

## The Highland Council

14<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Agenda Item	15
Report No	HC/20/15

### Up-date on the Review of Area Committees and Local Community Planning Arrangements

#### Report by Head of Policy and Reform

##### Summary

This report provides an up-date for Members on progress being made with reviewing Area Committees and Local Community Planning arrangements. Initial discussions will have started in 10 Wards by 11<sup>th</sup> May 2015. Workshops for Members are being scheduled for the remaining 12 Wards.

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 The Council considered the report from the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, [Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities](#) in October 2014 and Group Leaders subsequently met in December 2014 and January 2015 to consider how best to take forward the recommendations and principles within it. Group leaders also met the Chair and Secretary of the Commission on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015. Both were very complimentary about the way the Council was engaging with the Commission's work.
- 1.2 Subsequently Members considered a report at the Council meeting in March 2015 where they agreed that the Programme commitment to review Area Committees should be broadened to take into account the Commission's work. The specific points Members agreed to focus on are listed in Appendix 1.
- 1.3 In addition, as the Highland Community Planning (CPP) Board had agreed in March 2015 that partners locally would take part in discussions about reviewing local community planning arrangements, Members agreed that the review of Area Committees should take local community planning, including District Partnerships, into account. Members were also keen to avoid duplication in reporting to different local forums. This supports:
  1. the Commission's findings on the need to improve local democracy for all public services and not just those relating to Council business;
  2. the new duties arising from the Community Empowerment legislation, which Members also agreed to take into account.By broadening the review in this way it also made sense to include Ward Forums and Ward Business Meetings in the review.
- 1.4 The practical steps agreed at the Council meeting were:
  1. Members would initially discuss ideas for local democratic experiments

with Ward Managers in Ward Business meetings. These ideas, with officer support, would be developed into proposals for wider discussion with partners and communities, with agreed approaches to be trialled.

2. Members would agree locally the pace of change they seek, bearing in mind the long term nature of this programme and the capacity to support it.
3. That local solutions (which might be different in different areas) should be explored which would put decision making and budgets in local control and that ideally there should be several local experiments between March 2015 and March 2017.

1.5 To support the review Members noted that officers would:

1. Provide information on the nature of business considered in Area Committees over the past year (available end March 2015);
2. Provide a briefing on participatory budgeting (a way of local people deciding how to allocate funding, focusing initially on discretionary grants);
3. Survey Members (and also Ward Managers and relevant members of staff) to assess views on current local arrangements to find out what works well and where improvement might be needed;
4. Consult with Members locally about the type of democracy they wanted, how that could support people working together to make change happen in communities by having more power and influence over what mattered to them and how that could reduce inequalities;
5. Arrange a workshop for members Area Leaders and District Partnership Chairs;
6. Support Members to ensure the ideas to be trialled did not breach governance and accountability requirements.

1.6 Following the Council meeting a workshop was designed to support Members in their deliberation locally. The workshop covers all of the actions above in paragraphs 1.2 to 1.5, other than the latter two points above, with a joint workshop with District Partnership Chairs to be arranged and at this time it is too early to provide advice on specific governance issues as ideas generated so far have still to be discussed with partners.

## **2. Progress with local discussions with Members**

2.1 By the time the Council meets in May, the workshop will have started the conversations with members in 10 Wards, namely:

- Nairn on 2.4.15;
- Lochaber on 13.4.15;
- Skye, Ross and Cromarty on 22.4.15; and
- Badenoch and Strathspey on 11.5.15.

Conversations with members in the remaining wards are currently being timetabled.

## 2.2 The workshop covers:

- A briefing on participatory budgeting and whether Members locally want to use it as a way of encouraging greater participation in spending decisions, initially with discretionary grant. The Scottish Government is supporting the Council with training and guidance;
- Describing a day in the life of an Elected Member and the roles they currently have;
- Clarifying the new expectations of Members and staff given the Community Empowerment Legislation and budget outlook and what this means for their roles going forward;
- Reflecting on what works well in the current arrangements and what needs to change (thinking about Area Committees, Ward Forums, local community planning and other forums and partnerships);
- Imagining local democracy for the area in 2020 and identifying what needs to change to enable that, including specific actions by 2017; and
- Considering how to find out what other partners and people in the locality think too.

## 3. Ideas for localism emerging

3.1 The feedback from the initial conversations with members locally is shown below for different localities. This shows different models emerging in different places. This seems appropriate given their different local contexts.

