

Joint Area Committee - North - 25 November 2009

13. Joint Area Committees (Executive Decision) (Excepted Business)

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Purpose of the Report

To present the Joint Area Committee Review document for Members' comments and update Members on the withdrawal of Somerset County Council from Joint Area Committees (JACs).

Recommendations

- (1) To note the Joint Area Committee Review document and member and officer surveys.
- (2) To consider the continuing role of the Parish representative within a newly constituted Joint Area Committee.
- (3) To make specific suggestions for the development of the Joint Area Committee role, bearing in mind the conclusions from the JAC review document.

Background

In South Somerset Joint Area Committees resulted from a proposal agreed by both South Somerset District Council and Somerset County Councils in October 2008. A joint report brought before SSDC Full Council on the 30 October 2008 recommended to build upon the South Somerset Area Committee structure and to pilot a phased approach and constitutional arrangements to underpin the establishment of JACs.

JACs have been operational since January 2009 when our area committees took on the new role with formal county and parish representation. The outcomes to be delivered at this time were summarised as

- Better community engagement leading to true community empowerment.
- Better democratic decision-making.
- More effective local delivery of public services.
- Better engagement with partners at a local level.
- Greater demonstration of partnership working across the 3 tiers of local councillors.
- Greater linkage between local decision-making (JACs) and local engagement and empowerment (Area Forums – as currently being piloted by SSDC).
- Establishment of a sound basis to tackle requirements of the Sustainable Communities Act.

Somerset County Council Decision

A review of phase 1 was completed in the Summer 2009 which comprised an officer and member survey indicating the successes and areas for development. The JAC programme board met for the first time since the May elections on the 1 October 2009. At that meeting the representatives from Somerset County Council signalled their intention to withdraw from the JAC pilot. The reasons that have been put forward to SCC Full Council for their meeting on the 11 November are:-

- the financial circumstances facing the County Council now and in the future mean that one of the original intentions behind the pilot to devolve significant sums of money and decision making to the local level in one district area of the County is not an affordable option. It would be even less affordable if that model was applied to the other district areas so breaking significant elements of SCC funding down into 5 district areas with a resulting significant loss of economies of scale.
- the Council as it has in the past will take opportunities in line with the philosophy behind the pilot of taking SCC (planning) decisions locally by having Regulation meetings out in localities for decisions of high public interest – which already happens on occasion – so this is not considered a strong argument for moving the pilot into Phase 2.
- in terms of staff resources, the Council's involvement in JACs has already had a significant impact, particularly in Environment Directorate, and to delegate further activities and decision-making would present significant practical difficulties under current Officer structures. Again this problem would increase proportionately if this model of joint working was to be replicated in other areas of the county at a time when the County Council is facing difficult financial circumstances.
- concerns with the JAC model itself including public engagement at the meetings which was minimal.

It was indicated at the Programme Board meeting that whilst the County Council was not prepared to support the formal JAC model into the future, it would welcome the opportunity to work more informally with the district council on specific initiatives at a local level where there was mutual benefit, eg, the annual joint meetings between each JAC and the Area's Parish Councils are an example of joint working that the County Council would wish to continue to support.

The County Council has stated its wish in this report to continue to work with the district council informally on local initiatives outside of any formal committee structure where there are clear benefits for doing so and they hope that the district council will be receptive to this offer.

The report will be considered on the 11th November SCC Council agenda. With the decision becoming operational on the 10th December: SSDC Full Council meeting, when a report by the Assistant Director – Legal and Corporate Services will outline the constitutional changes required.

Phase 1 Review

A three phase approach was agreed, with a review after each phase.

The project was run under strict project management arrangements with a joint programme board, officer working groups and following a clear project initiation document.

This review is continuing in view of

- the agreed project management framework
- the amount of time and energy put into the JAC project
- the learning that can be gained from reviewing this pilot exercise

Survey Results

Members are invited to comment on this review document (appendix X) and the survey of officers and members (appendix Y).

Generally, both officers and members felt being able to get a county presence really helped, and there was an obvious advantage to discuss areas of service where both organisations responsibilities overlap, such as community safety and major planning applications. A highway presence is something that SSDC members value greatly. The SCC officer presentations were judged useful. Many felt that joint working was enhanced by all three tiers working together.

Many agreed that there was a great potential yet to be realised and it really was “too early to judge”.

There were clearly some teething troubles, understanding the voting, and what constituted ‘Excepted Business’.

The length of meetings and the ‘sheer breadth’ of what was being attempted to cover caused problems, in terms of scheduling agenda items and officer waiting times.

Some questioned whether there were enough decision making powers being devolved, and were sceptical about the added value of county presence.

Conclusion

The council, with its mature area committee system, is certainly ahead of the game in respect of community engagement and empowerment, in particular the requirement that by 2011 all local authorities should have embedded effective community engagement and empowerment arrangements.

It is in many ways disappointing for SCC to withdraw so early at phase 1, of what was intended to be a 3 phase process, before the learning from phase 1 could be incorporated.

This does not mean however that innovation and development will not continue. In many ways the Area Committee system is the perfect vehicle for delivering ‘localism in South Somerset’ – joined up services on peoples’ doorsteps – something all political parties are seeking in making public services more relevant and accountable.

South Somerset will continue to innovate and develop its area system. Examples are the way the Area Committee oversees a raft of engagement projects and processes such as: -

- Parish Council workshops
- Local forums and participatory budgeting.
- Community Safety Action Panels (enhanced by the police re-starting their neighbourhood policing teams to reflect our area committee boundaries)
- LDF 'cluster' workshops

Bearing in mind the review and survey documents members are asked to consider their views on:-

1. A parish representative being a formal joint area committee member (SALC have been asked for their comments and these will be reported)
2. The learning that can be gained from Phase 1.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

The report supports Corporate Aim 4, Ensuring Safe , Sustainable and Cohesive Communities (NI3, increasing civic participation in the local area).

- Background Papers:**
- Proposal to Establish SCC/SSDC Joint Area Committees - A Joint Report (SSDC, Full Council, 30th October 2008)
 - Recommendations of the Executive Board – Part 2 (SCC, County Council, 12th November 2008)
 - Report to JACs 'Somerset County Council - Managing Expectations' – January and February 2009
 - JAC Phase 1 Review (JAC Programme Board, 1st October 2009)
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