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**Overview and Scrutiny Management Board – Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2014**

**Report of the Director of Corporate Resources**

**Review of Community Forums**

**Purpose of Report**

1. To report on the findings of the review of the community forums after the first year of operation and to consider proposals arising from the review.

**Background**

2. Arrangements for community forums were established by the Council at its meeting on 26 November 2012 following a review of the former area committees carried out by scrutiny committee chairs and a period of public consultation. In setting up the forums, the Council asked for an ongoing review of the arrangements to ensure that they remain flexible and that a full review of the operation of the community forums be undertaken after 12 months of experience.
3. The report to the council set out some of the concerns about area committees, namely:
  - 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 meeting business
  - 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. The Council also established some initial principles for the new community forums, although these were to be kept under review. In summary, these were:
    - new structure is to be funded from existing resources
    - 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 in the traditional style
    - 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.
  5. Following the Council decision, area committees ceased with immediate effect, having met for the last time during October/November 2012. The nine community forums began meeting in February 2013 and met again during April.
  6. For the 2013/14 municipal year, the largest forum (both in terms of number of wards and total population served) Belle Vale, Halesowen North, Halesowen South, Hayley Green and Cradley South community forum was split into two (Belle Vale, and Hayley Green and Cradley South forming one and Halesowen North and Halesowen South forming the other), meaning that there would be ten forums operating during 2013/14. Five meetings of each forum were included in the calendar of meetings for the year.
  7. Establishment of the community forums has been an important part of the council’s commitment to becoming a community council. Future development of the forums therefore needs to be related to the wider community council context involving initiatives such as the Big Question budget consultation, the ‘love your community’ campaign, encouraging wider community engagement

and promoting a social enterprise culture. The forums were established following advice from and a session facilitated through Dudley Council for Voluntary Service, which has expertise in community engagement and in new approaches to community participation. The aim with community forums is to move them towards greater community participation in line with the aspirations for a community council, although at this stage specific criteria to measure how successful forums have been have not yet been established.

### **Process for review**

8. In accordance with the decision of the council, the operation of the forums has been kept under ongoing review with a community forum steering group, led by Councillor Dave Tyler and the director of corporate resources, meeting briefly at the time of each round. As a result, a few changes have been introduced during the first year including the move from nine to ten forums, the introduction of an online forum involving the Deputy Leader and the attendance from the September round of an officer from Dudley Council Plus at each forum to facilitate the feedback process from forums to service areas.
9. For the annual review, a survey of elected members was carried out following the November round of meetings and feedback forms have been made available for local community attendees to complete during each round of the forum. Discussions were held with a range of current and prospective lead officers and feedback gathered from others who had attended forum meetings or had some other involvement. Meeting paperwork was reviewed, particularly 'action notes' and examples of community or other area/locality based forums were looked at in other areas (although not visited).

### **Summary of feedback**

10. The survey of members was carried out during November to December 2013 where they were asked to give their views about forums and to share any ideas for improvement. 50% of members responded in some form to the survey although did not necessarily answer all the questions. A majority of responses referred to better attendances, more participation or greater informality as positive features of the forums compared with the former area committees. There was no particular consensus amongst respondents on the things which had gone less well although a few members referred to publicity, low levels of attendance at some forum meetings or a lack of continuity with notes of meetings only available on the website. A small number of responses were not in favour of community forums and questioned their role.
11. There was a range of subjects raised as possible items for future agenda, although some members emphasised that issues ought to come from local

communities rather than the council, and a few were happy with the agenda as it stood. Others thought that the opportunity could be taken for forums to feed into wider consultations and for joining up with other agencies' consultations, such as the Clinical Commissioning Group or the police, either one-off or more regularly. Having specific local items on the agenda, rather than just an open agenda, was seen by some as a measure which would encourage participation.

