

## **TAUNTON DEANE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE BOARD: 20 August 2008**

**Report of the Strategic Director and Community Planning Officer**

**This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Alan Wedderkopp**

### **Community Engagement – Taunton Deane Borough Council position statement**

#### **1. Purpose of this review**

1.1 On the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2008 the Taunton Deane Local Strategic Partnership held a meeting to review community engagement in Taunton Deane and make recommendations to improve its effectiveness. The scope of the review was as follows:

- To review the existing Community Partnerships, established by the Taunton Deane Local Strategic Partnership in October 2007
- To contribute to a wider debate, under Pioneer Somerset, of community engagement models across Somerset. This included consideration of the 'South Somerset model' of community engagement attached as Appendix A and Somerset County Council's review of its area working and community engagement structures (Appendix B).

1.2 This paper therefore constitutes Taunton Deane Borough Council's position statement on community engagement, informed by consultation with partners.

#### **2. Description of current structure in Taunton Deane**

2.1 The model for community engagement in Taunton Deane is Community Partnerships. The Community Partnerships were established in October 2007 and are sub-groups of the Taunton Deane Local Strategic Partnership. There were a number of principles upon which the Community Partnerships were founded:

- That they should be multi-agency. This was a key reason in the Community Partnerships being sub-groups of the LSP rather than of the Council. The intention was that all the LSP member organisations would use the Community Partnerships as their means of engaging with the public in Taunton Deane.
- That they would have no budget allocated to them. It was felt that this would divert attention away from issues to instead focusing on how the

budget should be spent. The intention was that the Community Partnerships would influence the way in which the LSP member organisations spend their main budgets in response to issues raised at the Community Partnership meetings.

- That the meetings would be open to all members of the public. The meetings are publicised widely and are open to all.
- That the Community Partnerships would not have a set membership i.e. a Board or Committee, in order to keep the meetings as informal as possible. It was envisaged that this would make the meetings less intimidating for people who do not usually engage with the LSP organisations. As a result the Community Partnerships have a Chair but no other 'posts'.
- That the Community Partnership meetings would enable the LSP to keep its Sustainable Community Strategy 'alive' by testing out whether the priorities in the SCS are still those that matter to communities

2.2 Three Community Partnerships were established covering the whole of Taunton Deane (see map attached at Appendix C).  
The Chairs are:

West Community Partnership – Shirlene Adam  
East Community Partnership – Kevin Toller  
Central Community Partnership – Joy Wishlade and Brendan Cleere.

It was envisaged that the Chairs would change after the first 12 months.

### **3. Somerset County Council's review of area working**

3.1 Attached at appendix B is a paper outlining Somerset County Council's review of area working and community engagement structures across Somerset. The group considered this paper and the conclusion within the paper that 'one size does not fit all; we therefore need to keep engagement flexible and local,' was welcomed.

3.2 The need to create a joint approach with the County Council to reduce duplication and confusion was considered important by all members of the group.

### **4. The South Somerset DC model of community engagement**

4.1 In summary the South Somerset model sees the district of South Somerset divided into 4 sub-district areas. Each sub-district area is served by an Area Forum and an Area Committee. The forums are open to community groups

and therefore provide the community with an opportunity to engage with the council, air community aspirations and give the delivery of services a local dimension. South Somerset DC has also used Area Forums as the mechanism for operating community kitties. The Area Committees are decision-making bodies with delegated budgets and members empowered to take local decisions in the interest of the community. The committees are focused on local issues and local action and use the Area Forums to enhance that focus.

4.2 The group made a number of comments when considering the South Somerset model:

- The South Somerset model sees actual engagement with communities take place at the Area forums. The existing Taunton Deane Community Partnerships serve a similar purpose to these and the group felt that it was particularly important that they are multi-agency and open to all the public.
- Area Committees do not currently exist within Taunton Deane. In line with the 'one size does not fit all' ethos, the general view was that a more informal approach to joint County and District member working is favoured. This is being piloted through the creation of the Taunton Unparished Fund. A review of this pilot will be held in January 2009 at which point further consideration may be given to rolling out the approach to other areas of the District.

