

ANGUS COUNCIL

POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE

29 OCTOBER 2002

REVIEW OF DECENTRALISATION ARRANGEMENTS

Report by the Chief Executive

ABSTRACT

This report proposes revised arrangements in relation to the Council's Decentralisation Scheme.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Policy & Resources Committee:-

- i approve the proposals, contained in section 4 of this report, in respect of the Council's decentralisation arrangements;
- ii instruct officers to discuss these proposals with the Angus Community Planning Partners; and
- iii note that the Chief Executive will bring forward further reports on these proposed decentralisation arrangements, as appropriate.

2. BACKGROUND

The Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994 placed a duty on all local authorities to prepare and adopt a decentralisation scheme for their area. Angus Council's Decentralisation Scheme was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee on 4 February 1997, Committee Report 175/97 refers.

The Council allocated overall responsibility for decentralisation arrangements to the Chief Executive.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

There are three broad aspects of decentralisation, which are:-

- a Physical Decentralisation
- b Managerial Decentralisation
- c Political Decentralisation

These three aspects of decentralisation are very much inter-related and there are other key factors that influence the Council's decentralisation arrangements, as mentioned below.

One of the Council's key themes is "*To lead the Community Planning Process in Angus*". Given the resonance with community planning, the Council's Decentralisation Scheme is one of the existing processes that should contribute to the community planning process.

Under the 21st Century Government banner, it is recognised that information and communication technologies are key tools for modernising government. The Council's E-government Strategy has attempted to integrate e-government with the Council's policies and priorities, and here there are also obvious linkages with the decentralisation arrangements.

Furthermore, the Council's E-Government Member/Officer Group has identified the need for an Information and Communication Management Strategy to ensure that the Council collects, processes, and communicates the right information effectively and efficiently. Decentralisation arrangements will also require to be considered as part of the development and implementation of this strategy.

a Physical Decentralisation

One of the aims of the Council's Decentralisation Scheme is to provide an integrated 'one stop' approach to service and information provision, to promote a clear corporate image, and to provide quality of service and high standards of customer care.

There are now ACCESS Offices in Monifieth, Carnoustie, Kirriemuir and Montrose, all built round and managed through Housing Offices. As a consequence ACCESS Offices are, in the main, still regarded, both internally and externally, as Housing Offices.

The Policy and Resources Committee on 5 February 2002 (Committee Report 180/02) approved the permanent establishment of ACCESS Line and the amalgamation of Switchboard and ACCESS Line to a single line management and budget within the Law and Administration Department with effect from 1 April 2002.

The developmental role of the ACCESS concept remains within the Chief Executive's Department given the Council allocated overall responsibility for decentralisation arrangements to the Chief Executive.

These different management arrangements and the split between the operational and developmental responsibility of the ACCESS concept have created difficulties particularly in the application of consistent standards in areas such as customer care and opening hours. It also creates confusion, both internally and externally, as to responsibility and accountability.

It is also recognised that the development of ACCESS is, essentially, a cultural issue which, if to be successful, will entail a change in attitude towards service delivery, an acceptance that there are associated resource and structural issues, and an acceptance that there are major associated training issues.

In respect of the less accessible areas of Angus, the Council's aim is, through its E-Government Strategy and Action plan, for the benefits of E-Government to be available to as wide a spectrum of the community as is possible.

In this regard, the implementation of the People's Network has provided free public access to the internet in all Council libraries, and the IT facilities in Community Education bases have been upgraded/extended. The Council is also seeking to extend the network of IT facilities in village halls and locations such as post offices across Angus.

b Managerial Decentralisation

Most of the Council's service departments operate a decentralised management structure, with area offices/service delivery points predominantly located in the seven burghs of Angus. This provides more accountable, efficient and responsive local government by devolving operational decision making to the lowest practicable level, ie closer to the point of service delivery, which is consistent with the objectives of the Decentralisation Scheme. However, significant decisions with regard to policy and finance remain at the centre.

Also, one of the objectives of the Council's Decentralisation Scheme is to avoid fragmentation of service delivery by ensuring that services delivered locally are managed consistently within the context of a clearly understood strategic framework. In this regard the Area Service Team concept was introduced initially on a pilot basis in Monifieth and Montrose in 1997, with the aim that it be implemented across Angus, based on the Area Forum boundaries.

It was originally intended that Area Service Teams would have responsibility for local community planning, and that there would be a link to Area Forums. However, as a consequence of the retention of policy and financial control at the centre through functional managerial structures, the role and responsibility of the Area Service Team is unclear and this has resulted in confusion, both internally and externally.

c Political Decentralisation

Because of the geographical compactness of Angus, the Council did not set up statutory committees under Section 56 of the 1973 Act with specific area remits and appropriate powers of decision making. However, the Council acknowledges that encouraging an active participatory democracy will encourage greater transparency of the political process, and wishes to bring the informed views of its citizens into local government processes.

Area Forums were initially set up on a pilot basis in Monifieth and Montrose. The concept has now been developed fully across the eight areas of Angus.

The Council considers that Community Councils and Area Forums have complementary roles in the Decentralisation Scheme, although some Community Councils believe that Area Forums duplicate their role.

The agenda setting and format of the Area Forum meetings are often perceived as being inflexible. Also, whilst notes of each Area Forum meeting are taken, the public do not always see the influence that Area Forums have on policy and service decisions.