12. Members used a variety of means to publicise forum meetings, usually using the posters provided or through word of mouth and day-to-day contacts. A few members used social media. Members had a large number of different suggestions for ways to improve forum meetings from better publicity, involving young people, different venues, specific agenda items, to changing boundaries. No suggestions were made about altering the frequency or times of meetings.
13. Relatively few feedback forms were completed by local people attending forum meetings during each round (although 66 have been received in total) and the majority of feedback through this mechanism has been positive. Members of the public responding have both appreciated the opportunity to raise and discuss issues with councillors and have welcomed the more informal settings of the forums. A significant number of those responding indicated that they attended other meetings in the area such as PACT (Police and Communities Together) meetings, tenants and residents meetings or councillors' surgeries.
14. Most respondents said that they would attend future forum meetings. Relatively few made specific suggestions about topics for future meetings but a number indicated that they were generally interested in local issues. On the less positive side, there have been some comments about publicity for the forums and a few attendees have expressed difficulty in hearing what was going on.
15. Feedback from officers in attending and supporting forums has been incorporated into the rest of the review report looking at particular aspects of the forums.

### **Attendances**

16. Attendances from the community have varied quite considerably from forum to forum and meeting to meeting, with some meetings attracting good numbers but others few. Overall, attendances have averaged around 15 per forum for each cycle of meetings during the first year of operation (i.e. 5 rounds of meetings). The profile of those attending, while there has been no formal monitoring of attendees, has largely been in the older age range with people from white groups predominating at most forum meetings. The choice of venue

has had some impact on attendance, although there is no clear correlation between types of venues, or location, and numbers of attendees. The sixth round of meetings (January/February 2014) saw an increase in average attendance over the first 5 rounds to 17 and a narrowing of the gap between the best and worst attended forums.

### **Venues**

17. Democratic Services work with forum chairs to identify appropriate local venues to host meetings. All forums have met in a number of different venues, particularly community centres, church halls and schools, across the wards which make up each forum. This has been seen as positive in that different geographical communities have had the opportunity to attend a local meeting in their area but there is clear evidence that people are less likely to attend the forum if it is not being held within their ward or locality.
18. The use of one or two venues, such as the Cornbow Hall, Halesowen, has received some adverse comments, and these may not be used in the future. There is also the opportunity to think more creatively about venues, subject to cost constraints, which should help to attract different communities or age groups to attend. It is proposed to keep venues used under review particularly to identify alternatives to those which have been used and proved less successful.
19. Some feedback has indicated that it is not always immediately clear to people turning up at venues that there is a forum meeting taking place that evening. It is proposed to signpost meetings better and to improve liaison with venue owners/occupants in advance of meetings to encourage them to play a greater role in publicising meetings.

### **Forum boundaries**

20. As previously noted, a small number of elected members made comments about changing forum boundaries. However, in general, there seems satisfaction that the forum boundaries strike the right balance between closeness to local communities and practicality/cost. All forums cover either two or three wards and populations of between 24,332 and 42,346 (average of 31,293) (source 2011 Census). Some wards will always fit more closely than others and there will be positives and negatives about every possible alignment. It is proposed to maintain the current boundaries for the foreseeable future, but to keep them under review to see if other proposed changes tackle some of the identified issues of lower attendances in some areas and reluctance to travel far to meetings.

### **Communication and media**

21. Forum meetings are advertised widely through channels such as the council's website, media releases, the council's e-bulletins, Dudley Together, social media and amongst council employees. Elected members are also expected to spread the word through their many contact networks and are supplied with posters to distribute and display. Given the financial situation, there is a limited budget available for publicity. However, it is proposed to make some improvements to the forums page on the council's website, publish an annual calendar of forum meetings and introduce an inbox for people to send in topics for meetings. There should also be a notice on the entrance to the venue on the evening of the meeting - venues are asked to display a poster in advance of the meeting, although don't always do so - and host organisations could include mention of the meeting in any newsletters or forthcoming events bulletins. Some more focussed publicity will be looked at around the less well attended forums.

