

# Overview and Scrutiny

## Neighbourhood Action Groups Review Group

### Report

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2442>

**Membership of the Review Group:** Councillors Brunning (Chair), Coventry and C Williams

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April 2013

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## 1. **Executive Summary**

This report sets out the evidence gathered by the Review Group to be considered as part of the process reviews and the recommendations to Cabinet. The purpose of the Group was to look at the current arrangements of Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) and how support from partners operated.

The Review Group had considered evidence from a wide variety of sources, with much being discussed at the Review Group Workshop held in November 2012.

The basis of the recommendations have been made surrounding the concept of a single point of contact, provided by Milton Keynes Council (the Council), to enable the successful and sustainable running of NAGs in Milton Keynes. The level of communication and access to resources, both of a financial and supporting nature, needed to be clear and easy to use. Support for NAGs needs to be on a strategic level from key partners in Milton Keynes, with the input from all the relevant stakeholders engaging with meetings where appropriate.

The Review Group presented the draft report to the Community Safety Crime and Policing Committee and the Responsible Authorities Group where the report was commended and received positive feedback on the work that had been undertaken.

## 2. **Introduction**

2.1 At the meeting held on 10 July 2012, the Community Safety, Crime and Policing Select Committee requested a review of how NAGs operate across Milton Keynes and how they assisted with the reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour. The Review was also to cover the structure and effectiveness of NAGs. It was considered that the Review would be timely due to the election of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) which took place in November 2012. The Review would allow Members to highlight the effectiveness, or otherwise, of the NAG network in Milton Keynes.

2.2 The Review Group agreed a Work Plan and Terms of Reference at its first meeting in September 2012, when Councillor Brunning was elected as its Chair. The Group looked at the existing structure of NAGs and examined alternative options if it was considered not fit for purpose. Attention was paid to those areas where there was not a fully established NAG in place and the reasons for this. A review of the partnership links was undertaken and partners invited to give their views on their experience of NAGs. There was discussions on how NAGs prioritised local issues and how they meet the needs of the community as a whole. The support for NAGs from all relevant partners and support available, including access to available funding was also considered.

## 3. **Report**

### 3.1 **Neighbourhood Action Groups**

A Neighbourhood Action Group is a multi-agency, problem-solving group that consists of volunteers from the following:

1. Residents
2. Relevant partner agencies (e.g. schools, local businesses)
3. Stakeholders (e.g. Thames Valley Police [TVP] and the Council)
4. Town and Parish Councils
5. Ward Members

NAGs focus their work around the main priorities that are identified after consultation with

the local community. Milton Keynes is currently split into 29 NAG areas.

### 3.2 **Legislation**

There is no current formal guidance on NAGs from Central Government. Previous guidance from the Home Office was rigid and the group which set these no longer existed. The Review Group felt that the timing of this Review, in parallel to the PCC elections, should provide a good opportunity to put steps in place to improve the effectiveness of NAGs across Milton Keynes. However, the Group received evidence explaining that the PCC had decided that Local Neighbourhood Policing should oversee the operation of NAGs as the Commissioner would be looking at the Thames Valley Police Area at a strategic level.

### 3.3 **Milton Keynes Council**

Safer MK represents organisations working with the community to reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and the fears people have about crime. The Partnership is made up of five key partners, including the Council and TVP, who provide strategic direction and are accountable to the public. These partners meet on a quarterly basis in the form of the Responsible Authorities Group (RAG) and make decisions around the strategic direction of the Partnership.

RAG consists of the following partners:

- Milton Keynes Council
- Thames Valley Police
- Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire and Rescue
- Thames Valley Probation
- National Health Service (NHS) Milton Keynes and Northampton

There are additional members of the partnership which includes representatives from the voluntary sector and Town and Parish Councils.

It was raised that the NAG Constitution was not easy to find on the Safer MK website. The Group recognised that the website did need updating with more effective signposting. The Constitution was part of the NAG Toolkit. The Review Group considered that it was important to make the NAG information easily accessible and as clear as possible. However, NAGs still required access to an officer for support.

### 3.4 **Safer Neighbourhoods Delivery Group**

Safer Neighbourhoods Delivery Group (SNDG) is a group which was initiated by Safer MK which was made up of key partners and representatives from the parish and town councils. SNDG had set up 29 NAGs across Milton Keynes to enable local people to address local issues.

The Chair of SNDG attended a meeting of the Review Group to provide comments on his view of the current situation of NAGs in Milton Keynes of which the main points were:

1. The handover process for Chairs of NAGs was not effective.
2. TVP had stepped back from the original formulated approach and this had allowed NAGs to operate more freely.
3. A 'one size fits all' approach to NAGs would not be suitable.
4. NAGs needed support, training, particularly for chairs, and back office support.
5. There was a lack of awareness within NAGs as to what resources were available to them.