### 3.2 Feedback from the conversation with Nairn Members

Members felt that for Nairn to be a shining example of local democracy, they needed to make sure that:

- They get positive relationships with the community;
- Public agencies work together with the community;
- They lead on projects and push on ideas and strategies – linked to priorities;
- They scrutinise the process for all public services;
- They make decisions for things they are elected for;
- They facilitate the community to deliver for the town;
- They address inequalities and include the harder to reach communities; and
- They build trust with community groups.

3.3 To achieve this vision, Members propose:

1. Taking forward participatory budgeting in 2015/16 so that people in Nairn decide how 50% of their ward discretionary budget is spent. The plan is to run a community event in early Autumn 2015 to distribute the funding. Members were open to identifying other potential discretionary funding to be distributed in this way in the future, possibly including the

Nairn Common Good Fund. Lessons from the first event will be identified for any future roll out.

2. To no longer have the Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey Area Committee, District Partnership and Locality Planning meetings. Instead the governance model proposed would be a local community planning partnership model. Potentially branded as the Nairn Community Partnership it would cover the issues of local importance (i.e. health and social care, transport, economy, town centre regeneration, community safety and possibly arts and culture) along with any other Council business. Meetings of the Nairn Community Partnership would be themed to make workload manageable and to encourage community interest and involvement. Ideally the resource for running the partnership would be shared across the partnership.
- 3.4 In developing this model, Council business would have to be dealt with appropriately with the right governance arrangements in place. This would include being clear on the respective roles of members and of partners during partnership meetings, making sure e.g. that Members know when they alone are responsible for making decisions.
  - 3.5 Following the workshop Cllr MacDonald shared the idea of the new model with some of those involved in locality planning and has received positive feedback so far. Conversations are underway with NHS regarding the potential changes to the District Partnership.
  - 3.6 **Feedback from the conversation with Lochaber Members**  
Members felt that for Lochaber to be a shining example of local democracy, they needed to make sure that:
    - They build on the good progress with community participation and enhance the way they interact with people in Lochaber;
    - Constituents get the answers they want quickly and accurately;
    - All public bodies respond to local people's questions/needs;
    - The Council and partners communicate in new and better ways with people given their needs and preferences;
    - Resources are better targeted locally, in a local forum and with equalities in mind for people and places (including rural poverty);
    - Local communities have more power to decide public budgets;
    - Local democracy is improved with more local decisions made for key Council services (initially focusing on planning, licensing and capital programmes);
    - Transport is improved to make services more accessible for everyone.
  - 3.7 To achieve this vision, Members propose:
    1. To introduce participatory budgeting in 2015/16 for their youth budget to

build on the engagement with young people to date. Members are also keen to use this method of distributing their ward discretionary grants for 2016/17 (with amounts agreed for rural and town areas) and with a view to looking at how this might work with some mainstream spend in the future (e.g. winter gritting priorities).

2. To build on the success of the Lochaber Partnership, the most mature local community planning partnership in the Highlands, by making it more participative. This would include carrying on with a review of the current forums in it, changing the frequency of partnership meetings and holding alternate meetings in different communities to encourage more community participation. Other ideas members want to discuss with partners include webcasting some partnership meetings, running themed ward forums after partnership meetings and inviting partners to attend ward business meetings for informal briefings.
3. To retain the Lochaber Area Committee and to review the scheme of delegation to broaden local member involvement. Areas members are interested in being more involved in locally include planning matters, licensing and capital programmes (including for housing). New arrangements for the annual reporting of progress from the Lochaber Partnership to the Area Committee are proposed.
4. Members are aware there are still issues to work through such as avoiding duplication of community safety reporting to both committees and being able to resource meetings given the staff resource.

### **3.8 Feedback from the conversation with Members in the Skye, Ross and Cromarty Area**

Members benefitted from a presentation from Rory Mair, the Secretary to the Commission in advance of their workshop. However they did not have enough time to reach conclusions together in their workshop and have agreed to continue the conversations in their Ward Business Meetings. Some shared views emerging included:

- The Skye, Ross and Cromarty Area geography is too big to be local;
- Combining the six current Wards into two or three areas may make more sense, with Wards 6 and 11 potentially as one grouping (but requires further discussions);
- Members were more interested to try participatory budgeting for local people to decide how some mainstream resources are allocated rather than discretionary grant. Members spoke about Community Services budgets and interest in exploring how to engage the public in prioritising roads repairs and local community works.

### **3.9 Feedback from the conversation with Badenoch and Strathspey members**

The workshop with local Members is scheduled for 11<sup>th</sup> May. A verbal up-date will be provided at the meeting.

### 3.10 **Taking forward the ideas**

Different ideas have been developed in Nairn and Lochaber and the next steps there are to discuss these ideas with partners locally since they are affected and to have conversations with local communities and community groups. Both Nairn and Lochaber want to experiment with participatory budgeting and the learning from this can be shared with other Wards. In addition, the ideas for Nairn will depend on the views of the local Members in Badenoch and Strathspey as they share the Area Committee and District Partnership.