### **Social media**

22. Alongside the September round of meetings the first online community forum was held with the Deputy Leader responding to questions and issues posted on Facebook. This proved to be popular and a commitment was made to hold a similar online forum to accompany each round of community forum meetings. Subsequent online forums have also been very successful and have received national media coverage. A number of other local authorities have contacted the council as a result as they are interested in running similar online forums themselves.
23. Some members indicated that they used social media such as Facebook and Twitter to publicise the forums. Embracing use of Twitter at forum meetings would be one way of encouraging more participation particularly amongst different age groups and those who are unlikely to or don't have the time to attend meetings.

### **Meeting agendas**

24. Agendas for forum meetings have taken the same open format to encourage local residents to raise any issues that they wish and to move away from the meetings looking or feeling like council committee meetings. No reports are taken to meetings other than on funding applications. A significant proportion of attendees, whilst welcoming the open opportunity to raise particular issues on the evening, would like to have some scope for particular topics relevant to local communities to be specified on the agenda and advertised in advance. This is likely to encourage more people to attend and also to move meetings away from being another opportunity to raise problems or concerns which

could be better directed through other channels such as councillors' surgeries, online reporting or the customer feedback process.

25. It is proposed that lead officers and community forum chairs/members liaise with local communities to identify local issues which can form the basis for a pre-planned and advertised item on the agenda. To date, many of the issues most commonly raised are around services which fall within the responsibility of the Directorate of the Urban Environment. This is no doubt due to the high visibility and the universality of these services. Appendix 1 shows a 'word cloud' of key words which most often featured in the action notes from the first five rounds of community forum meetings by way of illustration.
26. Attendees should be encouraged at forum meetings to identify topics which are of significance to local communities for discussion at future meetings. There are a range of participatory techniques which can be used to support this process and indeed to help where appropriate in moving forward with the support of local communities towards a more involving form of engagement. It is proposed to trial these at one forum initially.
27. Alongside this it is proposed to retain the open parts of the agenda as these are clearly welcomed by members and local communities to raise other issues of concern or interest to them. Some more minor changes can readily be made to forum agendas to make them look less like council committee meetings.

#### **Relationship with other bodies**

28. Representatives from some other public bodies, such as the police, the fire service and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), have attended some forum meetings although not on a consistent basis. Across the Dudley Local Policing Unit (covering the borough), PACT (Police and Communities Together) meetings are held according to local circumstances with some neighbourhood teams holding monthly meetings and some holding them less frequently. Police surgeries are generally also held between PACT meetings, although again the frequency does vary between areas. There is some occasional overlap between issues raised at police meetings and at community forums but police meetings are often held on a much more frequent and at a more localised level than community forums. There may be some scope for occasional joint meetings to be held where there are issues which would benefit from a joint local community, police and council response. The new police and crime board could potentially help to manage this relationship.
29. CCG representatives attended most community forums during the November cycle. In most cases this was without advance notice to the chair and lead

officer. CCG representatives took a wide range of different approaches in attending the meetings from making brief reference to current proposals and consultations to spending a sizeable proportion of the meeting in explaining changes in local health care provision, such as the proposed closure of the walk-in centre at Holly Hall. At some forums this appears to have been welcomed and at others less so.

30. For the future, it is proposed to put arrangements on a clearer footing. CCG or other statutory agency representatives should be welcome to attend forum meetings to make reference, for example, to consultation exercises and to encourage people to attend other events or to get involved. However, if they would like to use forums as specific vehicles for consultation then this should be agreed in advance and identified as something local people would like to see on the agenda.

### **Responding to issues raised**

31. If attendees at forum meetings wish to get a personal response to issues they raise which members or officers aren't able to address on the night, they are asked to complete a form with the details of the request and their contact information. A representative of Dudley Council Plus now attends to help with this process and to ensure that forms are filled in so that the request and contact details are clear. The form is then recorded by Dudley Council Plus within 48 hours, an acknowledgement sent to the customer and the issue forwarded to the relevant directorate contact to deal with and respond to the customer alongside feedback channelled through other routes.
32. In due course use of tablet devices may help in the forum feedback process but the cost of using these will need to be covered by efficiency savings found elsewhere in the process.

