

Review of the Cheshire Community Strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

The last meeting of the Cheshire Partnership held on 1 March 2005 received a report on the rationale and suggested process for a full review of the Cheshire Community Strategy. The Strategy, originally published in February 2002, was due to be wholly reviewed every five years in line with the five-yearly repeat of the Cheshire Quality of Life Survey. However, the importance of community planning and the role of LSPs had evolved considerably since the launch of the Strategy and it was therefore agreed by the Cheshire Partnership Strategy & Monitoring Group that the review be brought forward in the light of new initiatives, most notably the national roll-out of Local Area Agreements from April 2007.

This report seeks to outline and reach agreement on the principles underpinning the review of the Cheshire Community Strategy and a framework for the revised document.

2. PRINCIPLES

2.1 *Community Needs vs. Regional & National Priorities*

Part I of the Local Government Act 2000 placed a new statutory duty on principal local authorities to prepare 'community strategies', for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas, so contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK. Guidance published in December 2000, suggested four key objectives for community strategies:

- to allow local communities (based upon geography and/or interest) to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities;
- to co-ordinate the actions of the council, and of the public, private, voluntary and community organisations that operate locally;
- to focus and shape existing and future activity of those organisations so that they effectively meet community needs and aspirations; and
- to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development both locally and more widely, with local goals and priorities relating, where appropriate, to regional, national and even global aims.

The guidance went on to state that:

"In developing their strategies, local authorities and their partners should have regard to the Government's sustainable development strategy - which provides a national framework for integrating economic, social and environmental concerns - and work on regional sustainable development

frameworks. They should also take account of the ways in which national and global concerns - such as the mitigation of climate change and the protection of biodiversity - can be addressed through local action.”

However, the need to reflect and embed the community strategy based on local needs, priorities and aspirations remains paramount.

Principle 1 - As with the first edition, the revised Cheshire Community Strategy will be informed by the outcomes of the Cheshire Quality of Life Survey 2005 and supported by facts and evidence as highlighted within the Cheshire Community Report 2004. It will also reflect, where possible, existing strategies and plans, particularly community plans already developed at district level (though it should be noted that a number of these are also currently under review) and sub-regional / regional strategies.

2.2 Signposting / Re-inventing the Wheel

Guidance on the production of community strategies states that:

“A community strategy should identify the key priorities for action in a council’s area. It follows that it should act as an overarching framework for other service or theme specific plans and, together with other key strategic plans, should influence a wide range of activities.....A community strategy should provide a practical context for informing and linking other service or theme specific plans, including those already prepared with local partners. In reviewing or drawing up such plans, authorities should consider with their partners the extent to which the plans can and do contribute to the priorities in the community strategy. However, work on other plans should not be delayed until a community strategy has been finalised; they should instead be revised later.”

Despite the core task placed LSPs to bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives, the proliferation of plans and strategies remains. Some of these are focused at the neighbourhood level (e.g. parish plans, neighbourhood action plans), some at district level (e.g. district community plans, community safety strategies), some countywide (e.g. Cheshire Local Transport Plan, Cheshire Rural Recovery Plan) and some sub-regionally (e.g. Cheshire & Warrington Economic Strategy, Cultural Strategy for Cheshire & Warrington). Many of these are also informed by or based upon regional or national strategies. In all cases, the production of these plans and strategies is an iterative process based upon the results of consultation and evidence.

Principle 2 – To retain focus, avoid duplication and support the continued alignment of existing strategies and plans, the revised Cheshire Community Strategy will signpost to other documents, where appropriate, particularly in relation to detailed actions.

2.3 Ownership

The Local Government Act 2000 requires local authorities, in preparing community strategies, to consult and seek the participation of such organisations and people as they consider appropriate. The guidance states:

“Given the potential breadth of issues that might be covered, a community strategy will only lead to effective action to improve the well-being of an area if it involves all the statutory, non-statutory and voluntary organisations that provide services, or whose actions affect local quality of life.Community strategies should provide opportunities for all partner agencies to make better progress locally towards their own goals and targets...”