## **5. Future community engagement in Taunton Deane**

5.1 Each of the Community Partnerships in Taunton Deane has now held three meetings. The LSP review meeting looked at observations made about the Community Partnerships since their inception, along with the papers and proposals outlined above and considered how community engagement could most effectively develop in Taunton Deane. These considerations have informed the following recommendations, which constitute Taunton Deane Borough Council's position on community engagement:

- That the basic premise of the Community Partnerships remain the same i.e. those listed in the bullet points at (2) above.
- That the various community engagement models in place needed to be streamlined to avoid duplication and confusion
- That greater attendance by the public and Councillors of all three tiers be encouraged
- That a broader representation from the key organisations in Taunton Deane be achieved at the Community Partnership meetings

- That the geographic boundaries of the Community Partnerships be reviewed and consideration be given to splitting the Central area into two areas to gain better separation of the rural and urban areas
- That the format of the meetings changes where appropriate. For example, that the meeting has two halves, firstly the usual open forum followed by a themed session in order to widen the range of issues discussed.
- The importance of keeping an informal approach to the running of the meetings in order to be more accessible to the public was shared by all members of the group.
- That an informal approach to joint County and District member working is taken, through the piloting of the Taunton Unparished Fund. Depending on the success of this approach further consideration may be given to continuing the arrangement and looking at the possibility of extending a similar arrangement to other areas of the borough.
- That a greater level of support is sought from partner agencies including Somerset County Council in the planning of Community Partnership meetings and delivery of outcomes
- That Community Partnership meetings should not be seen as the only way to engage with the public. Efforts should be made to attend other public events to meet and engage with the public.

## **6. Comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Board**

- 6.1 The above report was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Board on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2008. The Board resolved that the recommendations outlined above at (5) be supported as Taunton Deane Borough Council's position on Community Engagement.

## **7. Recommendations**

- 7.1 That the Executive approve the recommendations outlined in (5) above as Taunton Deane Borough Council's position on community engagement.

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## Engagement at Sub-District level in South Somerset

### 1. Background

1.1 In response to the Local Government White Paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities', all local authorities in Somerset signed up to work in partnership to deliver on the agenda outlined in the paper. This partnership is called 'Pioneer Somerset' and has agreed clear outcomes that need to be delivered through a focus on 7 specific work strands. Each strand is being led by one of the Somerset local authorities. One such strand is the delivery of a countywide community engagement strategy.

1.2 It has been agreed that Somerset County Council (SCC) will lead on the wider community engagement strategy work. However at the Chief Executive and Leader's meeting in November 2007 it was agreed that a sub-group be formed to explore the 'sub-district' level engagement aspect of the Somerset community engagement strategy. This was reaffirmed in the Somerset County Council briefing paper for Leaders and Chief Executives in April 2008. The sub group was to be led by Phil Dolan, Chief Executive of South Somerset District Council (SSDC), because of that council's established track record through Beacon awards in community engagement and empowerment. The membership of the group would consist of the officer and member lead for community engagement who would act as representatives of their authority.

1.3 The main focus for the group was to:

1. Explore the applicability of the South Somerset engagement model in other local authority areas within Somerset;
2. Present the model as an option for debate and discussion at the consultation workshops that were organised by SCC.
3. As a result of 1 and 2 above, put forward a model of engagement and empowerment at sub district level that would form part of the wider Somerset strategy.

1.4 The group met for the first time during January 2008 and the model was presented to the group at the meeting in February 2008. It was also agreed that the model should be available for presentation at the consultation events held around Somerset. These events took place but at the Community Engagement sub-group meeting held in April 2008 it was concluded that the SDE\* was not adequately presented at the consultation events, notwithstanding the fact that the events were not well supported. Therefore the opportunity to explore the 'applicability' of the model or to enhance it had not arisen. As a result, the group requested a briefing paper that could be used by local authorities as a discussion paper with a range of stakeholders.