There are currently 3 Area Forum meetings held per calendar year and the fullness of the agenda varies from meeting to meeting and area to area. However, there is also a view that there should be 2 set meetings per year with the option of holding additional meetings if required.

Over the years, Area Forums have evolved in that, whilst these are Angus Council organised meetings, community planning partners and other public/voluntary sector agencies have made use of the forums as sounding boards, or for information sharing.

d Community Councils

The Council is well aware of the statutory role of Community Councils in gathering and representing community views, as well as carrying out many other tasks of benefit to their areas. The Council appreciates the importance of Community Councils, and it is recognised that the Council's relationship with community councils could be strengthened. In this regard a draft Policy Statement on the Council's Relationship with Community Councils has been drafted and submitted to Policy and Resources Committee on 29 October 2002, Committee Report 1276/02 refers.

e Local Community Planning

As mentioned above, the Council had originally intended that Area Service Teams should have responsibility for local community planning. However, given the issues set out in 3b above, the future development and implementation of local community planning now requires to be reconsidered, together with the role of the inter-agency Community Planning Team.

It was originally intended that the local community planning areas be based on the Area Forum areas, and that eight local community plans be produced. It is unclear as to what local community plans should look like and in the context of developments with the Brechin and Montrose Partnerships, there may be merit in being less specific about local community plans.

There is a need to manage a "bottom-up" approach to Community Planning, feeding in to the Angus Community Plan, across its five themes, and to build in an annual review process.

4. PROPOSALS

a Physical Decentralisation

- i The development and operational management of ACCESS should be delivered through a single management regime. In this regard the Chief Executive should be instructed to prepare a range of possible options for the Council's consideration in the future.
- ii The Council, through its E-Government and Information and Communication Strategies, should actively consider using other channels of communication for service delivery, including ACCESS, and the Council's website.

- iii Continue to identify services that can effectively be delivered electronically, through ACCESS, and other channels.
- iv Continue with the development of ACCESS to define a uniform level of service, and to provide a corporate image with high standards of customer care.
- v As resources allow, progress with the extension of the network of IT facilities in village halls, and other locations such as post offices, across Angus which could be used as communication/service delivery access points in remote, rural areas throughout the county.
- vi Encourage the use of electronic facilities such as the intranet and website throughout services and in communities.
- vii Consider the publicity arrangements, both corporately and from a service perspective, for ACCESS, in order to increase awareness of these service channels, internally and externally (on the street, on the phone and online).
- viii Continue with the development of a comprehensive A-Z of Services, which will replace Factbank.
- ix Review customer care training and consider the introduction of a customer care vocational qualification.
- x Continue to explore partnerships with other public agencies to provide "one stop community services".

b Managerial Decentralisation

- i Discontinue Area Service Teams.
- ii Area Forum Lead Officers should have a responsibility, for their respective geographic area, to bring departments/partners together, as appropriate to deal with any community based issues.

c Political Decentralisation

- i Extend the Area Forum concept, based on the existing geographic boundaries, to include community planning partners.
- ii Hold 3 set meetings per year, in Spring, Summer and Autumn, with the option to hold additional/special Area Forum meetings.
- iii Produce an information leaflet on the Area Forums.
- iv Acceptance of non-agenda items at the Area Forum meetings will be the decision of the Chair. Items should be notified at the outset of the meeting and, where practical, can be discussed at the end of the agenda. However, some items will need to be carried forward to future meetings.

- v Area Forum Lead Officers to have a responsibility, for their respective geographic area, to ensure that items raised at the Area Forum are passed on to the appropriate services/partner for attention.
- vi Further consideration to be given to the role of the community education worker (Link Worker).
- vii The publicity surrounding the Area Forums to be reviewed in order to increase awareness and attendance.
- viii The Leisure Services Library Cataloguing System should be developed as the single database of voluntary and community organisations.

d Community Councils

- i Produce a draft Policy Statement on the Council's Relationship with Community Councils for further consideration by the Council and its community planning partners in the first instance.

In this regard a draft Policy Statement on the Council's Relationship with Community Councils has been drafted and submitted to Policy and Resources Committee on 29 October 2002, Committee Report 1276/02 refers.

- ii Consideration to be given to improving communications, including electronic communications, with Community Councils.

e Local Community Planning

- i Not to proceed with the production of 8 geographically based local community plans, but to encourage "bottom up" local approaches such as those taken in Brechin and Montrose, and the Angus Citizens Panel, etc.
- ii Area Forum Lead Officers and the newly formed Community Planning Team to have responsibility for providing corporate advice in relation to the development and work of local partnerships.
- iii Continue to explore how best to take local community planning forward, together with the role of the Community Planning Team.

5. CONCLUSION

The decentralisation process set out in the Scheme is, by its very nature, a learning experience and continues to be so. In this regard, many of the objectives have been met in full, whilst others are at varying stages of implementation, or indeed, have since been superseded by other developments such as community planning and e-government.

This report has been compiled as part the Council's commitment under Best Value to evaluate and review the Decentralisation Scheme and details the progress made to date, planned initiatives, recommends future developments and, where appropriate, changes in operations and functions.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

7. CONSULTATION

All Chief Officers Management have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS

There are no human rights issues arising from this report.

A B Watson
Chief Executive

Note: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing this paper.