

Decentralisation

To: Communities, Social Mobility, and Inclusion Committee

Meeting Date: 10 March 2022

From: Director: Business Improvement and Development, Amanda Askham
Service Director: Communities and Partnerships, Adrian Chapman

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Outcome: Recognition and support for decentralisation as a key priority of the Joint Administration.

Recommendation: The Committee is asked to:

- a) Agree that the overall purpose of decentralisation is to improve Council decision making, and thereby outcomes for Cambridgeshire residents, by giving residents more opportunities to influence decisions that affect them;
- b) Agree that the work of officers across the Council being more embedded in local communities is one of the main ways for decentralisation to fulfil that overall purpose;
- c) Comment on the overall approach to aligning County Council services to local communities, as set out in this report; and
- d) Agree that Strategy and Resources Committee should next consider the implications and opportunities decentralisation will bring across the Council's work, and how it connects with other strategic priorities.

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Joint Administration Agreement touches upon the ambitions of decentralisation.
- 1.2 The 'Communities' priority contains the following:
We will encourage and participate in place-based partnerships with District Councils and the Greater Cambridge Partnership where possible, to avoid duplication in local arrangements. We will task officers to consult with District Councils and other partners on ways to devolve more of the Council's budget to be managed locally.
- 1.3 In the 'Governance' priority the view is expressed, in response to the question of local government reorganisation, that:

[I]t is best to devolve power as close as possible to people and local communities and for our Joint Administration to engage fully in the process and ensure that it is fully prepared to do so in advance.
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to confirm the Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee's view on the overarching purpose, principles, and outcomes of decentralisation, with a view to further work beginning more widely across the organisation.

2. Main Issues

- 2.1 As a local authority, we are enthusiastic advocates of the local delivery of services. We believe that even challenges which seem global or national in nature are often best addressed by local services. For example:
- The Think Communities approach has been encouraging residents to get more involved in the design and delivery of Council services such as libraries, youth provision and adult skills;
 - Our climate and environmental strategy, while the product of global drives, depends on behaviour change at the local level which the Council can influence through engagement with residents;
 - Pandemic recovery requires both Countywide and local approaches, including localised approaches to public health initiatives; and
 - Our work to develop a food strategy relies on very local implementation of initiatives that are unique to a place, but which are underpinned by a Countywide strategic approach.

These challenges may fall within the responsibilities of the Council but are impossible to tackle through its efforts alone. Decentralisation presents the opportunity to work more effectively with partners, residents, and communities to meet these challenges.

- 2.2 Additionally, and even more practically, much of the work that this Committee has been doing represents the beginnings of decentralisation in action. For example, the localised

networks and steering groups that we are setting up alongside the Cambridge Sustainable Food Alliance to create a whole-systems approach to addressing food poverty, the local organisations who are delegated to make direct decisions about funding for people they support via the Household Support Fund, the increasing role of Libraries becoming really active civic hubs responding to local needs, our Library Presents programme which is co-commissioned with residents to ensure appropriate, relevant and meaningful activity is programmed, mapping and developing localised responses to digital poverty, and our continued development of data sharing arrangements to develop very localised networks and support. There are many further examples beyond this committee's remit, including the Local Highways Initiative funding model, the commissioning of care provision at a place-based level, local climate change projects, and the alignment of services to the principles and priorities of the Council's role in the emerging Integrated Care System.

- 2.3 There are also some live workstreams that are in development but that also demonstrate a commitment to decentralisation, including the concept of Community Wealth Building, maximising the use of social value principles to ensure the decisions we make about what to procure and to provide benefit local people and communities, engagement with parish and town councils both through the Association of Local Councils and direct, and more recent discussions relating to deliberative democracy and how these approaches can help us to engage early with residents (and particularly those we rarely if ever hear from) and build ways to jointly make the right choices about the issues that are directly affecting them.
- 2.4 Underpinning all of this is our overall Think Communities approach, supported by other officers across the Council who operate across a defined locality. The decision to continue funding the Think Communities team provides the perfect impetus to strengthen the ways in which our own staff work alongside those embedded in each of our communities. The Think Communities staff are already acting as the link between communities and other County Council functions, connecting officers to residents, helping people navigate our structures, and building a rich sense of what the common issues are in order that we can consider changes to the ways we operate that simplify access for residents.
- 2.5 There are a range of broad principles that inform the decentralisation agenda. These principles can be characterised as follows:
- Even global or national challenges are often best addressed locally by services and partnerships that respond to the needs and goals of the people they serve
 - The design of Council services should be as informed by the residents and communities they affect as possible
 - Council officers working more closely with local communities and members enables residents to have a higher quantity and quality of opportunities to influence decisions that affect them
 - Genuinely bottom up, local-driven change can reach its full potential when the expertise and resources of the Council are more accessible to residents
 - The term 'communities' must be understood in both its geographical and non-geographical senses, to recognise that some residents, such as those in marginalised groups, do not yet have equal access to opportunities to influence decisions

