

Council – 14th April 2014

Community Engagement and Voluntary Sector

Progress report of Councillor I. Shires, Portfolio holder

A Year ago as I concluded my report to Council, I informed Members about plans for “devolution” which were being consulted on at that time through Scrutiny, Political Groups and within Area Partnerships. I said we were “considering the introduction of constituted Area Panels, participatory budgeting/resource allocation, Local Area Co-ordinators and further support to the third sector.” Well a year on I am pleased to report on progress.

On 22nd May 2013 Council agreed to establish six Area Panels which would enable certain decisions to be made within the Area Partnership structure:-

- To make decisions on Area Partnership funding, where allocated to an Area Partnership area, by the Council
- To agree Area Partnership Area Plans
- To agree representation to bodies, where an Area Partnership decision-making presence is required
- To agree outcomes of any participatory budgeting / resource exercise

I can confirm that each Area Partnership has developed an Area Plan, has representation on the Walsall Local Policing Crime Board and has had access to up to £40,000 to address local concerns in line with the Area Plan. Through funding of Area Partnership activity we have seen many innovative projects and additional funding levered into areas. Examples of projects include:-

Area 1: Brownhills/Pelsall/Rushall & Shelfield Area Partnership: Holland Skate Park project: The project involved work by the “Colourful Crowd” from Walsall College and young people from the area to revamp Holland Park Skate Park to make it more attractive and attract others to use the facility.

Area 2: Aldridge and Beacon Area Partnership: The Blackwood Park Improvement Plan: A collective with a local Friends Group, the Council’s Clean and Green service and Area Partnerships. Now completed, the park is seeking Green Flag status.

Area 3: Walsall North Area Partnership: Pinfold Bike Light Mechanics: A project to offer more opportunities to learners to gain accreditation in bike mechanics.

Area 4: Walsall South Area Partnership: Caledon St / Rochford Security Improvements: A project to reduce instances of crime, ASB, prostitution, drugs and fear of crime to the surrounding properties through the installation of a pedestrian gate, vehicle gate and fencing.

Area 5: Darlaston & Bentley Area Partnership: Herberts Park (George Rose Community Garden): Development of a community garden to benefit local residents and community members through shared social space, gardening, education, artistic and horticultural activities.

Area 6: Willenhall & Short Heath Area Partnership: Junior PCSO scheme: A project to allow local police officers in Willenhall North & Short Heath to work in partnership with local schools and other identified agencies on a number of issues including parking outside schools, bullying, litter and crime prevention which will reduce the dangers to children, parents and drivers in and around the schools. This funding will allow the scheme to be set up in 4 schools.

A further example of Area Partnership activity this year has also been the development of action plans to help address long standing health issues in each locality. This work, in partnership with Public Health colleagues has been utilising community assets in order to help address key issues identified through area based health profiles. An example of this is in Walsall South whose Area Partnership is focussing on diabetes.

In addition to the above local decision making through participatory budgeting has been further enhanced. Here we have seen £250,000 of the 2013/14 Engineering and Transportation budget made available for local people to have a say on where verge parking schemes should take place. This initiative aims to help address issues around unsafe and indiscriminate parking. This is a good news story, where we have not previously had funding to address verge parking issues and I'm pleased to say schemes have progressed/are progressing in each Area Partnership area. It is also pleasing to note how Council money has attracted up to £60,000 of partner money to further assist in this venture!

Turning to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) a review of support provided by the Council to the VCS has taken place over this year, as we seek to enhance the sector to enable local people to live and lead more independent, healthy and fulfilling lives, whilst recognising the ever increasing challenges on the public purse. Additional funding has been made available to the Borough's central infrastructure organisation, Walsall Voluntary Action to further enable them to help build the capacity of local groups to be able to do more against the priorities for our area, as shown by the Walsall Plan, 2013-16:-

- Supporting business to thrive and supporting local people into work
- Improving health, including well-being and independence for older people
- Creating safe, sustainable and inclusive communities – reducing levels of crime and providing the right environment for people to live in
- Improving safeguarding, learning and the life chances for children and young people, recognising that a person's early years crucially help determine what kind of future they will have.

The themes of the Walsall Plan have been the focus of partnership work through the greater alignment of teams at a local and strategic level. This work was showcased to approximately 80 representatives of local partners from the Police, the Fire & Rescue Service, health sector, the VCS and other agencies at an event at St Paul's the Crossing, Walsall in December, 2013.

A central theme to the devolution agenda that has emerged during this year has been building the resilience of our communities. For example, we are seeing good success from the Community Hubs initiative in Moxley (Darlaston and Bentley Area

Partnership Area) and Ryecroft (Walsall North Area Partnership area) with for example, helping people gain the skills they need to get back into work being a significant focus in both. As a Council we are also progressing with Local Area Co-ordination, with two learning sites identified as Darlaston North and Bentley and the Brownhills Wards. Citizen lead recruitment of two Local Area Co-ordinators is imminent as again we continue to seek to enable people to lead, healthy independent fulfilling lives that ultimately assists in reducing demand on the public purse.

Finally, staying with the theme of recruitment I'm pleased that we recruited as part of this programme for devolution, a Strategic Resources Officer (SRO) who is enabling local groups to access much needed funding. To date, the SRO has supported VCS organisations and Council Service areas to secure over £675,000 in external funding. Applications for a further total of £2.4 million are currently in development or awaiting decision from funders.

In 2014/15 there are great plans to further develop devolution and capitalise on the good work that has taken place so far. Next year I foresee greater opportunities for Area Panels, further opportunities through participatory budgeting, enhanced activity by Walsall Voluntary Action and greater support to the third sector. Only by working in partnership can we find the most appropriate/sustainable solutions to local problems and help people reach their potential in order to lead fulfilling, healthy and independent lives. Our collective efforts not only will achieve the Walsall vision, "Walsall is a great place to live, learn, work and invest", it will ultimately save the Council and its partners time and money.

Councillor Ian Shires
Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Voluntary Sector