

Consultation on the Review of Area Committees

Report of Scrutiny Chairs

Purpose

1. To outline proposals for a review of Area Committees. These proposals are subject to a consultation period from 1st October to 9th November 2012. Recommendations will then be submitted to the Cabinet and Council in November, 2012.

Background

2. Scrutiny Committee Chairs met on 18th July and 19th September 2012 to discuss the existing Area Committee arrangements and options for change. They were concerned to address three key questions:-
 - What should area/neighbourhood meetings achieve?
 - How should they operate?
 - How do we move forward to change Area Committees?

This report draws from Members' discussion on these questions and sets out a proposal for a preferred option.

3. The need to change Area Committee arrangements

There is a general consensus that while Area Committees were useful following their establishment in 2000, subsequently they have become less relevant and appropriate. Some of the concerns around Area Committees are set out below:-

- They are too bureaucratic and formal, which is off-putting for local people to become interested and involved in;
- There is insufficient time devoted to local issues, and for the public to have an opportunity to comment on, or raise items;
- Meetings are an unsatisfactory mix of community engagement and council decision making;
- As there are only three meetings a year, this makes the Area Committees insufficiently responsive to local issues. There needs to be more regular opportunities for local people to discuss issues and engage with Elected Members;
- The Area Committee boundaries are in general, too large, and smaller neighbourhood groupings would be preferable;

- They involve too much officer resource to attend each meeting;
- There is inconsistency in the links with other local events such as the PACT meetings, the Citizen First Panels etc.

4. **Purpose and Format**

It is proposed that in future, Community Forums should be centred around the democratic representational role of local ward Councillors, therefore all Directorates should ensure that ward Councillors are briefed about key issues affecting their wards. The principal focus of Community Forums should be the opportunity for local people to engage with Councillors to discuss local issues.

5. There are clear links to the Government's Localism agenda and the principles of the Localism Act 2011 in terms of effective community engagement. Therefore, while members would take a lead role in a meeting, there should be a clear focus on community engagement and members should encourage community participation.
6. To assist in developing that role, the Council will consider advice from Dudley Council for Voluntary Service (DCVS), drawing on their experience of managing community events and make use of a series of development sessions for Members before the launch of the new Community Forums.
7. In addition, information is available about recent work nationally and locally which considers the democratic role of elected members in the context of the Localism Act. This advice could be used in future Member development sessions.

8. **Geography**

The geographic coverage of the Community Forums ideally should be less than those of the Area Committees.

9. Various options have been considered, all based on existing ward geography and all returning a greater number of forum areas focussing on smaller, more local areas. The options put forward were based on 8, 9, 10 and 12 forum areas. Inevitably, some groupings are more naturally aligned than others and are easier to describe. However, any change to one boundary cannot fail to have knock-on consequences across the rest of the Borough.
10. The preferred option of Scrutiny Chairs is the 9 forum model in recognition of the need to keep to a manageable minimum the support resource required. This is shown as Appendix 1.

11. This proposal creates areas that vary between 25,044 and 47,899 in terms of whole population (2010 estimates). See Appendix 2 for details. In particular, the Scrutiny Chairs recognised that the largest Forum would be in Halesowen and noted that this represented the current Halesowen Area Committee with the exception of the Cradley and Wollescote ward. In putting forward this preferred option, Scrutiny Chairs acknowledged that consultation would be necessary with all ward Councillors and the public before a final decision is taken by the Council.

12. It is important to note that flexibility can be retained so that, for example, members and the public should be able to attend adjoining forums on matters that transcend boundaries, if they wish.

13. **Management and Resourcing**

Firstly, the new structure is to be funded from existing resources.

14. Meetings will be less bureaucratic and move away from stereotype “Council Committee” format:-

- Forums to meet in locally accessible venues (5 meetings per year);
- Focus on public forum/ward issues and area funding;
- Standard times of all meetings to be 6.30pm – 8.30pm (making it easier to publicise across the Borough);
- Removal of microphone/sound system;
- No special meetings to be called in view of increased frequency;
- Rooms to be set out informally;
- Officer attendance to be only one Senior Officer and a Democratic Services Officer to take a note of issues requiring action/response (bullet point informal minutes);
- No written committee reports;
- No separate working groups/pre-meetings (except for discussing funding applications if necessary). However, local ward meetings can take place on specific issues should ward councillors wish to arrange these.