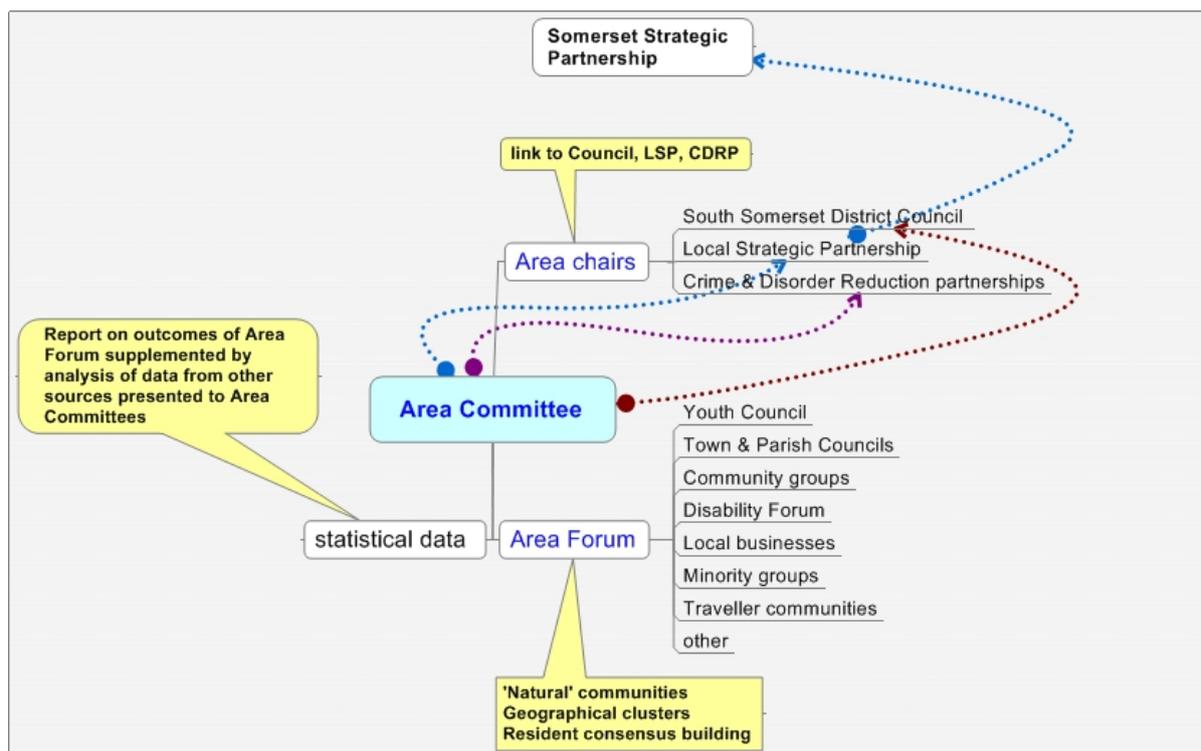
1.5 Hence this briefing paper aims to:

- Describe the current practice model;
- Test the applicability of the model in light of latest government requirements; and
- Suggest a way forward.

*\* The model hereafter in this paper will be referred to as the Sub District Engagement (SDE) model.*

## 2. SDE model

2.1 The model is represented diagrammatically below. If, at a basic level, community engagement is about involving people in the decisions that affect them and their locality, then any successful model must, simply and explicitly, show a clear route from concern and discussion through to decision-making and action. This SDE model would claim to do so as it empowers members by enhancing their community leadership role through Area Committees whilst working with 'natural' committees through Area Forums.



## 3. Area Forums

3.1 Area Forums are held in all four areas (At SSDC the district is divided into 4 sub-district areas, each serving around 40,000 residents). The Forums help to give a voice to community aspirations and give the delivery of services local dimension. They provide the link between community needs and decision making through building consensus amongst representatives. Some view them as a 'clearing house' for community issues and concerns. Forums in one area can have a different focus to one in another area. This flexibility is vital. Nevertheless Area Forums are currently being used for such things as prioritising of projects, the funding of projects, planning for real and buying in enhancements to service delivery should the community desire them. They are also being used as the mechanism for operating the community kitty approach. It has not been unusual for 200,300 or 400 people turn up to a community kitty event with maybe £20,000 available for distribution to community projects that meet agreed criteria.

## 4. Community Engagement

4.1 Engagement at 'sub-forum' level takes place in a number of different ways depending on appropriateness of methods allowing flexibility around engagement. However the results of these various engagement activities are supplemented by statistical data and information from other sources before they are presented to members at Area Committees.

## 5. Area Committees

5.1 Area committees are decision-making bodies with delegated budgets and members empowered to take local decisions in the interest of the community. The committees are focussed on local issues and local action and use the Area Forums to enhance that focus. Apart from the funding available to these committees, each individual member has access to an individual councillor budget for those smaller projects and causes the councillor wishes to support (see 8.3). Again an agreed criterion is set for such awards.

## 6. Linkages

6.1 As shown in the above diagram, the SDE model provides clear linkage with the Councils own Executive decision-making process, the Local Strategic Partnership, with Health and with Police. These are vital since many community issues will not relate solely to council activity. Communities must see how those issues are taken forward in a structured way.