Despite the wide involvement of the Cheshire Partnership and its constituent thematic partnerships in the production of the first community strategy and the references to lead or co-ordinating agencies in the delivery of specific actions, the Strategy is not as well embedded within the business / service planning or resource allocation processes of constituent partner organisations as it might be.

Principle 3 – To secure greater ownership of the Cheshire Community Strategy and its delivery, monitoring and review, more emphasis will be placed on the role and responsibilities of the key thematic partnerships supporting the Cheshire Partnership in relation to specific actions.

2.4 Addressing the Gaps

Despite the range of thematic plans and strategies already in place, it is anticipated that the Quality of Life Survey may uncover needs and issues which are not currently being addressed. Following the Cheshire Partnership conference last October and the focus on the demographic shift facing the county over the next 15 – 20 years, this may include specific action across all themes relating to the ageing population.

Principle 4 – To ensure that gaps in coverage contributing to the vision are covered, the action plan underpinning the revised Cheshire Community Strategy will focus on these areas.

2.5 Themes

The current strategy contains actions arranged around seven key themes:

- Innovation & New Ways of Working
- Positioning Cheshire in the Wider World
- Community Well-Being
- Valuing Diversity and Tackling Inequality
- Thriving Rural Communities
- Shared Prosperity
- A Sustainable Environment

In future, it is expected that community strategies will inform the development and content of national agreements, particularly Local Area Agreements. These are currently being piloted in 22 local authority areas though this pilot is to be extended to include a further 40 local authorities from April 2006 prior to roll-out to all areas from April 2007. It is currently suggested that LAAs be developed around four functional blocks:

- Safer and Stronger Communities
- Children and Young People
- Healthier Communities and Older People
- Economic Development – Local Enterprise Growth Initiative

Closer alignment of community strategy actions with the proposed LAA themes could offer an alternative approach to the development and presentation of the community strategy and could simplify the future development of Cheshire's LAA. However, it is suggested that the fourth block (economic development) cover the wider remit of Sustainable Communities and Transport in line with the local authority Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspection framework.

Principle 5 – The revised Cheshire Community Strategy be based around the four LAA themes, incorporating economic development within the broader theme of Sustainable Communities and Transport, and underpinned by a fifth theme of Innovation & New Ways of Working.

2.6 Format & Publication

The current Cheshire Community Strategy was produced in hard copy format with copies of the document being sent to all members of the Cheshire Partnership and other interested parties. The Strategy has also been published on the Cheshire Partnership website at www.thecheshirepartnership.com and is available for viewing at all Cheshire libraries and other key service access points. However, the hard copy format is restrictive and does not allow for easy updating or cross-referencing to other strategic plans.

Principle 6 – Consideration will be given to producing the Cheshire Community Strategy in an alternative, more sustainable and interactive format with embedded hyperlinks to other key plans and strategies where more detail on specific actions or targets can be found.

2.7 Future Monitoring & Review

Guidance on the production of community strategies states that:

“Local strategic partnerships will need to establish systems for monitoring progress on their community strategies, ensuring that the activities identified in the action plan are carried out and assessing their success in addressing the priorities identified in the strategy....Whatever the arrangements, however, it is important that they enable the partnership to readily identify the progress made and the areas where action looks like being ineffective and where

objectives are in danger of not being met....In order to establish effective monitoring arrangements, local strategic partnerships will need to consider how they will measure progress.....Monitoring progress on community strategies should focus primarily on key outcomes as the basis for providing clear and accessible progress reports back to the community”.

A two-pronged approach currently underpins the performance management of the Cheshire Community Strategy. This includes an annual snapshot review of progress against the range of actions contained within the strategy and annual reporting to the wider Cheshire community on performance against 22 broad “quality of life” indicators. This process is overseen by the Cheshire Partnership Strategy & Monitoring Group though robust mechanisms need to be established to ensure that those areas failing to achieve are addressed.

Principle 7 – Actions contained within the revised Cheshire Community Strategy will focus on outcome rather than output or input measures and these will be specific, measurable, achievable and realistic with a clear target timescale for achievement.

Principle 8 – The revised Cheshire Community Strategy will identify the most appropriate body to collect the data required to measure performance against each target so that duplication is avoided and the data collection burden is minimised across the Partnership.