- 2.6 Whilst widely shared across local government in the UK, these principles have also been informed by research into decentralised approaches to governing in other local authority areas. Those approaches can broadly be characterised in two basic categories:
- i. Engagement to inform decision making but where the ultimate decision still resides with the service delivery authority. (This can take the form of meetings within a council structure, or separate advisory panels or assemblies.)
 - ii. Transfer of community-based assets and physical place-shaping services (such as grounds maintenance, parks and open spaces, public toilets, etc).
- 2.7 From the current practice landscape visible through this research, some common themes can be identified in sustainable work towards decentralisation. These themes could be identified as building blocks for decentralisation in the Council's work to date and future work. They are:
- Strong partner engagement built on a shared vision followed by early successes
 - Clear local contribution to decision making. (This may be the direct involvement of residents in the decision-making process, or the involvement of partners who represent local communities.)
 - Resource allocation to deliver work resulting from community input (initially focused on relatively narrow service areas, or budgets created from joint contributions)
- 2.8 It is worth bearing in mind that there are few examples of established decentralisation initiatives in two tier local authority areas. Furthermore, just as other local authorities' work in this respect has emerged from their own local circumstances, so must Cambridgeshire's. Therefore, there is no pre-existing model of decentralisation that can just be taken from elsewhere and applied here. Nevertheless, these limitations in evidence are quite consistent with an evidence-informed approach to innovative and more local-focused ways of working. This is because, alongside what has been noted above, the collection and use of evidence is an ongoing activity, not just a preliminary one, in the lifespan of any initiative, and if the Council restricts itself to replicating what has been done elsewhere, it will never do things that are both genuinely innovative and reflective of its distinctive local context.
- 2.9 There are clear stakes in decentralisation for the Communities, Social Mobility and Inclusion Committee, such as the potential for greater inclusion of residents and marginalised groups to influence Council decisions; identification of paths to higher and wider upward social mobility and Community Wealth Building through Council work being more embedded in local communities; and stronger connections between residents, local communities, and Council officers and members.
- 2.10 At the same time, since decentralisation goes to the core of how the Council carries out its work, it also concerns further priorities. For example, the Climate Change and Environment Strategy depends on work being done at the local level, which will be as varied as the environmental assets and priorities of local places are, and highways and transport issues are of broad interest to residents and communities because of the immediate effect on everyday lives.

