

**DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES**

**Extracts from the minutes of area committees containing comments on the proposed changes to democratic arrangements:-**

**North Area Committee – 3 March 2011**

**142. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES**

The Committee received a report (previously circulated, now appended) which was previously considered by the City Executive Board at its meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2011. The report provided the detail to support the Administration's proposals for changes in the Council's democratic arrangements as set out in the Council's consultation budget.

Tony Joyce queried how the proposed Area Forums would work since they would be on a quarterly basis and he felt that the aspirations detailed in the report were challenging. With regard to the proposed planning Committees, he felt that these should meet in the evenings and that the membership should include members from the areas that the two Planning Committees covered. He further had concerns on the proposed single member decisions, especially on the possibility of one Member being able to sign off large contracts.

Councillor Armitage questioned the report and said that while it was true that not all of the Area Committees had worked well, which was not the case for the North Area Committee, it was not a reason to condemn them all. There should be an option for the Area Committees to continue and to continue taking planning decisions in the areas where they worked well and for the other areas that did not work well to work with the Community on a format that did. He added that it was hard to see how the Area Forums were a strategic improvement nor that by abolishing the Area Committees and creating 3 new Planning Committees and 6 Area Forums, would save the Council money. He further questioned the membership of the Planning Committee and feared that one or both would have no Councillors from the area that the Committees covered. He concluded by stating that these proposals were moving away from local decision making, would not save money, indeed costs would go up and the quality of the decision making would decline.

Councillor Fooks questioned the list of decisions that must be agreed by the current Area Committees, as she did not recall the North Area Committee for example ever being asked to take decisions concerning abandoned vehicles, nor to agree the yearly programme of works to be done on behalf of the County Council under Section 42 of the Highways Act 1980. She added with regard to single member decision making, this was part of the democratic structure at the County Council and seemed to work well, however Members were not given authority to approve the expenditure of large sums of money as was proposed here.

Councillor Campbell said that three things should be done, the first being that the North Area Committee should comment on the proposals, second, Members should also comment as individuals and third, the consultation questionnaires should be circulated as widely as possible. He added that should the changes be agreed it was important that the new structure should be made to work well. He added that the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee had looked at the proposals and as part of its recommendations, had the consultation changed so that it was not just conducted on line, and that the new structure was reviewed in December 2011.

The Committee agreed to forward its comments to the Head of Law and Governance as the consultation response from the North Area Committee and to encourage all Members and members of the public to also respond as part of the consultation.

### **South East Area Committee – 7 March 2011**

#### **112 DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES.**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended).

Mr Rodrigo addressed the Committee on this matter. He spoke in favour of retaining the Area Committee system and against the proposed quarterly Area Forums. He felt that the current Area Committees were not sufficiently advertised and that this could be improved and increased for very little cost.

Councillor Gill Sanders observed that there were very few members of the public present at the meeting tonight. Area Committees had been running for 9 or 10 years, and she thought that people should be aware of them by now. Ward Councillors were accessible by a variety of other means and did not have to be contacted solely through Area Committees. She felt that a Forum, dealing with a specific issue that was of real interest to people, would attract more people.

**The Committee resolved to:-**

**(1) Note the report;**

**(2) Note all comments made**

## **Central South and West Area Committee – 8 March 2011**

### **110. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) outlining proposed changes to the democratic arrangements of the City Council including the replacement of Area Committees with Area Forums.

The Committee held a brief discussion on the report, making the following observations:-

- The Central South and West Area had a number of smaller distinctive areas within it and it was important that this was recognised in the new system.
- There would be capacity and funding for four area forums per year with additional meetings to be arranged as necessary.
- It was important that as many key stakeholders as possible (including the police) were involved in the new forums particular in the City Centre where attendees were not necessarily residents of the area.
- Geographic/ward boundaries were not necessarily the most effective way to divide the new areas.

The Committee agreed to continue the discussion amongst members outside of the meeting.

## **North East Area Committee – 15 March 2011**

### **95. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES**

At the request of the Committee a copy of a report (previously circulated, now appended) was submitted, which the City Executive Board considered at its meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2011. The report provided details to support the Administration's proposals for changes in the Council's democratic arrangements as set out in the Council's consultation budget.

Jill Cummings felt that the decision on the proposed democratic changes had already been taken, however, despite this she felt that the Area Committees worked well as residents were able to see all of the Councillors together and not just the ones representing their wards. She said that the Area Committees gave her a forum to raise issues, whereas the proposed Area Forums would become cosy and a clique. She further added that having a wider audience for planning issues was also very good. She acknowledged that there were some negatives, such as the Chair not always being in control. However she saw no reason to change the current system. She concluded by responding to comments in the

media that the same people always came to meetings, that one person could and did represent more than themselves.