15. However, it is important to ensure that there is an audit trail of the business of meetings and what happens to issues raised at them, otherwise there is scope for community issues to be lost with no apparent action outcome. For example, an issue might have a number of “destinations” depending on its nature, including:-

- Straightforward service response from the appropriate Directorate;
- Report to a Scrutiny Committee; a Regulatory Committee; a Cabinet Member or the Cabinet and Full Council;
- Referred to local partners such as police, fire, health;
- Bullet point Forum minutes to be reported in White Book to full Council.

16. Communication and Media

Community Forums will be publicised through all available channels such as Council website, Twitter, Facebook, media releases. Other publicity to be more targeted depending on local issues identified by ward Councillors rather than a 'blanket' approach.

17. Dates to be programmed in the Council Calendar with all Community Forums meeting in the same week (i.e. from Monday – Thursday), but ensuring that neighbouring Forums are not on the same night. This makes it easier to publicise meetings during identified 'democracy weeks' and councillors to attend neighbouring Forums as necessary.

18. Agendas to be focussed on local issues, with input from partners when necessary to avoid duplication with other meetings.

19. Venue

The proposal is to use existing community centres or venues provided by local groups, although these may need to be augmented by other premises where appropriate. However, this is a matter that can be left to local discretion.

20. The Way Forward

The Scrutiny Chairs have considered how to take this forward as follows:-

- Approve a process of consultation with Members of the Council, partner organisations and the general public during October/early November 2012 (based on the preferred option);
 - Special meeting of the Cabinet to be held 13th November 2012 with a view to making recommendations to full Council on 26th November 2012.
21. A development programme for both members and supporting officers to be arranged between December 2012 and February 2013.
22. New Forums to be launched in February 2013 (the Area Committees previously programmed in 2013 will no longer take place).
23. Build in a process of ongoing review to ensure the new arrangements remain flexible. Community Forum Chairs, Vice Chairs and Lead Officers to meet regularly (i.e. after each cycle initially) with a full review after 12 months.
24. The Scrutiny Committee Chairs, at their meeting on 19th September 2012, recommended that the proposals in this report be accepted as the preferred option for consultation.

Finance

25. Costs will be met within existing budgetary allocations.
26. Area Grant allocations will remain as £10,000 per ward. Funding to be allocated by the Director of Corporate Resources on the recommendation of each Community Forum.
27. Members' allowances payments to be retained for the Chair and Vice-Chair of the new Community Forums but these will be contained within the existing budget allocation (pending a review of the Members Allowances Scheme in 2013).

Law

28. Area Committees are currently established in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972.

Equality Impact

29. The report takes into account the Council's policies on equality and diversity.

Recommendations

30. That comments on developing the proposals in this report be submitted to the Director of Corporate Resources by the deadline of 9th November, 2012.
31. That comments and views received during the consultation period be collated and considered by the Cabinet and Council during November, 2012.

