



Executive Committee

All wards

2nd December 2009

4. NEIGHBOURHOOD GROUPS TASK AND FINISH GROUP – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(Report of Councillors Banks, Enderby, Pearce and Thomas)

1. Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to inform the Executive Committee of the final recommendations that have been made by the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is asked to **RECOMMEND** that

- 1) the Neighbourhood Groups are not now fit for purpose and should be discontinued;**
- 2) the Partners and Communities Together (PACT) group meetings should be re-launched and delivered as an equal partnership arrangement;**
 - a) Redditch Borough Council should work with the Police and other local agencies participating in Partners and communities Together (PACT) to agree funding and administration for PACT meetings;**
 - b) a protocol should be jointly developed outlining the roles and responsibilities of all agencies in the re-launched Partners and Communities Together Groups;**
 - c) the Chairs of all Partners and Communities Together meetings should be independent members of the community;**
 - d) promotion of the re-launched Partners and Communities Together (PACT) meetings should be appropriately targeted towards clarifying the meaning of the new arrangements for residents living in areas where PACT and Neighbourhood Group meetings currently only take place on the same night;**
 - e) there should be small, local budgets for each of the re-launched Partners and Communities Together groups which could be spent at the discretion of the group;**

- 3) the Neighbourhood Groups also be replaced with a further variety of methods that will enable Redditch Borough Council to inform and consult more effectively with local residents;

these alternative methods should include the following:

- a) the Council should publish quarterly editions of Redditch Matters during the year to inform residents about local public services, activities and Council business;
 - b) Redditch Borough Council should continue to host road shows throughout the Borough;
 - c) Redditch Borough Council should embrace the Worcestershire Viewpoint Citizens Panel and use every opportunity to work with the Panel to consult with residents over local issues;
 - d) the Council should promote web based systems, such as the Worcestershire Hub and FixMyStreet, that can be utilised to resolve residents' individual issues;
 - e) social networking should be used by the Council to inform and consult with residents in appropriate circumstances;
 - f) the use of Councillor Calls for Action be promoted in order to be used to resolve local neighbourhood issues;
 - g) more effort should be made by the Council to advertise the fact that residents should resolve individual issues through direct contact with Councillors, Officers and the One-Stop-Shops;
 - h) the Council should work in equal partnership with the Police and other local agencies to advertise Street Briefings and Environment Visual Audits to local residents;
- 4) Redditch Borough Council should continue to seek ways to better engage and consult with a more diverse range of residents;
- 5) the Council should have a robust monitoring system in place to assess the effectiveness of each of the mechanisms used to inform, engage and consult with local residents;

- 6) **the Community Forum and similar groups which engage and consult with local residents should report to the Executive Committee; and**
- 7) **the Council should have a central electronic database which would be used for the purposes of consultation with key partners in the Borough.**

3. **Objectives of the Review**

- 3.1 Our review was established in June 2009. The Group consisted of four Members: Councillor Banks who chaired the Group; and Councillors Enderby; Pearce; and Thomas.
- 3.2 We were commissioned to undertake this review of the Council's Neighbourhood Groups by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. We were specifically tasked with reviewing how the Neighbourhood Groups were operating and whether this corresponded with their purpose; determining whether the Neighbourhood Groups represented value for money; and considering whether alternative consultation methods would be more effective.
- 3.3 The review was considered to be a timely exercise. Central government is increasingly encouraging local authorities to actively engage residents and other local stakeholders over developments in service delivery and local decision making. Indeed, Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 introduced a duty to involve, requiring local authorities to involve local representatives persons where appropriate. In this context, a review of the continuing viability of the Neighbourhood Groups as a local consultation mechanism was considered important.

4. **Methods and Activities**

- 4.1 We interviewed relevant Officers from Redditch Borough Council to develop an understanding of the existing Neighbourhood Groups process. We also interviewed the leaders of each of the political party groups represented on the Council to develop an understanding of the political perspectives towards the process and alternative consultation methods that could be utilised by local authorities.
- 4.2 At an early stage we sought to establish the purpose of the Neighbourhood Groups as we understood that this would help to inform our assessment of the ongoing viability of the process. In order to achieve this we questioned our interviewees about what they perceived to be the purpose of the Neighbourhood Groups. We also circulated a questionnaire amongst Borough Councillors, County Councillors, local Police Officers and relevant Council Officers which

asked recipients to outline their views of the purpose of the Neighbourhood Groups.