- 2.11 There are multiple types of decentralisation (political, administrative, economic) just as there are multiple mechanisms and models (asset transfer, privatisation, citizens assemblies) to realise these types. However, the Joint Administration's ambitions for decentralisation do not neatly conform to these existing forms but instead concern a more fundamental change in the way the Council works as an organisation. In other words, the aim is a reorientation (rather than a transferral) of the Council's work to be more deeply embedded in local communities – giving residents more ownership of the Council's direction and giving the Council more accountability to residents.
- 2.12 The rationale behind this reorientation is that residents and local communities have a better understanding of their needs and wants than the Council does, and therefore that they would make better decisions about services and resources that affect them than the Council itself would. More resident- and community-informed decisions would thus produce more appropriate solutions to the challenges the Council faces, tailored to the diverse needs and strengths of the County's diverse communities. For this to be possible, though, the Council's standard way of working and making decisions needs to become one that is distinguished by its deeper knowledge of local places and greater accessibility to residents.
- 2.13 It seems vital that we build on existing work and on existing relationships as we progress towards implementation. We have developed some of the strongest and most positive and productive relationships for example with our district and city council partners over the past 2 or 3 years. These relationships have been built on trust and transparency and have been cemented as a result of us demonstrating that we will and do deliver on our promises. Discounting this progress – effectively resetting these relationships, even if advertently – will impact directly on our ability to embed a decentralised approach to governance and decision making at a local level.
- 2.14 Further, we have some very effective relationships with a significant number of parish councils, and the same principles apply. As with our district/city council relationships, we can and must always do better, but it would be unhelpful to disregard the existing dynamics. To evidence this, and in discussion with the Association of Local Councils for Cambridgeshire, they shared a very strong view that having parish councillor representation and participation in any form of decentralisation would be essential if we are to maximise the full potential from across local government.
- 2.15 There are also significant opportunities to pursue our decentralisation priorities alongside the Combined Authority, and especially its focus on communities. Discussions with the Combined Authority have continued throughout and follow on from the initial set of discussions with district and city council representatives previously reported to committee members. It is important that we return to these discussions with much more detail prior to finalising our models, in order that we establish appropriate local support.
- 2.16 We have held previous discussions about the form of governance that may be necessary to fully embed a decentralised approach. It is important to recognise that the approach we take will need to be agile and flexible such that it best suits the needs of the local communities, organisations and structures within each of our places.
- 2.17 For many of our residents, the services the County Council provides by default are sufficient to meet their needs, and they have no particular reason to engage directly with the Council.

For others, they are already in receipt of directly delivered County Council services, such as support from social care. However, there are likely to be a significant number whose needs are not yet being met by the County Council, or whose needs have not yet emerged but are very likely to over the coming months and years. This is particularly likely for households who are impacted by the effects of the pandemic on their household income, employment status, health and wellbeing, and social infrastructure and who have previously been relatively self-sufficient. The demand for support via the Household Support Fund evidences the realities for many of our residents.

- 2.18 We are concerned that many of our residents who have an emerging or future need may not know who to reach out to for help and support, and that they may only do so at point of crisis. This reduces our collective abilities to prevent escalation and increases the likelihood of growing demand across our statutory functions.
- 2.19 Our local government system is complex: parish, district/city, and county councils, and a combined authority. Added to this is the complex NHS system, and the role of other public sector partners including the police and fire services. Navigating the system and finding the right entry point is challenging for most people, and likely to be even more challenging if trying to do so when facing the pressure of an immediate crisis.
- 2.20 We need our residents to not be concerned with the ways in which the local government system works, but instead for them to be able to get the right information, advice and support however and whenever they try to access it. We need to prevent hand-offs between different parts of the local government system, as well as between our own Council departments, so that people don't need to keep repeating their stories and describing their challenges to multiple officers. We need to create a can-do public sector approach to problem solving, with the aim of helping people as early as possible to avoid uncontrolled demand across the system.
- 2.21 Many of the ways in which we have operated as a system during the pandemic pave the way to mainstreaming these approaches in a new business-as-usual approach. The approaches we have taken to intelligence sharing, joint problem solving, rapid decision making, and delivering local solutions backed by Countywide strategies need to become mainstreamed, and our decentralisation approach is a helpful way of providing a framework and purpose for achieving this.
- 2.22 Further, our own place-based staff, primarily but not exclusively within the Think Communities service, have developed close and practical working relationships with counterparts in both district/city and parish councils, parts of the NHS system including social prescribers and NHS integrated neighbourhood managers, local voluntary sector organisations, and partners supporting localised activity including those emanating from the community safety partnerships.
- 2.23 Alongside further developing and embedding the Think Communities approach, and the role of our staff as key connectors between place and system, members have referenced the need for an accessible tool that shows, comprehensively, the services and opportunities available within communities. This might include those services that households facing crisis can access, as well as opportunities that people may want to take up relating to voluntary action or learning new skills. This tool will be a further important mechanism for connecting the County Council to our residents without major structural change.

