

**To: Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee**

**Date: 28<sup>th</sup>. November 2012**

**Report of: Area Forum Review Panel**

**Title of Report: Area Forum Start Up Review -2011-2012**

### **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present the views of the Scrutiny Review Panel on the Operation of Area Forums in the first year

**Key decision? No**

**Scrutiny Lead Members: Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson**

**Policy Framework: Stronger, Active Communities**

**Recommendation(s):**

**For the Scrutiny Committee to consider the report findings and recommendations and decide how it wishes to take the review forward.**

### **Introduction**

1. The Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee set a Review Panel (RP) to consider the operation of Area Forums. These were agreed by Council within new democratic arrangements starting in May 2011. The RP consisted of Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson. This was expanded after interim consideration to also include Councillors Campbell and Sinclair.
2. The original intention had been to report in late 2011 but the RP decided that they needed to observe more meetings to see progress and development before they gave a view. On the presentation of this view the Committee asked for further opinions to be taken. This has now happened and conclusions and recommendations have been adjusted on the basis of these.

3. The observations detailed in the body of the report are based on research done by the RP in 2011/2012, no meetings have been observed in this Council year.
4. The scrutiny committee did not set any criteria for the RP to work within so the information below contains not only the opinions of the RP but the method used to decide on the criteria for review.
5. The RP would like to thank all those officers and councillors involved.

### **How the RP started**

6. Within the outline of new democratic arrangements agreed by Council, Area Forums were set up as flexible tools to better contribute to community engagement and leadership through locally elected representatives. It was envisaged that the form and function of these arrangements would vary to fit the needs of the local area and the knowledge of local members about what is likely to work.
7. Specifically the agreement of Council was that Area Forums would be used as a community engagement tool to:
  - Engage communities to develop local plans and policy interventions that seek to address local issues
  - Support active neighbourhood management
  - Allow residents and communities to raise local priorities and discuss and take forward actions needed
  - Form local partnerships to include councillors, schools, businesses, community leaders and communities
  - Help the Council to better understand local priorities
8. To give an informed and useful opinion the RP decided it needed to have some criteria around which to judge the success of operation in the first year and in this wanted to recognise that Area Forums are only one part of improvements in community engagement and leadership. Given the flexible nature of the concept the RP members decided to attend the “start up meetings” for each Area Forum to listen to what councillors said were their ambitions for their Area Forum and in doing this hoped to be able to select a set of criteria that would fit with the ambitions of all members.
9. When listening to councillors at their start up meetings some common aims did emerge. These were not always expressed as aims but were implicit in what was said and discussed. The common features were:
  - Councillors need to act as “community leaders” to bring forward relevant/significant issues for their communities. Communities need to be actively involved in this process.

- Issues need to be discussed in the right place, with the right people and groups and at the right time.
- To deliver on community leadership. The issues/themes discussions need to be problem solving in nature resulting in options and conclusions rather than just “talking shops”.
- Options and conclusions need to be taken forward to produce change and resolution for communities and if this cannot happen then clear; open and honest reasons should be available quickly and appropriately.
- Follow up and championing of options and recommendations by councillors and officers alike is essential.
- City Council officers (across all services) need to be supportive of this form of engagement and how it will relate to their service.
- Relationship building across partners and community groups within areas is important to achieve a willingness to trust, engage, and be part of problem solving. Councillors in their areas are key to developing these relationships.

Other issues were raised but the list above was mentioned by all.

10. Area Forums are only one tool to improve community engagement and leadership. To successfully measure improvements in this area we would not be looking at Area Forums in isolation. We would instead focus on changes in community actions, attitudes, perceptions and confidence. These things are likely to take a long time to develop. The RP view of Area Forums is therefore only a part of this and provides for a step along the way.
11. Using the common aims voiced by councillors the RP set a framework within which to make judgements on the success of Area Forums and decided early on that these could not be measured in a quantitative way instead the RP would have to attend meetings to observe, talk, listen and inquire.
12. It is worth emphasising at this point the common “offer” at start up to councillors, in their area groupings, by the organisation was to deliver the concept through cross area meetings which officers would support no more than 4 times a year.

