

# **Overview and Scrutiny Committee Community Councillor Reference Group**

Report of the Head of Strategy and Innovation

## **Recommended:**

- 1. That a Community Councillor Reference Group comprising members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be established.**
- 2. That six members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be appointed to the Community Councillor Reference Group.**

### **SUMMARY:**

- The report sets out a proposal for the further engagement of members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in supporting the Council's work to support its communities to thrive.
- The proposed community councillor reference group will provide direction and support to the Member and Community Development Group by providing insight from their experiences working as community leaders and facilitators, reflecting on areas of focus for the Council in continuing to develop its approach and support for councillors in their community councillor role and the way in which communities are engaged with.

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek the Committee's approval to establish a community councillor reference group of councillors from the membership of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.2 The reference group will work with the Member and Community Development Group to further develop the Council's community councillor model and its thriving communities work as set out in the Corporate Plan.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The Council has a longstanding track record of its work to empower communities, in particular the importance of enhancing democracy through the work of local councillors and supporting them in their role as community councillors.
- 2.2 Over the last twelve years, this has included work with the LGA Keep it Real programme, contributions to the Councillor commission, unique partnerships with other local authorities such as Kirklees MBC, and more recently our engagement with the New Local Network.

- 2.3 Working at the most local of levels, recognising that one size doesn't fit all, and ensuring that a diversity of voices are heard, have been key principles of the approach. This has been underpinned by opening up access to resources through council funding where there is a proven evidence of community need. The council's community-led approach over the last twelve years has recently been the subject of a podcast produced by New Local which can be accessed via the following link ["Everything we do is driven by our communities": Inside Test Valley's ground-breaking approach to community engagement - New Local](#)
- 2.4 The new Corporate Plan - a place for everyone, supporting our communities to thrive; reinforces the commitment to work with communities across Test Valley at a level which is meaningful to them. The plan sets out how the council will deliver its strategic priorities that have been shaped by local communities ensuring they are relevant and appropriate to local circumstances.
- 2.5 At its meeting in January, Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report highlighting how the council will build upon its community councillor model as part of strengthening the approach to public involvement and engagement. The committee expressed its support for this work and an ongoing willingness to play an active role alongside the Member and Community Development Group where appropriate to do so.
- 2.6 The Member and Community Development Group was first established in 2011 by the Leader of the Council following on from the successes and valuable insight gained as part of the council's involvement in the national Keep it Real pilot. The Group is a cross-party group consisting of group leaders, cabinet members and ward councillors chaired by the Leader. It has played a key role in developing the support and initiatives taken by the council to support the role of the community councillor alongside important developments such as the Councillor Community Grant scheme and the Community Asset Fund.
- 2.7 Following the adoption of the new corporate plan, the Member and Community Development Group has undertaken a review of its work programme which has been designed to continue to support and enhance the role of councillors with a focus on three broad areas, each supported by a number of targeted projects which have been identified through councillor and officer engagement and reflections on the place-based work being undertaken.
- 2.8 The work programme and associated projects are based on three interconnected themes:
- Using the community councillor model to enhance local democracy and deliver actions for communities.
  - Information, communication and measuring impact at a community level.
  - Councillor development.

- 2.9 The work programme includes areas of work to support councillors in their role including the use of local data and information, developing the offer to councillors to be able to access support for community-led planning and reviewing and updating the programme of member development.
- 2.10 Over recent years the composition of the group has changed and is currently made up of a majority of councillors who have appointed roles such as cabinet members and senior members of the opposition. The MCDG reflected on this when considering the views of the wider membership in developing its work programme and agreed that the insights of the broader membership would be helpful in continuing to develop the Council's approach.
- 2.11 The MCDG therefore propose that it would be beneficial to the work being developed to support the community councillor role if a wider group of councillors were engaged in shaping and piloting initiatives. This will be particularly helpful given the focus on developing the support and resources available to councillors at a local level.
- 2.12 With Overview and Scrutiny's policy development role in mind, and that the committee comprises of councillors who in the main are not appointed to other roles, it is proposed that a community councillor reference group comprising councillors from the overview and scrutiny committee is formed.

#### Key Areas of Focus for the Group

- 2.13 The community councillor reference group will work directly with the Member and Community Development Group to test and pilot new areas of work that support councillors in their role working with local communities.
- 2.14 Through this work the group will be able to provide feedback and draw upon their experiences of how this works in practice, highlighting areas where the council could further refine and develop its member support and development offer.
- 2.15 As a reference group that is formed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the group will be able to provide both a policy development and scrutiny role providing the committee with insights and ideas for improvement that could be recommended (informally) to the Member and Community Development and formally to Cabinet. The key areas of focus initially for the group will be:
- Testing the offer of support to community councillors to evaluate how it works in practice when undertaking community-led planning exercises.
  - Testing and providing feedback on the information, data and insights available to ward councillors to support them in knowing the make-up of their communities and the potential key issues relevant to that area.
  - Evaluating and understanding the impact of our work in communities and ongoing member development support that councillors require.

2.16 Options and option appraisal Option 1 – to establish a community councillor reference group.

2.16.1 The benefits of this proposal are that it enables Overview and Scrutiny Committee to play an active and ongoing role in shaping the council's approach to how it works with local communities which is a key pillar of the council's corporate plan. It will also support the involvement of a wider group of councillors in the policy development associated with this area of work as well as building upon the cross-party approach that has been a hallmark of this work over the last twelve years.

2.16.2 This is the recommended option.

2.17 Option 2 – to not establish a community councillor reference group.

2.17.1 This option is not recommended as the establishment of a reference group will allow the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to participate in the development of policy in relation to how the council works with its communities as well as having direct input into the development of the support and resources available to councillors in their role as community leaders.

### **3 Corporate Priorities**

3.1 The new Corporate Plan, A Place for Everyone - Supporting our Communities to Thrive, is about making the wider opportunities for our communities a reality, progressing long term strategic projects underpinned by a community focus to ensure the council's approach is tailored and relevant to local circumstances.

3.2 Therefore, the contribution of the proposed community councillor reference group alongside the work of the Member and Community Development Group will cut across a number of the corporate priorities and is about strengthening the way we work and supporting local councillors in helping their communities to thrive.

### **4 Legal Implications**

4.1 There are no legal implications associated with the recommendation contained within the report. The proposed Community Councillor Reference Group will not have any decision making authority and will make any suggestions for the development of policy and initiatives via the Member and Community Development Group which makes recommendations to Cabinet.

### **5 Equality Issues**

5.1 There are no equality issues arising from the recommendation contained within the report.

### **6 Other Issues**

6.1 Community Safety - None

6.2 Environmental Health Issues – None

6.3 Sustainability and Addressing a Changing Climate - None

6.4 Property Issues - None

6.5 Wards/Communities Affected - None

**7 Conclusion**

7.1 The Committee is asked to consider approving the recommendation to establish an Overview and Scrutiny Community Councillor Reference Group and consider appointing six members to the Community Councillor Reference Group.

7.2 To ensure the Committee is kept up to date with the progress of the work of the community councillor reference group, it is recommended that an opportunity to update is provided by the relevant councillors as part of the Panels updates section which is a standing item on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u>			
None			
<u>Confidentiality</u>			
It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.			
No of Annexes:	None		
Author:	James Moody/ Emma Silverton	Ext:	8130/8001
File Ref:	N/A		
Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Date:	10 April 2024