- 4.3 Based on the information gathered from these expert sources we concluded that the purpose of the Neighbourhood Groups was to provide a forum where the Council could: inform residents and other stakeholders about Council business, including policies and developments in service delivery; engage with residents and other stakeholders over the needs of local communities; and consult with residents and other stakeholders over policies, developments in service delivery and local decision making.
- 4.4 However, we concurred that unfortunately the Neighbourhood Groups were failing to meet this purpose. Evidence gathered during the course of our review indicated that a consistently low number of people attended Neighbourhood Group meetings. Moreover, the residents attending Neighbourhood Group meetings were overwhelmingly white and either middle-aged or elderly. (For further information please view Appendix E, pp 89-95, in the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report). Under these circumstances the Neighbourhood Groups failed to enable the Council to inform, engage or consult with a representative sample of local residents.
- 4.5 The evidence provided by expert witnesses indicated that there was a lot of duplication over the types of items that were considered at Neighbourhood Group meetings and at Partners and Communities Together (PACT) meetings, which are similar public meeting arrangements which take place in the Borough. Many respondents though considered the PACT meetings to be more effective than the Neighbourhood Group meetings: the items which were prioritised during PACT meetings were quickly listed on the West Mercia Police website alongside information about the action taken to resolve the issues.
- 4.6 We interviewed Inspector Ian Joseph, a senior representative of the West Mercia Police, to obtain an understanding of a key partner's view of the Neighbourhood Groups and opportunities to enhance the ability of local public service organisations to engage with residents through partnership working. It was during this meeting that the suggestion was made that the Partners and Communities Together meetings, by involving all partners working together to resolve issues of concern to the local population, could be re-launched as the primary local meeting arrangement. In this context the Neighbourhood Groups would no longer be required.
- 4.7 We also concluded that additional consultation mechanisms could be used by the Council to more effectively engage with residents. In particular, we felt that it was important for the Council, and the Council's partner organisation, to utilise a range of methods as this

could enable the Council to interact with a more diverse and representative sample of the local population.

- 4.8 As a group we recognised that our proposals would have significant implications for local residents, particularly for those residents who have regularly attended Neighbourhood Group meetings in previous years. We therefore consulted widely with residents over our initial proposals by circulating information about our review amongst residents for whom we had contact details and attending the October round of Neighbourhood Group meetings to present our proposals. The feedback provided by residents was largely supportive of our proposals and informed our final recommendations.

5. Recommendations – Further Details

- 5.1 More detailed information about each of the recommendations has been provided in the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group – Final Report. However, some brief details are also provided in this Executive Summary:

- 1) **The Neighbourhood Groups are not now fit for purpose and should be discontinued.** (For further information about recommendation 1 please refer to pp 28-29 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.1.1 During the course of our review we assessed the number of residents who had attended Neighbourhood Group meetings for which figures were available, from February 2007 – February 2009. Unfortunately this analysis revealed that less than 2 per cent of the population attended Neighbourhood Group meetings.

5.1.2 Many of the Councillors, Officers and residents who were consulted during the course of our review commented that the Neighbourhood Groups were not working effectively. Typically it was suggested that: few items were resolved following Neighbourhood Group meetings; often personal issues were raised which could have been resolved more quickly if they had been referred directly to relevant Officers or Councillors at an earlier stage; and many of the issues discussed were not within the remit of the Council to resolve or required work from more than one organisation.

5.1.3 Despite these problems Redditch Borough Council continued to invest £62,210 per year to support the three Neighbourhood Group meetings which took place in thirteen locations across the Borough. In particular, significant expenditure of £43,690 was allocated to central support

service costs, or the indirect costs involved in providing Officer support for the process.

- 5.1.4 We concluded that due to the small number of residents attending meetings the Neighbourhood Groups were not effectively meeting their purpose to inform, engage and consult with residents. Furthermore, we agreed that the continuing expenditure on the Neighbourhood Groups, when attended by so few residents, could not be justified as cost effective. We therefore believe that the Neighbourhood Groups should be discontinued.