The SNDG had conducted a survey during autumn 2012 with the aim that the feedback would provide basic information about NAGs as well as the current priorities and how they

operate and areas where more support and development was needed. The Survey results were received by the Group. Nine out of the 29 NAGs requested to complete the survey had returned responses. The Chair of this Review Group, as a member of SDNG, had worked with representatives from TVP who had offered their support to phone and email people to try to get responses from people.

From the lists that SNDG was working from - out of 28 records:

- 15 NAG chair details were incorrect
- 4 NAGs have merged – with no record of this being available
- 2 NAGs have disbanded - no record on the file

The Group considered that, while this was a poor return, it did highlight the following issues:

- Lack of central contact
- Lack of SNDG knowledge
- Lack of resident members
- Lack of partnership attendance - with Parish or Town Councillors being specifically mentioned
- Lack of knowledge on budget availability
- Lack of knowing the password to the NAG email box. (This email address is published for each NAG on the Council website)

The positive from the returned surveys was that there was good attendance at meetings from TVP and the Council.

The SNDG had undertaken to attempt to visit to each NAG at the beginning of 2013. Each group would be updated on issues such as budgets and toolkits. There was a workshop held on 5 March 2013 which was attended by a variety of representatives from NAGs. During January the SNDG had amended their Terms of Reference in line with the changing climate and requirements of the present community structures. The next phase for the SNDG would be to reach out to other areas that no longer have NAGs. Members would engage with Parish and Town Councils and resident groups to identify how the priorities for these areas are addressed, and if partnership agencies are involved. The SNDG would then review the findings to see what support was needed and offered to these groups.

### **3.5 Structure and priorities**

The Review Group discussed the process for how NAGs structured themselves. There was agreement that, while NAGs should have the same general terms of reference, it should be down to each area to interpret them. A common approach to communicating with residents and a process for identifying new priorities would be of great benefit. It was viewed that to provide all NAGs with a set of guiding principles would enable them to maintain a consistent approach without restricting the individuality of each area. Alternative forums for residents to be involved in their neighbourhood had been considered, in particular those areas who no longer had established NAGs or who had amalgamated with another forum.

### **3.6 Partnership working and resources**

Officers, Members, witnesses and partnership representatives had all raised the issue surrounding the function and purpose of NAGs and what NAGs should be aiming to achieve. Once this had been established the structure for NAGs could be identified.

The Group considered that at times there was an overlap with functions performed by NAGs and other partnerships in Milton Keynes. This issue would need to be looked at in

more detail as to what solutions could be put in place.

A workshop with a cross section of partners took place where the objectives for the groups were to conduct a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats) of NAGs.

The key themes from the workshops were that:

1. Partners from all sectors wanted to get involved with NAGs
2. NAGs should set achievable aims and priorities and manage expectations.
3. Council officer attendance for NAG meetings was thought to be an advantage to gain access to Council services.
4. The training of Chairs was key to running an effective NAG – with an effective handover process for new Chairs.
5. Communication links and a central source for support, including administrative support, were key for NAGs – and a single point of contact was viewed as necessary.
6. Sharing good practice and establishing good links between NAGs would be positive.
7. The role of the SNDG needs a more consistent approach.
8. All NAGs understand how to access available funding and resources.

### **3.7 Thames Valley Police**

The representative from TVP stated that it was important to look at the benefit to communities that NAGs enabled. When NAGs functioned fully they were effective from a TVP perspective in addressing issues of crime and disorder.

He queried the governance structure for NAGs and where the central point of contact was. He believed, after hearing the evidence gathered via the workshops and SNDG survey, that this was missing and would solve many of the problems that had been identified.

The representative considered that it was important for NAGs to have this central point of contact, knowledge of what was available and also where to access available funding and resources and how to apply for this. Once NAGs had funding they could implement projects and see tangible results. This would in turn give credibility to NAGs and stimulate further activities.

He considered that NAGs were important as they identified the priorities for their areas. This assisted TVP with the coordination of their resources. Direction had been lost recently but NAGs are an important resource for all relevant partnerships to access to get messages to communities.

It was viewed that a central point of contact officer would need to be accessible five days a week. However, it was considered that the weekly workload would only consist of two-three days' work.

An online resource was viewed as highly valuable in providing information and guidance for NAGs. It would also act as somewhere for NAGs to promote the work they were doing. It was important that the maintenance of this was considered to ensure that not only was the website fit for purpose but to have the resources to ensure this was sustainable.

