

**REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES**

**SUMMARY OF ISSUES RAISED DURING CONSULTATION**

The following is a summary of the key issues raised during consultation.

Copies of the minutes of meetings and individual responses/replies are available from the Director of Corporate Resources.

**AREA COMMITTEES**

**Central Dudley Area Committee**

- Need to publicise the new Forums effectively.
- Consultation period ceased on 9<sup>th</sup> November to enable new structure to be considered by Cabinet and Council in November 2012.
- Area Committees will cease when new Forums are launched.

**North Dudley Area Committee**

- Need to publicise the new Forums effectively.
- Use existing community newsletters to publicise meetings.
- Answers to questions raised should be given immediately. If they cannot be replied to straight away, a response should be sent within 48 hours.
- Speedier action should be the priority rather than additional meetings.
- More meetings will increase pressure on people to attend. Area Committees could be retained but increased to 5 per year as before.
- Meetings should be less confrontational.

**Stourbridge Area Committee**

- Questionable as to whether the proposals address the 'key questions' ie: what should the meetings achieve?
- Although the aims of the review are accepted, doubts were expressed as to whether this would be achieved in practice and within the existing budget.
- Questionable as to whether the proposals will be achieved from the existing 'cost envelope'
- Forum boundaries do not reflect natural communities.
- Equality issues arise as a result of the microphone systems being lost.
- The statement that Area Committees are an 'unsatisfactory mix of community engagement and Council decision-making' is a misunderstanding. Area Committees only make decisions on grants and Trust issues.
- Forum meetings should meet the needs of local communities discussing matters of interest to the community. The Chair has a key role to play in transacting the proceedings in this regard.
- Proposals can be changed if they are not working.
- Meetings should be community focussed.
- There is no consensus that Area Committees are now "less relevant and appropriate."
- Proposal for 50 meetings is a large increase and will not save money

- Councillors can attend neighbouring meetings at present so this point is not relevant.
- Concerns over how the proposed changes will be managed.
- More work will fall on 2<sup>nd</sup> tier officers and this will cause difficulties given current workloads.
- The proposals are a genuine commitment to consultation.
- Hope to improve communication with communities.
- Members already meet with communities in a number of ways and there will be additional costs associated with extra meetings.
- No consideration given to the adequacy of transport arrangements.
- Will Area grant allocations remain at £10,000 per ward?
- Scepticism as to what will be achieved; meetings may remain bureaucratic, Council led and residents are unlikely to get answers to queries within 48 hours.
- Concerns over various issues concerning the future management of the Ernest Stevens Trusts.

### **Halesowen Area Committee**

- General agreement that changes are required to the existing Area Committees.
- Queried how the proposals can be achieved within the existing budget.
- Queried how money was going to be saved by the introduction of the proposals which would inevitably mean an increase in the numbers of Chairs and Vice-Chairs.
- Concern over the reduction in Officers attending the meetings and the ability for responses to be given.
- Overall there would be an increase in Officers attending meetings due to the substantial increase in meetings.
- Concerns over removal of microphones.
- Special Responsibility Allowances for Chairs and Vice-Chairs could be withdrawn and consideration should be given to offering Chair or Vice-Chairmanship to someone other than a Councillor.
- Layouts of the new boundaries are unfair.
- Councillors do not have the authority to make decisions as decisions are made by Cabinet Members and Officers. The Council should consider returning to the former Committee System.
- Forums are unnecessary for Councillors to communicate with the community, as there are other avenues such as emails and attending Members' surgeries to keep in touch.
- Reference made to the proposal to create 2 Forums covering Belle Vale/Halesowen North and Hayley Green & Cradley South and Halesowen South.

NB: Following the Halesowen Area Committee, a response has been received from the Chair of the Area Committee concerning the possible retention of the 4 Halesowen wards continuing to meet together. If the area is 'split' then we should group Halesowen North and South and Belle Vale & Hayley Green & Cradley South. He also questions the grouping of Cradley & Wollescote with a Forum that includes Amblecote but not Pedmore.

### **Brierley Hill Area Committee**

- Generally welcomed the review as Area Committees are not engaging the general public.
- Police should be involved with the Forum meetings.
- Questioned the continuing payment of Chair and Vice Chair allowances.
- Doubts expressed that the 50 Forum meetings can be met from the current budget.
- Councillors to be able to raise questions on the night rather than having to contact Officers beforehand in order that full responses can be given on the night of the meeting.
- Forums to be well publicised in order to promote public attendance.
- Forums to be subject to ongoing review to ensure that they work effectively.
- Forums not to be solely relied upon for public consultation.
- Local health representative to be present at the Forums.

### **INSPIRING DEMOCRACY SESSION**

An event was organised by Dudley Council for Voluntary Services on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2012 to facilitate a discussion with voluntary, community and faith groups on the proposals for a review of the Area Committee structure. This was a positive session and a report from the session is available for Members on request from the Director of Corporate Resources.

### **SUMMARY OF ISSUES RAISED IN INDIVIDUAL REPONSES**

1. Why not use PACT meetings as the local community forum?  
Area Committee meetings should be used to promote and engage the whole community – changes needed to the way Area Committees operate  
Why do we need more meetings? Use the existing meetings more effectively.  
Splitting area grant allocations could mean that a ward might miss out or be disadvantaged.  
There are issues and concerns relating to the future management of the Ernest Stevens Trust  
Any increase in cost, time and resources is not necessary or justifiable.
2. Members of the public should be entitled to speak on all items: not just Public Forum. Meetings include too many Council business items – not relevant to local people.  
There should be more meetings per year to give more members of the public an opportunity to attend.  
Meetings should alternate on different days of the week.
3. Concerns expressed relating to the move of Cradley and Wollescote ward from Halesowen to meet with wards in Stourbridge. Cradley has a greater affinity with the rest of Halesowen than it does with Stourbridge.

4. Although the meetings will be less formal, an agenda with key points likely to be discussed at the meeting would be helpful to generate interest.
5. The Council needs to be aware of its obligations under the Equality Act to ensure participation of disabled members of the public in the future arrangements.
6. Consideration to be given as to how land and property matters are dealt with through the new structures. Ensure ward Councillors are kept informed of matters affecting their ward.
7. Congratulations on the recognition that reform is needed. However, the Council should consider holding ward surgery 'workshops' to hear residents concerns. Smaller groups should compensate for removal of microphones, however, we need to take account of people with disabilities.
8. Objection to Cradley being moved from Halesowen to be joined with Lye, Stourbridge and Amblecote.
9. The new Forums should concentrate on local issues but the structure does not reflect 'local' areas (ie: natural communities). Some of the areas are too large and people would have a way to travel.

Question why 5 meetings a year? 6 meetings would be held bi-monthly, which would give an easily remembered pattern.  
6.30pm is too early to start - suggest 7.00pm is a more practical start time, and would allow for travelling.

Communication of dates, times, and locations of meetings through media releases should include advertisements in local press? Not everyone has the internet. Meetings and locations of meetings within the Forum area should be rotated during the year so everyone has a chance to attend at least some meetings.

10. Agree with the ending of the Area Committee system, however, consideration should be given to the positioning of Cradley as this is split as part of separate wards. Historically, Cradley has close links with Halesowen.
11. Safeguards needed to ensure that valuable meetings continue and that the majority of the time spent on these meetings will be questions and answers to members of the public. Need to ensure that meetings do not revert back to being overly bureaucratic.

There must be some form of agenda otherwise it has the potential to become a free for all.

Ceasing PACT meetings would be a backwards step for the community.

Any cost savings should be reflected in council tax.