## 7. Community Views

7.1 The above model works well for 8 key reasons:

1. Decision-making on council matters is seen to be nearer communities and not remote
2. Issues and concerns can be quickly linked to decisions
3. communities can see that councillors are listening to them
4. The community can have a say over service enhancements
5. The community can have a say over what community kitties fund
6. Community engagement is flexible and varied, there is no 'one size fits all' mentality
7. Area Forums, while new, are beginning to help make better sense of the 'noise' from communities
8. Residents concerns raised at Area Forums and Area Committees act as a platform for 'community call for action'

## 8. Framework for the Future: Applicability of the Model

8.1 The model provides the framework for putting in place the latest government thinking around engagement and empowerment. However it is recognised some enhancements need to be made to take it to the next level.

8.2 '*Action Plan for Community Engagement: Building for Success*' paves the way for the statutory 'duty to involve' which comes into force in 2009 and requires local authorities to **inform, consult, involve and devolve**. In the main this requires local authorities to take a lead in:

- Engaging community in design and delivery of services
- Enhancing participatory budgeting – larger ‘community kitties’
- Commissioning for local services
- Decision making at local level (joint committees)

8.3 This action plan sets out activities in three key areas:

1. *Widening & deepening empowerment opportunities*

This is about more people in more areas able to access opportunities such as participatory budgeting. ‘Community kitties’ enable communities to be involved in budget decisions.

This is currently in place at SSDC through Area Forums as shown in paragraph 3.1. Area committees are given an additional £40,000 to begin the process of better aligning service need with service delivery. Each individual member has an additional budget of £2500 to support local community initiatives/projects in harmony with the council’s priorities as set out in the corporate plan. For example in Area East, the Forums are open and inclusive with Parish and Town Councils, a range of groups and community representatives but also open to any citizen from the area that wishes to attend. They look at all available information about local needs based on Parish/Town Plans and other data and agree service issues and improvement priorities. These are used to work up some costed proposals for service enhancement. Before the decision is made, the Forum gets the opportunity to talk to service providers in more detail about the costed proposals which may throw up some further refinements. Final proposals are presented to the Area Committee that uses its allocation to fund Area specific enhancements.

2. *Enabling empowerment opportunities*

- create a menu of opportunities locally
- make it easier to participate

Currently mechanisms for engagement in South Somerset maximize opportunities for local participation because ‘Forums’ are held in different local venues.

3. *Strengthening representative democracy*

- enthusiasm for local democracy
- greater local accountability
- clearer leadership

Meetings are well attended by the public, although this can always be improved. Accountability is demonstrated through the area committees. Area chairs figure prominently although residents see every member as a community champion and community leader.

8.4 The table below is brief summary of the principles of community empowerment as outlined in key government papers and demonstrates how the SDE model fares when assessed against them.

<b>Government proposals</b>	<b>Predominantly Met</b>	<b>Partially Met</b>	<b>Can be developed</b>	<b>Cannot accomodate</b>
<i>Local government (White Paper)</i>				
More choice for local people in the way local services are designed and delivered		√	√	
A new duty for councils to 'inform, consult, involve and devolve'	√			
More co-ordinated support for citizens and community groups to help them take advantage of empowerment opportunities	√		√	
People will have the right to an answer when they put forward suggestions to their councils or ask for action	√			
The Community Call for Action - giving Councillors more power to demand action on behalf of their communities	√		√	
More neighbourhood management		√	√	
More opportunities for communities to take on the management and ownership of local facilities and assets, with a new fund to encourage them		√	√	

Local charters in which communities and their councils can agree the services to be provided		√	√	
'power of well-being' means that Quality Parish Councils will be able to respond better to their communities' needs		√	√	
<i>CLG,2007. An Action Plan for Community Empowerment:Building Success</i>				
<i>widening &amp; deepening empowerment opportunities</i> - Develop more community kitties		√	√	
<i>enabling empowerment opportunities</i> - create a menu of opportunities locally - make it easier to participate	√		√	
<i>strengthening representative democracy</i> - enthusiasm for local democracy - greater local accountability - clearer leadership	√		√	
<i>Governance of Britain (Green Paper)</i>				
aims to give citizens the means of participating in decision-making at every level.	√		√	

