

Closer to Communities – Interim Update

To: Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: 21 March 2024

From: Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not applicable

Executive Summary: For members of the committee to receive an interim update relating to the mobilisation of the Closer to Communities (decentralisation) portfolio of work and early findings.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:
Note the contents of the report.

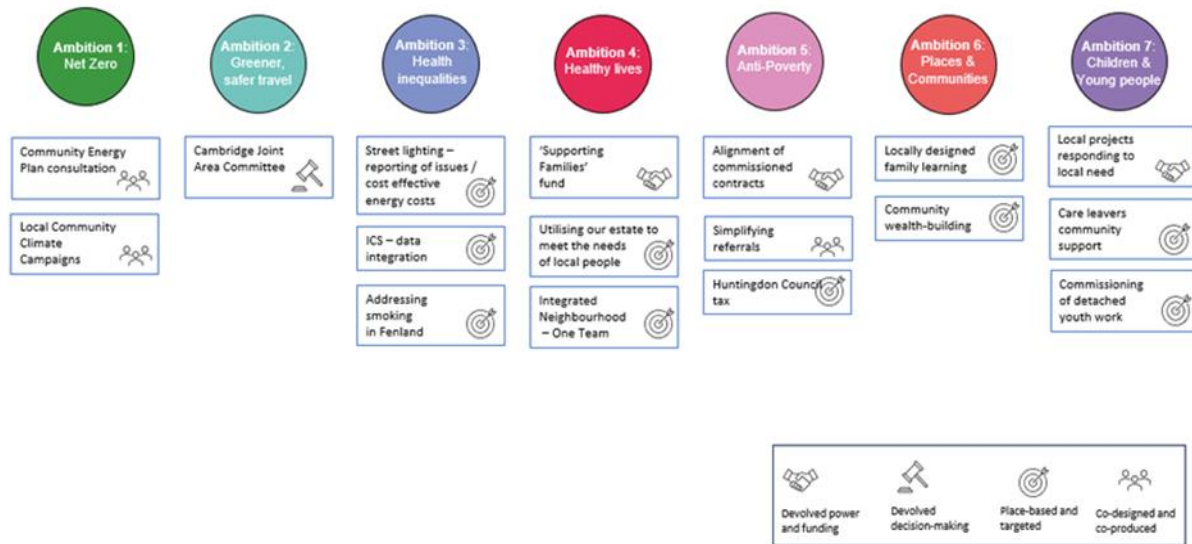
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1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the progress of the Council’s approach to bringing services and support Closer to Communities, through the delivery of a series of pilot projects and evaluation. At the point of initial design, careful consideration was given to the vision and ambitions set out in the strategic framework.
- 1.2 The initial 17 pilots that make up the Closer to Communities portfolio of work were selected to ensure that all seven ambitions, directorates and geographical areas across the county were included. Figure 1 provides an overview of the seven ambitions and the pilots that link to each one.

Figure 1:



2. Background

- 2.1 In July 2023, the Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee approved proposals to test new ways of working through a series of pilots that support services to deliver their work ‘Closer to Communities’. The full set of proposals are available to view via the link in Section 7 of this report (Source Documents).
- 2.2 This report provides an update on the work that has taken place so far, presents early findings and sets out the direction of travel for the next twelve months.
- 2.3 A final report and recommendations will be made to the committee at the end of the programme in March 2025.

3. Main Issues

3.1 Programme mobilisation

- 3.1.1 In September 2023, a Project Manager was appointed to lead and coordinate the work. The role is hosted in the Policy, Insight and Programmes directorate.
- 3.1.2 In October 2023, the Closer to Communities officer governance board met for the first time, bringing together representatives from each directorate of the Council. Chaired by the Executive Director of Strategy and Partnerships, the board receives regular highlight reports from each pilot and risk notifications from the Project Manager. As the programme develops, the board will consider and appraise evaluation and recommendations to further embed the Closer to Communities approach across the Council.
- 3.1.3 Mobilisation of the initial pilots presented to the committee took place between July and December 2023.
- 3.1.4 It is critical for the committee to note that the pilot outcomes themselves are not the key driver of this work, and whilst they be evaluated in their own right, what is being tested through this programme is how work is carried out differently across the Council to bring services Closer to Communities.

3.2 Themes

- 3.2.1 To assist with future learning and evaluation, four themes have been identified to track the learning from the pilots about how the Council can get Closer to Communities:
- devolved decision-making
 - devolved funding
 - co-designed and co-produced
 - place-based and targeted
- 3.2.2 Appendix 1 provides further information regarding the four themes and their potential outcomes.

3.3 The pilots

- 3.3.1 Appendix 2 provides an update on each of the initial 17 pilot projects.