3.11 An up-date of progress locally can also be considered by the Highland CPP. This is scheduled for the Chief Officers Group at the end of May and the Board on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. Partner views can be gauged then too.

3.12 A common theme emerging from the conversations across the 10 Wards is the interest Members have in being more involved locally in planning, licensing, Community Services and capital programming (notably housing) decisions. It would be useful to consider the implications arising for the Scheme of Delegation and the remits of strategic committees. Piloting some new approaches in some areas could provide a way of assessing how this improves local democracy and how best to manage risk. Further work will be done on this matter by the Executive Leadership Team.

## 4. **Implications**

4.1 Resource implications – any change to governance and partnership arrangements have to be affordable. It is too early to assess any costs of new models emerging. The Community Empowerment Bill currently proposes that community planning is a shared responsibility across five partners (the Council, NHS, HIE, Police Scotland and SFRS) rather than the sole responsibility of Councils to facilitate as at present. Where new local partnership arrangements are proposed, shared resourcing will be explored.

4.2 An amendment to the Community Empowerment Bill at Stage 2 has led to the inclusion of participatory budgeting as a requirement on public bodies.

4.3 Legal implications – the implications of the Community Empowerment Bill are being considered as part of the workshop with members.

4.4 Equalities implications – amendments to Stage 2 of the Community Empowerment Bill amends the definition of community planning to be about improving local outcomes and reducing inequalities. Members have included this in Nairn and Lochaber as part of their vision for their areas.

4.5 Climate Change/Carbon Clever implications – none are identified at this stage.

4.6 Risk implications – Members are aware that the Commission's advice is to see the journey to real localism as evolutionary and requiring a 10-15 year programme. By agreeing to develop several local experiments over the next two years, the pace of change and the learning from it can reduce risks arising from change. Experiments by their nature do not all succeed. Some failures as well as learning are inevitable by adopting this approach.

- 4.7 Gaelic implications – there are no Gaelic implications at this time.
- 4.8 Rural implications – the main rural implications arising so far are:
- Tackling inequalities in rural areas can be more challenging as disadvantaged households are more dispersed and can be harder to find and engage with;
  - How to run participatory budgeting events in rural areas needs more thought to ensure some communities are not disadvantaged by distance.

### **5. Recommendation**

5.1 Members are asked to note the progress being made in early conversations among local Members. Two different models have emerged so far, one combining Council and partner business with community involvement into a community partnership in Nairn; the other keeping Area Committee and partnership governance distinct but with new connections between them through reporting and with greater community involvement. Participatory budgeting is to be tried in both localities in 2015/16, using different approaches.

5.2 Members can be advised on the ideas emerging from Members in Badenoch and Strathspey at this meeting and for others areas at the Council meeting in June.

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### **Extract from the Council report/minute:**

Members agreed at the Council meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> March to take forward the Council's response to the recommendations from the Strengthening Local Democracy Commission, as outlined in paragraphs 2.10 and 2.11 of the report, namely:

- 2.10 The Commission's four focal points for reform and remodelling are:
1. Democracy from the community up, not top down – built around subsidiarity and empowerment and clarity in the different 'spheres of Government' each with clarity on their democratic mandate.
  2. Community accountability for all locally delivered services.
  3. Variation instead of one size fits all – different contexts need different responses.
  4. Decision making at the right scale.
- 2.11 Leaders also agreed with the Commission's findings and intentions that:
1. They should be seen as the start of the process, recognising that a process of localism will take 10 to 15 years.
  2. New approaches, or local democratic experiments should be tested, adapted and others tried depending on local contexts and what is agreed locally. A 'one size fits all' approach is not sensible.
  3. We should identify current and emerging action that would demonstrate effective localism, learn from that (as well as what needs to improve) and share it.
  4. We need to be mindful of the processes of exclusion and how that plays out in rural as well as urban areas so that we can build a far more participative and inclusive democracy. The idea of developing a 'democracy and inclusion test' to apply to any new arrangements to trial was supported.
  5. Such transformation requires culture change, new habits of democracy for public services staff, organisations, elected and Board members as well as residents in how together they make better government and for democracy to function well.
  6. A programme of organisation development, being alert to and tackling institutional and cultural barriers to change, encouraging new behaviours and developing the practise of dialogue.
  7. Members' representative role can be supported by more participative approaches and we should experiment with these.
  8. We should foster social capital supporting communities to deliver better outcomes for themselves through their networks, associations, volunteering, reciprocity and third sector activity.