

REINVIGORATION OF AREA PARTNERSHIPS

Report by Director - Resilient Communities

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

14 December 2023

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report gives details of work which has been undertaken on reinvigorating the Area Partnerships and proposes some further work be undertaken on a way forward.**
- 1.2 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 was created to strengthen community empowerment, engagement and participation, and how this can be supported and embedded within communities. Scottish Borders Council welcomed the introduction of the Act and the ethos behind it, anticipating that it would provide a strong legislative basis which could be built on to achieve the Council's vision of stronger, empowered and sustainable communities able to participate in public decision making and shaping their communities.
- 1.3 In response to the Act, and taking steps to achieve its vision, the Council at its meeting on 2 November 2017, reshaped Area Partnerships with part of their remit being to inform the development of Locality Plans by involving communities in establishing a shared understanding of need in the area; the outcomes and priorities for the area; and the proposed outcomes to be achieved. This saw the constitution, remit and focus changed to one of community engagement and involvement with a view to increasing public participation. These changes brought greater emphasis on community empowerment, participatory budgeting, and locality planning.
- 1.4 Following a Fit for 2024 update report to Council in June 2019 it was identified that more needed to be done to achieve the Council's vision and, the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) was commissioned, in July 2019, to consult with individuals, groups and communities to identify how they could become more involved in Area Partnerships and decision making. Further work took place in 2021, delayed due to the pandemic, to seek views on the changes proposed by Area Partnership Working Groups, established following SCDC's work.
- 1.5 There has been significant progress in relation to the development of Area Partnerships, both with the involvement of local communities and also by the investment made by the Council in 2021 to increase community

capacity building. However, while there has been progress, we are yet to make significant steps of achieving the Council's vision of meaningful and increased community participation at Area Partnership meetings. Meetings still tend to feel formal and Council led, which may be perpetuated by the fact that Area Partnerships are committees of Council.

- 1.6 There are a wide variety of arrangements across Scotland, and many other local authorities, in a similar way to Scottish Borders Council, have used organisations such as SCDC to carry out discussions with communities in order to develop action plans for specific areas. In particular, East Lothian is seen as an exemplar of community led Area Partnerships.
- 1.7 The Council has recently completed a further series of community conversations, to gain an understanding of what communities' concerns and priorities are and what they would like the Council to do. Along with the work on place making and *Community Planning locality plans*, it seems incumbent to revisit the role and membership of Area Partnerships. This could include considering removing Area Partnerships as formal committees of Council and establishing them instead as unincorporated bodies, creating real opportunities to create local community partnerships, owned by the community rather than the Council. In this respect, Area Partnerships could be chaired by members of the community, with SBC Elected Members as attendees.
- 1.8 It is proposed that, building on the engagement carried out by SCDC, the public consultation and what is working well elsewhere, officers explore further a model whereby Area Partnerships are moved out-with the Council's Scheme of Administration to become unincorporated bodies – becoming community led with membership decided by the community - and linked more closely with the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Further work is also needed on the management of any funds allocated to such bodies by the Council to ensure that this complies with the criteria from "Following the Public Pound". It is anticipated that the Council will still provide support to these bodies to the current level as it does just now for Area Partnerships.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 I recommend that Scottish Borders Council agrees:-

- (a) to note the work undertaken so far in terms of reinvigorating Area Partnerships; and**
- (b) to request the Director – Resilient Communities, following a further engagement with Area Partnerships, brings a further report to Council in due course on a future model for Area Partnerships, taking account of the following points:**
 - (i) removing Area Partnerships from the Council's Scheme of Administration and making their membership more community led;**