3.4 Early findings and opportunities identified through the mobilisation of the pilots:

- Providing a safe space to reflect and consider how residents receive or access help from the Council, including real examples and feedback, created positive opportunities to change the culture.
- Encouraging system join up across the Council and adopting a one team approach helps the work to develop at pace but requires investment of time, in relationship building and learning from all involved.

- Some service areas already work in a decentralised way and are keen to find ways of communicating, celebrating and providing opportunities for learning from their approach with senior leaders, colleagues and elected members.
- Most officers involved in the delivery of place-based pilots, co-produced alongside local communities and enabled by small amounts of devolved budgets, report being able to mobilise work quickly to focus on what matters to local people and places.
- Early findings were responded to by developing workshops for pilot leads on how to evaluate this work, creating new cross directorate opportunities to bring colleagues together and enabling new ideas and collaborative approaches to inform the plan for the coming year.
- Emerging appetite to do more together, across directorates, and to refine the approach to testing decentralisation methods.

3.5 Early findings, and things to consider or address:

- Some service areas felt that they already worked in a decentralised way and were initially resistant to the approach, often failing to grasp how the work of their team or service could be delivered differently to enhance the way residents experience Council services and support.
- Supporting services that 'do', and those that 'don't', work Closer to Communities to promote work or provide constructive feedback and challenge to shift the culture takes time and skill.
- This approach requires significant input in the initial stages, often before any benefits are realised. These steps include actions such as aligning priorities, designating resource capacity, and allocating roles and responsibilities. Once these steps are in place, benefits can begin to be realised.
- Where a pilot involves devolving power or funding to another organisation, ongoing expertise and capacity from the Council is likely to be required. Over time, this may reduce, or the Council may take on the role of facilitator or convener. This is something that needs to be tracked over the next year.
- Some pilots reported difficulties in developing local plans to spend devolved place-based budgets, due to a lack of capacity and felt a wider approach across several teams would be more beneficial.
- The Council lacks a consistent approach to developing pilots, as well as measuring and evaluating work.

3.6 Action taken to address initial findings:

- Introduced in-person workshops for the pilot leads, to ensure a consistent understanding of the Closer to Communities approach and its vision and framework.

- In response to a potential gap in knowledge around evaluation and evidencing impact, provided pilot leads with good practice information and case studies from officers who hold expertise in this area. This has contributed to the upskilling of officers who are supporting the programme through their work.
- Introduced a cross directorate officer governance board to track and monitor progress and support services to reduce cultural barriers across the Council.
- Provided new opportunities for services to come together in meetings and workshops, providing space for cross service collaboration of workstreams and the alignment of work and priorities.
- The 17 pilots represent only a selection of the closer to communities work currently happening across the Council. To recognise this, work is underway to develop a mechanism to collate and maintain a summary of wider examples.

3.7 Refining the approach

3.7.1 From April onwards, the pilot projects being tracked for the purpose of the Closer to Communities evaluation will be reduced, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

3.7.2 This will allow the Project Manager to focus on pilots where the greatest level of learning can be achieved and reflects that some pilots have already concluded, for example as a result of a decision made by another organisation.

3.7.3 In addition, three new areas of work will commence, helping to test learning to date and refine the approach ahead of making fuller recommendations to the committee in spring 2025.

