

**NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS – REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS**

*To:* Cabinet

*Date:* 28 September 2010

*From:* Rod Craig, Executive Director of Community and Adult Services

*Electoral divisions:* All

*Forward Plan ref:* Not applicable *Key decision:* No

*Purpose:* The purpose of this report is to present the findings and conclusions of the recent review of the County Council's participation in Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent), in the light of more than one year's experience of the process agreed by Cabinet and other relevant issues since that time, including the development of the County Council's Community Engagement Strategy and the emerging proposals to address the Localism agenda.

*Recommendations:* It is **RECOMMENDED** that the Cabinet:

1. notes the achievement made in terms of the development of the Neighbourhood Panels process to date and the contribution that the County Council has made in that regard;
2. agrees that the County Council should continue to play a positive role in the Neighbourhood Panels process;
3. agrees that the County Council should work collaboratively with other local authorities and key partner agencies to achieve effective community engagement through using the panels process as one of a number of methods to take forward the Localism agenda;
4. accepts that Neighbourhood Panels (or district area equivalent) are likely to operate differently in each district, to reflect local practice, but requests officers to continue their efforts to achieve operational consistency, as far as possible, across the County;
5. re-affirms the aims and operating principles for Neighbourhood Panels adopted in December 2008 (sections 1.1 and 1.2 of Appendix 1 refer);
6. endorses revision of the two current Neighbourhood Panel Liaison Officer (NPLO) posts to release capacity to undertake other work to support delivery of the Community Engagement Strategy and the wider Localism agenda;

7. re-affirms the expectation that County Councillors will attend and participate in Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent);
8. agrees that the roles of the County Councillors and the Lead Officers in relation to participation in Neighbourhood Panels be developed and for them to be more “self reliant”, requiring less support from the NPLOs;
9. agrees that further training/learning be provided for all elected members in relation to their role as a community leader and that the importance of their engagement in the Neighbourhood Panels process be reinforced;
10. agrees that any role descriptions being developed for County Councillors should include the role that they are expected to perform in relation to Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent).

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 On 2 December 2008, Cabinet decided, having regard to the national and local drivers at that time, to agree a number of principles around the County Council's support arrangements for the multi-agency Neighbourhood Panels operating around the county and to review these support arrangements after they had been in operation for at least a year. This report sets out the findings, conclusions and recommendations from this review, which Cabinet agreed to delay to ensure that links between Neighbourhood Panels/Forums and the emerging Localism agenda were explored fully.
- 1.2 The Council's commitment to developing Neighbourhood Panels is one strand of a programme of projects which aim to enhance the Council's approach to community engagement, as set out in the Community Engagement Strategy.
- 1.3 Since the Parliamentary Election, there has been renewed focus upon the need to engage communities as a means to achieve the Government's aspirations around Localism and the Big Society. Although Neighbourhood Panels/Forums are only part of the programme of work to enable this agenda to be taken forward, as proposals regarding the promotion of the Big Society are developed, it will be important to ensure that the opportunities presented by Neighbourhood Panels/Forums to involve local people in this agenda are maximised.

## **2. SUMMARY OF REVIEW FINDINGS**

- 2.1 It is clear that some of the Neighbourhood Panels/Forums are according fully with the Operating Principles (see Appendix 1) adopted by the County Council in December 2008, i.e. currently in East Cambridgeshire and in Huntingdonshire and about to commence in Fenland. In other areas, this is less so. This does not mean, however, that these operating principles were flawed. It has been acknowledged that it is not realistic, albeit possibly desirable, to achieve a "one size fits all" solution.
- 2.2 The average level attendance and participation at Neighbourhood Panels etc by Lead Officers (the roles of these officers are set out in Appendix 1 to this report), which varies across the County, is 71%. In some areas, the Lead Officer role is performed very effectively and in others there seems to be no place currently for this role; sometimes, the level of effectiveness can be dependant upon the character traits or confidence of the individual officer.
- 2.3 Officers consider it essential that the Lead Officer role be developed to enable capacity to be provided within the current Neighbourhood Panel Liaison Officer roles (as set out in Appendix 1 to this report) to undertake additional activities linked to delivery of the Community Engagement Strategy and the Localism agenda. When consulted, Lead Officers have expressed support for the development of a more meaningful role.
- 2.4 The level of elected member attendance and participation at Neighbourhood Panels etc varies across the County. Even in cases where there is a good level of attendance, some elected members do not generally engage in the meetings; they merely tend to observe proceedings and do not seek to explain the County Council's policy and practice on issues raised.