## 9. A Key Enhancement

9.1 Whilst the SDE model works well at present in South Somerset it can be enhanced if Somerset County Council were to move from their Area Working Panel system (which contains some duplication of the SDE model) into a full partnership approach with South Somerset District Council. To do this would require county and district agreement on issues such as:

- Area committees be formally constituted as joint committees
- On which current district and county functions would now be appropriate matters for the joint committees to determine
- The expansion of area forums to assist both tiers
- An examination of possible joint staff resources in support of members
- Options to jointly engage
- A willingness to discuss parish/town council representation at sub-district level

9.2 This could then pave the way for a full partnership approach across all of Somerset.

## **10. A Way Forward**

10.1 It is now appropriate for each council to consider this SDE model and ask a number of specific questions:

1. Will this model provide the community engagement at sub-district level that is needed?
2. If adopted will this model produce real benefits for residents?
3. Would the council wish to take democratic decision-making to a sub-district level? If so why? If not why not?
4. Does it provide sufficient flexibility for specific circumstances at this council? What are those circumstances? How could the model cope with this?
5. Is the council willing to adopt this model?
6. If willing to adopt this model, to what timeframe?
7. Would the council wish to work in partnership with the county council on this from day one?

10.2 Each council has agreed, through its member representatives on the sub-group, to provide an answer to these questions to the sub-group chairman, Phil Dolan, by mid June 2008. This will enable the results to be reported to the Leaders and Chief Executive Group at the next appropriate meeting.

**Phil Dolan**  
**30.4.2008**

## **Community Engagement – An Update**

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 This paper describes in brief the various strands of development & review work relating to community engagement, which are currently underway, and the next steps for taking forward this work.

### **2. Background and Context**

- 2.1 One of the workstreams of the Somerset Pioneer PID relates to community engagement and the development of single Community Engagement Strategy across the 6 authorities.
- 2.2 This reflects the need for a consistent strategic approach at County level together with a flexible district-by-district approach to community engagement at a local level. South Somerset District Council (Beacon status council for community engagement work) is leading the piece of work to develop a single framework at sub district level to which all of the Councils could sign up to.
- 2.3 At the same time we recognised that Area Working Panels (AWPs) need to evolve alongside the proposal which emerges from the sub-district work as part of an improved multi-agency community engagement approach across the county.
- 2.4 All of this work will also need to consider how LSPs and the engagement work of other agencies can be improved and joined up to provide more effective models for engaging with local communities.

### **3.0 Summary of County Council's interim review**

- 3.1 Independent consultants, Creating Excellence, will be producing the feedback reports by early May from the six community engagement workshops held in March and these will be presented to AWP meetings later that month.
- 3.2 A summary of the key findings (set out as a list of principles) from across the 6 workshops is set out in Appendix 1. None of these are necessarily new, but they help reinforce that we need to improve current approaches to engagement and make them simpler and clearer for communities if we want to improve their participation. **An overriding theme was for joint work on coming up with ways of improving engagement, to avoid duplication and that successful community engagement across the county needs to be about more than structures and joint committees as the solution.**

- 3.3 In addition to the workshops, the County Council's Members event on 2 April considered the evolving role of 'frontline councillor' and ways to improve members engagement with their local communities. This event identified that there are cultural development issues for the County Council, particularly in relation to member support in order to make community engagement work effectively. The event also concluded that members want a community engagement Action Plan not another strategy document.
- 3.4 The experience from the AWP's over the last 12 months has provided a number of lessons for the County Council in terms of community engagement such as:
- engagement designed around communities and not organisations
  - engagement is more than formal public meetings
  - a need to rationalise meetings – 1 common type of forum for engagement at a local level ?
  - need flexibility with engagement rather than rigid committee structures
  - need to get engagement right before launching into empowerment
  - need to improve support for members to fully undertake the role of 'frontline' / 'community' councillor

The overriding message from **our experience with the AWP's is that one size does not fit all; we therefore need to keep it flexible and local.**

- 3.5 The review indicates that successful community engagement across the county needs to be about more than structures and joint committees as the solution.