- 2.24 Finally, the scope of the Joint Administration's ambitions for decentralisation highlights the further changes the Council needs to make if residents are to have greater access to services and more influence on decisions that affect them. Decisions across the Council are still taken in relative isolation from the people directly impacted by them, and the Council needs the insights of local people and communities to meet the systemic challenges it faces. The view is that significant progress on this can be made if Council officers across the organisation work in ways that are more directly focused on, embedded within, and accessible to local communities.
- 2.25 As described throughout the report, decentralisation requires a wholesale change in the way the Council operates, alongside absolute support and commitment from all Council services. Whilst this Committee can and should drive forward many aspects of the approach, especially as they relate to communities and partners, as well as governing the overall approach in accordance with its terms of reference, for decentralisation to be meaningful and to fully exploit all of its positive potential, we are recommending that a further debate is held at the Strategy and Resources Committee to consider these broader Council elements.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Communities at the heart of everything we do

Our decentralisation strategy exists to ensure that communities genuinely and meaningfully are at the heart of everything we do, as demonstrated throughout this report.

3.2 A good quality of life for everyone

Decentralisation seeks to achieve positive change, in collaboration with partners, which benefits our residents and their communities, offers opportunity for all, and ensures no community is excluded or disadvantaged. By focussing on these objectives we can ensure that the quality-of-life outcomes for everyone are improved.

3.3 Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full

The report sets out proposals that will positively affect all residents, regardless of age. Moreover, achieving decentralisation to help build communities that are vibrant and have opportunity, and that enhances the social mobility of families, will directly and positively create the best possible start for our children.

3.4 Cambridgeshire: a well-connected, safe, clean, green environment

There are multiple opportunities described in this report to positively contribute to our climate change priorities. Decentralisation offers us the opportunity to create or contribute to very local projects that support climate change, to reduce the need for residents to travel long distances to access services, and to support voluntary sector groups to do more in this space.

3.5 Protecting and caring for those who need us

For citizens to be confident, healthy, safe and secure, they need to live in communities that mirror those attributes, and where there is a strong sense of local identity and cohesion. Decentralisation seeks to support the development of a strong local identity, helping to protect those that live there.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications

There are no significant implications within this category at this point. However, as specific proposals emerge they will be subject to detailed analysis to ensure financial implications are understood before final decisions are taken.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

Any purchases to support the work described in this report will be carried out in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

There are no significant implications within this category at this point. However, specific proposals may emerge which have an impact on local decision making, at which point full implications will be identified before final decisions are taken.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications within this category at this point. It is however anticipated that decentralised approaches to Council delivery will help ensure broader representation from more voices in communities, and a better understanding of the needs of our population at a local level.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

There are no significant implications within this category at this point. However, as detailed proposals emerge it will be clear that they will significantly enhance the opportunities for broader and deeper engagement with residents and partners.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

The role of our Members in the decentralisation agenda is vital; they will help lead the development of locally developed models of delivery, will be integral to local decision making, and will hold services to account to ensure that the agreed principles of decentralisation are being followed.

4.7 Public Health Implications

Key to Public Health is the improvement of health and wellbeing across the population, which needs action across many determinants. The developments described in this report aim to focus on needs at the local level and addressing them through local solutions and partnerships. The economic hardships experienced by many communities is a particular focus and the report identifies the support that will be given which will help mitigate their impact on health and wellbeing. Officers will continue to work closely alongside Public Health professionals to develop and embed approaches that support this.

4.8 Environment and Climate Change Implications on Priority Areas

There are no significant implications within this category at this point. However, there are significant opportunities to develop more localised projects that directly contribute to our climate change priorities, and for services to be delivered more locally to reduce the need for residents to travel longer distances to access them.

4.8.1 Implication 1: Energy efficient, low carbon buildings.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.2 Implication 2: Low carbon transport.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.3 Implication 3: Green spaces, peatland, afforestation, habitats and land management.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.4 Implication 4: Waste Management and Tackling Plastic Pollution.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.5 Implication 5: Water use, availability and management:
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.6 Implication 6: Air Pollution.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

4.8.7 Implication 7: Resilience of our services and infrastructure and supporting vulnerable people to cope with climate change.
Positive/neutral/negative Status: Neutral

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes
Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the Head of Procurement? Yes
Name of Officer: Clare Ellis

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? Yes
Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillan

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications? Yes
Name of Officer: Amanda Rose

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Adrian Chapman

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health?

No

Name of Officer:

5. Source documents

5.1 Source documents

None