### **Lead officers and officer attendance**

33. One of the key requirements in establishing forums was for a significant reduction in officer time required to attend and support them compared with area committees. With the increase in numbers of meetings of forums (50 a year in total) compared with area committees (15 a year), this has been achieved by limiting officer attendance at forum meetings, initially to a lead officer and a democratic services officer.
34. Most lead officers have been at assistant director level but in setting up the arrangements it was always planned to hand on lead officer responsibility to other senior managers at below assistant director level. These managers have been going through the first stage of the council's new leadership development



programme, launched in early 2013. Potential new lead officers have shadowed existing lead officers and have been provided with training and support sessions to enable them to take over the role.

35. Lead officers have seen their role as providing support to the chair and playing a role in facilitating the meeting, alongside dealing with the funding side of the forum. Some lead officers indicated that they thought that some more clarity of their role as the forums developed would be welcomed.
36. The only other regular officer attendance at meetings has been a democratic services officer to take a note of issues raised at the meetings. Notes of meetings are made available on the committee management information system (CMIS) and submitted to council in the white book, but are not circulated at forum meetings. Forums are not formally constituted committees of the council so do not require a formal record. There is scope to make the forum notes less formal looking and more like the bullet points originally intended. Some of those who gave feedback during the research queried why the notes of the meeting were not circulated at the next meeting to provide some continuity.
37. From the September round of meetings most have also had an officer from Dudley Council Plus present to assist attendees, who wish to raise service requests and who want a personal response, to complete forms. On a small number of occasions an additional officer with specialist knowledge has attended an individual meeting in order to address a specific issue which was going to be raised.
38. It is proposed to hold further occasional sessions, as needed, for lead officers to support them in developing into the role. Formalising the role and the required competencies for lead officers would be helpful, alongside clarifying where within the organisation support is available to enable them to fulfil their role. Lead officers should also have ongoing opportunities to share what has worked well with the forum they support. The roles of other officers attending also needs to develop in line with the development of the forums, to widen them from the more traditional approach, and it is proposed to provide some support in helping them to do so.
39. In line with the proposal to have a specific item on forum agendas, there will be a need at times to have additional specialist officer attendance at some meetings but this will need to be kept to a minimum.

### **Elected members**

40. Training has been offered to elected members who chair meetings. Some chairs may appreciate a short briefing note on items to mention in introducing forum meetings. A little more information could also be included on the meeting agenda.
41. Some comments were made during the research about further developing the relationship between chairs and lead officers for individual forums. In order to assist with this and to help establish some clearer success criteria for each forum, it is proposed that prospective chairs of individual forums meet prior to the start of the first round of forums in the next municipal year with the new and past lead officer for their forum to review the past year, to map out the top three priorities for the forum for the coming year, identify potential agenda items which can be shared with local communities and set out an improvement agenda for the particular forum. Each forum should aim for both good levels of attendance and high levels of participation from attendees and chairs and lead officers may wish to assess the forum's current position using the model set out at Appendix 2.

### **Funding**

42. Previous funding allocations to area committees were carried over to the community forums on a ward by ward basis. Most forums have received a good number of requests for funding although some forums have had meetings where no applications have been received. It is felt by some that the application forms are a little onerous for small community organisations to complete when applying for small amounts of funding. It is proposed therefore that application forms will be simplified for the new municipal year both to help in their completion but also to make it easier for members to access the relevant information, whilst ensuring that appropriate probity arrangements are still in place.
43. Some elected members and officers have expressed some concerns about the funding guidelines, both in terms of who can apply and receive funding and in terms of administration. It is proposed that the guidelines be adjusted to clarify that forum funding should only be available to community organisations based in the borough, parent organisations rather than, for example, individual teams within a sports club, should submit applications, and to introduce a deadline for submission to particular forum meetings (any urgent applications being dealt with between meetings, usually by email between the lead officer and forum members). It should also be made clear when organisations are bidding to all or a number of forums.

