

## **Strategic Leadership**

- 1. Can you explain the role of the area action partnerships in each of the 14 communities? How will they operate with the Sustainable Community Strategy/LAA? Are they to be the main delivery vehicle for the LAA and if so what is their relationship with the County Durham Economic Partnership; County Durham Children's Trust; Neighbourhoods Partnership and Health and Well-Being Partnership?**

## **Role**

1.1 The principal role of the area action partnerships is to provide 'local choice and local voice' at natural community level in the County.

1.2 Based on the 14 or so main settlements and rural areas of the County, the partnerships will perform an important 'brokerage' role between the natural communities and their constituent neighbourhoods, and the public services which shape local quality of life and meet communities' service needs.

1.3 Area action partnerships build upon the experience of the two neighbourhood management pathfinders in the County, which have taught us a great deal about the value of local lobbying, capacity building and steering mainstream investment towards local priority areas. The brokerage role - enhancing community capacity and confidence, articulating local needs and joining up local service delivery - represents a new way of working for local government, which will genuinely complement the work of mainstream services in the County. Whilst it would not be economically affordable to deploy neighbourhood management models in a meaningful way on a universal basis across the County (each pathfinder currently costs £250,000 per year to run), the new unitary council would be able to replicate the principles and practices of neighbourhood management and apply them on a universal basis through the area action partnerships (see pages 28 to 36 and 84 to 86).

## **Relationship with LAA**

1.4 To enable partnerships to focus on local brokerage, we do not envisage that they or the associated area coordinators, would play a major role in managing service budgets or taking responsibility for delivering mainstream Local Area Agreement targets.

1.5 Decisions around service commissioning would sit with service partners and we would not expect other partner organisations to alter their

commissioning arrangements to match the structure of 14 or so areas, unless it suited their purposes. (Appendix 1 below)

1.6 Instead, each area action partnership would have a minimum area budget of £150,000 to invest in 'added value' services, over and above the basic service quality standards in the County or LAA. This funding would be directed towards meeting local priorities, which could be agreed through 'mini-LAAs' or area charters.

1.7 The model therefore provides a variety of opportunities for local problem solving and self-determination; with frontline ward councillors having a clear mandate to solve local problems quickly and effectively using their £50,000 neighbourhood budget. Failing that the member of the public, in person or through their councillor, can take an active part in the area action partnership's prioritisation process. As a tool of last resort, the councillor could initiate a 'community call for action' to challenge the unitary council to consider and respond to neighbourhood issues (see Appendix 2).

1.8 Area action partnerships would also play a key role in bringing together participative and representational interests at the local level. Membership would therefore be open and inclusive and would vary between different parts of the County, reflecting the local strengths and circumstances of each area. In Newton Aycliffe, for example, the strong town council would be a key player in the area action partnership. Elsewhere, in Chester-le-Street for example where the main urban area is not parished, community and voluntary sector organisations would have a much stronger role, potentially creating a more diverse membership. Whatever the composition of the area partnerships, there will be a need to balance the contributions of different local stakeholders in the decision making process. (see pages 32, and 84 to 86).

## **Neighbourhood Engagement**

### **2. Paragraph 5.29 of your proposal stresses the importance of developing partnership arrangements that achieve effective community engagement. How will you develop such arrangements?**

2.1 Effective community engagement would be built into the proposed partnership arrangements and the working practices of the new unitary council in a number of ways.

### **Build upon and learn from existing arrangements**

2.2 County Durham has a strong tradition of community-based organisations which engage and involve local people. Examples include community empowerment networks, residents associations, community associations, community partnerships, neighbourhood management schemes and town &

parish councils. We have many dedicated people involved in strong and flourishing community organisations and partnerships across the County, in places such as Trimdon, Coundon, Craghead, Tow Law, Sacriston, West Rainton, Wheatley Hill, Cornforth and Annfield Plain.

2.3 What the County has lacked in the past is a consistent approach to maximising the impact and potential of this local 'social capital'.

2.4 As explained in paragraph 5.32, the new unitary council would work with the community and voluntary sectors to maintain current good practice and share best practice across the County.

2.5 In developing the new partnership arrangements and a consistent infrastructure of area action partnerships across the County, we would look to ensure that local community organisations are supported to actively involve local people in a sustainable way which can feed into the new structural arrangements.

2.6 The proposed area coordinator posts would play a pivotal role in this. Working to community development principles, they would help to develop and maintain positive and productive community relations across the County.

2.7 A key point here is the approach we suggest should be taken with the existing local strategic partnerships. Given the success of some local strategic partnerships in engaging local community organisations, the unitary council should certainly avoid 'throwing the baby out with the bath water' in the transition from local strategic partnerships to area action partnerships. To differing degrees, local strategic partnerships have developed expertise in performance management, financial investment and community engagement which the County can ill-afford to lose. We therefore suggest a managed period of transition; in which the new authority will work closely with current LSP coordinators to bring about the shift in role, focus and purpose of the new area action partnerships. This could involve piloting the transition in one area first before rolling the model out across the county. LSP coordinator contracts would be safeguarded during this period so that their expertise, networks and influence can be brought to bear in establishing the new area action partnerships in an atmosphere of trust and progression.