- (ii) establishing direct links between Area Partnerships and the Community Planning Partnership; and**
- (iii) ensuring the management of any Council allocated funds to Area Partnerships takes account of the criteria within "Following the Public Pound".**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Area Partnerships have existed since January 2018, when they were re-shaped from Locality Committees which included reflecting new duties under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Scottish Borders Council welcomed the introduction of the Act and the ethos behind it, anticipating that it would provide a strong legislative basis which could be built on to achieve the Council's vision of stronger, empowered and sustainable communities able to participate in public decision making and shaping their communities.
- 3.2 The constitution, remit and focus of Area Partnerships became one of community engagement and involvement. This brought greater emphasis on community empowerment, participatory budgeting, and locality planning – not just for the Council, but for other public authorities/services – with their main aim being the formation of a community engagement platform to develop priorities and outcomes for each area. It was anticipated that they would act as a community consultation body, not just for the Council but other service providers/community planning partners in the area and become a strong voice.
- 3.3 Following a Fit for 2024 update report to Council in June 2019, Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) was commissioned, in July 2019, to consult with individuals, groups and communities to identify how they could become more involved in Area Partnerships and decision making.
- 3.4 A total of 199 individuals responded to the SCDC consultation. Of these, 124 responded to a survey, 59 took part in focus groups, nine participated in one-to-one stakeholder interviews and ten Elected Members attended a seminar.
- 3.5 Following the receipt of SCDC's report, immediate changes were made to begin to build the new Area Partnership model which included community involvement in agenda setting; the promotion of various aspects of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; and create community led Assessment Panels that would make recommendations in relation to community funding (Neighbourhood Support Fund) to their respective Area Partnership for decision making.
- 3.6 Each Area Partnership established a Working Group and these Groups were tasked with reviewing the findings of the SCDC report regarding the future model for Area Partnerships and to make recommendations for public consultation within each area.

4 AREA PARTNERSHIP WORKING GROUPS' SURVEYS 2021

- 4.1 An online consultation took place from 26 May to 1 August 2021. This sought views on the changes proposed by the Area Partnerships Working Groups.
- 4.2 A total of 34 responses were received. While, at 34 the number of responses was very low and not statistically significant, they were informative and gave an indication of the level of support for the

recommendations in each locality. The survey questions varied in each area, reflecting the discussions in each of the Working Groups. The largest number of responses was from individuals, followed by Community Councils.

- 4.3 On the whole, the majority of respondents were unsure whether the Area Partnerships should remain Council committees. In addition to asking about legal governance, the survey went on to ask a range of questions about remit, structure and operational matters for each of the Area Partnerships. There was in general an appetite for change with the meetings having a greater focus on place making and Locality Plans. There was support for forming sub-groups and/or holding smaller, more focussed meetings.
- 4.4 Since the survey was undertaken, community led Assessment Panels have been established in all localities. Place Making Working Groups are also operational in all localities and are working very effectively.

5 CURRENT POSITION

- 5.1 There has been significant progress in relation to the development of Area Partnerships, both with the involvement of local communities and also by the investment made by the Council in 2021 to increase community capacity building. The latter had been identified as a key requirement to provide support to all our communities to enable them to play a central role in Area Partnerships.
- 5.2 In this respect, nine community capacity building officers were appointed:
 - 5 x Community Engagement Officers
 - 1 x Greenspace Programme Officer
 - 2 x Place Making & Regeneration Officers
 - 1 x Climate Change Officer

The role of these Officers is to strengthen the skills, abilities and confidence of people and community groups to take effective action and play a key part in relation to the development of communities across the Borders. Over the past two years, we have seen increased engagement and positive outcomes, with a significant number of community projects supported in both capacity building and maximising funding opportunities.

- 5.3 The Community Engagement Officers are responsible for working with communities to develop Area Partnerships to ensure that they reflect priorities within each area. However, while there has been progress, we are yet to see a significant increase in the number of community organisations and the wider public attending Area Partnership meetings. Meetings still tend to feel formal and very led by the Council. This is perhaps perpetuated by the fact that Area Partnerships are committees of Council.
- 5.4 As the community empowerment agenda progresses at both national and local government, level it is essential that there is an effective mechanism in place for communities to engage with the local authority and other community planning partners. Area Partnerships have a vital role to play in the Council's operating model, currently being developed, which will have a

citizen-centric approach at its foundation. They will be core to active engagement with our communities, incorporating their input in policy making, service design and evaluation processes and achieving the Council's vision of stronger, empowered and sustainable communities able to participate in public decision making and shaping their communities. Similarly, the Scottish Government's Community Wealth Building approach puts people at the centre of a society that is thriving across economically, socially and environmentally. It is clear from Place Making that there is a desire in communities to shape their towns and villages through rethinking and reinventing their local areas. With 58 of 69 community council areas in the Borders developing action plans Area Partnerships have the opportunity to harness that willingness and enthusiasm and provide channels for wider community participation.

