

UPDATE ON ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS TO AREA COMMITTEES

To:

Civic Affairs Committee 10/07/2024

Report by:

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Wards affected: All

1. Introduction / Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides the follow-up to a report brought to Civic Affairs Committee in October 2023, as requested by the Committee at that time. It provides an update on work carried out in accordance with that report's recommendations to explore alternatives to Area Committees.
- 1.2 The report proposes a direction of travel and emerging ideas for more meaningful forms of democratic and civic engagement with local communities, building on earlier feedback from councillors and others.
- 1.3 Many other progressive councils are testing and learning from different ways to engage communities, building on the Covid experience. Cambridge has made a positive start on this journey. The Council should continue to work with local communities to develop more diverse, community-centred approaches that enable richer and more meaningful conversations than traditional council committees.

2. Recommendations

To recommend to Council:

- That Area Committees be paused for the remainder of the municipal year, 2024/25, while pilot work on alternatives continue and while more detailed proposals are developed for implementation from the start of the municipal year 2025/26.

3. Background

Process and findings of the review to date

- 3.1 The City Council commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to advise on governance arrangements at the Council in the Autumn of 2021. The CfGS surveyed councillors and officers on various issues and reported their findings in early 2022.
- 3.2 With regard to Area Committees, the CfGS noted that “There was a strong view that Area Committees need a complete overhaul – that they are no longer fit for purpose...Area Committees should integrate better with existing community engagement activities and the Council should give consideration as to whether they need to be formal committees.”
- 3.3 The CfGS recommended: “Consider pausing Area Committees while a review is undertaken, releasing officer and member resource to focus on developing a new approach which forms part of the Council’s community engagement strategy.”
- 3.4 In the summer of 2023, the Council determined to undertake a review of governance arrangements, responding to key recommendations of the CfGS. A member Governance Reference Group (GRG) was formed to take this forward.
- 3.5 In October 2023, the GRG reiterated the need for change from Area Committees as they had lost direction and purpose, were poorly attended, and did not make good use of officer or councillor time and resources. The desire to hear from communities more effectively, and to hear different voices, was a key theme for members.

- 3.6 Via a report to Civic Affairs, Council agreed to pause Area Committees for two cycles and asked officers to report back in July 2024 as outlined in this report.
- 3.7 To support the process of review, the social enterprise New Local was engaged to identify alternative approaches. New Local interviewed a number of City Councillors, a small number of officers and community representatives. New Local also reviewed approaches to local democratic engagement in other councils.
- 3.8 From their interviews with Cambridge councillors and community representatives, New Local heard further views on the limitations of Area Committees and the desire for more informality, dynamism, inclusivity and co-ordination with existing activity (as well as some reflections on when Area Committees had worked best, which included occasions when contentious issues had led to greater attendance, and when decisions had been taken at the committees).
- 3.9 New Local also identified the broad range of other channels and fora by which Cambridge residents and communities contact or engage with the City Council, after officers undertook a mapping exercise over the winter. See Appendix B.
- 3.10 From their research on other councils, New Local identified different approaches taken in various councils – they reported that there was not a single approach that had been proven to “work”, and a number of councils were going through similar trials of new approaches.
- 3.11 Some of these seemed to fit closer with the aspiration of Cambridge councillors to be more informal and engaging, and responsive to differing issues and needs within their areas (e.g. aspects of the approach taken by places like Test Valley and Oxford City). Here, a “portfolio” approach (a variety of types of engagements adapted for different local needs) allowed different types of engagement best suited to different needs and issues, but included informal forms of local engagement which put councillors in a more “community councillor” or “community champion” role.
- 3.12 New Local presented their initial findings and thinking to the Governance Reference Group in April 2023, and heard responses and reflections that broadly reiterated the focus going forward on hearing resident voices on their own terms and hearing from a wider cross-section people.

- 3.13 New Local reflected this feedback in their final report, which was submitted to the Council in May 2023 (Appendix A). The report included five recommendations:
1. Take a portfolio approach to member-resident engagement rather than returning to the Area Committee structure.
 2. New activities should explicitly prioritise open-ended resident voice and relationship-building in dynamic, informal settings.
 3. Member-resident engagement should build on existing community-led structures and activity, wherever possible.
 4. Consider opportunities to increase / better signpost the number of opportunities for residents to meaningfully influence decision-making such as through tenant reps.
 5. Consider the opportunity of the grants review to explore participatory budgeting.
- 3.14 In addition to New Local's report and the internal officer discussions and mapping process, a number of other relevant strands of work have started since the decision to pause Area Committees was made (some of which were not foreseen or planned at that point).
- 3.15 Firstly, the Council has developed and adopted a Community Wealth Building Strategy, with unanimous support at committee. This strategy sets a new direction for the Council in seeking to collaborate with communities to build social and other forms of capital in the city's communities. This includes an ambition to build community power (community-led agency over more decisions and initiatives).
- 3.16 Secondly, the new Director of Communities joined the Council in November and has been working with colleagues to develop new ideas. This will include a redesign of the Communities Group and a transformation of our ways of working with communities.
- 3.17 Thirdly, as part of this evolution in ways of working, the Council has initiated a new approach to community engagement in East Barnwell, under the "Shaping Abbey" banner. This cross-council initiative has sought to put community-led discussions and community voice at the heart of a more co-ordinated approach to the Council's activity and engagement in that community.

