Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel

6th January 2015

Agenda Item No. 7

Devolution to Area Partnerships

Ward(s)   All

Portfolios: Cllr K Husain

Executive Summary:

Improving locality working, widening community involvement and strengthening the role of voluntary and community organisations is a priority for Walsall Council. Area Partnerships have a pivotal part to play in establishing new ways of delivering services at an area level. A delivery plan, currently under development will underpin a refresh of the role of area partnerships to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Key to the success of the delivery plan is the ability of area partnerships to affect a meaningful response to evidence-based local priorities, ensuring resources are targeted at meeting the needs of the communities they represent.

Cabinet has requested that the scrutiny panel explores how the current role of area partnerships can be enhanced, reviewing a range of appropriate powers, exploring good practice in relation to influencing mainstream service delivery and making recommendations to Cabinet for potentially further devolution. To carry out this role the panel may wish to consider the involvement of other scrutiny panels to ensure a council wide perspective.

Reason for scrutiny:

Cabinet has requested that Neighbourhood Scrutiny Panel explore the potential for area partnerships to have greater devolved powers and a wider range of responsibilities as this will provide members with the tools to shape services making them relevant to the needs of local communities

The panel is invited to make recommendations to Cabinet based on their findings.

Recommendations:

That: The Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel

1. Set up a working group whose membership is drawn from a range of Council scrutiny panels to carry out a review of the potential for greater devolution of powers and responsibilities to area partnerships.

2. Identify learning from within Walsall and elsewhere and explore how this can be applied and strengthened to make services more locally responsive.

3. Advise cabinet on the implications of any recommended changes.

Resource and legal considerations:

Citizen impact:

Increasing the range of responsibilities of area partnerships may impact positively on communities as service delivery is likely to be more closely aligned to local needs.

Members will need to be mindful of the impact of any decisions relating to a specific neighbourhood, ward or area on communities in the adjoining areas.

Environmental impact:

There is potential for positive impact on the environment as local community organisations and volunteers are more likely to support and participate in locally generated initiatives.

Performance management:

This exercise may improve the Council's performance in that it could yield efficiencies through targeted service delivery and through supplementary service delivery as a result of closer partner and resident involvement.

Equality Implications:

Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out? No

An equality impact assessment is not needed at this stage as the new area partnership arrangements should benefit communities with protected characteristics providing them with more opportunity to engage. Once the devolved powers and range of responsibilities are defined and in place an EIA will be required to ensure opportunities for residents to participate in and influence this approach are equitable.

Consultation:

None at this stage

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Devolution to Area Partnerships

1. Background

Walsall has a long and rich history of area based structures. The latest version of these, area partnerships, has been in place since 2010. The role of these partnerships is set out in the appendix.

A review of area partnerships took place last year leading to an agenda for devolution. This commenced through constitutional reform by bringing in local member decision making through area panels. In addition some early work on participatory budgeting emerged, through schemes such as verge parking and some modest devolution of budgets.

The area partnerships model offers some flexibility to meet community needs. The model is intelligence lead and has the commitment of local partners, for example Walsall Housing Group, the Police, health and others. Given the issues our communities face a multi-agency approach offers great opportunity to change what we've always done as single institutions

2. Developing Area Partnerships

The Cabinet has commissioned further work to strengthen the area partnership model to focus more on
- Effective Delivery
- More community involvement in matters affecting local neighbourhoods
- A stronger role for community organisations.

A delivery plan is currently being developed to meet these objectives and to support the alignment of area partnership activity with the Council's strategic priorities.

Effective delivery relies on good decision making and this is dependent upon robust understanding of the strategic priorities for the Borough and the specific issues and challenges in local communities. Whilst aligning council strategies is a task best placed with Cabinet and strategic directors, in the public and voluntary sector; improving efficiency whilst maintaining the best possible outcomes for local people would be best achieved by working much more closely with Area Partnerships. Led by elected members, area partnerships should be recognised as having a key role in identifying evidence-based local priorities to ensure service delivery is targeted at meeting the needs of the communities they represent.

There is also a need to explore whether the current range of responsibilities at an area level is appropriate or whether these should be extended. A review of potential responsibilities by Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel would provide a useful steer for the future direction of area partnerships.

3. Suggested Scrutiny Role

a. The Extent to Which Area Partnerships Influence Mainstream Service Design.

