

## AGENDA ITEM NO. 6

**REPORT TO:** Halton Strategic Partnership Board

**DATE:** 13 July 2005

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Local Authority Chief Executive

**SUBJECT:** Neighbourhood issues

### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform the Board of the Government's proposals for citizen engagement at the neighbourhood level.

### 2. RECOMMENDATION: That the Board agree that in light of the neighbourhood elements in recent Government documents, and the current focus on neighbourhoods locally, the Halton Partnership Team co-ordinate a review of current practice in Halton.

### 3. BACKGROUND

In January 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published its five-year plan, 'People, Places, and Prosperity'. The plan is part of the 'local:vision' process, a 10-year plan for the development of local government.

One of the issues the Government aims to tackle through these is the re-engagement of citizens with our democratic institutions. Research shows that while turnout at elections is falling, the general public remains interested in improving public services and wants to be directly involved in doing so.

In the last few years, Government reports have repeatedly made the case that involving and engaging citizens has clear benefits. For example, the National Audit Office's evaluation of the Single Community Programme (through which the Community Empowerment Network is funded) found that:

"Community participation is vital in ensuring value for money in public services. Services designed and delivered without community input risk wasting public money because they will be unused or underused if they are not what people need."  
(National Audit Office, October 2004)

### 4. RECENT GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS

The Government has published a consultation document, 'Why neighbourhoods matter', which sets out how they see the community engagement agenda developing during the next few years.

There are two main ideas from the document that will affect how the Board and partners (especially Halton Borough Council) carry out community engagement activity:

- the establishment of a 'neighbourhoods charter'
- the setting of five key principles for neighbourhood arrangements

Details of both are attached to this report.

The basic thrust of the Government's ideas is that there should be additional mechanisms put in place for people to influence decision-making in their local area beyond the traditional ones, e.g. electing local councillors.

The mechanisms used will differ from area to area but will always fit within a national framework and be at the level that provides the most appropriate input from local people and is the most efficient way of doing so.

The importance of linking these mechanisms to traditional ones, especially local councillors is highlighted. The Government does not intend these new mechanisms to replace what is currently in place and works. It believes that they will strengthen existing democratic arrangements by stimulating interest around public services.

Last month, the Government launched its 'Together we can' action plan. The plan aims to lead to a significant shift in the balance of power between local communities and central government and sets out the Government's commitment for citizens, communities, and public bodies to work together to set and achieve common goals.

It outlines the following key policy areas:

- citizens and democracy
- regeneration and cohesion
- safety and justice
- health and sustainability

It forms part of the Government's plans to listen to local people more and involve them in decision making. Twelve Government departments are committed to the approach and will be carrying out actions from the plan, led by the Home Office.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

There is already a good deal of focus of activity around the neighbourhoods of Halton:

- Area Forums and Participation and Delivery meetings provide the opportunity for a dialogue between local residents and key decision makers on issues of concern at a neighbourhood level – these meetings are now aligned to allow a more efficient process.
- large elements of service delivery are neighbourhood based, e.g. housing management, environmental services, policing, facilities such as Children's Centres, and community development.

The elements of local dialogue and local delivery are well connected through each area having lead officers. This adds to the existing strength of local service management. Given an increased focus on neighbourhood governance and delivery of services, it may be worthwhile to examine the neighbourhood focus of the Partnership's work. This would complement the work agreed at the May meeting to look at data and statistics at a neighbourhood level.

#### **ATTACHED DOCUMENTS**

A headline illustration of a neighbourhoods charter

Five key principles for neighbourhood arrangements

## A HEADLINE ILLUSTRATION OF A CHARTER

### THE NEIGHBOURHOODS CHARTER

1. We recognise that people should expect:
  - Their neighbourhood to be clean and safe
  - To live in a good quality local environment
  - To receive in their neighbourhood good quality local services
2. We expect that people should recognise and respect:
  - The diverse views and culture of other people in the neighbourhood
3. We therefore give neighbourhoods the ability:
  - To establish neighbourhood bodies to work in conjunction with the council
  - To require co-operation by local service providers
  - To take responsibility for/ownership of local assets where appropriate
  - To “trigger” action by service providers
  - To agree neighbourhood contracts with service providers
  - To request the introduction of model byelaws in appropriate circumstances
  - To levy fixed penalty notices and apply for ASBOs when authorised to do so
  - To raise additional funds in certain circumstances
  - To be responsible for their own neighbourhood fund or budget where this is delegated to them
  - To influence others’ budgets

Taken from ‘Why neighbourhoods matter’, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, January 2005

## **Five key principles for neighbourhood arrangements**

There are five guiding principles to which we must work when establishing arrangements for neighbourhood engagement:

- 1) All councils, in partnership with other service providers, should provide opportunities and support for neighbourhood engagement through appropriate arrangements so that they can respond to the needs and priorities of neighbourhood communities.
- 2) Neighbourhood arrangements must be capable of making a real difference to the everyday lives of citizens.
- 3) The nature of neighbourhood arrangements must be appropriate to local circumstances, be flexible to changing circumstances over time and be responsive to the needs and diversity of the community and its organisations.
- 4) Neighbourhood arrangements must be consistent with local representative democracy which gives legitimacy to governmental institutions, and places elected councillors as the leading advocates for their communities, and with the requirements of local democratic accountability.
- 5) Neighbourhood arrangements must be balanced with the demands of efficiency and proportionality.

Taken from 'Why neighbourhoods matter', Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, January 2005