- 3.17.1 Abbey is an area set to receive over £100m investment over the next few years with significant regeneration, new community and sports facilities as well as additional key infrastructure coming forward. With this pilot, the Council is taking a place-based approach and putting residents at the heart of its engagement, seeking to ensure those who live in Abbey have a greater say about things that affect their lives and their community and building stronger relationships with the Council.
- 3.17.2 Activity has included community conversation and listening events in March, June and another planned in October. Officers are testing new methods of engagement as well as cross service and organisational working. Learning from this will influence future engagement plans as they emerge.
- 3.18 Finally, the Council has agreed to undertake a programme of work to design and implement a revised Leader and Cabinet model of decision making and to revise its constitution.
- 3.19 All of these processes and initiatives have started and are underway, but not yet concluded. They are all part of a piece, around listening, engaging and participating with communities in a richer and more meaningful way, to enable the Council to play a modern, convening, enabling and empowering role in the city.
- 3.20 In this context, officers recommend pausing Area Committees to the end of the current municipal year (2024/25), while these initiatives (including the Shaping Abbey pilot) progress and evolve, allowing officers and members time and space to learn and reflect further, and to crystallise a new approach that could be implemented from the start of the 2025/26 municipal year.

Looking ahead – options to develop

- 3.21 Current thinking on what that approach could look like, taking account of the New Local report as well as the city council-led initiatives mentioned above, is as follows.
- 3.21.1 In 2-3 areas of the city, the Council might take forward the “Shaping neighbourhoods” approach that is being piloted in East Barnwell. This would best suit those areas of the city where the council has a number of different but related projects or areas of activity, and might include for instance

(in addition to parts of the East area of the city) neighbourhoods in the north of the city where there are particular challenges around life chances as well as opportunities arising from regeneration or growth; and neighbourhoods in the south of the city where growth and change are also presenting opportunities and challenges that would merit closer community engagement as well as stakeholder co-ordination.

- 3.21.2 Exactly what this might look like needs to be worked up as further learning from the Abbey experience emerges.
- 3.21.3 Complementing this richer, more intense approach in this limited number of neighborhoods, officers are thinking that there would be a “universal” approach in all areas (probably ward based) which would feature the kind of informal, community-led engagement activities seen in Test Valley and elsewhere.
- 3.21.4 These might be characterized as “Cambridge Community Conversations”, and could take place perhaps once or twice per year (depending on local community demand / need / capacity). They would provide spaces for the community (probably convened/represented by key local community groups where these exist) to set the agenda, and to share with councillors their key ideas, aspirations, concerns and challenges.
- 3.21.5 As per the New Local recommendation, they would build on existing community groups and activities and events wherever possible, so that the Council would, through ward councillors, be engaging on communities’ terms, and in formats that residents felt comfortable with. This should make it more likely for residents to feel able to voice their thoughts, ideas and concerns. It would place local councillors in a community champion role.
- 3.21.6 Officers envisage that training/development activities could be provided for councillors to help them develop their skills and confidence in this more active role, where appropriate (recognizing that many councillors already have great skills and experience in this territory).

- 3.21.7 The Community Councillor role could potentially include promoting the new small community grants proposed in the recent Community Grants Review. See para 3.25 below.
 - 3.21.8 In many parts of the city, there are existing residents' / community groups that could be encouraged / supported / empowered to play an active role in convening and enabling such "community conversations".
 - 3.21.9 In those places where such social capital is less well developed, the Council's Communities team may be able to play a supporting role, subject to the outcomes of the Communities redesign project.
- 3.22 As the thinking on all of these initiatives and approaches is set to evolve over the next six months, it is proposed that the Director of Communities bring a report to the Environment & Communities scrutiny committee in March 2025 setting out details of the proposals. Any consequent changes to the constitution would be brought back to the subsequent Civic Affairs Committee.
- 3.23 Officers believe this approach would fit well into an emerging strategic approach to stakeholder and community engagement under the "Cambridge Conversations" banner.
- 3.23.1 The Leader's / Executive's annual/biannual briefing might be seen as the pinnacle of this approach;
 - 3.23.2 the thematic partnerships and events that the Council is involved in or convenes being an intermediate tier of "thematic Cambridge conversations".
 - 3.23.3 the neighbourhood-based approach outlined in this paper forming the foundation level "Cambridge Community Conversations".
- 3.24 Again, this is emerging thinking which hasn't been fully worked up yet, but is shared here to give greater context to the proposals in this paper.
- 3.25 In the meantime, where councillors and local community groups or organisations have or are able to agree arrangements for such community-led conversations in the remainder of this year, officers see no reason why these shouldn't go ahead as part of the piloting / learning process.