The current arrangements at an area level are significantly dependent upon informal co-operation between departments and partner organisations. Strategically we understand what interventions are required to address the challenges faced by communities in Walsall. This understanding translates effectively into service delivery at a borough wide level, but efficiency and community benefit could be significantly improved by using the extensive local knowledge held by area partnerships in informing service design. Research could be undertaken to understand best practice in relation to simple more formal arrangements for area partnerships to affect mainstream service design and to act as an agent for facilitating co-design and co-delivery.

b. The level of responsibility for managing mainstream budgets

Each area partnership has a budget of £40,000 to support projects and initiatives that contribute to the priorities for the area. This budget tends to be used on a significant number of smaller projects delivered by local voluntary organisations and community groups. There is potentially a case for delegating authority for a proportion of mainstream spending for specific budgets to area partnerships. However It is questionable that financial devolution could be much more than token as the need to achieve economies of scale are increasingly crucial and long term and ongoing maintenance of assets is dependent upon their place in the queue for central budget funding. Reducing central budgets significantly puts the service area at risk of having insufficient funds to facilitate longer term activity. Research could be undertaken to establish whether there are any good practice examples of this approach.

c. The extent to which Area Partnerships direct local service delivery

The tasking meetings in each of the six areas focus predominantly on environmental issues and community safety. However in addition to the reactive work that is undertaken a wide range of associated proactive activity delivered by multiple partners also takes place. There are is a sizeable number of mainstream services both within and external to the Council that do not engage with this approach and there is currently no local mechanism for ensuring co-ordination.

There is significantly more scope for area partnerships to take a proactive role in the prioritisation of local service delivery, helping shape where and when services are delivered. Formalising tasking arrangements with other services and partners would arguably provide greater scope for area partnership delivery at a local level. In addition whilst tasking meetings are a breeding ground for good ideas and shared good practice, profile information could potentially be used to inform the membership of Tasking meetings. This might ensure Council and partner staff time is utilised effectively servicing the tasking groups where specific issues are the most significant across the Borough. Consideration could also be given to the development of virtual tasking groups, using web based technology in a 'chat room' scenario would enable partner to update one another on progress, highlight

new and emerging issues and share good practice. In this way the need for regular physical meetings would reduce making better use of partner time.

Whilst a better understanding of other models of good practice may inform debate on the shape of area tasking in the future, of equal interest is how other Authorities have mitigated the risk to consistency and quality of service delivery where this is tasked locally.

d. *Mechanisms for ensuring effective commissioning to deliver area priorities.*

There is already a requirement for groups applying for grant funding to demonstrate how their activities or project will contribute to the priorities for the area. However this requirement cannot be applied too rigidly as it might deter some groups that are small and have limited experience of applying for grant funding, Whilst elements of participatory budgeting have been trialled in some areas this has been limited and further pilots will be implemented, however it is not yet clear that this is an approach suited to Walsall. Further consideration should also be given to the merit of adopting a local commissioning approach where area partnerships define objectives more explicitly and invite local voluntary and community groups to bid to deliver specific pieces of work.

It would be helpful to understand good practice in approaches to awarding area or neighbourhood grant funding and some investigation around successful models of participatory budgeting may help inform the debate in Walsall.

e. *The scope for monitoring public services (council and partners)*

There is a potential role for area partnerships to hold council services and partners to account for the services they deliver. Colleagues across some service areas and partner organisations have the capability to disaggregate their monitoring information to provide regular updates on the progress of services and initiatives delivered against strategic priorities (for example a number of public health priorities) These updates could be provided to area partnerships quarterly or twice yearly to support better understanding of the impact of service delivery at an area level. Identifying models that incorporate this approach and whether it is considered effective could help inform further debate.

4. **Conclusion**

The points above provide some possible themes for review by the Panel and might assist the formulation of subsequent recommendations to Cabinet. However the list is not exhaustive and members of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel may wish to explore alternative themes.

Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel may wish to consider the merit of drawing working group members from a range of Scrutiny Committees as this could provide greater insight to the potential for delivering differently in areas.

Role of Area Partnerships

As agreed by Council on 28 January 2010

1. Focus on areas that people identify with and that partners can logistically operate in

2. Create proper accountability for results, with an Area Manager for each of the six areas

3. Produce an Area Plan for each area, which will combine the aims of the Sustainable Community Strategy (Walsall Plan 2013 – 16), with other local priorities

4. Give people a forum to discuss the utilisation of mainstream budgets in their area

5. Increase community engagement – Walsall needs to improve its performance in terms of people believing that they can influence decisions affecting them, in their area

6. Adopt a partnership approach, with the partners jointly resourcing the staff team, including some Area Managers being employed by partner organisations

7. Recognise the role of Elected Members, as leaders within their communities – Elected Members leading and empowering others to lead through community meetings

8. Localise tasking, by convening Area Partner meetings on a monthly basis