

## **Meeting of the Council – 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2012**

### **Report of the Cabinet**

### **Review of Area Committees**

#### **Purpose**

1. To invite the Council to consider proposals for a review of Area Committees. This report is based on the recommendations from Scrutiny Chairs and the proposals approved at a special meeting of the Cabinet on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2012.

#### **Background**

2. In accordance with the decision taken at the annual meeting of the Council on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2012, the Scrutiny Committee Chairs met on 18<sup>th</sup> July and 19<sup>th</sup> 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 recommendations following the consultation process.

#### **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 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. **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 is considering advice from Dudley Council for Voluntary Service (DCVS), drawing on their experience of managing community events and making 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 can be used in the future Member/Officer 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 following consultation is the 9 forum model in recognition of the need to keep to a manageable level the support resource required. This model is shown as Appendix 1.

11. This proposal creates areas that vary in terms of whole population (2010 estimates). See Appendix 2 for details. The consultation process took place during October and closed on 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2012. A summary of the responses received is set out in Appendix 3.
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 so 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). In the New Year we will be launching a leadership development programme aimed initially at senior managers. Once managers have completed the first phase of development they will become part of a talent pool where they will be expected to undertake further practical development through working on real projects, shadowing, short term secondment etc. This will include shadowing or working alongside an Assistant Director at a Community Forum with a view to taking on this role in the future;
  - 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.

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 the ‘White Book’ to full Council.

16. **Communication and Media**

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

17. Dates will be programmed in the Council Calendar with all Community Forums meeting during an identified fortnight, but ensuring that neighbouring Forums are not on the same night as far as possible. This makes it easier to publicise meetings during identified ‘democracy weeks’ and councillors can attend neighbouring Forums as necessary. A proposed schedule of dates for meetings is set out in Appendix 4 for the remainder of this municipal year.

18. Agendas will 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 within the budgets available.

20. **The Way Forward**

The Cabinet considered recommendations at its special meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2012. The recommendations set out in paragraphs 28 onwards are submitted for consideration by the Council.

21. If the Council endorses the new Community Forums, it is proposed to undertake a development programme for both members and supporting officers in the coming months. The new Forums will be launched in February 2013 (the Area Committees previously programmed in 2013 will no longer take place).

22. The future arrangements will build in a process of ongoing review to ensure the new arrangements remain flexible. Community Forum Chairs, Vice Chairs and Lead Officers will meet regularly (i.e. after each cycle initially) with a full review after 12 months.

### **Finance**

23. Costs will be met within existing budgetary allocations.
24. Area Grant allocations will remain as £10,000 per ward. Funding is to be allocated by the Director of Corporate Resources on the recommendation of each Community Forum.
25. 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**

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

### **Equality Impact**

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

### **Recommendations**

28. That the outcome of consultation be noted and the issues raised be taken into account in the implementation and ongoing review of the proposals.
29. That 9 Community Forums be established, on the basis outlined in this report, to replace the existing Area Committee structure and that the Community Forums maintain a clear focus on community engagement and participation.

30. That the revised structure and area arrangements be funded from existing resources.
31. That the proposed dates of meetings of the Community Forums for the remainder of the municipal year be as set out in Appendix 4 and that the meetings of Area Committees previously programmed in 2013 be no longer proceeded with.
32. That the Council nominate Members to serve as the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Community Forums initially with effect from the first meeting in February, 2013 until the annual meeting of the Council in May, 2013.
33. That, pending a review of the Members Allowances Scheme in 2013, annual Special Responsibility Allowances be paid to the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Community Forums and it be noted that these payments will be contained within the existing budget allocation for the allowances currently paid to the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Area Committees.
34. That the payment of Special Responsibility Allowances to the existing Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Area Committees cease with effect from the launch of the new Forums on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2013 and the Members Allowances Scheme, as set out in the Constitution, be amended accordingly.
35. That the Director of Corporate Resources, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, be authorised to determine the reallocation of any unspent Area Committee local area budgets to the Community Forums on a ward by ward basis in due course.
36. That the Director of Corporate Resources be authorised to organise development sessions for Members and Officers and to determine any other consequential arrangements to ensure the implementation of the Community Forums from February, 2013.
37. That the revised area arrangements be the subject of an ongoing review to ensure that they remain flexible and a full review of the operation of the Community Forums be undertaken after 12 months of experience.



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**Leader of the Council**