### **More influential frontline councillors**

2.8 Local people will also be engaged more effectively in partnership arrangements and local community affairs by the enhanced role played by elected Members, as high profile and influential frontline ward councillors.

2.9 Councillors will be supported by the area coordinators to engage local people and perform their local community leadership role and where appropriate could use their £50,000 neighbourhood budget to support local engagement projects.

## **Realise the potential of multi-agency approaches to community engagement**

2.10 Currently, a number of local organisations have started to look beyond traditional consultation to more participatory and inclusive approaches to community engagement. With the coterminous boundaries and congruent relationships which would exist between a countywide unitary council and the other principal public services organisations in the County, we could realise the potential to develop multi-agency approaches to community engagement, spreading the principles and practices across a broader range of agencies. This would help to present a unified public services interface to the public and local communities and also enable public sector organisations to benefit from each other's expertise or special relationship with particular sections of the community.

## **Empower local communities to manage and coordinate their own affairs**

2.11 In the short term, the new unitary council would take the lead in overseeing the development of area action partnerships across the County. However in the longer term, it is conceivable that in certain parts of the county where community-led regeneration is more developed, that area action partnerships could develop into local community trusts, capable of securing alternative sources of funding and providing more local community control. The new unitary council would facilitate this by transferring budgets, assets and area coordination staff to the trusts and varying its area regulatory decision-making arrangements if required, to make way for greater community control.

## **Local influence**

- 3. Can you explain how, through the structural arrangements that you are putting in place, local people will influence the decisions of the executive and the Sustainable Community Strategy?**

## **The Executive**

3.1 The unitary council would consult area action partnerships on all aspects of its policy framework and related key decisions. Through this mechanism, local people would be enabled to comment upon and influence Executive policies and decisions, and positively encouraged to do so through the locally relevant presentation and consultation afforded by area action partnerships.

3.2 In addition, within our submission, we highlight our interest in the potential for the new unitary council to be led by a directly elected Cabinet. This would help to develop a more influential relationship between the electorate and the Executive. As stated in para 6.11, we are keen to explore with Government

whether this leadership model could be developed in such a way that it would work in the circumstances of County Durham, potentially overcoming some of the concerns expressed by local politicians during the development of our submission.

### **Sustainable Community Strategy**

3.3 The area action partnerships will be established as the vocal fora for representing the views of local areas and will be key consultation mechanisms for all partners seeking local views. The unitary council will work to secure partner recognition of area action partnerships and encourage partner organisations to consult and engage area action partnerships in their key plans and decisions. As 'readymade' fora, the partnerships could act as the community engagement mechanisms for the overall Sustainable Community Strategy and other LAA blocks, reconciling strategic priorities with local community concerns and preferences.

### **Links between neighbourhoods, area action partnerships and the County Strategic Partnership:**

3.4 Through representation, there would be a consistent thread between local neighbourhoods, area action partnerships and the County Strategic Partnership to ensure that the interests of areas are able to affect the Sustainable Community Strategy and strategic decisions.

3.5 In addition, the third sector and town & parish councils would be represented independently on the Strategic Partnership through 'strategic' umbrella bodies such as One Voice network and the County Durham Association of Local Councils.

3.6 Similarly, there would be a consistent thread in planning documentation, throughout the model. Town and parish plans will be taken into account in local regulatory decision-making, with area action partnerships and the new unitary formally having regard for them in their decision making processes. Area action partnerships will be encouraged to work with communities to shape area plans, and define targets for 'added value' improvements through 'mini-LAAs'. Whilst area action plans and mini-LAAs would be drafted in the context of the countywide priorities and targets, the Sustainable Community Strategy and the LAA would in turn, be informed by the development of the local area plans.

### **Financial Issues**

**4. The summary table on page 130 of your proposal and the financial framework appear to indicate that there will be a revenue saving of £500k in lead-year 1, which will be used to boost reserves. It is not clear to us, how this saving is being made, especially as the**

**summary table on page 130 appears to show no change in the costs of the county and district councils in that year. We should be grateful, therefore, for an indication of the source of these savings.**

4.1 This saving is from the existing County Council budget for one stop shops. It is detailed in the seventh item on the table on page 125. It was highlighted separately on page 130 to draw attention to the item. The logic is simply that without Unitary Government in County Durham the existing County Council needs to establish one stop shops in all the major centres.