- 2.5 The average level of member attendance at Neighbourhood Panel meetings since the County Council's participation began is approximately 52%. The role that elected members are expected to play at Neighbourhood Panel/Forum meetings is included in Appendix 1 to this report.
- 2.6 The County Council's participation in the Neighbourhood Panels process is valued very highly by the partner agencies, particularly by the Constabulary. Now that the County Council has participated very effectively in this process to date, it is considered that withdrawal by the County Council would result in not only a reduction in the ways by which communities are able to engage with the authority but significant reputational damage.
- 2.7 The principle behind Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent) is enabling local people to have a means of influencing the decisions and services that affect their lives; it is questionable as to whether this is being achieved through the Neighbourhood Panels process in the way that it currently operates. In addition, it is important that communities feel a relationship with the "neighbourhood" in which they have been "placed" by the administering partner agency.
- 2.8 However, Neighbourhood Panels/Forums are effective at capturing issues raised by communities and providing subsequent feed back to those communities on actions taken by the relevant agencies.

The majority of issues raised at panel/forum meetings currently tend to constitute "fault reporting" and "service requests", such as:

- Fly-tipping
- Vehicle nuisance (speeding, illegal parking, parking on pavements etc)
- Littering
- Graffiti
- Anti-social behaviour
- Condition of carriageways and footways and byways
- Traffic calming and parking restrictions
- Street lighting.

Therefore, although Neighbourhood Panels seem to be providing an effective mechanism for delivering information to and receiving issues from communities, other methods are required to fully deliver community engagement and participatory democracy and achieve "localism" amongst all our communities.

Other methods being developed and implemented include, for example, the Shapeyourplace website in Fenland.

- 2.9 The people who currently engage with panels/forums are not generally representative of the local community - it is a small demographic which engages through these means. In addition, those who do engage are more likely to also do so through other means, e.g. to make a complaint or to give feedback via their Parish Council. Again, therefore, **Neighbourhood Panels/Forums must be seen as only part of a menu of ways for people to feel engaged in decision-making about local issues.**

- 2.10 Meetings in 'draughty church halls' are seen as out-dated by many people today and, even with changes to the current model, it is unlikely to attract a truly representative cross-section of society. Other methods, such as the use of social media and web-based solutions must be used in conjunction with panels/forums to ensure that we are reaching all our communities.
- 2.11 Although it would not be appropriate for the County Council to withdraw its participation in Neighbourhood Panels (or district area equivalent), it is felt to be appropriate to divert some of its efforts, particularly some of the officer resource applied to supporting these structures, towards other community engagement initiatives, especially given the aspirations within the Community Engagement Strategy and the need to address the Localism agenda, set in the context of reductions in financial resources.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

- 3.1 Over the last year or so, Neighbourhood Panels have developed an increasingly significant role in County, Districts' and the Constabulary's public and local engagement processes. The panels/forums provide the main local platform for local communities to meet with local authorities and are highly visible. The Council has a stated commitment to, and invested much effort in, supporting Neighbourhood Panel (or district area equivalent) arrangements.
- 3.2 However, panels still require some improvements with regard to their support arrangements to increase the effectiveness of the County Council's contribution to these forums. These include the need to:
- Increase Councillor attendance and participation
  - Increase engagement with the public – at meetings and through associated activities
  - Expand the remit to make panels/forums about more than fault reporting
  - Publicise the outcomes from panels/forums much more widely
  - Focus on areas of insufficient progress in meeting Council goals for panels/forums, e.g. in Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire; even in the other three districts, where a level of consistency of approach has been achieved, further development work in this regard would be desirable.
- 3.3 It is important to recognise the achievements secured to date through the Council's support for, and input into, Neighbourhood Panels, namely:
- A structure for delivering County Council input into the panels/forums is in place
  - The County Council's support for the panels/forums has improved partnership working with the Constabulary and most of the District Councils
  - County Council presence at the panels/forums means that residents can raise County Council issues and receive responses, and that the County Council can assist in providing multi-agency solutions to a range of issues
  - There are a number of examples where County Council input into the panels has led to positive community engagement activities taking place related to, but outside of, panel meetings.

3.4 Given the increasing emphasis upon enabling Localism to take root across the country, and the public-facing nature of the panels/forums, it is considered appropriate for the County Council to utilise the Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent) as a formal locally-based delivery mechanism for Localism, and to re-align the officer support arrangements for them. This will enable the County Council to work with partners to increase the effectiveness of panels/forums as public engagement forums, thus achieving a step towards the 'Big Society'. The re-alignment of the Neighbourhood Panel Liaison Officer support, agreed by the Lead Member for Communities (of which all County Councillors have been informed), came into effect on 23 August 2010.