### **Framework for judgements**

13. What the RP decided to look for:

- **Are the right things on the “agenda”?**

*How themes are developed, by that we mean what happens behind the Forum with councillors to engage communities so they have an active part in setting or guiding what is discussed*

- **Are councillors leading and acting rather than talking and complaining?**

*Are all the appropriate people around the table; is information and support available to enhance discussion; are discussions brought to options/conclusions and converted into actions; is ownership taken for those actions*

- **Are councillors making a difference?**

*Is leadership taken in assuming responsibility for actions; who takes the lead (councillor, officer or both); how are communities kept informed and engaged; what is actually different; and has the Forum produced meaningful outcomes?*

14. The RP attended nine Area Forum meetings and all start up meetings to report against this framework. The detail of opinion is available to councillors on request. Overall views and findings are given below.

## Findings

15. Within the principle of flexibility and doing what works in an area, Area Forum meetings varied in their style but were broadly viewed within four types:

- Individuals and groups invited around a topic or issue (problem solving).
- Facilitated community discussion around a specific topic.
- Workshops around a topic or issue
- Traditional agenda led meeting run loosely in the traditional committee style

16. Most had open sessions planned at the beginning or end which were set as an opportunity to engage informally with local councillors and officers.

17. It is difficult to say which of these was the most appropriate or useful because it was obvious that all have their merits providing that the subject matter, attendees and resources matched the style. The table below gives the RP view on their observations of meetings and their usefulness within the concept of community engagement and leadership.

<b>Style</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Individuals and groups invited around a topic or issue (problem solving).	Allows consideration of the "right stakeholders"	Often misses the perspective of the community  Requires	This method was observed to reasonable effect.  On a few

	<p>Problem solving is easier and more likely</p> <p>Open and honest discussion is more likely</p> <p>Can allow for equal status amongst statutory and voluntary groups</p> <p>Solutions are much more likely to stick</p> <p>Builds trust between partners</p>	<p>excellent chairing and facilitation skills and if these don't exist discussions can be counter productive or one sided</p> <p>Can undermine community trust and engagement if outcomes are unclear and not communicated well</p>	<p>occasions it was clear that the topic had not been pre-planned carefully by councillors and so the right people and focus wasn't delivered.</p> <p>Some meetings lacked the drive to bring issues to agreed solutions and actions so they could be taken forward into the community.</p> <p>With more investment this could be a successful method of running a problem solving meeting outside an Area Forum but was not in the view of the RP a suitable mechanism for Area Forums.</p>
<p>Facilitated community discussion around a specific topic.</p>	<p>Allows all comers to engage in the debate</p> <p>Builds confidence amongst communities</p> <p>Hear directly what people think and where the tensions are in communities</p> <p>Gives councillors a real opportunity to visibly lead</p>	<p>Requires good quality facilitation to be successful</p> <p>Requires councillors to be very actively engaged in the discussion through listening, concluding and directing. Without this it can be counter productive for all.</p> <p>Good quality</p>	<p>This was observed to reasonable effect and was always led very well by officers rather than councillors. Some councillors contributed very little.</p> <p>These discussion meeting operated very well in some areas particularly when led by experienced</p>

	<p>their communities in issues that engage them</p>	<p>outreach and advertising is required to avoid polarised or one sided discussions</p>	<p>community development workers. The RP commented that this type of meeting is likely to happen anyway within general community development work.</p>
<p>Workshops around a topic or issue</p>	<p>Allows all comers to engage in a debate</p> <p>Allows for strategic or complex issues to be challenged or developed by communities</p> <p>Gives councillors real opportunities to understand in detail the views of communities and then champion these</p> <p>Builds real partnership and trust</p>	<p>Requires good quality facilitation to be successful</p> <p>Requires councillors to be very actively engaged with their communities and be prepared to lead and negotiate solutions.</p> <p>Good quality outreach and advertising is required to avoid polarised or one sided discussions</p>	<p>This was observed not to good effect.</p> <p>It was clear from the comments of residents they didn't like the style ("like being at school")</p> <p>The discussions weren't always facilitated well so most people seemed frustrated.</p> <p>This style has limited use within the terms of Area Forums but could be useful in general community development work led by officers</p>
<p>Traditional agenda led meeting run loosely in the traditional committee style</p>	<p>Allows for clear leadership and direction by councillors</p> <p>Can build trust and partnership</p>	<p>Without good outreach work can be a poor tool to engage broad public opinion</p> <p>Can be off putting</p>	<p>This was observed to good effect. Despite being the style that most matches the Area Committee format it proved</p>

	Allows for competing issues to be handled on the same agenda	to those who dislike formality  Can be perceived as bureaucratic and simply going through the motions	successful. This was mainly down to sound management by councillors
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18. Most Forums moved their meetings around the area. This proved to be useful and allowed some attempt to focus subjects around communities.