2) The Partners and Communities Together (PACT) group meetings should be re-launched and delivered as an equal partnership arrangement. (For further information about recommendations 2-2e please refer to pp 30-45 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

- 5.2.1 As a group we did recognise that local public meetings remained important to many people. Indeed, during our consultation process many residents commented that they appreciated local meetings because it provided them with an opportunity to meet with local officials face to face. However, we believed that this requirement could be met through the delivery of one rather than two local public meeting arrangements.
- 5.2.2 We believe that a re-launch of the Partners and Communities Together process would be appropriate because it would challenge unfortunate existing perceptions that this is a Police only process. The West Mercia Police have indicated that they are as keen as we are to ensure that all relevant stakeholders understand that Partners and Communities Together is designed to address local problems through partnership working.
- 5.2.3 The Council has signed up to the Redditch Sustainable Community Strategy. This strategy commits the Council to a vision for 'Redditch to be successful and vibrant with sustainable communities built on partnership and shared responsibility'. We believe that by committing to a re-launch of the Partners and Communities Together process the Council would demonstrate its commitment to partnership working.
- 5.2.4 However, we do not feel that the exact arrangements for delivering the re-launched Partners and Communities Together process can be specified by us as a Group. Instead, we feel that these arrangements would need to be the subject of more detailed negotiations between the relevant partners that would be represented on the re-launched process. We

have, however, made a number of suggestions for the consideration of those partners, which are detailed in our final report (pp 31-45).

5.2.5 We further believe that Council investment in the re-launched Partners and Communities Together process would represent greater value for money for the people of Redditch than investment in the Neighbourhood Groups. Indeed, following the discontinuation of the Neighbourhood Groups we would anticipate that the Council would make considerable savings even whilst investing in the re-launch of the Partners and Communities Together process. However, we do not feel that we can specify the extent of the financial savings that would be made or the amount that the Council would need to invest in the re-launched Partners and Communities Together process as this would be subject to the outcomes of negotiations between the relevant partner organisations.

3) The Neighbourhood Groups also be replaced with a further variety of methods that will enable Redditch Borough Council to inform and consult more effectively with local residents. (For further information about recommendations 3-3h please refer to pp 46-64 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.3.1 We believe that there are a variety of measures that can be used by the Council to more effectively inform, engage and consult with residents than the Neighbourhood Groups. Some of the activities which we think have the potential to be particularly effective are already implemented or must be made available by local authorities in accordance with legislative requirements. However, we are concerned that these measures, such as Councillor Calls for Action and Street Briefings, are not recognised by many people and therefore need to be more actively promoted.

5.3.2 We consulted with residents over many of the alternative mechanisms which we are proposing should be used by the Council. Significant support was expressed by residents for the following measures: Citizens Panels; Councillor Calls for Action; Environment Visual Audits; FixMyStreet; road shows and Street Briefings.

5.3.3 We also consulted with the Redditch Student Council to obtain further information about how younger people would prefer to communicate with the Council. They were unanimous in their view that the Council should utilise Facebook to engage with younger people.

5.3.4 We are aware that some concerns have been expressed by a number of residents that increasingly organisations are using IT methods to interact with the public, although not all residents have access to the internet. Whilst we are recommending that web based facilities, such as FixMyStreet, should be promoted by the Council and social networking should be undertaken by the Council to interact with residents, this only forms one part of our package of proposals. We feel that the opportunities provided through using IT facilities should be utilised alongside and not at the expense of face to face interaction and traditional forms of written communications.

4) Redditch Borough Council should continue to seek ways to better engage and consult with a more diverse range of residents. (For further information about recommendation 4 please refer to pp 65-66 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.4.1 During the course of our review it has become clear that consultation processes are constantly evolving. Measures which may have effectively enabled the Council to inform, engage and consult with residents at one time might no longer be effective a few years later.

5.4.2 We believe that increasingly developments in technology, particularly information technology, will enable people to develop new communications tools. This should facilitate more efficient and convenient forms of engagement for future years.

5.4.3 The Council needs to be able to respond to these changes so that it can make use of new opportunities as and when they arise. This will ensure that the Council continues to remain familiar with the needs of our communities and will enhance the local authority's ability to comply with the responsibilities set out in the duty to involve.

