

## Area West Committee – 21st January 2009

### 8. Briefing on the Establishment of SCC/SSDC Joint Area Committees

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#### Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the agreements made to date by the Councils of South Somerset and Somerset, to establish four Joint Area Committees in South Somerset District, together with an update on work completed and planned in order for the first meeting of the SCC/SSDC Joint Area Committee for Area West to take place in February 2009.

The Head of Area Development (West) will provide any further updates at the meeting.

#### Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- (1) note and comment on the report, including any matters they wish the project team to consider prior to the first meeting of the Joint Area West Committee;
- (2) note arrangements for the review of phase 1, leading to the development of phase 2 as set out in the report;
- (3) note the date and time of the first meeting of the Joint Area West Committee as 18th February 2009 at 5.30 p.m. at the Shrubbery Hotel, Ilminster.

#### 1. Background and Introduction

Members will be aware that Full Council held on 30th October 2008, approved a series of recommendations, developed jointly between Somerset County and South Somerset District Councils to establish four Joint Area Committees, as a pilot and first phase, based on and developed from the existing area committee structure in South Somerset District.

This endorsement was followed by a similar approval by Somerset County Council at its meeting on 12th November 2008.

A full copy of the report is available from the officer named at the top of this report, or may be downloaded from [http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/media/pdf/s/k/Item\\_8.pdf](http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/media/pdf/s/k/Item_8.pdf)

These exciting proposals seek to build upon the South Somerset model for local democracy and community engagement, leading in due course to substantive partnership arrangements at a sub-district level, supported by a level of community engagement that would surpass anything that could be achieved by the individual agencies working alone. Truly empowered local communities are the ultimate aim of these new arrangements.

The other district councils in Somerset have confirmed that they will watch this pilot phase with interest. The Audit Commission has similarly praised both councils for their willingness to develop new ways of working.

## **2. What is a Joint Area Committee (JAC)?**

Under current legislation, any local authority can enter into an agreement to form a joint committee with another, to perform or add value to existing powers and functions.

The term 'Joint Area Committee' (JAC) will be used to describe the joint committee, established to serve the geographical area of North, South, East or West of South Somerset District. Members of each committee will include all those elected councillors for Somerset County and South Somerset district councils, for the area. Where there is an overlap of boundaries, a county councillor will be entitled to serve on each committee, district wards are already self-contained within each area boundary.

## **3. What powers and functions will the JAC be given by each authority?**

A summary of the likely functions to be delegated from each Council to the Joint Area Committee is included in Appendix A (pages 7 - 8)

In broad terms, the current remit of the area committees will continue, what will expand and develop is the scope and significance of the matters considered – covering both SCC and SSDC functions.

SSDC full council will receive a report seeking formal delegation of voting rights on development control matters to SCC councillors, early in the New Year. In the meantime SCC councillors will be able to make representations on planning applications, and take part in the discussion at committee, but not vote.

Although no changes to the current SSDC planning functions delegated to Area Committees are envisaged, these new ways of taking decisions on developments affecting the local area will be developed over time. Once various regulatory matters have been put in place, including the required training for councillors, certain land related and spatial planning decisions will be passed to the JAC by Somerset County Council.

Initially there are no additional financial resources allocated to the JAC, however in time this will be reviewed to ensure that the most effective decision making arrangements on local funding for community-led initiatives or service enhancements are achieved.

A further update on the progress of the proposals relating to delegation of powers will be provided at the meeting.

## **4. How will the Joint Area Committee work to make a difference?**

Members of the public will be able to attend one local meeting to hear about both District and County matters on one agenda, thus avoiding the need to go to two or more meetings.

They will be able to ask questions in the Public Question Time relating to both District and County matters and hear answers from Councillors from both tiers of local government, thereby achieving a more "joined up" response. District and County Officers will also be in attendance where appropriate to present reports and answer questions.

In due course a Parish Council representative will be invited to join the Committee to give a Parish perspective on matters discussed. (Arrangements for the election of a local parish or town councillor are to be undertaken by the Somerset Association of Local Councils).

The work programme and agendas for the Joint Area Committee will become focused around local community and regeneration issues that require a combined approach to provide better outcomes. This approach is entirely in line with the need to work in partnership on a range of issues in order to deliver the aspirations and vision set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy.

Specific issues, which could benefit from joint working, include services for supporting young and older people, highways, accessibility and rights of way, affordable housing provision and local economic development and regeneration initiatives. As part of this approach, and within the remit of the Joint Area Committee, future consideration will be given to combining budgets and other resources.

Once the final resolutions and training requirements have been met, Joint Area Committees will also consider both County and District planning applications thereby providing a more rounded response to planning issues, which often cut across both authorities. This will be introduced on a gradual basis over the coming months.

Finally, there will be a role for the JAC to scrutinise both District and County services and so avoid wasting time passing issues between both authorities. This will, of course, need to be carefully managed given finite officer time, to write reports and be present at meetings. A joint approach to developing co-ordinated forward plans for JAC will be essential (and should end up saving time and resources).

## 5. What is the process to establish the JAC?

Each council has agreed to establish the JACs from January 2009. The first Joint Area Committee to meet will be Area North, followed by South, East and West during February. The earliest JAC, which will make joint voting decisions on land-use and spatial planning applications, will be Area South in early March 2009.

The project to establish fully developed Joint Area Committees for South Somerset will be delivered in three phases:

**Phase 1** – Development, implementation and review (year 1)

**Phase 2** – Review and consider extending delegations/functions (years 1-5)

- Phase 2 will commence following the evaluation of phase 1, and after the County Council elections. This phase is intended to include further delegation of powers from either authority. The aim in phase 2 will be to enhance the authority and impact of the JAC in local decision making and to address local priorities, and to increase its influence and scrutiny of local service delivery.

**Phase 3** – Review and develop to multi-agency membership (years 2-5)

- The stated ambition of both councils is that, 2 years from the establishment of the JACs, they will evolve into 'first of kind' multi public agency decision-making and service delivery bodies, that make use of participatory budgeting initiatives.

Remaining tasks to complete phase 1 include:

- Amendments to the Constitutions to reflect the councils' decisions.
- Final agreement of operational (practical) arrangements to close down existing area committees, convene and start-up new JACs.

- Councillor training including required training to be involved in land use and spatial planning decisions.
- Communications and briefings for staff, councillors and community.
- Formal resolutions to delegate powers relating to development control and other planning matters.

## **6. How will the results be measured and evaluated?**

The project team will establish baseline measures including efficiency, customer satisfaction, reputation and partnership working, and establish a monitoring and performance management system to measure progress against outcomes. The results of phase one will inform the future agreements for phase two.

## **Financial Implications**

None.

## **Implications for Corporate Priorities**

The work of the Joint Area Committees will support the delivery of all corporate priorities.

**Background Papers:** *Report for Full Council 30th October 2008 – Proposal to establish SCC/SSDC Joint Area Committees.*