19. Open sessions were provided by most Area Forums. The intention of these was not obvious but advertised as an opportunity for councillors and residents to talk informally. The RP observed little useful interaction or effort to create any.

20. When listening to the residents it was clear they had often come for the “open session” but were expecting something more akin to the more formal Area Committee” style when they could raise issues publicly and directly with officers and councillors in an effort to call them to account.

### **Outcomes against the set framework**

21. Below are the views of the RP against the framework agreed. They are based on direct observations of meetings in the council year 2011/2012. The RP accept that these are the observations of a few people and therefore not a broad representation of opinion. The RP however did:

- View meetings and form opinions individually. When brought together these individual opinions varied very little.
- Set their observations against a framework that was derived from the common ambitions of all councillors for Area Forums

### **Are the right things on the “agenda”?**

*How themes are developed, by that we mean what happens behind the Forum with councillors to engage communities so they have an active part in setting or guiding what is discussed*

22. What is discussed is one of the most important building blocks to success. To engage communities councillors have to provide Forums that challenge and celebrate the issues that are important to residents in the most appropriate form. Acting as community leaders councillors have a key role in guiding this.

23. It is clear that councillor engagement in setting agendas/topics/issues for discussion is variable. It was obvious that many themes had been

suggested by officers and some councillors based on what is known about developments and issues in areas rather than what is known about what communities want to say and discuss. Some of these proved successful some proved not to be and very few (if any) engaged a broad range of the community. It was hard to “see” the outline concept for a Forum agreed at Council in some meetings.

24. In start up planning meetings the concept voiced for getting communities involved in setting the agenda was simple:

- Councillors would hold their usual ward meetings/surgeries/walkabouts and continue to deal through these with locally confined issues.
- Any issues that couldn't be resolved here or were common across a group of wards or were particularly contentious in nature or were difficult to resolve in isolation would be taken forward for discussion at a Forum.
- Councillors would keep abreast of strategic issues or developments planned in their wards and decide if any of these should be brought to an Area Forum for community discussion.
- Councillors would begin to encourage partnerships to develop on Forums and influence the agenda.

25. This process seemed to provide for a good starting point in beginning to allow local people, through their local representatives, to set the agenda. It wasn't obvious that this happened. Items on agendas were often “topical” or had a topical flavour but were clearly not those that engaged a broad range of people or even particular groups in a ward or group of wards. The RP wonder whether this type of Forum is ever likely to engage a good cross section of communities. In reality outside of a few very engaged residents people turn up and take part when they see a good reason to do so and that reason usually needs to have some direct effect on them now or in the future. Agendas did get better but much depends on the enthusiasm and input of councillors and residents. This must improve.

26. Each meeting had methods of asking “what topics should appear on agendas” and some suggestions were made. This does however provide for a rather narrow selection from those who had turned up to the meeting and on its own is not within the spirit of what we are trying to achieve but may improve over time. The RP in particular felt it was not appropriate to hold public consultations over planning proposals within the Area Forum arena: these should be held separately.

**Are councillors leading and acting rather than talking and complaining.**  
*Are all the appropriate people around the table; is information and support available to enhance discussion; are discussions brought to options/conclusions and converted into actions; is ownership taken for those actions*



