



REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

EVALUATION OF LENGTHSMAN SCHEME PILOT

Purpose of report

1. This report provides Policy Committee with a preliminary evaluation of the Lengthsman scheme pilot and proposals for the future of the scheme.

Information and Advice

2. County Council agreed that a Lengthsman scheme should be piloted in Nottinghamshire as part of its Localism Policy agreed on 26 January 2012. Criteria and funding for the current pilot was approved by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Transport and Highways on 18 April 2012.
3. A Lengthsman is a person employed or contracted by a number of town and/or parish councils to carry out minor highways and environmental works locally. These works may not always be an immediate priority or cost effective for the County Council to carry out on a small scale. The work of a Lengthsman is prioritised and managed locally by the town and/or parish councils to enable them to respond quickly and cost effectively to meet local needs.
 1. A pilot has been in operation since July 2012 and aims to test and evaluate the Lengthsman concept across 4 clusters of Nottinghamshire town and parish councils. The pilot will run until 31 March 2013.
 2. Progress has been reported to Policy Committee which agreed on 12 September 2012 that an initial evaluation of the pilot would take place during November 2012 to tie in with County Council and parish and town council budget setting processes.

Summary of the Pilot Scheme

3. Sixteen individual parish and town councils are participating in the pilot scheme, collaborating as 4 clusters which vary in size from between 2 and 6 councils. These are illustrated on the map at Appendix 1.
4. Each cluster has been provided with a grant which is managed centrally by a lead town or parish council. This figure was formulated by calculating the cost a Lengthsmen working a minimum number of hours (approximately 3 per week) in each parish or town, plus on-costs. The cost equated to between £1,600 - £2,100 per participating parish or town council, with each cluster having discretion about how to best utilise the available grant in their local area.

5. It is a key principle of the Lengthsman scheme that this cost will be met 50/50 by the County Council and participating parish or town councils. However for the purposes of piloting the concept the County Council has provided 100% of the cost.
6. Three of the 4 pilot schemes have been operational since August/September 2012. The cluster comprising of Ollerton and Boughton Town Council and Rufford Parish Council is not yet fully operational due to unforeseen circumstances locally. The County Council is working closely with the cluster to move this forward.

Evaluation

7. The scheme's evaluation has focused on 4 key areas:
 - Feedback from town and parish councils who are taking part
 - An event to discuss and evaluate the pilot scheme attended by County Councillors and representatives from town and parish councils
 - A survey of residents in 2 of the pilot communities: Dunham-on-Trent and Harworth and Bircotes
 - A review of the scheme from a Highways Division perspective
8. Below outlines a brief summary of this evaluation. A further detailed overview is provided at Appendix 2.
9. The initial 3 months of the pilot have received a positive reception from both parish and town councils and Nottinghamshire residents. Overall, people value the concept of a Lengthsman and see it as a good way of delivering services at a local level. A number of parish and town councils have also indicated their interest in participating in a future scheme.
10. A wide variety of work has been carried out as part of the pilot. This has been bespoke to each community and driven by local priority setting. Examples of some of the work undertaken are demonstrated at the table in Appendix 2.
11. At the evaluation event at Rufford Mill on 13th November 2012, parish and town councils identified the following positive aspects of the pilot scheme:
 - The flexibility that has existed during the pilot scheme to 'make the scheme our own'
 - Improved local pride in the community
 - Greatly improved standard of service delivery by carrying out jobs locally
 - Ability to resolve issues locally e.g. having a quick word with local land owners about overhanging hedges and vegetation
 - Greater control and ability to prioritise jobs to suit local need
 - The training and equipment provided by the County Council to help start the scheme up
 - Effective co-ordination of the scheme by Nottinghamshire County Council