- 3.26 The other fora and channels for community and resident engagement are expected to continue (albeit there may be ways to improve or review these in due course). This includes some specific place-based initiatives including the “Community Forums” that exist to bring residents together with the councils and developers to plan and manage new communities most effectively.
- 3.27 In terms of other activities that previously took place under the auspices of Area Committees, as mentioned above, Area Committee grants are now being replaced by Small Community Grants [subject to Executive decision on 27th June]. This should ensure that the Council’s grant funding is more focused on the greatest need, and recognises that communities are best placed to define what ‘community’ means to them, whether that be a community of place, identity or interest.
- 3.28 The current Environment Improvement Programme has no further capital budget allocation beyond this year. Officers are currently focusing on catch-up and delivery of existing commitments, taking stock of what funding might be left over from current allocations and whether there may be potential to consider further applications later in the year. Officers will share project proposals with ward councillors for comment prior to decisions on any new allocations being taken by the Executive Councillor.
- 3.29 Crime data and issues affecting residents are now managed directly by the police, and all councillors and residents are invited to attend the Cambridge Community meetings that the police arrange.
- 3.30 Some environmental data will be published on the council webpages by ward on an annual basis, allowing councillors and residents to see trends in the data and to inform any issues they may wish to raise with officers or the executive councillor. This could be discussed, for instance, at the Cambridge Community Conversations, if local residents wished.
- 3.31 In these ways, the business of the Council can continue to have a locality focus in a more efficient and engaging way. Officers do not believe it would be appropriate to re-start Area Committee meetings for two cycles during the remainder of this municipal year. Re-starting these meetings would not seem to be a good use of public resource, officer or member time, given the feedback received from councillors and others through the CfGS and New Local surveys.

Officer teams across the council, including the Democratic Services team, are going through redesign and restructure processes, and/or are facing capacity challenges and constraints.

3.31 Finally, as the thinking on this approach to engagement develops alongside the work to design a new governance system, we anticipate there will be ways to link the two.

3.32 For instance, councillors could bring the insights into community concerns that they might glean through community conversations back into the Council's policy-making, decision-making and scrutiny processes, potentially. This could help ensure that those processes are informed by that greater understanding of communities and residents' issues that would emerge from the richer conversations that we anticipate would take place.

Conclusion

3.33 In conclusion, officers believe there are exciting new ways for councillors and officers and the council more broadly to engage in their communities.

3.32.1 For individual councillors, we believe this approach would put them more firmly and visibly at the heart of their communities as community councillors and champions.

3.32.2 For the Council as a whole, this approach seems to fit well with the underlying aspirations of the Community Wealth Building strategy, to be empowering and listening to communities, and giving them more of a voice and a say.

3.34 While the details are still to be worked through, we believe this sets a positive and progressive direction of travel.

6. Implications

a) Financial Implications

The budget allocation for Area Committee venues and audio (around £6,000) would not be spent, although this has tended to be subsumed by pressures in the democratic services budget arising from additional member support costs.

Going forward, officers do not anticipate a significant budgetary impact from the proposals outlined in this paper, although detailed plans for new engagement methodologies will need to consider financial resources required including associated costs for training of members and officers.

b) Staffing Implications

Pausing Area Committees for the remainder of the municipal year would mean committee managers would have some additional capacity to continue streaming other committee meetings, and to engage in the review of their team that will accompany the governance review. The recent resignation of one committee manager means the team will be at three quarter capacity in this summer/autumn.

The future proposals outlined in this paper may have implications for staff in other teams including the Communities Group, subject to the detailed proposals to be worked up and brought forward by the Director of Communities alongside his Group redesign project.

c) Equality and Poverty Implications

No significant equalities or poverty impacts have been identified. These factors (including accessibility to any new types of engagement) will be considered as the detailed proposals are developed.

Officers anticipate that there will be positive impacts from the Council shifting resource and focus to more intentionally hear from seldom-hear communities and residents whose voices have not always been well-represented in more traditional consultation processes.

d) Net Zero Carbon, Climate Change and Environmental Implications

No impacts have been identified.

e) Procurement Implications

N/a

f) Community Safety Implications

Policing and community safety data and priorities will continue to be managed by the police through their events, which are open to all.

7. Consultation and communication considerations

Members of the Governance Reference Group or their nominees, plus a small number of officers and community representatives were interviewed by New Local as part of this process. New Local presented their initial findings to the GRG and took on board GRG members' feedback in finalizing their report.

The Council's website will be updated to reflect the position on Area Committees if this recommendation is agreed.

Community groups will be engaged informally as the thinking on the new approaches develop in the coming months.

8. Background papers

Background papers used in the preparation of this report:

Review of Governance – [Recommendations from Governance Reference Group 9/10/23](#)

Cambridge City Council [Community Wealth Building Strategy](#)

9. Appendices

Appendix A – Fora and channels for community and resident engagement

Appendix B - Local Democratic Engagement in Cambridge (New Local)

10. Inspection of papers

To inspect the background papers or if you have a query on the report please contact Andrew Limb, Assistant Chief Executive, tel: 01223 - 457004, email: andrew.limb@cambridge.gov.uk