e.g. in-line with delivery of key milestones).
- 103 Communication and engagement activities will also be delivered to specifically promote the new community engagement function and 'go live' in April 2025 to advertise and raise awareness of the new Local Networks, and to attract increase participation from local residents and communities.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 104 An equalities impact assessment screening (appendix 6) details the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups for the implementation of the new model. In summary the recommendations for the new community engagement model do not disproportionately impact (both negatively and positively) the protected characteristics. The model is designed to be as inclusive as possible, with reasonable adjustments made where necessary in order to ensure the participation of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

- 105 We are aware that AAPs have been operating for 14 years and it is appropriate that we received independent advice and consulted widely with all stakeholders 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.

106 In consulting and listening to the voices of our current AAP members, residents, partners and elected members etc. we intend to implement a new and improved community engagement model building on strengths of the current model and opportunities presented through the review and consultation phases. The new Local Networks will help the council, with our partners, to better engage, consult with and develop our communities so we can tackle the challenges that we face more effectively and help build more resilient communities.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

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

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The proposed new engagement model based is aimed to strengthen the Council's ability to ensure it meets it's statutory 'duty to consult' of service change.

Finance

The proposals set out in this report aim to enhance the capacity for local residents to engage with the council and its partners to ensure local communities are resilient and supportive. The proposals set out in this report are cost neutral, with the aim that the reviewed service, in line with the council's well-being principals, will help mitigate the level of need for other council 'mainstream' support services. Any costs for new online grant management or engagement tools would be met by current departmental budgets.

The funding guidelines and criteria will be developed in consultation with the council's internal audit team to mitigate and manage the level of risk associated with any changes to financial processes.

Consultation

The outcomes from the countywide consultation exercise are summarised within the report and further detail is provided in appendices 2 and 3.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

An equalities impact assessment screening is attached as appendix 6 detailing the potential impact of the protected characteristic groups. The recommendations for the new community engagement model do not disproportionately impact (both negatively and positively) the protected characteristics. The model is designed to be as inclusive as possible, with reasonable adjustments made where necessary in order to ensure the participation of people with disabilities.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

Local Networks (as current AAPs) will support the council's legal responsibility for preventing and reducing crime and disorder in the area by enabling communities to identify and highlight crime and disorder issues in their area, and work with partners to problem solve and implement crime reduction and prevention strategies.

Staffing

The new Local Network model is based on the current AAP staffing complement.

Staff engagement has been a key element of the review process to date. Subject to the approval of this report, further engagement will be carried out 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 outcomes and the timescales we are working towards to implement the new model.

Accommodation

Consideration will be given to the Local Network teams making greater use of local community facilities to carry out drop-in sessions across their areas.

Risk

There is a risk that the desired increase in local residents do not engage with the new model. To mitigate this, a robust communications plan will be developed to promote the changes. Furthermore, staff will have more capacity to explore new engagement mechanisms, over and above the local network meetings, to engage with a broad range of the community.

The funding guidelines and criteria will be developed in consultation with the council's internal audit team to mitigate and manage the level of risk associated with any changes to financial processes.

Procurement

Procurement procedural regulations will be followed in the acquisition of a grant management and consultation/engagement systems.