27. The original concept for the formation of Area Forums was to allow councillors to engage and lead their communities, form partnerships, problem solve and develop plans for their communities. Area Committees with their formalities and bureaucratic processes were considered to be a poor tool within which to do this. When listening to councillors at start up meetings it was clear that councillors have differing views about what community leadership means and how to go about achieving this. Levels of interest and engagement in the concept are variable amongst councillors but all agreed that for Area Forums to be successful councillors would have to take a leading role with their communities. All of the forms of Forums seen provide opportunities for councillors to do this but it was not often observed.
28. Getting the “right people” to a meeting is important regardless of the form of Area Forum or the subject matter for debate. This includes not only the appropriate people to deliver the solution or give advice and information but also the communities, individuals, groups etc that might be affected or have an opinion. Without this at best the meeting and its outcomes are “marks in sand” and at worst talking shops. Some attempt had been made at all meetings to get appropriate partners and officers there but communities were not engaged in the appropriate place or number. As an example a number of Forums had broad discussions around youth services and provision. Very few young people were engaged in these debates.
29. Engagement of communities is multi-faceted and time consuming and relies on many factors but to set a Forum as a community engagement tool and then not engage the communities under consideration is ineffective. It seems likely that without much more support and training councillors will not be able to achieve this through Forums. The amount of time and money available to do the outreach work and advertising necessary to improve on this is not available. This significantly undermines their usefulness and differing forms of Forums must be explored with local residents and councillors.
30. Regardless of the nature or style of the meeting it is important that councillors are seen to:
- Handle the difficult discussions.
  - Provide options and pathways.
  - Be honest about what can and cannot be done.
  - Draw consensus.
  - Agree actions and next steps.
  - Allocate these to individuals and champion them.
  - Report back to communities on implementation.

In short form a real partnership with communities on issues and solutions.

31. A couple of Area Forums have clear processes for agreeing actions and assigning them but other action plans were not agreed or assigned at meetings but put together afterwards by officers and placed on the web site at varying intervals. This left participants sometimes unclear about what was to happen and who was to make it happen. A couple of Forums provided for some feedback on outcomes but mostly it was not clear how actions were progressed to delivery or reported back to those in the community interested in their resolution. The link back into the organisation is through the allocated senior officers and the RP did not explore in any detail the actions of senior officers after Area Forum meetings so accept that more work may have been done than was apparent.
32. For a significant number of meetings some councillors made very little contribution to the discussions and debates and took very little part in forming consensus around actions.
33. Senior officers were allocated as supports to councillors in Area Forums to form links back into the organisation. This was seen by the RP as a potentially useful role and seemed to give councillors a good link in persuading for their communities. In practice the input varied considerably. One senior officer took his role seriously, had engaged in the debate at Area Forums and it was clear had been involved behind the scenes. Other contributions were not obvious. To go forward this relationship needs to be more firmly established and pursued on both sides.

**Are councillors making a difference?**

*Is leadership taken in assuming responsibility for actions; who takes the lead (councillor, officer or both); how are communities kept informed and engaged; what is actually different*

34. This is difficult to answer at this stage. As discussed above councillors vary considerably in their engagement with communities through Area Forums. That is not to say some councillors don't engage with communities because of course they do but Area Forums are clearly not the method of choice for many councillors and some see little benefit to this as a local engagement exercise.
35. The ideas and outcomes that seem to have the potential to make the most difference are those that are likely to move forward into community development plans or compliment the work underway in Neighbourhood Forums.
36. Regeneration Areas already have in development Neighbourhood Forums where significantly more input and resource is available to engage communities and partners in decision making around infrastructure, cultural and social developments in the area. Councillors could quite reasonably ask what more is to be gained

from a Forum particularly one that doesn't have the resources to deliver on the engagement necessary to add value.

37. For other areas where there are no or limited regeneration plans Housing and Communities staff are working with communities developing community plans and to do this successfully are engaging councillors, communities and partners. Councillors could quite reasonably ask what more if anything they could get out of an Area Forum until this work is embedded.
38. When thinking about the scale and diversity of our communities those people who attend Forums are few in number and for some areas mostly similar to those who attended Area Committees. Some councillors report that fewer people attend Area Forums than Area Committees. These people will get something from the experience and there is evidence that actions have been brought forward that will make a difference and contribute to community cohesion. The RP asks "Is this good enough?" and what would make it better.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

39. The RP set their conclusions and recommendations around the guiding question set by the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee when the review was set:

### **"Are Area Forums working?"**

40. The answer to this question varies depending on councillor's point of view at the outset. Positions vary with all supporting the concept of community leadership and recognising they have a part in this but a number unsure or unclear on delivery and achievement.
41. What is clear is that Area Forums framed as area meetings, with agendas covering broad based issues, with no decision making power or direct access to this and following a formulaic style :
- Are not universally supported by councillors with a number seeing very little community value to the process and therefore not the "engagement of choice".
  - Do not attract residents in any number and so do not often provide for any meaningful community engagement or leadership.
  - Produce outcomes that are limited in nature and style by the process itself.