6 AREA PARTNERSHIPS AS COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL

6.1 Area Partnerships are currently committees of the Council and, as such, their membership and functions are set out in the Scheme of Administration. The core membership comprises:

- All SBC Councillors for the locality
- One representative from each of 4 different Community Councils as non-voting members (*Note: In practice, all Community Councils are invited to attend, which ranges from 8 in Teviot & Liddesdale, to 21 in Berwickshire*)
- Any other non-voting members appointed by the Area Partnership up to a total core membership maximum of 20.

6.2 Invitations to attend and participate as non-voting members in meetings can also be extended to additional members which include representatives from the CPP partners (NHS Borders, Police Scotland, Scottish Fire & Rescue, SOSE, Live Borders, RSLs, Borders College, H&SC Integration Board, etc.), a representative from any other community group or local body as appropriate, and a representative from any other community of interest group. The Chair and Vice-Chair of each Area Partnership is an Elected Member.

6.3 The functions referred to each Area Partnership are:

1. Champion/lead the preparation and publication of a Locality Plan for the area, while taking account of the Scottish Borders Community Plan.
2. Inform the Locality Plan, by involving local communities in establishing:
 - (a) a shared understanding of need in the area;
 - (b) the outcomes and priorities for the area;
 - (c) the proposed improvement(s) to be achieved.
3. Approve the Locality Plan and recommend final approval by the Community Planning Strategic Board.

- *4. Review and monitor the progress of the Locality Plan, including approval of an annual progress report for publication, and receive progress and performance reports on local services, making recommendations to the relevant body/committee, as appropriate.
- *5. Where there is a local dimension to a Borders-wide plan, or a specific locality plan, act as a community consultation body.
- 6. Consider applications for financial assistance from the Council from the Community Fund¹ up to the value of £10,000 or in exceptional cases £30,000 *Note: The decisions on the Fund applications at Area Partnerships shall be by consensus (i.e. widespread agreement) and where consensus is not possible, then only SBC Elected Members will make the final decision. The Chair of the Area Partnership shall have a casting vote if required should there be an even split amongst SBC Elected Members.*
- 7. The distribution of Pay Parking Income (where available).
Note: Only SBC Elected Members have decision making powers on the above Fund.
- 8. Promote and support the Localities Bid Fund², and encourage communities to get involved and participate.
- 9. Decide whether the funding for each Area Locality Bid Fund is to be allocated in a particular way (e.g. urban/rural split); if any themes are being applied to a particular release of funding; if there is to be any cap on the amount of grant for any project and whether a cash contribution will be required.

*Those functions above marked with * are referred to the Area Partnerships for consideration and recommendation only and must receive approval of the relevant other Council committee.*

7 ARRANGEMENTS ELSEWHERE IN SCOTLAND

- 7.1 There are a wide variety of arrangements across Scotland, and many other local authorities, in a similar way to Scottish Borders Council, have used organisations such as SCDC to carry out discussions with communities in order to develop action plans for specific areas. In particular, East Lothian is seen as an exemplar of community led Area Partnerships.
- 7.2 Within East Lothian, there are six Area Partnerships which represent the local voice of community planning. Membership of these Partnerships varies between areas, but generally includes Community Councillors; tenants & residents' groups; pupil & parent council representatives; local community groups; and Elected Members. The Chair and Vice Chair are members of the local community and are elected at an AGM. Decisions are made on a consensus basis where possible.
- 7.3 Each Area Partnership has an Area Plan which serve as Community Planning Partnership's Locality Plans required under the Community Empowerment

¹ Now known as the Neighbourhood Support Fund.

² The Localities Bid Fund took place in two rounds between 2017 and 2019.

