

Somerset Council  
Scrutiny Committee – Corporate and Resources  
– 08/08/2023



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LCNs: Initial Meetings and Emerging Themes

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Executive Lead Member: Cllr Theo Butt Philip, Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources

Associate Lead Member: Cllr Val Keitch, Associate Lead Member for Public Health and Localities (LCNs)

Division / Local Member: N/A

## **1. Summary**

- 1.1.** The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the implementation of the first round of Local Community Network meetings, including initial lessons learnt and emerging themes of importance to communities, and it seeks the views from Scrutiny Committee on any matters concerning LCNs that it would welcome further analysis and feedback on.
- 1.2.** It also considers the governance, staffing and support, geographies, participation and stakeholders of LCNs, recognising that LCNs are in their infancy and will evolve as partnerships and ways of working mature.

## **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

- 2.1.** The Scrutiny Committee is asked to note, and comment on, the contents of this report.
- 2.2.** The Scrutiny Committee is asked to indicate if there are any particular areas of interest that they would like to further explore.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1.** Local Community Networks (LCNs) are a key commitment to ensure the new Somerset Council is engaged with and listening to our communities.
- 3.2.** The purpose, ways of working and initial roles of LCNs, were agreed by the Executive on 18 January 2023, with the Terms of Reference agreed by

Constitution and Governance Committee in 30<sup>th</sup> January 2023, with final approval and adoption in the constitution at Full Council in 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2023.

- 3.3.** The purpose of LCNs, as agreed by the Executive on 18 January 2023, is as follows:

*To be the focus for community development, engagement and partnership working at a local level; improving outcomes for residents and establishing strong connections between the Council, our communities and our partners.*

- 3.4.** It is intended that LCNs will:

- Inform and influence Council policy and service development and delivery
- Develop local solutions to local issues
- Share the delivery of actions between all partners
- Develop and test innovative placed based ways of working and by doing so improve outcomes for residents.

- 3.5.** At the time of writing, we are two thirds of the way through the delivery of the first round of LCN meetings. The meetings are taking place, primarily, in community venues and are running as hybrid meetings.

**3.6. Geographies**

Following extensive consultation, it was agreed that there would be 18 LCNs, covering all of Somerset, created around communities, landscape character and the natural flow of residents between towns and parishes.

- 3.7.** Initial feedback regarding geographies was that on the whole the LCN boundaries reflect the above. However, there are a couple of parishes on the margins of the boundaries in one LCN area that are potentially interested in being grouped in a neighbouring LCN area. There is provision for boundary changes to be made in consultation with the Associate and Lead Members during the year, where there is a clear rationale for such a change.

- 3.8.** As services within Somerset Council become more familiar with the purpose of LCNs and the opportunities arising from working with communities in this way, some are starting to align their project delivery or areas of focus to the LCN boundaries

- 3.9.** Partners in the Voluntary Community Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sectors are also considering a best fit with LCN boundaries in terms of service delivery and data gathering, including Citizens Advice, Somerset Rivers Authority and Avon and Somerset Police.

- 3.10.** It is anticipated that a review of LCN boundaries will take place before the LCNs hold their Annual General Meetings (AGM) next year and where appropriate boundary changes will be considered.

### **3.11. Governance**

The Terms of Reference (ToRs) were developed to enable LCNs to be recognised as formal boards of Somerset Council, providing an established link both into and out from the Council. It was agreed, in February, that a review of the ToRs would take place within the first year of LCNs.

- 3.12.** The first round of meetings has highlighted some areas that require further consideration in preparation for the January 2024 Constitution and Governance Committee, where any changes to the ToRs will be considered, ahead of the Full Council meeting in February 2024.
- 3.13.** Initial feedback from core members for LCNs indicates a desire to consider some changes to the standard agendas for both the AGM and other meetings, particularly in respect of the ‘public question time’ item which, in the context of a participative forum, is perhaps considered too formal.
- 3.14.** There has been some discussion in LCN meetings with regards to the ‘core membership’ of LCNs, in particular who the core members are, how they are identified, agreed and approved. It was originally anticipated that LCNs would take time to build partnerships and get to know each other through the first meetings and that the core membership would be agreed by the participants, including Somerset Council Members, City, Town and Parish representatives and other partners as listed in the terms of reference. However, for LCNs to be formally recognised as boards of Somerset Council it has been necessary to appoint a Chair and Vice chair of each LCN, at which point the identification of those on the core membership becomes key to the election process.
- 3.15.** Where more than one candidate has been nominated for the role of Chair or Vice Chair, elections have taken place involving the core membership. Two of the three elections highlighted a need for a more detailed description of the core membership – particularly with regards to statutory services and VCFSE members.
- 3.16.** In order to provide more clarity regarding the core membership, to inform the selection and election of Chairs, a Lead Member Non-Key decision paper, building on high level detail regarding the core membership in the ToRs, was written. It was approved by the Lead Member for Transformation and Human Resources on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2023 and circulated to all Somerset Councillors.
- 3.17. Promotion, Participation and Attendance**
- Inaugural LCN meetings have been promoted to City, Town and Parish Councils, Somerset Council Members and to wider VCFSE and statutory partners as outlined in the ‘core membership’ defined in the ToRs, through existing mechanisms, as a soft launch.