One size very clearly does not fit all. Community engagement and empowerment is multi faceted and this was recognised at inception. We should move forward with no pre-determinates on form but rather led by what will work for individual communities. The Council has no plans to devolve budgets to area groupings apart from budgets given to individual councillors so this has not been considered by the RP.

## Can Area Forums Work

42. It is clear that community development and leadership is a concept that is valued by the Council and significant investment through staff and buildings is made in this area. The RP therefore thought the better question to answer was

### **“How can we improve on the current arrangements”?**

43. Community engagement, development and leadership is important to regeneration, social well-being, effective representation and the health of the Council, we must and are moving forward on this. As seen in the body of the report the Council and councillors have:

- Neighbourhood forums developing in regeneration areas.
- Community development plans under consideration.
- Tenants and Residents Associations either existing or being encouraged.
- Parish Councils.
- Action Groups.
- Community Associations.
- Various formal and informal lobby and residents groups.
- Councillor ward surgeries, ward meetings, open sessions, walkabouts, street surgeries and ad hoc meetings.

44. All of these provide broad community engagement and deal with the very local issues that residents are interested in. Most are resourced to do the job and are actively supported by the organisation, councillors and residents.

45. Anyone of these activities or groups could fit within the original concept of an Area Forum for those residents involved without any need for a further layer of meetings styled as forums meeting simply for the sake of it.

46. The key is that members and residents will have the best view of what is likely to work in their areas to deliver on the concept and it is for local members to discuss and agree with officers what is needed and what can reasonably be delivered within the resources available. This discussion should be unencumbered by pre determined views on form and structure.

47. It wasn't clear in monetary terms how much resource has been made available to Area Forums. The RP noted that money had been found to book rooms and provide some publicity and other “administrative” arrangements but the bulk of the resource came in the form of the officer's time to support and encourage the process. It is probably difficult to quantify this officer time because staff are either in Communities with a brief for an area or are service delivery staff. In

making the recommendation below the RP are looking for an open debate about how to get the best for areas within these available resources.

### **Recommendation 1**

**That an informed debate takes place between councillors in their area grouping and community development officers to agree how councillors community leadership roles can best be delivered and supported in their areas within the councillor, officer and likely resident resources available.**

48. It was obvious to the RP, based on the evidence taken at first hand, that whatever local practices are in place they need to be linked into the various discussion, development and decision making process of the Council. Without this communities become frustrated and are less likely to engage in a positive manner. Councillors already have some rights of access and challenge on behalf of their communities but more thought needs to be given to how community, views, solutions and demands can be heard and considered within the governance and officer structures of the Council. The senior officer link to an area was a good start but relied too much on the attitude and outlook of the officer concerned so proved to be only marginally successful.

### **Recommendation 2**

**That the Council considers within its governance structures how the community voice can be heard in a way that allows:**

- **Ideas, issues and solutions from communities to be heard and considered by decision makers through their ward councillors in a timely manner.**
- **For service and officer protocols to exist that link community views within service construction and outcomes.**
- **In all circumstances for the views and challenges of communities to be responded to via their local councillors or decision makers whichever is more appropriate.**

### **Recommendation 3**

**For the various mechanisms already available to councillors to champion the views of their communities within the organisation to be detailed clearly within protocols and made clear to all.**

49. Local councillors are key to connecting local people to the Council and therefore good community leadership skills amongst councillors are likely to provide for more effective community empowerment. When talking to councillors and attending and listening to the debates at Forums it was clear that this was accepted by councillors but the

skill level and understanding of what this meant in practice was variable amongst councillors. Support and training is needed to improve on this. Training programmes for councillors are currently under developed in the Council and the RP would like to see work in this area in partnership with councillors and learning from the best to help councillors move forward in their roles as community leaders.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**That the Chief Executive facilitates a cross party debate on the various roles played by elected councillors as ward representatives and members of the Council. The aim of these debates would be to get broad agreement on the expectations and requirements to allow training and support programmes to be designed, put in place and command the respect and engagement of all.**

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**List of background papers:**

**Version number: 6**