3.5 In particular, it is proposed that the following steps be taken:

- Achieve greater County Council involvement in agenda setting, which tends to be led by the District Councils currently
- Re-negotiation of County Council's expectations for Neighbourhood Panels in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City
- An identified lead County Councillor be appointed to each panel/forum
- The role of the Lead Officer be clarified, including the introduction of a job "purpose". This would include working with the lead County Councillor on managing the authority's input to panel/forum meetings.

## **4.0 SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS**

### **4.1 Resources and Performance**

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers under the Risk heading:

- There is a risk that the outcomes of Neighbourhood Panels/Forums will not meet the expectations of the public or partners. To mitigate this, the approach to working with Neighbourhood Panels/Forums must be embedded across the Council, and answers to requests for information should be provided in an accurate, relevant and timely manner. The "you said, we did" approach to issues raised by communities, which has now become part of the operational practice within most of the panels operating within the County, must be maintained.
- Any further development must maintain a level of consistency and minimum standards across the County whilst remaining flexible enough to respond to local needs. Continuation of the close working with partners is essential to achieving this.
- The business of Neighbourhood Panels/Forums must not become driven by the partner agencies. Each panel/forum needs to include an open forum and an element of bottom-up agenda setting.
- It is crucial that the elected members of the County Council not only attend but participate positively with Neighbourhood Panels as part of their community leadership role.

- Failure to demonstrate effective community engagement will have a negative impact upon the legislative requirements in this regard and affect adversely the authority's reputation with partners.

#### **4.2 Statutory Requirements and Partnership Working**

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- The Neighbourhood Panels/Forums are in an ideal position to play a 'place shaping' role by enabling community planning, including helping to improve the links between neighbourhood and community-led plans and the Local Strategic Partnership. It may also be helpful for the Neighbourhood Panel/Forum to be involved in delivering geographically cross-cutting priorities found in neighbourhood and community-led plans.
- Neighbourhood Panels/Forums seem to be providing an effective mechanism for delivering information to and receiving issues from communities but other methods are required to fully deliver community engagement and participatory democracy and achieve "localism" amongst all our communities.
- The change in the financial climate for the public-sector strengthens the need for a collaborative, partnership approach to engaging with communities.
- Delivery of the Localism/Big Society agenda.
- Recent legislation which requires, among other issues, duties to: promote democracy; involve people in decision-making; inform.

#### **4.3 Climate Change**

There are no significant implications for any of the headings within this category

#### **4.4 Access and Inclusion**

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- There is a need to ensure that the whole community can engage in Neighbourhood Panels/Forums, and that vulnerable groups/communities of interest can participate in ways which suits their needs.
- There is a challenge to ensuring that capacity building takes place within communities to enable citizens to be in a position to be engaged/involved in the Neighbourhood Panels/Forums.

## 4.5 Engagement and Consultation

The following bullet points set out details of significant implications identified by officers:

- To help inform this review, officers have undertaken a brief consultation exercise involving relevant officers within the partner organisations and all elected members of the County Council and these responses have helped inform the conclusions and recommendations within this report.
- A meeting of officer representatives of the key partners engaged in the operation of Neighbourhood Panels/Forums, at which the conclusions and recommendations of this review were discussed, has taken place. The representatives of the partner organisations are supportive of the recommendations being made.
- A meeting of the County Council's Lead Officers for Neighbourhood Panels/Forums, at which the conclusions and recommendations of this review were discussed, has taken place. The Lead Officers present at the meeting are supportive of the recommendations being made.

Source Documents	Location
Strong and Prosperous Communities, CLG, 2006	<a href="http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous">http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/strongprosperous</a>
The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007	<a href="http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070028_en_1">http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070028_en_1</a>
Communities in Control, July 2008	<a href="http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/886045.pdf">http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/886045.pdf</a>
Report to Cabinet on 2 December 2008	<a href="#">Room 114 at Shire Hall or www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk</a>



## APPENDIX 1

### 1. COUNTY COUNCIL'S AIMS AND OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

1.1 In December 2008, the Cabinet agreed that the County Council would work with partners to develop Neighbourhood Panels so that they fulfil three key aims:

- i) To improve outcomes for local people by bringing agencies together to address problems in a joined-up way
- ii) To help citizens engage with and influence public service delivery and democratic governance
- iii) To support local communities in taking local action.

It was acknowledged by Cabinet members that the exact arrangements for how these aims are delivered may vary from district to district, in response to local needs.

1.2 In addition to agreeing the aims set out at 1.1 above, members approved the following general operating principles:

- Elected representatives should be part of a Panel which meets in public. The balance and makeup of the Panel should be decided locally;
- Proportionally substantial meeting time should be allocated to questions from the public or an open forum;
- Time should be allocated for the neighbourhood policing team to present the neighbourhood profile and establish priorities with the public;
- Issues raised by the public at meetings should be referred to the appropriate agencies or group of agencies and action taken. Outcomes should be reported back at the following meeting.