- 3.18.** LCNs are underpinned by an ethos of participation and engagement, with an expectation that they will create a local, discursive forum. They will build collaboration and consensus between a wider range of partners to improve outcomes for residents through the creation and delivery of an action plan to address local priorities.
- 3.19.** Attendance at LCNs has been encouraging with an average of over 70% of parishes being represented. Whilst the majority of attendees join the meetings in the room there has been an average of three online attendees at every meeting and initial feedback regarding the hybrid experience is positive.
- 3.20.** There has been representation from wider stakeholders including the Police, VCFSE, Business groups and Business Chambers, Health and members of the public at many of the initial LCN meetings.
- 3.21.** All attendees are encouraged and supported to fully participate in LCN meetings, which are laid out in a café style to support discussion and conversation amongst participants during breakout sessions planned into the agenda. Online participants are also supported to participate in these discussions in online breakout rooms. Headline feedback from table discussions is shared during the meeting, in addition the discussions on each table were captured and is being collated and shared.
- 3.22.** Feedback from attendees has been positive. Some have reported being initially sceptical about LCNs but then being pleasantly surprised, and looking forward to making a difference together in their communities and have demonstrated a desire to share local knowledge and plans post the event. The LCN team have noted a step change that happens during the meetings where any specific frustrations with Somerset Council services turns to a desire to identify wider priorities and to start to consider actions that could be shared at a local level.
- 3.23.** It is anticipated that the wider membership of each LCN will grow, in the coming months, to reflect individual communities and topics of interest. During the discussion item at these initial meetings participants have identified a wide range of partners who could further inform and support discussion around emerging themes and priorities. The LCN Link offers will be key, alongside the Chairs and Vice Chairs, in developing stakeholder relationships pertinent to the area or topic, increasing participation both within the main LCN meetings and at working groups which will take place between meetings.
- 3.24.** There is growing interest from Somerset Council colleagues and partners in the VCFSE in participating in LCNs as they learn more about the opportunities of working in a participative way to shape, inform and deliver place based projects and services.

**3.25.** The Service Director for Partnerships and Localities and members of the interim LCN team, including the LCN Development Leads, have attended a number of meetings and forums both within the Council and with wider partners to brief them on the role of LCNs, ways of working and practical considerations and to discuss wider participation in LCNs over the coming year.

**3.26. ICT, Hybrid and Practical Considerations**

LCN meetings are being supported by ICT colleagues to trial a technology set-up that provides adequate and appropriate sound and visual infrastructure to create inclusive online and in person participation.

**3.27.** Managing online meetings in community venues has presented some IT challenges, in particular sound quality and the visuals of the room for online participants.

**3.28.** The LCN / ICT teams have learnt that rural Wi-Fi bandwidth can drop significantly in the evenings in some areas, and this impacts the quality of hybrid meetings.

**3.29.** There is a staffing and time implication impact of using community venues, however an important ethos of LCNs is to balance the power and build relationships between all of the partners and stakeholders at a local level and therefore using a range of venues is considered key to this in the first instance.

**3.30.** Many participants travel to the meetings by car and therefore adequate parking is important. A small number of the venues used in this first round have not had adequate parking arrangements.

**3.31. LCN team / staff capacity**

The first round of LCN meetings has been supported and facilitated by an interim LCN staff team, drawn primarily from colleagues across Partnerships and Localities Service Directorate. We have learnt more about the capacity needed, and the vital role of staff in enabling new ways of working, during this first round of LCN meetings.

**3.32.** LCNs are also serviced by Democratic Services colleagues and have been supported by the ICT team. It is anticipated that in the medium to long term the support for LCNs will be proportionate and focussed, maximising the use of technology solutions. However, whilst the technology set-up is still in its trial phase, and the Link Officers are not yet in place, we are discussing arrangements for ICT to continue to support LCN meetings in the short to medium term.

**3.33.** A permanent team will be recruited to support LCNs. Each LCN will have a dedicated Link Officer who will forge relationships with stakeholders in the LCN

area and work with partners and colleagues to progress agreed priorities. It is anticipated that the team will also provide some specialist support and the ability to have an overview across all LCNs. They will facilitate the sharing of best practice, discovery of shared issues and topics and enable cross LCN working.

**3.34.** There are some capacity challenges in this interim stage, particularly where there is a strong desire from many LCNs to meet regularly in their initial stages. The team are working hard to manage the practicalities of the delivery of LCN meetings, planning the next round, looking to balance the initial support for newly elected Chairs, building bespoke data packs and ensuring that we continue to build strategic and local links with partners and stakeholders to inform and support identification of LCN priorities for each area. However, there is a growing reputational and operational risk associated to the delay in recruiting the permanent LCN staff team.

**3.35. Emerging Themes**

These initial meetings have had a focus on starting to explore the issues and opportunities arising in communities, with a view to further defining the priorities for each LCN over the coming months, through a series of LCN meetings.

