

**NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS WORKING GROUP
(Report of the Working Group)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Neighbourhood Forums Working Group met on 27th February 2012 when Councillors S J Criswell and R J West and Mr R Coxhead were present. Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors J Dutton and S M Van De Kerkhove.
- 1.2 Members will be aware that the Working Group has been reviewing the boundaries, elected Member representation for each area and the constitutional terms for new Neighbourhood Forum arrangements. This work has taken a significant amount of time to complete, but takes into account the consultation responses received from Town and Parish Councils which were presented to the Panel in November 2011, the preliminary views of the existing Neighbourhood Forums and the outcome of initial discussions with the Police and Cambridgeshire County Council. The Working Group has now completed this work and is seeking the Panel's views on its recommendations.

2. PROPOSED BOUNDARY AREAS AND ELECTED MEMBER REPRESENTATION

- 2.1 A map defining the proposed boundary areas for the Local Joint Committees (LJC) will either be projected or tabled at the meeting. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the map was unavailable for circulation but is currently being amended by Officers to take into account the changes proposed by the Working Group at their meeting on 27th February 2012. An attempt has been made to identify areas that are smaller and more localised than the existing Neighbourhood Forums. Members of the Working Group have been mindful of localism and the opportunities that the LJCs would present in this respect and are therefore proposing nine new areas within the District – please refer to **Appendix A**. Under the present arrangements, there are five Neighbourhood Forums. As has been said, the areas reflect the views of Town and Parish Councils on whom they considered to be part of their local communities.
- 2.2 Members will recall that, at their meeting in December 2011, the Panel endorsed a recommendation that the Cabinet should adopt the Shape Your Place initiative within Huntingdonshire. The initiative seeks to promote community engagement by enabling local public bodies to establish dialogue with a sector of local residents that might not utilise the existing Neighbourhood Forums. This has subsequently been endorsed by the Cabinet at its January 2012 meeting. The initiative will be launched on 1st July 2012 and a drop in session for Members will be held prior to the April meeting of the Council on the 25th April 2012 to introduce it. It is intended that the boundaries for Shape Your Place will, as far as possible, be co-terminus with those proposed for the LJCs. This has been achieved, though some Shape Your Place areas will cover more than one LJC. There is a need to finalise the boundaries for the LJCs to enable Cambridgeshire County Council to commence designing the Huntingdonshire Shape Your Place website.

2.3 The boundary areas could not be considered in isolation from the elected Member representation for each proposed area. **Appendix A** provides a breakdown highlighting the Towns and Parishes which fall in each area together with the District Wards and relevant County Council Divisions. It has been difficult for the Working Group to ensure a consistent split in Member representation, however, the view has been taken that localism and the geographical identities of settlements should be the overriding factor in determining the boundaries for the proposed Local Joint Committees.

3. LOCAL JOINT COMMITTEES – CONSTITUTIONAL TERMS

3.1 Members of the Working Group have considered at some length the constitutional terms for the LJsCs which are attached as **Appendix B**. These have been subject to review by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and the Managing Director (Communities, Partnerships and Projects) has had prior sight of them.

3.2 The constitution has been designed in such a way that it will be flexible enough to allow the LJsCs to operate as they see fit. The Committees do not have to undertake all of the functions proposed, and they can adapt their own arrangements in accordance with local need.

3.3 Given the possibility that the LJsCs might have decision making responsibilities delegated to them, consideration has been given to a range of options relating to representation, voting and decision making. Section 7 of the constitution covers voting arrangements. The options considered by the Working Group include:-

- Various models of appointment to the LJsCs;
- Differential voting rights through weighting or veto;
- Differential voting rights by restricting the items on which Members may vote;
- Conditioning the way matters are delegated to the Local Joint Committee;
- Insisting on unanimous decisions; and
- Insisting on a minimum percentage on decisions – for e.g. 75%.

3.4 Each of the options has been considered and it has been concluded that Town and Parish Councils should be entitled to one seat each. The relevant District and County Members will make up the rest of the LJC membership.

3.5 The Working Group proposes that Town and Parish Council nominations should be Councillors who are not also the relevant District or County Member for that area. Additionally, it is suggested that the Town and Parish Councils should be requested to nominate a substitute as it is felt that they should be represented at all times, particularly if any budgetary or financial decisions are to be made.

3.6 In terms of voting, the Working Group has concluded that all of those with a seat on the LJC should be entitled to one vote each. “Twin-hatters” (i.e. Members who are both the relevant District Councillor and County Councillor) should receive two votes each.

3.7 Voting will be determined by way of a simple majority of votes either for or against a proposal, with the Chairman having a casting vote if necessary. The Working Group has considered whether votes should be weighted for each local authority tier, but has concluded that this option might prove to be too complex in practice given that

views could be divided within a local authority tier. In addition, it is felt that the chosen option demonstrates commitment to localism.

- 3.8 The Working Group suggests that, when necessary, voting could be conditioned when a matter is delegated to LJsCs. For example, if a decision is delegated it might be that it is taken by an Executive Councillor after consultation with an LJC. There need to be clear rules on what decisions can be made by the Committees. Work in this respect will follow at a later stage in the Working Group's investigations.
- 3.9 It is proposed that the LJsCs should meet at least two times a year, with other meetings being called upon as necessary (Section 5 of the constitution). The Working Group has discussed the servicing of the meetings (Section 10 of the constitution) and has suggested that, in the spirit of localism, secretarial functions should be shared with the Town and Parish Councils within the area, perhaps on a rota basis. Officer support from both the District and County Councils are further being proposed, the duties of which are outlined within Section 11 of the constitution.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 The Working Group has spent a significant amount of time reviewing the boundaries for the proposed LJsCs whilst being mindful of elected Member representation for each area and their constitutional terms. There is a need to consult the Town and Parish Councils on the LJsCs to gain their views on the proposals and, if they are to be introduced, all the local authorities who are to be represented on them will have to complete various formalities. The Panel is, therefore

RECOMMENDED

to consider and comment on the proposed boundaries, composition, voting and constitution for Local Joint Committees.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Minutes and Reports of Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 6th September, 1st November and 6th December 2011 and 3rd January and 7th February 2012.

Neighbourhood Forums Working File held by Democratic Services Section.