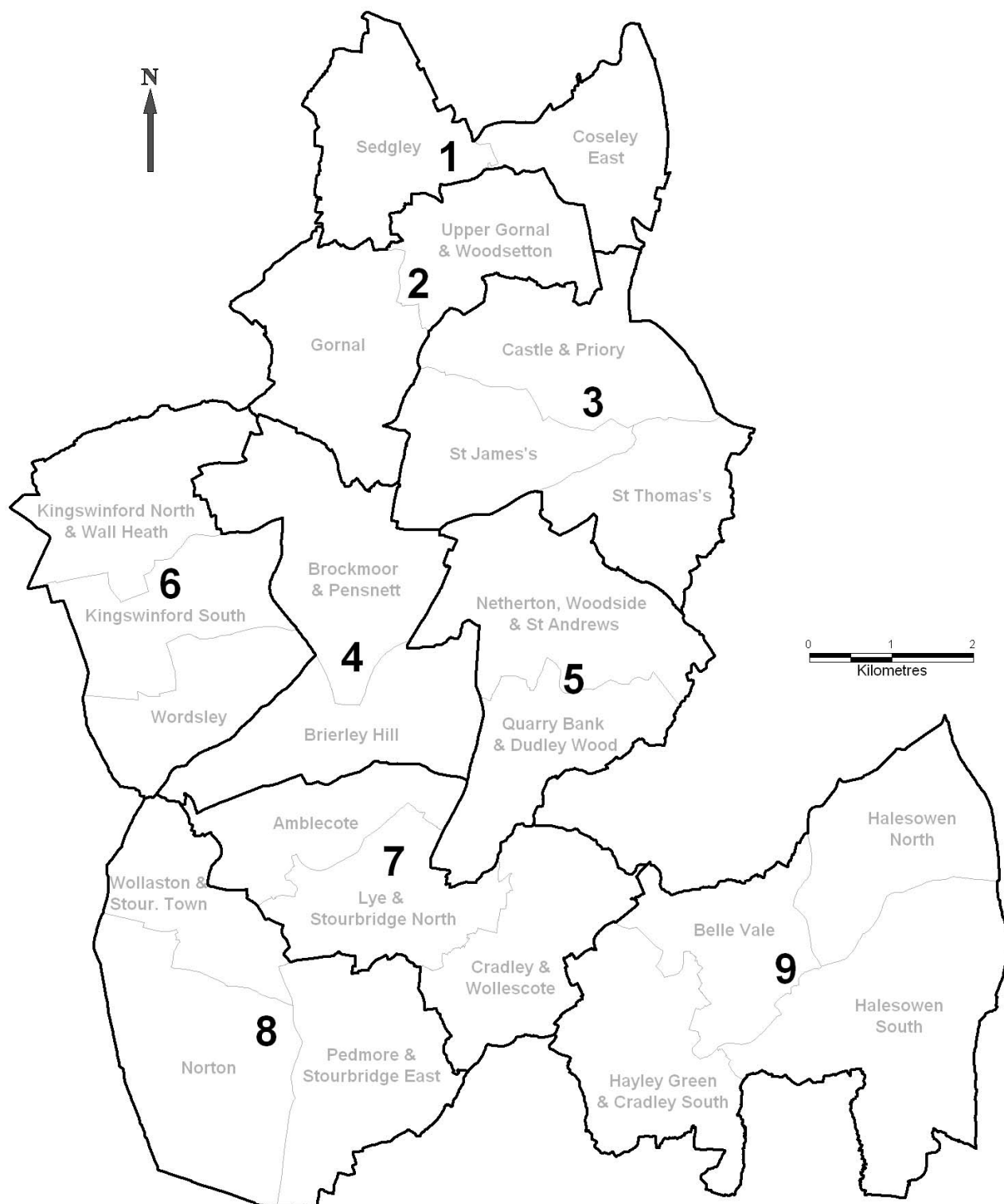
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9 Forum Model In Relation To Electoral Ward Boundaries



Source: Corporate Policy & Research, Dudley M.B.C.

Produced by: NL, 20/09/2012, Corporate Policy & Research Team, Dudley M.B.C.

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APPENDIX 2 : Indicative Population Figures For Community Areas: 9 Forum Model

Area No.	No. of Wards	Electoral Wards Covered	Population	Variance From Average Population
1	2	Coseley East / Sedgley	25,044	- 9,107
2	2	Gornal / Upper Gornal and Woodsetton	26,133	- 8,018
3	3	Castle and Priory / St. James's / St. Thomas's	41,848	+ 7,697
4	2	Brierley Hill / Brockmoor and Pensnett	26,483	- 7,668
5	2	Netherton, Woodside and St. Andrews / Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood	27,462	- 6,689
6	3	Kingswinford North and Wall Heath / Kingswinford South / Wordsley	37,597	+ 3,446
7	3	Amblecote / Lye and Stourbridge North / Cradley and Wollescote	38,568	+ 4,417
8	3	Norton / Pedmore and Stourbridge East / Wollaston and Stourbridge Town	36,328	+ 2,177
9	4	Belle Vale / Halesowen North / Halesowen South / Hayley Green and Cradley South	47,899	+ 13,748
		<i>Average Population</i>	<i>34,151</i>	

Source: 2010 Mid-Year Population Estimates, Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Notes:

1. The population figures are based on aggregations of Electoral Wards.
2. 2010 is the latest year for which Mid-Year Population Estimates are available. The scope of these Mid-Year estimates is limited to population figures by age and sex; other demographic and socio-economic data at the ward level is available but must be sourced from the 2001 Census.
3. Data from the 2011 Census at the Ward level is due to be published in the second phase of 2011 Census outputs scheduled for November 2012 - February 2013.
This will enable the data presented here to be updated to give a more accurate picture of the population.
4. The summed variance from average population may not equal the average population due to rounding.