4.2 An annual budget of £0.5m had been identified for this in the County Council's Medium Term Financial Plan. If a single unitary option is pursued then the County Council would not make this investment but instead utilise existing District facilities and staff. The budget allocated in this and future years can then be credited towards the costs of creating the new Council.

**5. Both the summary table and the financial framework agree that in lead-year 2 there will be a net revenue cost of nearly £13 million, which will be met from reserves. Paragraph 8.6 of the proposal, however, appears to indicate that part of that cost will be met from recurring savings, "which would already start to be made". We would be grateful for further details of these savings.**

5.1 The savings are from the budget allocated in the County Council's Medium Term Financial Plan for our existing Access to Services strategy ('one stop shops'). There would be no need to pursue this strategy should our bid be successful as the creation of a new Unitary authority would allow the same outcomes to be realised through the utilisation of District facilities.

5.2 For lead-year 1 and lead-year 2 this would create an annual contribution towards the costs of reorganisation of £0.5m (a total of £1m in recurring savings) which would reduce the amount required from Reserves to meet our costs.

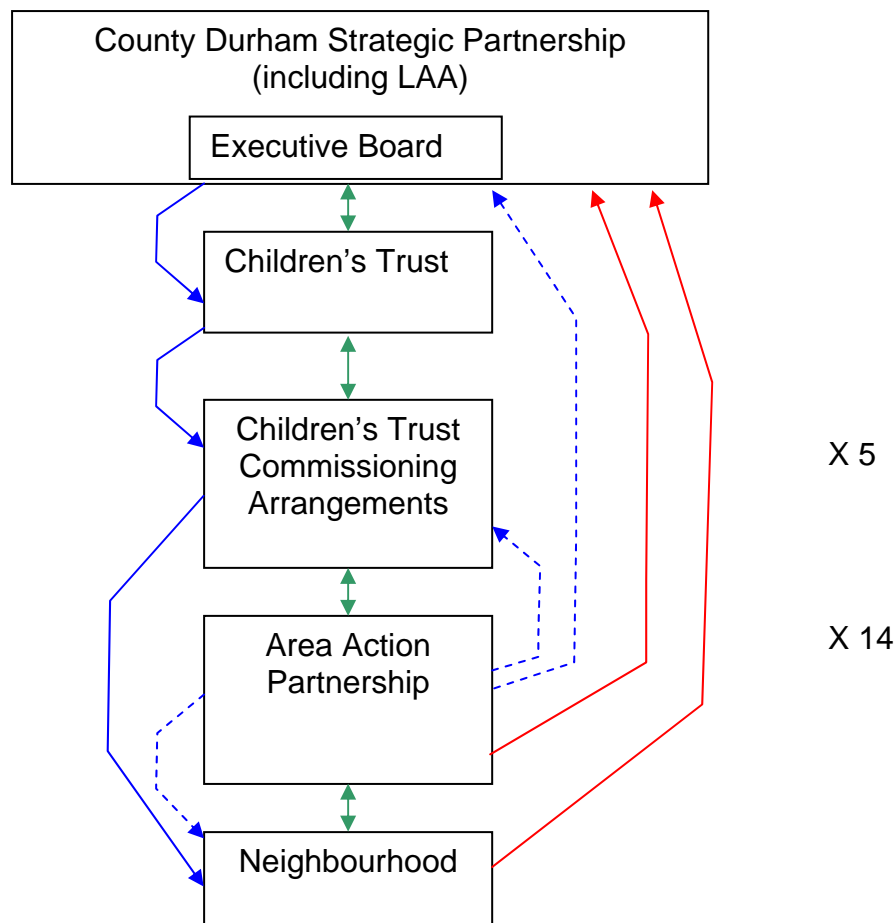
5.3 When we look at the current County Council and District Reserves combined and apply the current Reserves Policy of the County Council to them, even with the need to reduce the level of General Reserves by £12.4m, our Reserves are still sufficient to fall within the Reserves policy.

## Appendix 1 – Inter-relationships between Structures within Model

This diagram exhibits the inter-relationships between parts of the governance model; in this case specifically for the Children and Young People’s Trust, for funding / targets within the LAA. The fundamental relationships within the model are replicable however, for the remaining three LAA/partnership blocks:

- the County Durham Economic Partnership (existing);
- the County Durham Neighbourhoods Partnership (proposed); and
- the County Durham Health and Well-being Partnership.

- Mainstream Service commissioning
- - -→ Local ‘Added Value’ Service commissioning
- Engagement
- Plans / Decisions informed by



## **Appendix 2 – Service Standards and the Route for Issue Resolution**

This diagram exhibits, from the perspective of a member of the public, the options available as they seek to either resolve specific service issues or voice views more generally about the future of a community.

Over and above countywide minimum service standards, (supported by mainstream budgets) the LAA would be the mechanism through which partners agree targets for priority improvements.

- Service query re local environmental issue
- Community Call for Action
- Suggestion about project(s) to improve area

