

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING:	Cabinet	
MEETING DATE:	8 May 2013	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE:
		E 2545
TITLE:	Connecting Communities: A Local Engagement Framework for Bath and North East Somerset	
WARD:	All	
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM		
List of attachments to this report: Appendix 1: Connecting Communities: Our Framework for Change Appendix 2: Connecting Communities: Toolkit Appendix 3: Connecting Communities: Draft Action Plan		

1 THE ISSUE

1.1 This report sets out a new approach to working with local communities in Bath and North East Somerset called “Connecting Communities”. It identifies the Framework jointly adopted by local public services as well as a “Toolkit” of good practice which will be built on at locality level. The report also outlines the key changes and actions for delivery of Connecting Communities and the benefits expected from this new way of working.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet agrees that:

2.1 It adopt the “Connecting Communities Framework” set out in Appendix One, along with other public service partners working through the Public Services Board

2.2 It request officers to begin the implementation of the framework through widely publicising the “Core Offer” set out in the “Connecting Communities Toolkit” in Appendix Two

2.3 It delegates to the Divisional Director, Policy and Partnerships in consultation with the Council Leader the detailed plans for implementing the “Local Offer” set out in the “Connecting Communities Toolkit”

2.4 It request the Divisional Director, Policy and Partnerships to work with local groups and communities to keep updated the Connecting Communities Toolkit in order to share good practice in local communities

2.5 It notes the Draft Action Plan set out in Appendix Three and request a further report in 6 months updating on progress in implementing Connecting Communities

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 However, work in drawing up Connecting Communities has highlighted that the Council and its public service partners invest significantly in staff time and other resources in supporting a wide range of local community engagement and consultation mechanisms. There is therefore the opportunity to improve effectiveness by working with local communities to reduce duplication and streamline these approaches, releasing efficiency savings.

3.2 Cabinet in May 2012 agreed to allocate £105,000 from the Community Empowerment Fund specifically to improvements to local engagement. This will be used to deliver the programme and ensure maximum benefit from it for local communities.

4 CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

4.1 Connecting Communities is central to delivering the Council's aim of being "a listening Council with active citizens that reaches every community and culture". By working jointly with local communities on identifying issues and working together, innovative solutions can be identified to address the key Council priorities as below:

- *Promoting independence and positive lives for everyone-* by providing opportunities for local people to be involved in shaping their communities and to build local projects
- *Creating neighbourhoods where people are proud to live-* by celebrating the successes and strengths of community projects and facilities
- *Building a stronger economy-* by increasing local skills and establishing and growing successful social enterprises

5 THE REPORT

5.1 Bath & North East Somerset Council's refreshed Vision and Values identifies the ambition of being "A listening Council with active citizens that reaches every community and culture". Increasingly this will require the Council to develop its role as an "enabler", helping support and strengthen our communities so they are better able to tackle issues of local concern. As the Council seeks to move from good to excellent, it will increasingly be judged on how well it works with partners to help local people shape the areas they live and work in.

5.2 Bath and North East Somerset is fortunate in having a wide range of effective voluntary and community groups, parish and town councils and residents' associations. However, the mechanisms that have evolved over time for working with these groups and with local communities are complex and can lead to duplication and confusion. There is also the potential for key local issues to go unresolved through this fragmented approach.

5.3 In addition, our mechanisms for local engagement have generally been service-based, driven by the needs of a particular issue, organisational requirement or national initiative. This has in some cases militated against the longer-term

conversations and relationships needed to build trust and confidence to tackle local issues. This is made more challenging by the diversity of Bath and North East Somerset and particularly the fact that it has both parished and unparished areas.

5.4 Bath and North East Somerset's Public Services Board comprises Bath & North East Somerset Council, Avon and Somerset Police, Avon Fire and Rescue Service, Bath & North East Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group and Curo, with voluntary and community sector membership currently subject to an open recruitment process. The Board recognises that our communities do not think or work in either service or agency "silos" and increasingly expect "seamless" engagement. In addition, key drivers such as the Placemaking Plan, Connecting Families and Community Budgets require new ways of working to succeed. More details on these challenges are set out in Appendix One.

5.5 The Public Services Board has therefore taken the initiative to achieve better joint working with local communities in order to meet these challenges and to address public expectations for better, more streamlined services. Its aim is a "joined up" approach to tackle the concerns that local people raise with us and to work together on solutions to local concerns through "one conversation". Connecting Communities is about public services supporting and enabling local initiatives to thrive as communities increasingly take the lead in shaping their areas and in contributing to solutions.

5.6 The new approach, adopted by the Public Services Board on 24th April, is set out in the Framework document attached in Appendix One and can be summarised in the following way:

(1) Public Services are jointly signing up to a series of principles and commitments which set out how they will work. These are:

To LISTEN - *always being open to ideas* Our commitment is to understand what it is that communities are asking for, rather than making assumptions based on existing ways of working.

To PRIORITISE - *making sure local needs come first* Our commitment is to work with local communities to identify the different needs of each area, rather than adopting a "one size fits all" approach to deciding priorities. We will support communities to make decisions grounded in the best possible evidence.