Principle 9 – The review of the structure, roles and responsibilities of the Cheshire Partnership will clarify where responsibility for overseeing performance against targets within the Cheshire Community Strategy and any associated documents (e.g. Local Public Service Agreement, Local Area Agreement, etc.) rests.

2.8 Sustainability / Proofing

It is expected that the current guidance on the development of community strategies will be revised and updated in the near future to provide stronger emphasis on the development of “sustainable” community strategies. There is a process for measuring the sustainability of strategies and plans though the existing strategy has never been appraised in this way.

The current strategy also contains a series of actions in relation to “Thriving Rural Communities” and “Valuing Diversity and Tackling Inequality”. As a largely rural and socially diverse county, it is important to reflect these characteristics within any revised strategy.

Principle 10 – In anticipation of further guidance on the development of “sustainable” community strategies, the revised Cheshire Community Strategy be subject to a sustainability appraisal prior to its publication. Furthermore, the revised strategy be subject to rural proofing and assessed against the policy framework for tackling regeneration and social exclusion across the county.

3. FRAMEWORK

As already highlighted, we are not starting with a blank sheet of paper in developing the second community strategy for Cheshire. Many of the actions within the current strategy remain valid and other strategies and plans are now in existence which should help inform the content of the new document. Community issues and priorities have been identified through the Quality of Life 2005 survey and community needs analysed through the annually produced Cheshire Community Survey.

To reflect this, it is therefore suggested that the revised Cheshire Community Strategy be organised around the following framework:

- i) *General Introduction* – restating the statutory requirement to produce the community strategy, the function and structure of the Cheshire Partnership, the long-term vision for the area, underpinning principles for the development of the strategy, headline pan-Cheshire results of the Quality of Life 2005 survey and the process for monitoring and review.
- ii) *Main Content* – structured around each of the following suggested five theme headings:
 - Safer & Stronger Communities
 - Children & Young People
 - Older People & Health
 - Sustainable Communities & Transport (including economic development)
 - Innovation & New Ways of Working

Each theme will summarise the following information:

- *What the Community Said* – based upon more detailed analysis of the Cheshire Quality of Life Survey 2005.
- *What the Evidence Says* – based upon current facts and trends as highlighted within existing documents such as the Cheshire Community Survey 2004, Cheshire Population Report, etc.
- *Achievements to date* – based upon the findings of the review of the current Cheshire Community Strategy, district community plans and other related strategy / plan updates.
- *Desired Outcomes & Related Action* – these will identify what we want to achieve (e.g. we want people to feel safer on the streets after dark), how we are going to achieve it (e.g. we will increase police presence in priority areas), how we are going to measure success (e.g. Quality of Life respondents stating that they feel safer) and the timescale for achievement (e.g. based on Quality of Life survey 2010). It is expected that these actions will cross-reference to more specific, possibly geographically targeted actions as highlighted within other related strategies and plans (e.g. community safety strategies). Where desired

outcomes and related actions are not adequately reflected elsewhere, the community strategy will contain more detailed action.

- *Ownership* – identifying the key thematic “host” partnership for each outcome. It is expected that a more formalised process of performance monitoring and reporting be agreed with each partnership.

4. PROGRESSING THE PROCESS

Subject to the agreement of the Cheshire Partnership to the above principles and framework underpinning the revision of the Cheshire Community Strategy, it is suggested that as the detail of the revised strategy is formulated, it is referred to the appropriate “host” partnership for verification and endorsement prior to final agreement and adoption by the Cheshire Partnership in the autumn.

In workshop groups, the Cheshire Partnership is asked to:

- 1) consider and agree the ten principles outlined under section 2 of this report, suggesting any amendments or additions where necessary;**
- 2) consider and confirm the continued relevance of the current vision of the Cheshire Community Strategy for incorporation in the revised document, i.e.**

“Cheshire to be a place where everyone can thrive, at work and play, at home and in the community, in a safe and healthy environment, take an active part in decisions, and continue to learn and develop throughout their lives”;

- 3) consider and agree the proposed framework for the content of the revised Cheshire Community Strategy; and**
- 4) consider and agree the suggested approach for the verification, endorsement and adoption of the revised Cheshire Community Strategy.**