Visits to other local authorities – Sept and Oct 2010

Summary of learning points

During September 2010 members from the Council visited six other local authorities (Eastleigh BC, Ipswich BC, Oxford BC, Wiltshire, Newcastle and South Tyneside Councils) to assess how their local arrangements were performing. The following table shows some of the main characteristics found.

Local authorities visited	Characteristics found
Evident in all local authorities visited.	*A high profile/standing of the Area Committees in the organisation and community, with active championing, officer co-ordination, promotion and status for Chairs.* *Area Committees are at the "centre" of the local authorities work rather than a "bolt on". Chairs take an active role in setting agenda, assessing need (community profiles) and reflecting back community issues to the organisation and beyond.*
Eastleigh BC	*Meetings are focused on decision-making, with limited room for consultations, so that agenda time is freed up. One officer is the point of contact for an area and acts as a "mini Chief Executive" handling most questions in the meetings and making sure things get done. Utilising developer contributions forms a key part of the Area Committees work.*

Ipswich BC and Newcastle Council	*Listening more – giving emphasis to informing and consulting in an informal setting that promotes networking and gives support to people who wish to contribute. The use of small tables to group around helps people talk to each other and a refreshment break aids networking. These types of forums tended to be officer led.*
Newcastle Council and Wiltshire Council (although reflect previous district arrangements).	*Giving clarity between regulatory matters, such as planning, and open forum sessions, which require different types of involvement. Holding separate local meetings to consider regulatory matters allows the Area Committees to extend involvement and have a more diverse agenda.*

Ipswich BC	*Connecting with local community and voluntary groups through annual community fairs to showcase local groups and improve networking.*
Ipswich BC, Wiltshire and Newcastle Councils	*Using social media so that local people don't have to attend meetings to feel a part of an area committee's work. Allowing people to submit questions online, assess the progress of previous questions and follow a work programme of the area committee.*
Newcastle Council	*Demonstrating the Area Committee is making a difference by using the "You Said, We are Working on it and We Will Respond by" approach to hold issues from meetings and allow local people to track progress. This also featured in annual reports to enhance accountability.*

South Tyneside Council	*Extending membership of Area Committees to include seats "at the table" for local business and other community representatives, such as a member of a Youth Parliament.* *There is a debate about whether the determination of local planning applications should be included in their Area Committees.*
Wiltshire and South Tyneside Councils	*Using officer surgeries before meetings to pick-off issues that can be dealt with on a "one to one" basis. This approach also allowed members to filter out casework from general Open Forum contributions.* *Hold occasional meetings in a carousel format, where local people can move between tables to talk to different agencies about their problems.*
Oxford City Council	*Area Committee meetings on a four-week cycle so that more business can be done. Re-orientating community development activities to focus on the Area Committees.* *There is a debate about whether the determination of local planning applications should removed.*
Wiltshire Council	*Using Parish Councils as a building block for the Area Committees with representatives from each attending. Looking to transfer assets and services to Parish Councils, where possible, to "give power back" to local people.* *Have created a flatter management structure to support local areas.*
South Tyneside Council	*Encouraging the leads for grant aided projects to report back to the Area Committees, showing what they have achieved with the grant.*

Evident in all local authorities visited.	*Setting out a vision for an area in a local sustainable community plan at area committee level – holding workshops with local people to set out local priorities. These plans then guide the work of area committees and prevent them being bogged down in more parochial matters.*
South Tyneside Council	*Providing a clear work programme showing what the Area Committee had done, work in progress and what it was going to do. Incorporating a Housing Improvement Programme.*