To JOIN UP - *working in partnership with our local communities* Our commitment is to act as "one Council", and increasingly as "one public service", so that when communities talk to someone who works for a public service they can gain access to all public service resources without duplication of effort

To WORK WITH YOU - helping communities find the best way to tackle local issues Our commitment is to always be open to new ideas and to look for solutions rather than barriers

To SHARE IDEAS - building on what works Our commitment is to share information and best practice across our area and to encourage learning and innovation

- (2) To put these commitments into practice, Public Services will for the first time work through a single framework for local engagement with partners and residents. This will be based on “Clusters” and will be rolled out in both the unparished and parished areas of Bath and North East Somerset.
- (3) These clusters will be supported through a “toolkit” of approaches, information and opportunities for local projects and joint working, drawing on successful projects across our area and elsewhere. It is important to note that Connecting Communities can build on experience of successful community engagement across our area, in particular “on the ground” projects such as Community@67 in Keynsham, *Changes in Whiteway* and our programme of Community Asset Transfer (reported to Council in February).

5.7 Connecting Communities will be complemented by a Public Service “core offer” across the whole of Bath and North East Somerset which focuses on activities such as working through local elected members and the democratic process, formal consultation mechanisms and engagement with “communities of interest” including equalities groups. Key commitments from the Council to support Connecting Communities include:

- (1) A continuation of the Council’s programme of asset transfer so that communities increasingly take control of local facilities, with more local community hubs such as the new Paulton library. The Medium Term Service and Resources Plan identifies savings in 2014/15 and 2015/16 arising from better use of community assets.
- (2) Leading the creation of “virtual teams” across public services to support the development of these clusters
- (3) Use of wider Council resources, eg data, skills and other capacity to support and enable communities

5.8 Connecting Communities will be supported by the wider “family” of Public Service partners operating through groups such as the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Community Safety partnership, supported by the Public Services Board. Partners will work closely with the clusters to highlight key issues locally and work on solutions, linking closely with partner initiatives such as Connecting Families.

5.9 The benefits of this new approach are expected to be:

- Less duplication of effort and meetings and quicker responses to local issues
- An opportunity to see the “big picture” of public service budgets within an area
- A single point of contact for local residents and community groups who wish to work with the public services on local solutions
- An expansion of projects more quickly into other areas through better sharing of information about “what works”

- More support for local innovation - for example the Proud of Your Doorstep initiative in Whiteway

5.10 The presumption of Connecting Communities is “one conversation” between public services and communities, with the cluster as the place where this happens. As such our clear offer of support for Connecting Communities may also mean that Public Services will also no longer support mechanisms which do not contribute to tackling local solutions, which create duplication or which do not fully engage with local people.

5.11 The proposed Clustering arrangements are set out in Appendix One of the report. It is important to note however that these Clusters are designed to enable our process of locality working with communities rather than constrict them within strict boundaries. Our aim will therefore be to encourage natural communities to come together through this process in ways that work best for them. Further discussions will take place on the phasing of the introduction of the “local offer” through the Clusters. However, it is currently expected that in order to maximise the benefits of current regeneration and investment initiatives Phase One will include the Keynsham Area Cluster, the South East Bath Cluster and the Somer Valley Cluster.

6 RISK MANAGEMENT

6.1 The report author and Lead Cabinet member have fully reviewed the risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

7 EQUALITIES

7.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed. The EqIA found that Connecting Communities offered a number of opportunities to meet equalities objectives by helping focus support on communities who need the most help in tackling local issues, as well as sharing and disseminating good practice. In addition to the locally-based engagement work, however, the “core offer” provides direct links with equalities groups and communities of interest across the Bath and North East Somerset area as a whole, particularly through the newly-formed joint Independent Equalities Advisory Group.

8 RATIONALE

8.1 The rationale for adopting Connecting Communities is that it is now timely, given the Council's refreshed Vision and Values, for a clear statement of the approach it will take to working with local communities. In addition, working with public services through the Public Service Board is also considered the most appropriate way of creating greater clarity and reducing duplication. Given the diverse nature of our local communities it is also considered appropriate that this be seen as a “Framework” which can be adopted in local circumstances.

9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 To adopt a “Council-only” Local Engagement Framework without working with other public services

9.2 To continue with the status quo

10 CONSULTATION

10.1 Cabinet members; Other B&NES Services; Local Residents; Community Interest Groups; Stakeholders/Partners; Other Public Sector Bodies; Section 151 Finance Officer; Chief Executive; Monitoring Officer

10.2 Connecting Communities has been led by Cabinet members and has been worked up collaboratively with stakeholders including from other public services and from the Stronger Communities Partnership. A workshop took place on February 20th identifying the key strengths of the area that can be built on through Connecting Communities. The Public Service Board considered Connecting Communities on April 24th. It agreed the Framework, identified opportunities for improved outcomes through public services working together at local level, and agreed to receive future reports focusing on the needs of individual Clusters.

10.3 The adoption of the Connecting Communities framework set out in this report represents the start of a process of more effective engagement with local communities across our area and in localities.

11 ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN REACHING THE DECISION

11.1 *Social Inclusion; Customer Focus; Sustainability; Property; Young People; Human Rights; Corporate;*

12 ADVICE SOUGHT

12.1 The Council's Monitoring Officer (Divisional Director – Legal and Democratic Services) and Section 151 Officer (Divisional Director - Finance) have had the opportunity to input to this report and have cleared it for publication.

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Background papers	
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	