(Scotland) Act 2015. The Plans provide a profile of the main features of the local area and priorities for improvement. The Area Plan is used to help focus each Partnership's allocated budget on the priorities identified by local people. The total devolved budget for each Area Partnership in 2022/23 is £200k (Musselburgh £250k). Of that funding, £50k is for general projects in the area; £50k of the Roads service budget for the area; and £100k of time equivalent of the Amenity Services budget for the area.

- 7.4 The Area Partnerships are not committees of East Lothian Council and are regulated by standing orders that set out their governance arrangements. Support for each Area Partnership is provided East Lothian Council.
- 7.5 On the whole, the responsibilities of the Area Partnerships in East Lothian do not vary greatly from those in the Scottish Borders with the distribution of Pay Parking Income being the only substantive difference.

8 FUNDING

- 8.1 As previously set out, community led Assessment Panels were established in the Borders following the review undertaken by SCDC on behalf of the Council. The role of the Panels is to assess made applications to the Neighbourhood Support Fund and present recommendations for funding. The decision whether to agree recommendations is made, generally by consensus, by the Area Partnership.
- 8.2 The example of Area Partnerships in East Lothian, as set out above, illustrates that they do not need to be Council committees in order to allocate funding to community-based groups. The East Lothian experience sets out how decision making could be devolved to, and made by, community led Area Partnerships.
- 8.3 Were the Area Partnerships to be removed from the Council's Scheme of Administration it would be essential that robust processes, evaluation and reporting mechanisms were put in place to ensure that Following the Public Pound requirements continued to be met. These will be addressed in a further report to Council.
- 8.4 It is not anticipated that there would be large scale changes required to the role and remit of Area Partnerships in the Borders should their governance arrangements change.

9 OPPORTUNITIES

- 9.1 The Council has recently completed a further series of community conversations, to gain an understanding of what communities' concerns and priorities are and what they would like the Council to do. Along with the work on place making and Community Planning locality plans, it seems incumbent to revisit the role and membership of Area Partnerships. This could include considering removing Area Partnerships as formal committees of Council and establishing them instead as unincorporated bodies, creating real opportunities to create local community partnerships, owned by the community rather than the Council. In this respect, Area Partnerships could be chaired by members of the community, with SBC Elected Members attendees.

- 9.2 Consideration could also be given to aligning Area Partnerships with the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Although community planning functions, in relation to the Locality Plans, are referred to Area Partnerships, there is currently no representation or reporting link to the CPP. This is at odds with many parts of Scotland where area/locality-based community planning is part of the CPP's governance structure. The Scottish Borders CPP is currently reviewing its governance arrangements and in August 2022, Scottish Borders Council agreed in principle that the CPP could become an unincorporated body, removed from the Council's Scheme of Administration.
- 9.3 By moving away from more formal association with the Council decision making structure, while ensuring there were still checks and balances in place for any Council funding, it is anticipated that that there could be a number of additional benefits:
- Strengthening the existing framework for community engagement, empowerment and development both within the Council and for the Scottish Borders as a whole;
 - Placing the Council in a stronger position in assisting communities to maximise opportunities provided by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015;
 - Ensuring the Council provides strong leadership while encouraging the development of the community and voluntary sectors in the Scottish Borders;
 - Further developing the capacity building investment of the Council to support communities;
 - Providing a robust approach for involvement of partners within the Scottish Borders Community Planning Partnership at the centre of each locality;
 - Providing the flexibility for each Area Partnership to function in a way that best suits the locality. Although it also recognised that having five potentially different operating models could pose a risk as they could be quite diverse across the area; and
 - Ensuring there were locally based, community led sounding boards/ points of reference for public engagement by the Council and other local bodies.
- 9.4 It is proposed that, building on the engagement carried out by SCDC, the public consultation and what is working well elsewhere, officers explore further a model whereby Area Partnerships are moved out-with the Council's Scheme of Administration to become unincorporated bodies – becoming community led with membership decided by the community - and linked more closely with the CPP. Further work is also needed on the management of any funds allocated to such bodies by the Council to ensure that this complies with the criteria from "Following the Public Pound". It is anticipated that the Council will still provide support to these bodies to the current level as it does just now for Area Partnerships.