5) The Council should have a robust monitoring system in place to assess the effectiveness of each of the mechanisms used to inform, engage and consult with local residents. (For further information about recommendation 5 please refer to pp 67-68 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.5.1 In the current economic climate there are scarce resources available to local authorities and their partner organisations and this situation is set to continue for the foreseeable future. Public service organisations must ensure that public spending addresses local needs and leads to the best possible outcomes for local communities. In this context we believe that any mechanisms which are utilised by the Council to

inform, engage and consult with residents should be robustly monitored to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

5.5.2 We are aware that there was no standard system in place to monitor the effectiveness of the Neighbourhood Groups. Instead, the impact of the groups on local communities was assessed on an ad hoc basis. We think that this prevented the Council from taking action to address the shortcomings of the Neighbourhood Groups at an earlier date.

5.5.3 The impact and implementation of our recommendations, if approved, will be monitored by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course. However, the scrutiny monitoring process is limited to one or two meetings. We feel that robust, standard monitoring arrangements will also be required in the long-term to review the ongoing effectiveness of all the consultation measures utilised by the Council.

6) The Community Forum and similar groups which engage and consult with local residents should report to the Executive Committee. (For further information about recommendation 6 please refer to pp 69-70 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.6.1 The Community Forum was designed to act as a critical friend to Redditch Borough Council in relation to equalities issues. Members of the Community Forum are consulted over the equalities implications of local strategies and policy changes as a standard part of the Council's consultation process.

5.6.2 We believe that the Community Forum is an important initiative. Through interacting with members of the Forum the Council is able to engage with representatives of groups who have traditionally proved hard to reach.

5.6.3 However, we have some concerns about the current operation of the Community Forum. We feel that work needs to be undertaken to strengthen the Forum's governance arrangements so that there can be greater transparency in relation to the work of the Forum and the contribution that it makes to policy development and decision making at the Council.

5.6.4 We believe that the governance arrangements of the Redditch Community Forum should be organised so that it reports directly to the Council's Executive Committee. Meetings of the Executive Committee are open to public attendance and minutes of Executive Committee meetings are published on the Council's website. In this context, all interested parties could

view information about the contribution that has been made by the Forum to policy development and local decision making.

- 7) The Council should have a central electronic database which would be used for the purposes of consultation with key partners in the Borough.** (For further information about recommendation 7 please refer to pp 71-72 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

5.7.1 There is currently no central Redditch Borough Council database of contact details for residents which could be utilised for consultation purposes. Instead, there are a number of different contact lists which are used for specific purposes, such as the distribution list for the Neighbourhood Groups. Access to these distribution lists is not provided across the Council but rather to Officers working in specific service areas.

5.7.2 We feel that this situation is untenable in an environment where the duty to involve requires local authorities to actively engage with local representatives over Council business wherever appropriate. Moreover, we believe the number of residents who provided their contact details for use in future consultation processes during the course of the 2009 road shows clearly demonstrated that there was some willingness amongst residents to engage with the Council.

5.7.3 A central electronic database could amalgamate the contact details from the different distribution lists to create a larger distribution list. We recognise that if this action was to be approved permission would need to be obtained to do so and it would need to be undertaken in accordance with data protection rules set out in the Data Protection Act 1998.

5.7.5 We also recognise that any central database would need to be carefully managed. Contact details should only be accessed for the purposes which have been permitted by the resident or business contact. We believe that a similar method should be used to that which has been implemented to manage use of the contact details provided during the road show events. For that process a senior Officer, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, manages access to the data.

6. Conclusion

We believe that Redditch Borough Council must ensure that the methods it uses to inform, engage and consult with residents are fit for purpose both for the present and for the future. We have reached the conclusion that alternative mechanisms would enable the Council, together with the Council's partner organisations, to more effectively interact with residents than the Neighbourhood

Groups. Indeed, we believe that the alternative arrangements we have proposed will be more cost effective and widely appreciated by a more diverse section of the local community.

7. **Background Papers**

The Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Report. (A comprehensive Bibliography of the sources that were scrutinised during the course of the review have been provided in this document).

8. **Consultation**

There has been extensive consultation with representatives of external bodies and with the public. (For further information about the consultation that took place as part of this review please refer to pp 24-27 of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group Final Report).

9. **Author of Report**

The authors of this report are the Chair of the Neighbourhood Groups Task and Finish Group, Councillor Kath Banks, and Councillors Enderby, Pearce and Thomas. Further information about this report can be obtained from Jess Bayley, (Overview and Scrutiny Support Officer) who can be contacted on extension 3268 or e.mail: jess.bayley@redditchbc.gov.uk .