The point was raised that within the Thames Valley area there could be improvements made to joined-up working between NAGs.

### **3.8 Community Safety Crime and Policing Select Committee**

The Committee received the draft report and recommendations of the Review Group. The Committee acknowledged the work done by the Group. The Committee viewed NAGs as important forums for public engagement and that this should be encouraged. Members of the Committee welcomed the acknowledgment of partnership working within the report and the wide spectrum of partners that needed to be involved.

### **3.9 Responsible Authorities Group**

The Group discussed the need to involve senior officers of the Council and other Partners. It was agreed that the Group would take this report to the Responsible Authorities Group (RAG) in March 2013 to get support on the recommendations from a wide range of senior officers.

The Chair of the Review Group presented the report and recommendations to the RAG on 21 March 2013. The Chair provided a summary of how evidence had been gathered, in particular the work completed in the workshop and the input from the SNDG and how this had influenced the findings of the Review. The Chair explained that it was the view of the Group, and evidenced by the report that a single point of contact, ideally located within the Council's Safer MK Team, would be of high value and would address many of the issues, not least the communication issues, that the current NAG structure experienced.

The RAG members welcomed the report and the clear evidence it presented. There were a number of views expressed about NAGs but over all the support for NAGs was identified as a key mechanism for resident and partnership involvement and engagement with localised issues.

A central administrative support for NAGs was viewed to be beneficial as it would provide joined up communications across NAGs, allow best practice to be shared and provide guidance and support for NAGs. It was recognised that not all NAGs required the same level of support at all times, however as Chairs of NAGs changed it was important for the support to be there. The RAG agreed in principle that a single point of contact was needed and that the responsibility for the post should be with the RAG. The TVP representatives, who had been involved with the Review process, were also present and stated that NAGs provided support to TVP and where NAGs perform well there was a significant contribution and benefit to the local area. The role of single point of contact needed further scoping but would support and encourage this to enable NAGs to flourish in Milton Keynes.

The RAG were planning to hold a Development Day to discuss the review of the Community Safety Partnership in light of work conducted by the Safer MK team and this report and role requirement would be discussed at that workshop.

## **4 Conclusion**

4.1 The appetite for NAGs in Milton Keynes was high in some areas and that partners were keen to work together to make improvements on the current make-up of NAGS. However, where other arrangements were in place instead of a NAG, it was accepted that these usually provide viable alternatives.

The Group felt that the right balance needed to be struck between providing a supporting framework and allowing NAGs the flexibility to operate in way which is suitable for their area.

Much of the evidence received made it apparent that a single point of contact for NAGs, coordinated through the Council, with the assistance of partners, was of high value in addressing many of the issues identified.

The workshop provided the Group with a good breadth of evidence from across partners in Milton Keynes. This allowed the Group to see the common trends and make recommendations taking into account the views of the majority. The main areas of concern were:

- Around the flow of communication;
- Where NAGs could access funding sources and other resources;
- The support network from NAGs; and
- The lack of coordination of this.

There was good practice in existence but no mechanism in place in order for this to be shared across the network of NAGs.

Throughout the Review Group process there was liaison with the SNDG in providing current information to the Group to assist the Review.

- 4.2 Not all areas have Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs), and for these areas it is possible that they could miss out on some of the opportunities that NAGs can provide. Some areas may be in receipt of support for dealing with a particular problem or in funding for something that may be important or critical to that area. Many of these areas were in more socially deprived parts of Milton Keynes. It was often the case though that there may be active Parish//Town Councils and these may not always be aware of what was on offer. There may also be smaller residents groups who actively try and improve the area that they represent, but may be unaware that there are opportunities for them to engage with other agencies in addressing the concerns of residents about crime, environment or other issues. It was important that this did not leave some areas of Milton Keynes with a disadvantage over areas that do have active NAGs.
- 4.3 It was important that either the Safer Neighbourhoods Delivery Group or its partner agencies and groups such as Thames Valley Police and Milton Keynes Council distribute all the relevant information that goes to NAGs at present to these organisations as well. It was also important that these groups offered training and advice on how to deal with residents concerns to enable all areas of Milton Keynes have similar opportunities and skills in assisting with such issues.
- 4.4 A programme of work needed to be arranged by the Responsible Authorities Group (RAG) or delegated by RAG to look at what organisations are working in areas of Milton Keynes that are not covered by Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) and try to gain an insight and contact details of the groups that are working in these areas to engage with them and to offer them training, support and advice, which will lead to either these organisations taking up the opportunities that NAGs can provide or to maybe even to assist in the setting up of NAGs in these locations. Some of these groups may need substantial support at the outset, and it is imperative that a system of support was set up and managed by one or more of the key partner agencies.