#### **4.0 Proposed way forward**

- 4.1 Accepting the need for multi-agency agreement to the solutions we are working towards, we will need sign-up from all parties for this to be successful.
- 4.2 The County Council's review of the AWP's is scheduled to be presented to Full Council in July. This will not be presenting an overall structural solution for the county as it would not be in the spirit of Pioneer Somerset.
- 4.3 The interim review from initial findings would suggest that we need to allow for an evolution of the County Council's engagement from AWP's to a more localised level through the District engagement models, make use of existing District developed arrangements, reduce duplication, provide an opportunity for Councillors to consider the pros and cons of these localised engagement structures and test them with partners and communities before committing to a formal constitutional change.
- 4.4 At this point, the report to July's Full Council is being proposed as an Engagement Action Plan with the following likely key recommendations:
1. Through Pioneer Somerset, that further qualitative work is undertaken to develop common engagement structures/models and methods for across the county during 2008 and work towards implementation in 2009. This will allow for a jointly agreed solution and draw upon best practice examples from across the county.

2. The County Councillors work through AWP's is evolved further through discussions with individual Districts about the potential for County Councillors to join District community engagement meetings on an informal basis to respond to community issues and be community champions. These discussions could also consider the potential for 'streamlining' other forums like the LSPs and CDRPs into these locally based multi-agency community meetings.
3. To develop an improvement plan for the County Council to provide for better organisational support for County Councillors to deliver the enhanced role of 'community councillor'.

Clearly, views would also be welcomed from District Council partners as part of the journey towards producing the Action Plan for July.

- 4.7 The proposals would tie in with the proposed new county councillor local initiatives budget scheme for 2008/9, as the scheme provides the flexibility for County Councillors to work informally with District colleagues in a variety of settings and use these as further opportunities to identify community priorities. This could improve the connections between councillors, communities and partners to direct their £15,000 budgets to meeting community priorities and making a difference.
- 4.8 **In short the Action Plan for July won't be about producing the long awaited single solution for all on engagement, instead it will provides an opportunity for the County Council to improve its approach with Districts and other partners. It will also recognise that the County does not want to impose a solution 'top-down' but really wants to develop solutions with agencies, partners and most importantly local communities.**
- 4.9 The suggested timescales for taking forward the County's review and the Action Plan are as follows:
  - Key findings and summary to Leaders & Chief Executives 23 May
  - Draft Action Plan to SMB 27 May
  - Draft Action Plan to SMB/PH 2 June
  - Draft Action Plan to Scrutiny 10 June
  - Draft Action Plan to Leaders & Chief Executives 4 July
  - Draft Action Plan to Executive Board 9 July
  - Action Plan to Full Council 23 July

**Author(s)** Miriam Maddison, Corporate Director – Community Services

**Community Engagement Workshops - Summary of Key Themes**

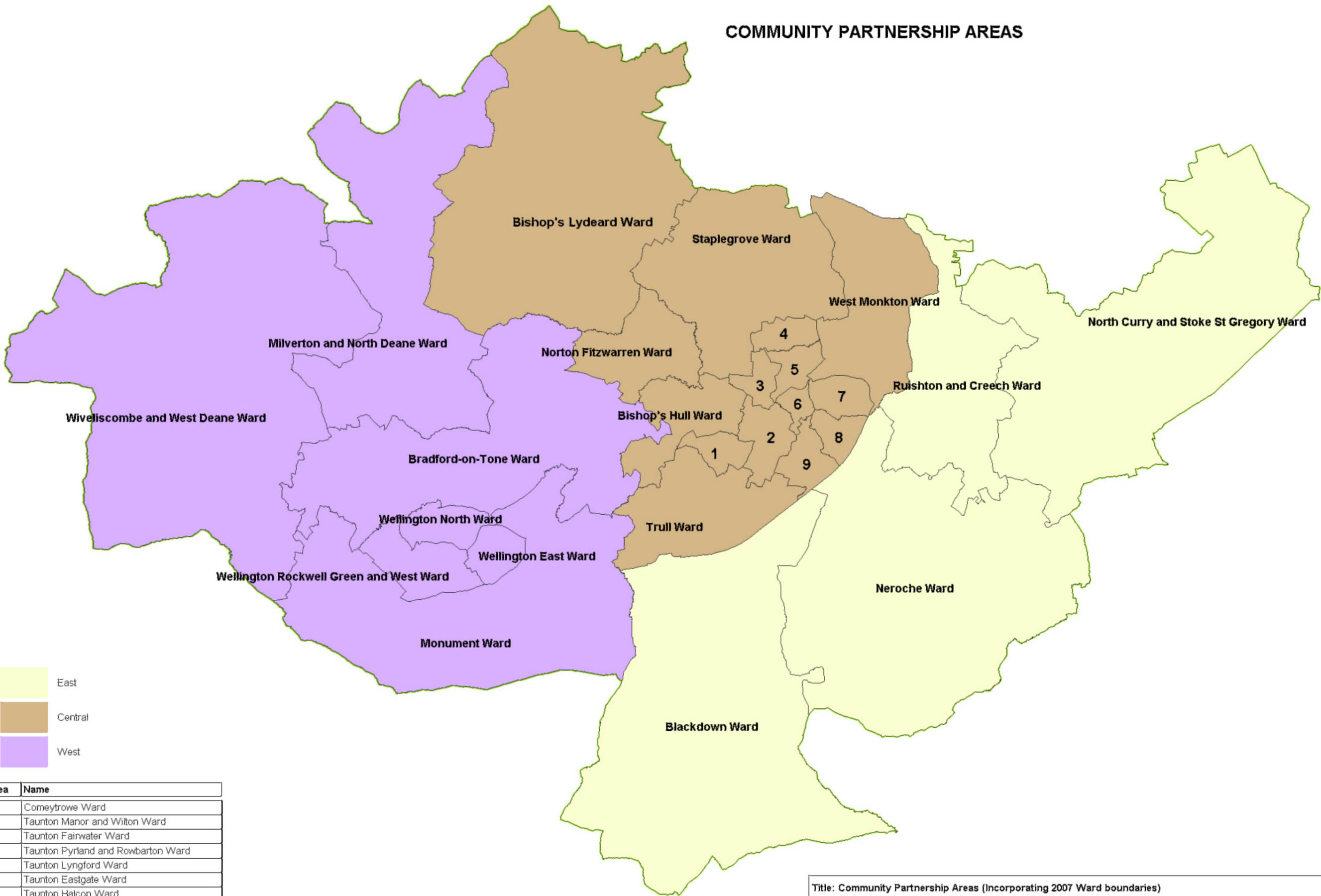
In no particular order .....