44. It is proposed to retain the arrangements whereby members consider applications at forum meetings and make recommendations on funding to the director of corporate resources. Some attendees at forum meetings have questioned why only elected members are allowed to decide which applications to recommend for funding. However, the steering group feels that as councillors are democratically elected as local representatives they are accountable for and have the legitimacy to make these decisions. Applicants should, though, continue to be encouraged to attend the meeting where their application is being considered and to speak in its support. Some small changes can be made to the website and the agenda encouraging community organisations to make applications. Funding reports should, as originally agreed, be less formal and not in standard committee format.

## **Conclusions and summary of proposals**

45. Although clear success criteria were not specifically identified when community forums were established, there is a general view that they have proved to be a good step forward from the former area committees and have provided a much better opportunity for engagement between local communities and the council through the local ward members.
46. There is no doubt that some forums have proved more successful than others, evidenced in part by attendances, but also through other feedback.
47. A longer term evaluation of community forums would need to be undertaken in the wider context of the developing community council, given that community forums are but one aspect of this, and against the backdrop of reductions in funding, transformation of the way the council provides services, changing community expectations and broader work on community engagement such as that being undertaken by staff on the leadership development programme.
48. The identification of top priorities and an improvement agenda for each individual forum will help in measuring the success of the forums in the future.
49. **Summary of proposals:**
- Review the venues used for meetings to remove those which have been less successful and look more widely at venues which might attract a broader attendance (subject to cost) (paras 17, 18)

- Maintain current forum boundaries, but keep them under review, along with the frequency of meetings (five times a year) and times (6.30 - 8.30 pm) (paras 12, 20)
- Make some improvements to the forum web page, provide an inbox for topic suggestions and ensure improved publicity at the meeting venue (para 21)
- Continue with the online forum at the time of each round of community forums (para 22)
- Use of Twitter to be encouraged at forum meetings (para 23)
- Meeting agendas to feature a specific topic advertised in advance alongside the existing open items (paras 24-27)
- Pilot participatory techniques at one forum initially (para 26)
- Better manage the relationship with other statutory organisations inputting into forum meetings; explore the option for occasional joint meetings where the local community wishes (paras 28-30)
- Officer attendance be kept to a minimum but the need for additional specialist officer attendance be accepted where a particular item is on the agenda (para 39)
- Meeting paperwork and action notes to be less formal still (paras 27, 36, 44)
- Ongoing training and support to be provided to lead and other officers and forum chairs/vice-chairs, as appropriate (para 38, 40)
- Chairs and lead officers to establish priorities and an improvement agenda for individual forums at the start of the municipal year (para 41)
- Application forms and funding guidelines to be amended (paras 42-44).

50. This review report was considered and agreed by the community forum steering group which met on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

51. A joint session with forum chairs, vice-chairs, lead officers and democratic services officers was held on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2014 to present the findings of the annual review and to obtain feedback on the proposals. Points raised have been reflected in the report.

## **Finance**

52. Costs of community forums have been contained within past budgetary allocations for area committees. The general fund expenditure on the former area committees and community forums over the past 6 financial years is set out below. The reductions take account of decisions taken by the Council in

previous years to reduce printing and publicity and to cease the provision of refreshments. In addition, the frequency of the former area committees was reduced to 3 per year. The administrative arrangements for community forums have been much 'lighter touch' and have involved the removal of the sound/microphone system, the further reduction in the production/printing of paperwork and the booking of smaller community venues.

2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
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£37,619	£35,641	£23,345	£10,099	£6,544	£4,205 (projected)
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53. Area funding allocations currently remain at £10,000 per ward per annum with unspent allocations from previous area committees carried forward into the community forums.
54. No separate special responsibility allowances are paid to the chairs and vice-chairs of community forums.

## **Law**

55. Area committees were established under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972. Community forums are not formally constituted committees and do not fall under the provisions of the Act.

## **Equality impact**

56. A number of the recommendations in the report are intended to ensure that community forums are of interest to and attract people from different backgrounds in the local area. Embracing social media gives opportunities to people who are unable or do not usually attend meetings to have a say, as well as attracting more younger people to take part. Reviewing venues used will help to identify the ones which are most accessible to and appropriate for people from different communities.