## 5. Recommendations

- 5.1 Strategic support for Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs)
- a. That Milton Keynes Council seek confirmation from the Police and Crime Commissioner that NAGs will be supported by Thames Valley Police.
  - b. That the membership of the Responsible Authorities Group provide strategic support and commitment to NAGs in Milton Keynes.

- c. That partners provide the support and resources needed to maintain and sustain effective NAGs.

## 5.2 Resources and Communications

- a. That Milton Keynes Council provide a single point of contact for Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs), with the single point of contact being responsible for:
  - i. The contact for the flow of communications into and from NAGs to relevant partners and residents.
  - ii. Maintenance of the website (as detailed in point 5.2b).
  - iii. Providing support and advice to NAGs.
  - iv. Providing the tools, and supporting the development of, and the publicity for NAGs.
  - v. Providing support to partners involved with NAGs.
  - vi. Supporting the process for resident involvement.
- b. That a website be developed as an online resource for Chairs, members of NAGs and for residents, with the website including:
  - i. Clear signposting for available funding and how to access this.
  - ii. The NAG toolkit.
  - iii. The NAG Constitution.
  - iv. A list of key contact details for NAGs (e.g. partners).
  - v. A list of contact details of established NAGs.
  - vi. Sources of training for NAGs – including training for Chairs.
  - vii. A library for NAGs to access showing good practice of NAGs and options for operation.
  - viii. Details of how residents can get involved and projects currently running in their area, with this section including historical projects where possible.
- c. That there be a programme, or at least access to, sources of, effective training for Chairs of NAGs, including the process for handing over responsibility to a new Chair.
- d. That documentation issued to NAG Chairs should be distributed to Ward Councillors, and Parish Council clerks. This would enable:
  - i. A point of contact for those areas with no established NAG;
  - ii. Assistance for Chairs to increasing their knowledge of the area;
  - iii. An alternative view point on any issues of potential conflict.; and
  - iv. The flow of communication to be improved to keep actions on track.

## 5.3 Governance arrangements

- a. That the role of the Safer Neighbourhoods Delivery Group be made clear to all partners and residents in order for more effective support to be provide.
- b. That a number of options for the functionality of Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) be provided to NAGs to enable them to select the most relevant method of operation for their area.

## 5.4 Partnership working

That attendance at meetings of Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) be consistent by all groups, and the following key partners should attend NAGs meeting on a regular basis (or at least when the agenda dictates):

- i. Milton Keynes Council
- ii. Thames Valley Police
- iii. Parish Council
- iv. Town Council
- v. Ward Members
- vi. The Parks Trust
- vii. Health representatives
- viii. Fire and Rescue Service representatives

5.8 The Group recognised that some points of recommendation may be, or are planned to be, undertaken by the Safer Neighbourhoods Delivery Group but felt it was important that the Cabinet be made aware of the need for this to be monitored and coordinated by the Council.

## 6. Background papers

6.1 Responsible Authorities Group meeting

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2410>

Neighbourhood Action Groups, Review Group Meeting papers

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2442>

Community Safety Crime and Policing Select Committee

<http://cmis.milton-keynes.gov.uk/CmisWebPublic/CommitteeDetails.aspx?committeeID=2412>

Police and Crime Commissioner

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/police/police-crime-commissioners/>

Localism Agenda

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topics/local-government>  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/5958/1923416.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5958/1923416.pdf)

## 7. Acknowledgements

7.1 The Neighbourhood Action Groups Review Group would like to thank Richard Solly (the former Head of Community Safety), Colin Wilderspin (Deputy Head of Community Safety) and Auzra Flynn (Head of Neighbourhood Management) for their assistance during this Review. The Group also acknowledges the input from witnesses who provided valuable information for the Review.

## 8. Members, officers and witnesses observations

8.1 The Group worked well together and discussed the topic effectively. There was a clear

aim from the beginning that the Group all had an interest in improving the effectiveness of NAGs. Members and officers all contributed to the process and meetings were well attended. The Review was well planned out and information shared in a timely manner to allow the Group to work effectively and keep on schedule.

It was viewed by some that more investigation could have been done to look at the barriers to other service areas within the Council participating and where more effective joint working could be achieved. It was thought that maybe closer questioning of NAG Chair and resident representatives could provide further insight in to how NAGs operate. Representatives from these areas attended the workshop. The workshop was well received by Members, officers and witness as a good use of time and allowing a wide section of stakeholders to contribute to the Review.

Members of the Review Group thanked the Chair of the Group for her commitment to the Group. The Group also thanked the Scrutiny Officer for the support provided.



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