1. **What is a community?** – more difficult to answer than you might think! There are geographical communities, communities of interest, communities based on age, communities based on ethnicity etc, etc. Even in the most cohesive of communities there will be different groups or ‘communities within communities’. We need a form of engagement that can recognise and respond to these differences.
2. **Some communities are very small, some are much bigger** – real people are members of both kinds at they same time! Sometimes what happens on my street or in my neighbourhood is very important, at other times its what happens in my town or district or county. We need a form of engagement that lets people influence both the very local and the not so local.
3. **Issues not strategies!** – too often ‘engagement’ is about people being asked to comment upon the latest strategy to be produced in response to the latest Government initiative. Mostly these are much too long and written in language that ordinary people don’t understand. People want to talk about the issues that affect their everyday lives and how services can be provided in ways that will improve them.
4. **No more boring meetings!** - there are lots of different ways to engage people that don’t involve expecting them to turn up to a meeting. Getting engaged should be easy for people, and on their own terms. We need to make better use of technology, such as e.mail, internet or text messaging, as well looking at other ways people are willing to engage, e.g. radio phone ins. If there has to be a meeting please can it be fun and interesting and not boring!
5. **Its much too complicated!** – all of the agencies are tripping over each other to engage ‘their’ citizens. There are so many Panels, Boards, Forums etc, it’s really hard to know who is running them and what they are for. We need a much simpler structure that is understandable to ordinary people.
6. **Its not just about money!** – in fact, sometimes money just gets in the way of finding the best way forward. Offering money in the form of grants might get people to meetings, but it can be divisive and create jealousy and resentment for those groups whose bids are unsuccessful. The really important thing is that engagement offers communities real influence over the services that are provided to them.

One other thing that I think its important to note ....

- **None of this is new!** – most councillors have (and always have had) conversations with lots of different people about lots of different issues. Sometimes those conversations take place in formal settings, more often in informal settings. The question is how best to make use of all of that grass roots community engagement in ways that improves the quality of life in local communities.

# COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AREAS



Area	Name
1	Comeytrove Ward
2	Taunton Manor and Wilton Ward
3	Taunton Fairwater Ward
4	Taunton Pyrland and Rowbarton Ward
5	Taunton Lyngford Ward
6	Taunton Eastgate Ward
7	Taunton Halcon Ward
8	Taunton Blackbrook and Holway Ward
9	Taunton Killams and Mounfield Ward

Title: Community Partnership Areas (Incorporating 2007 Ward boundaries)

Date: 26/09/2007 Scale 1: 100000

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