

AGENDA ITEM NO. 4

REPORT TO: Halton Strategic Partnership Board
DATE: 13 July 2005
REPORTING OFFICER: Local Authority Chief Executive
SUBJECT: Community Strategy Priorities Process

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The overall policy direction for the Borough is captured in the Community Strategy. This is structured around the five agreed priorities. The purpose of this report is to seek a view on whether the new strategy documents should continue to follow this framework.

2. RECOMMENDATION: The Board is recommended to offer a view on a revised structure for the priorities

3. BACKGROUND

The Partnership has adopted a strategic planning framework, the 'Priorities Process', which has been held up as a model of good practice by central Government. The current Community Strategy expires on 31 March 2006. The process to refresh, reinvigorate and refocus the strategic direction of the Partnership is underway, and going well. A partnership event will take place immediately following the Board meeting to reflect on this and start to frame the new strategy. A key consideration is structure.

The strategy and structure of the Partnership is currently based on five agreed priorities:

- Health
- Urban renewal
- Life chances and employment
- Wealth and equality
- Safe and attractive neighbourhoods

Whilst the State of the Borough report clearly shows that the issues and challenges that Halton faces are clearly established, the scale and nature of the response may change. One crucial element of the final Community Strategy will be the articulation of the priorities. This allows us to make sense of the challenges and frame our response. It is timely to ask the question of how relevant are the five priorities as currently stated.

4. OPTIONS

The obvious option is to continue with the five current themes. They have the advantage of being well established, mirroring current arrangements, and fitting with the agreed principle that consistency and perseverance are cornerstones of the Halton approach. However, they do not easily respond to some of the wider concerns and pressures set out below. There are other options that could be considered.

One of the foundations of our approach came from the National Strategy on Neighbourhood Renewal. That categorised the policies, funding, and targets of regeneration into five themes:

- Employment and economies
- Crime
- Education and skills
- Health
- Housing, environment, and liveability

These cover the same hopes and aspirations encompassed in our priorities and remain valid. These would provide an alternative framework. Further, since the strategy was published central and local government have agreed a set of shared priorities which encapsulate a joint commitment to improving life for local communities. Originally there were seven of these, but they have been condensed into the following four:

- Creating safer and stronger communities
- Promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities
- Improving the lives of children and young people
- Developing sustainable communities through improved housing, transport, environment, and more vibrant economies

There is an indication that for Comprehensive Performance Assessment purposes these could become five, with the needs of older people being separated out from the health priority.

The Government has signalled its intention to use these shared priorities as a vehicle for greater coherence in enacting its policies (i.e. more joined up government). An example of this is in the Local Area Agreements which are currently being piloted as a way of focussing non-mainstream funding (like Neighbourhood Renewal Fund) through local partnerships on specific targeted outcomes within the framework of the shared priorities. Halton expressed interest in being in the next round of Local Area Agreement authorities commencing in April 2006. As reflected elsewhere on the agenda, that bid was not successful. Even so, the Local Area Agreement approach will become operational for Halton from April 2007 and partners need to forward plan for this. For Safer and Stronger Communities an agreement for a mini-Local Area Agreement is already in place.

These are just two alternative examples to the current structure, and there are numerous examples in other districts of approaches to this.

5. ISSUES

There are obvious dangers in accepting wholesale priorities prescribed centrally by Whitehall. The community strategy is about our aspirations for Halton and must reflect local conditions. Similarly, some concerns could arise from articulating priorities which are mixed in definition, for example around a mix of demographic groupings (e.g. children or older people), single thematic issues (e.g. health), or a basket of measures (e.g. sustainable communities).

The question remains how do we best define our priorities in Halton? We have to set our agenda for the next 10 years in such a way that it encourages widespread ownership, makes sense of the challenge, avoids creating silos so that a robust and rounded approach is taken, helps to rationalise the number of partnerships, meetings and overlaps between them, and avoids obvious conflicts within each priority amongst its subsidiary elements. In addition, the number of priorities set must be small enough to be manageable in relation to the challenges, yet broad enough to encompass the richness of activity. This is a difficult task and no perfect solution exists.

A number of issues have emerged in partner discussions in recent months:

- One of the key tasks of the local strategic partnership was to rationalise partnership arrangements in the borough. This is partly about having fewer, fitter partnerships (and meetings), and developing ways of working that take the agenda forward. It is also about having a framework of relationships which helps to join up activities and adds value to a greater process of transformation. There is a sense that more could be done on this.
- There are perceived to be certain tensions between agendas within certain priorities. This can lead to a feeling that particular issues are not being given due prominence.
- Wealth and Equality presents a challenge. Many partners feel that its agenda is fundamental to the success of the partnership. However, some feel it is marginalised and the major decisions that can really make a difference in addressing poverty are made elsewhere. However, Wealth and Equality has been exemplary in its approach to partnership working and its genuine commitment to commissioning new activity.

The corollary to this would be that action on poverty and equalities has to be an explicit commitment in all of the priorities – a cross-cutting theme perhaps. If thought appropriate, we could also define some other cross-cutting themes, underpinning the priorities around social inclusion, diversity, and engagement.

6. PROPOSAL

As a way of generating an initial debate, it has been suggested that Halton should define its community strategy around the four themes of the Local Area Agreement, that is:

- Healthy communities and older people
- Safer and stronger communities
- Children and young people
- Sustainable communities

It is possible that adults and older people could be added to children and young people to avoid creating a sense of division. It is also recognised that these titles are a little opaque. It would be helpful to give them greater clarity and local colour, for example:

- A healthy Halton
- A safer Halton
- Halton's people
- Developing Halton

Partnership arrangements for Local Area Agreement purposes would be needed to develop a strategic approach on these themes and performance manage dedicated special funding.

7. CONCLUSION

The Board is invited to react to this proposal and agree a proposed framework for the priorities. This can then be tested and discussed with a wider cohort of partners. The afternoon session gives an immediate opportunity for this.