**3.36.** Initial themes common across LCNs can be grouped into Climate Change and Environmental action, Crime and Policing, Education, Economic Development, Employment and Skills, Community Development, Housing, Infrastructure, Planning, Health and Wellbeing, Social Care and Support.

**3.37.** Examples of the issues raised include a desire to:

- mitigate the impact of flooding
- tackle anti social behaviour
- improve access to education and employment
- increase provision of affordable housing
- increase access to NHS dentistry
- improve response to roads maintenance
- influence the revision and creation of the local plan and 106 requests to better meet local infrastructure needs
- expand community transport options and develop local walking and cycling infrastructure routes
- create green corridors and dark skies policies.

**3.38.** There is an appetite to progress initial discussions around priorities within LCNs between formal meetings, and the capacity to support this will be key. There are a wider range of partners to be identified relevant to topics and

geographic areas that will play a key role in informing discussions and decisions regarding priorities.

### **3.39. Next Steps**

- Identify interim staff support specific to each LCN.
- Create bespoke data packs for each LCN
- Map common themes across LCNs and work with the Council and other partners to provide contextual information to inform future discussions.
- Recruit the LCN Link Officer team.
- Agree ITC support for future meetings this year.
- Schedule a calendar of meetings with appropriate venues, taking the learning from the first round of meetings into account for each LCN.
- Review the Terms of Reference for LCNs
- Continue to build local and strategic links with partners and stakeholders to inform priority setting and action planning for LCNs.
- Budget for and identify financial resource for the support and delivery of LCNs for the coming year as part of the MTFP process.

**3.40.** The LCN team will continue to gather feedback regarding this first round of LCN meetings in order to inform the development of individual LCNs and the wider programme. Honouring our ambition to evolve LCNs as a codesign between Somerset Council and other stakeholders, we welcome the opportunity to work with all partners to develop mechanisms for review and development of LCNs.

## **4. Consultations undertaken**

**4.1.** The engagement and consultation activity regarding LCN development has involved a wide range of internal and external stakeholders over a number of years and elicited a diverse range of views and opinions, which have informed decisions on matters including LCN geographies and governance. Initial informal feedback from the early meetings is reflected in the themes of this report. More detailed feedback will be sought and reported as part of the ongoing development and evaluation of LCNs.

## **5. Implications**

### **5.1. Financial and Risk Implications**

The establishment and ongoing development of LCNs requires a level of financial investment in their infrastructure, primarily in terms of staffing budgets. On 18 January 2023, Executive noted that indicative annual costs for running LCNs would be up to £900k. Members agreed a one-off Earmarked Reserve amount of £300k that could be used to mobilise LCNs, pending a review of existing community development spend across the Council. This review would seek to realign and repurpose existing budgets to be able to deliver LCNs. This review is however fairly complex and involves several service directorates, and therefore will take some time to complete.

**5.2.** Recognising the increasing risk of not having the permanent LCN team in place, the focus is on identifying any potential savings that can allow LCN team recruitment to progress ahead of completion of the full review of community development activity and spend.

**5.3.** It is intended that the priorities of LCNs will, locally and strategically, influence the spend of the Council and it is hoped that over time existing funding streams aligned to particular priorities can be directed through these networks. There is also the potential for ‘return on investment’ with LCNs playing a role in preventing residents reaching crisis.

**5.4. Legal and HR implications**

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. Emerging governance issues relating to the approved LCN ToRs, and how they will be addressed are detailed within the report.

**5.5.** HR implications relate to financial implications, in as much as there is a need to put the operations of LCNs on a financially sustainable footing, which includes provision for a permanent staff team.

**5.6.** As referenced above in Financial Implications, LCNs will need to be supported by a team of officers with a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience, spanning community engagement and development, stakeholder and partnership relationship building, the ability to think locally and strategically, manage projects and negotiate solutions and resources.

**5.7. Equalities Implications**

An initial Equalities Impact Assessment accompanied the decision paper to Executive on 18 January 2023. This assessment directly influenced how LCN meetings have been designed and delivered, however equality considerations are a key part of ongoing evaluation and review.

**5.8. Community Safety Implications**



There are no community safety implications arising directly from this report. However, there is potential for LCNs, once established, to support community safety priorities.

**5.9. Sustainability Implications**

There are no sustainability implications arising directly from this report. However, there is potential for LCNs to support sustainability priorities of communities and the Council.

**5.10. Health and Safety Implications**

There are no health and safety implications arising directly from this report.

**5.11. Health and Wellbeing Implications**

There are no Health and Wellbeing implications arising directly from this report. However, there is an expectation that LCNs will have significant potential to support Health and Wellbeing priorities.

**5.12. Social Value**

There are no Social Value implications arising directly from this report. However, there is potential for LCNs, over time, to contribute to Social Value priorities.

**6. Background papers**

- 6.1.** Decision Report to Executive January 2023: Local Community Network (LCN) Development Next Steps is [here](#)  
Decision Report To Governance and Constitution Committee January 2023: Governance Arrangements for Local Community Networks [here](#)

**Note** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author