- Faster response times to resolve minor issues, with the Lengthsmen on the ground and able to resolve local issues quickly, efficiently and without any red tape
 - Levels of professionalism and breath of local knowledge provided by Lengthsmen
12. Suggestions from parish and town councils to improve any future scheme included:
- Extending the pilot scheme for an additional 12 month period to test the scheme across different seasons and weather conditions
 - Extending the Lengthsman concept to un-parished communities
 - Reviewing the way that grants to each council are calculated. There was a general feeling that giving the same amount of funding to each parish/town council regardless of size was not appropriate
 - Funding the scheme for more hours
 - Greater flexibility in the approach to clustering to reflect the wide disparity of responsibility between different town and parish councils, with the opportunity for some councils to 'go it alone'
 - Challenges facing smaller parish councils to participate in the scheme without the support of larger councils
 - A more straightforward and simple contract and guidance
13. Feedback from the Highways Division supports operating a Lengthsman scheme in the county. Within its first 3 months, the scheme has achieved a number of positive outcomes for the County Council, including:
- Improved standards of local service delivery in a cost effective way
 - Improved communication and relationships locally with town and parish councils
 - Improved public perception of the County Council
 - The Lengthsmen able to 'have a quick word locally' with landowners about issues such as overgrowing trees and vegetation to resolve locally, avoiding more expensive County Council intervention
14. Given the limited timescale over which the pilot scheme has operated, it is felt that this has not afforded a sufficient period to realise and fully evaluate all of the benefits that the scheme has to offer. An extended pilot would support more Nottinghamshire communities to test the concept using some alternative models and the County Council to assess further anticipated outcomes including:
- A reduction in the number of highways complaints in areas benefiting from a Lengthsman
 - An increase in the number of suitable minor jobs being 'passed on' from Highways Inspectors to Lengthsman

Proposals for the Lengthsman scheme in 2013/14

15. It is proposed that the pilot Lengthsman scheme is extended for an additional 12 months, to operate from 1 April 2013 until 31 March 2014, with the County Council to meet 100% of the cost.
16. An extended pilot will allow the scheme to be expanded to test different models of the concept over a wider variety of communities and seasonal conditions, in addition to realising further benefits for the County Council.
17. Taking into consideration feedback obtained during the pilot and evaluation, the proposed scheme will be based upon the following revised criteria:
 - The scheme will encourage applications from a broader cross section of communities. This will include large towns, urban areas and communities in central and southern Nottinghamshire
 - Work will be carried out with a number of elected Members who have un-parished communities, to develop and test suitable operational and funding models for those areas
 - The scheme will operate on a new funding formula: which seeks to offer different levels of grants to parish and town councils to reflect the level of work required in each area. This is outlined at Appendix 3
 - Parish and town councils will not be required to cluster to participate in the pilot. However, in recognition of the benefits of working together, councils who chose to cluster in groups of 3 or more will receive an additional remuneration. This is detailed at Appendix 3.
 - A review of County Council administration of the scheme to up-date, improve and wherever possible simplify guidance documentation and contracts
18. It is anticipated that the 2013-14 scheme could incorporate between 45 and 55 communities, compared with 16 participants in the 2012-13 pilot scheme. This aims to tests the scheme over a variety of operating models.
19. The cost of operating an extended pilot is likely to materialise at around £125,000. This can be met from the existing Lengthsman scheme budget, of which there is £470,000 remaining. This will include the cost of supplying each Lengthsman with Personal Protective Equipment, in accordance with the decision on 18th April 2012.
20. It is expected that following successful the completion of the 2013-14 pilot, there would be a requirement for participating town and parish councils to match 50% of the cost of any further Lengthsman scheme.

Other Options Considered

21. Other options considered on the future of the scheme include:
 - Concluding the Nottinghamshire Lengthsman scheme at the end of the 2012-13 pilot
 - Proceeding to fully implement the scheme in April 2013, with parish and town councils to meet 50% of the cost

22. Feedback from local residents and parish/town councils demonstrates a high level of interest in seeing the Lengthsman concept continue beyond the 2012-13 pilot scheme. Proceeding to full implementation is not considered an appropriate option at this stage. From the evaluation it is apparent that the limited timescale available to the pilot scheme has not afforded sufficient opportunity to fully test and evaluate the concept. It is felt that proceeding to implementation at this stage would be premature.

Reasons for Recommendations

23. The Council's Localism policy and Implementation Plan contain a commitment to evaluate the merits of evaluating a Lengthsman scheme based upon a pilot. The proposed extension to the pilot scheme meets this commitment, along with supporting other commitments set out in the authority's strategic plan.

Statutory and Policy Implications

24. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, the public sector equality duty, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

RECOMMENDATION/S

It is recommended that Policy Committee:

1. considers the preliminary evaluation of the Lengthsman scheme pilot, and;
2. approves to extend the pilot for an additional 12 months from 1 April 2013 until 31 March 2014, and;
3. approves the revised criteria outlined above as well as the funding arrangements set out in Appendix 3.

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Deputy Leader of the Council

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Constitutional Comments (SLB 04/01/13)

25. The Committee has authority to consider the matters set out in this report by virtue of its terms of reference.

Financial Comments (MB 07/01/13)

26. The financial implications are set out in paragraph 19 of the report.

Background Papers

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Nottinghamshire County Council Localism Policy
Survey questionnaire results from town and parish councils participating in the pilot

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All