## **Recommendation**

57. That the Management Board considers the proposals set out in the report and recommends their adoption to the Cabinet or Council as appropriate.



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## **List of Background Papers**

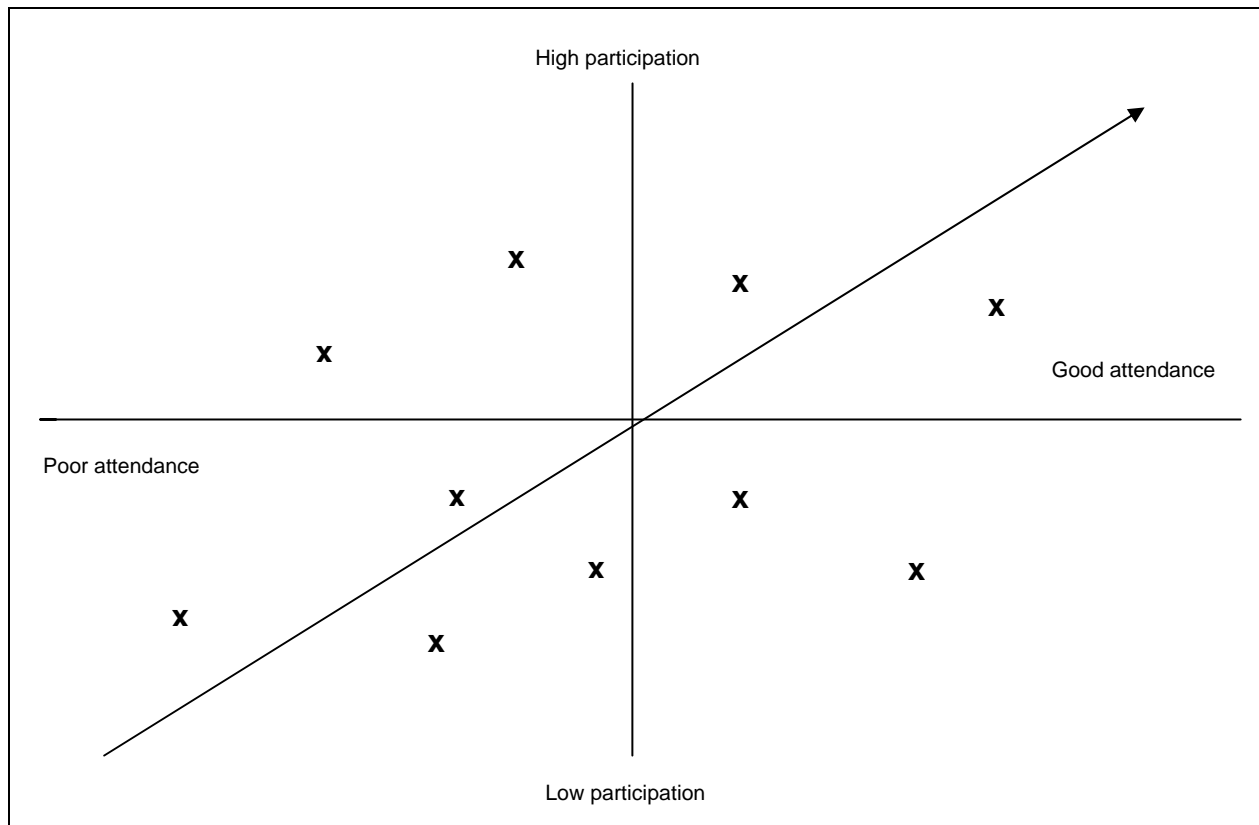
Community Forum meeting paperwork and feedback forms  
Forum steering group agendas and minutes

Appendix 1. Word cloud showing key words most commonly featured in community forum action notes (February – November 2013)



## Appendix 2. Improvement model for community forums

Each community forum should aim for good attendance levels and high rates of participation from attendees.



Note: The positions of community forums denoted by x are hypothetical and not based on any assessment of individual forums carried out during the review