9.5 Officers will continue to explore the use of digital platforms and technological solutions to best support Area Partnerships in each locality.

10 RISKS

10.1 As well as the opportunities arising from removing Area Partnerships from the Council committee structure there are also risks that should be considered prior to moving forward.

10.2 While it is anticipated that changing from an Elected Member to a community representative, in the role of Chair, would bring a stronger community dimension and feel to meetings it is important that the right person is in place. The skill required to successfully chair a meeting covering topics as diverse as those discussed at Area Partners should not be underestimated.

10.3 A significant amount of officer time could be required to build the capacity of individuals stepping into the roles of Chair and/or Vice Chair. The extent to which the Chair works with council Officers may vary depending on their skill set but also willingness to do so. Although operating as community led committees, it would still be important to work closely with Officers to ensure that the correct protocols were followed. There could be a potential opportunity for a Chair to use their position to further their own priorities and beliefs. Suitable measures would be explored and put in place to reduce the likelihood of this happening whilst still allowing community leadership.

10.4 The role and remit of the Area Partnerships would need to be carefully considered. While council Officers would assist the Partnerships and their membership with the identified responsibilities, the onus to take work forward would be on each Area Partnership. The ability to do this successfully may be impacted by the willingness and capacity of members.

10.5 It should be stressed that the Area Partnerships would be independent bodies and while Officers would be available to support the Partnerships through advice and discussion, they would not be able to instruct how things were carried out e.g., following meeting standing orders.

10.6 It is acknowledged that time would be required for any changes to be in. However, to ensure that any changes were positive ones there would be a watching brief put in place and a full review, of any changes agreed, after two years of operation.

11 FURTHER CONSULTATION

11.1 Although consultation has previously been undertaken it is proposed that this is built on through further discussions with the Area Partnerships, community based organisations, community planning partners and the wider public. It will be important to play back previous consultation feedback to Area Partnership members to ascertain if the views remain valid.

12 IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Financial

There are no costs attached to any of the recommendations contained in this report.

12.2 Risk and Mitigations

There is a reputational risk to the Council that, having carried out work previously on reinvigorating Area Partnerships, increasing community engagement and empowerment, and surveying the public, nothing more is done and the public will feel that the Council is not listening to their views and taking forward their priorities. Further work is needed on potential governance and financial management structures to ensure that neither the Council nor any member of a future Area Partnership is put at risk. A watching brief would be in place and changes fully reviewed after two years

12.3 Integrated Impact Assessment

A Stage 1 Integrated Impact Assessment has been carried out and a full IIA is not required at this stage. A further assessment will be carried out for the next report to Council on any governance changes proposed to Area Partnerships to ensure that there is no discrimination.

12.4 Sustainable Development Goals

By encouraging greater community involvement, Area Partnerships will be able to contribute to UN Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages), UN Goal 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all), UN Goal 9 (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation), UN Goal 11 (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable), UN Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts) and UN Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels).

12.5 Climate Change

Area Partnerships can play their part in considering local needs for energy, sustainable public transport, and infrastructure & land use; raising awareness of climate change/net zero at local level.

12.6 Rural Proofing

Area Partnerships cover all areas across the Scottish Borders.

12.7 Data Protection Impact Statement

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

12.8 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

No changes are required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals in this report.

13 CONSULTATION

13.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, and the Director (People Performance & Change), are being consulted and any comments received will be reported back at the meeting.

Approved by

Jenni Craig

Director – Resilient Communities

Author(s)

Name	Designation and Contact Number
Jenny Wilkinson	Clerk to the Council
Clare Malster	Participation Officer, Tel: 01835 826626

Background Papers: Nil

Previous Minute Reference: Scottish Borders Council, 26 June 2019

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Clare Malster can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at Clare Malster, Participation Officer, Council HQ, Newtown St Boswells, Melrose, TD8 0SA. Tel: 01835 826626 Email: cmalster@scotborders.gov.uk