1.3 The County Council's aims and operating principles for Neighbourhood Panels were agreed with partner organisations prior to reference to Cabinet for adoption.

### 2. THE ROLE OF MEMBERS IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

2.1 The Community Empowerment White Paper argued that councillors have a 'vital role... in shaping local services, speaking up for people, championing their areas and keeping our democracy alive,' and that key to effective representation is the 'relationship and connections between councillors and their constituents'.

2.2 The format and local focus of Neighbourhood Panels (or district equivalent) offers an opportunity for councillors to build and enhance relationships and connections with their constituents, and as such, there is **an expectation that members will attend their local panel.**

2.3 In summary, the role of the elected member in this process is:

- Being a champion for their community
- Leading and influencing and building relationships

- Taking up residents' concerns
- Feeding back action that has been taken.

### **3. CURRENT OFFICER SUPPORT TO NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS**

- 3.1 Two Neighbourhood Panel Liaison Officers (NPLOs) currently provide support to the County Council's participation in the Neighbourhood Panels process.
- 3.2 The key responsibilities of the NPLOs are currently:
- ensuring County Council officer presence at Neighbourhood Panel meetings
  - maintaining an overview of issues and liaising internally as necessary
  - supporting and briefing County Councillors (and Lead Officers)
  - liaising with partner agencies on the development of panels.
- 3.3 In addition, each Neighbourhood Panel is allocated a Lead Officer (existing senior managers of the authority), to represent the Council on all services.
- 3.4 The key responsibilities of the Lead Officer role are:
- representing the Council, and participating as necessary, at panel meetings
  - supporting County Councillors at panel meetings
  - acting as the 'eyes and ears' of the Council at panel meetings
  - contributing to the success of Neighbourhood Panels.

### **4. WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF PARTNERS**

- 4.1 The approach which was supported by Cabinet in December 2008 had been developed in partnership with the District Councils and Cambridgeshire Constabulary and the developments that have emerged during the last year or so have also happened on a partnership basis.
- 4.2 In each of the five districts within Cambridgeshire, the District/City Councils or Police provide the organisational/ administrative lead on Neighbourhood Panels (or district area equivalent) and some have employed dedicated staffing resources for that purpose. Although it is not suggested that the County Council should attempt to lead on any of these panels/forums, it is considered appropriate that the County Council should adopt a more assertive role in relation to agenda setting.

### **5. CURRENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS (OR DISTRICT EQUIVALENT) IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE**

- 5.1 The existing arrangements across Cambridgeshire have evolved to greater or lesser extents from the Neighbourhood Policing Panels rolled out across the County by Cambridgeshire Constabulary in 2006.
- 5.2 Irrespective of the specific local arrangements, Neighbourhood Panel meetings are held approximately quarterly and issues that are discussed often include community concerns which typically lend themselves to being addresses by way of a cross-cutting multi-agency approach. Some of these arrangements include a formal panel of councillors only or councillors and officer representatives of agencies.

## APPENDIX 2

### COUNTY COUNCIL LEAD OFFICERS FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD PANELS

PANEL (OR DISTRICT AREA EQUIVALENT)	LEAD OFFICER
<b>Huntingdonshire - Neighbourhood Forums</b>	
Huntingdon	Leon Livermore
St Ives	James Burgess
St Neots	Joanne Tompkins
Ramsey	<i>Vacant</i>
North West Huntingdonshire	Jo Voce
<b>East Cambridgeshire – Neighbourhood Panels</b>	
South	Ivan Molyneux
Soham and East	Lorraine Lofting
West	Linda Mynott
Ely	Paul Nelson
Littleport	Jo Sollars
<b>Fenland - Neighbourhood Forums</b>	
Chatteris and District	Louise Collier
March and District	Anna Calvert
Whittlesey and District	Tanya Edgell
Wisbech and District	Karen Beaton
Waterlees and Clarkson (Wisbech)	Derrick Biggs
<b>Cambridge City – Area Committees</b>	
East	Michelle Wright
North	Paul Connelly
South	Sarah Ferguson
West/Central	Richard Preston
<b>South Cambridgeshire – Safer Neighbourhood Panels</b>	
Bassingbourn and Melbourn	Anna O'Leary
Comberton	Caroline Ryba
Gamblingay	<i>Vacant</i>
Histon	Joseph Whelan
Linton	Malcolm Taylor
Sawston	J Schickell
Swavesey	Jon Butler