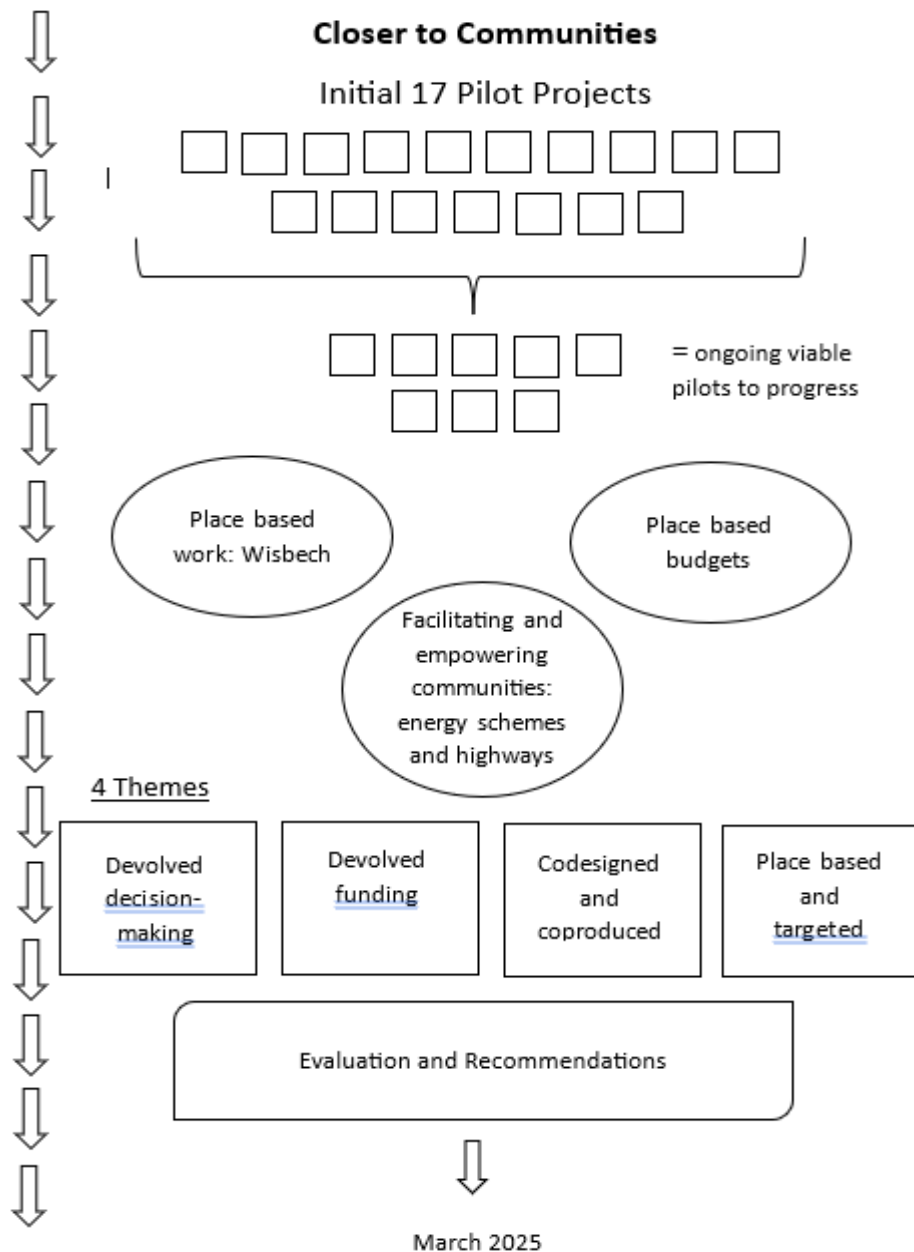


Figure 1

3.8 Refining the approach – place based budgets

3.8.1 To further test learning, this work will:

- Allocate an un-ringfenced budget of £7000 to each of the five district council geographical areas.
- Led by the Communities service, teams operating in a place based way (for example, libraries or child and family centres) will come together, alongside local people, to identify local priorities and solutions.
- Monitor and evaluate the benefits of devolved budgets to support the delivery of local priorities.

3.9 Refining the approach – place-based work (Wisbech)

2.9.1 To further test learning, this work will:

- Use the domains and measures of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to review the current baseline data in the local super output areas of greatest deprivation in Wisbech.
- Starting with the education, skills and training domain, mobilise a cross-directorate workstream to develop a new set of targeted, place-based interventions to address the key issues.
- Link with key partners to apply the same approach to the domains of crime, health deprivation and disability, barriers to housing and services and living environment.
- Monitor and evaluate the approach to establishing place based targeted interventions utilising the IMD as a starting point to identify need and appropriate actions.

3.10 Refining the approach – facilitating and empowering communities (highways)

3.10.1 To further test learning, this work will:

- Test improved ways of working with local communities to identify and implement transport schemes (Wisbech St Mary).
- Consider and assess different delivery models of local infrastructure.
- Identify local asks for public realm and transport improvements.
- Identify blended funding approaches to advance works.

4. Alternative Options Considered

4.1 N/A – This is an interim report for information only.

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 This report provides an overview of the mobilisation of the Council's approach to move services and support Closer to Communities. It also provides details of early findings and actions taken to address them.

5.2 Over the next year, pilots and the Council's approach will be monitored through the Project Manager and governance board, ahead of recommendations being reported to the committee in March 2025 that will provide a blueprint for the organisation to transition closer to communities across all service areas where it is appropriate to do so.

6. Significant Implications

6.1 Finance Implications

Place based/devolved budgets or the alignment of funding will require forward planning during budget preparation and clarity for officers around ringfenced money and related parameters.

6.2 Legal Implications

None

6.3 Risk Implications

None

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the Closer to Communities work.

6.5 Climate Change and Environment Implications

None

7. Source Documents

7.1 [Agenda Item 5 \(Closer to Communities\) – 6 July 2023](#)