John Green felt that the proposals were a coup-de-tat, leaving no opposition against them. Area Committees were being abolished to be replaced by vague Forums and he felt that Councillors preferred smaller meetings. Oxford was rather parochial and the Area Committees allowed for wider issues to be raised and discussed. He questioned how you could improve involvement by restricting it, and he felt that this was an attack on democracy. With regard to the proposed Planning Committees he felt that it was inept the way they had been put together and should be split North/South and not the proposed East/West. He concluded that the proposals were not about democracy rather the negation of it.

Peter Wilkinson said that he had attended the South East Area Committee for many years and had spoken in his capacity as the Chair of the Rose Hill Tenants' and Residents Association, one person representing many which was vital to the democratic process. He said that the Area Committees won't be replaced by Forums, this was only likely to happen in the East Area Parliaments area, and that Members of the South East Area Committee had already said that they would not hold Forums. He acknowledged that not all of the Area Committees were perfect, but they could work better and should not be abolished. He said that any savings associated with the proposals were unlikely and that accountability and democracy would not be served. He felt that planning decisions should also stay in the current area format. He concluded by saying that Labour Councillors wanted to engage the public at a local level, but did not feel that this had been evidenced.

Councillor Darke said that they worked within a representative democracy and Councillors were elected to represent the residents of their wards etc. These proposals were not about abolition and the evidence across the City was that Area Committees were patchy in their effectiveness. He acknowledged that there was a financial constraint on the Council, but this was not the driving force behind the proposals.

Councillor Darke with regard to planning said that people had commented that it was good to have decisions at a local level, however the Council worked at a strategic level and it was important to have consistency across the City. Decisions were taken on "local feeling" rather than within the strategic framework. He concluded that this was an opportunity to have a more varied approach to engagement.

Members of the public at the meeting asked further questions such as how would the practicalities of the Forums work as it was important that important strategic issues were dealt with and the examples of the proposed County library closures and highways works were given. In response Councillor Darke said that issues were aired in a variety of places at the City and County Councils.

Councillor Clarkson said that the North East Area Committee boundaries had been arbitrary and agreed that the proposals for the Area Forums were ill defined. With regard to planning, she said that the Committees would be

politically balanced and would contain Councillors with an interest and knowledge of planning and how it worked.

County Councillor Roz Smith said that she was concerned at the loss of Area Committees and felt that the North East Area Committee was the right balance for major issues to be discussed. She highlighted that the report detailed the responsibilities of the current Area Committees, but gave no detail on what the new Forums would deal with. She said that it was good that Area Committees brought together City, County and Parish Councillors, as it was the one forum where all could hear of the issues affecting the area. With regard to the Planning Committees it was important that they continued to be held in the evenings and in the area. She did feel that the proposals were a loss to democracy.

County Councillor Brighthouse said that most case work came from individuals and not the Committees. She said that the Area Committees had worked well in Oxford and hoped that Councillors and local residents could continue to meet and hold specific issue meetings.

Roger Jenkins said that there were strong views on Area Committee, but asked what in the new proposals constituted an area, was it a ward, a street, or a larger area. In response Councillor Darke said that he felt that an area was how it was now. Councillor Wilkinson said that she had also asked this question and was told that an area was what they wanted it to be. She felt that the proposals had not been thought through.

Councillor Wilkinson said that she was not sure if the proposals would save money and this had been asked at the Scrutiny Committee. She felt that there would be more call-ins and she did have concerns over the resources available and on ward budgets which would mostly be spent on paying for venues. She wondered whether the proposals would be more effective and questioned where the power was in the Forums and what the reporting lines were. She also had concerns on the boundaries and that planning should be dealt with at a local level as residents liked to see their Councillors making difficult decisions as this gave accountability. How would the Planning Committees deal with Section 106 developer contributions? She concluded by saying that while there were good and bad Area Committees, there should be a proper review and that the proposed Forums were ill defined and not thought through and that while the responsibilities of the Planning Committees and Single Member Decision Making was outlined, the Forums were not.

Councillor Altaf-Khan felt that the proposals were about one party trying to take planning away from Area Committees which had been tried before and failed and so now resulting in the abolishment of the Area Committees. He did not mind making difficult decisions at a local level and Officers would not attend the Forums. Power was being taken away and there was no reason or logic to this approach. Forums would not achieve the same as an Area Committee.

Patrick Coulter said that Councillors should take encouragement that the North East Area Committee was wanted by local people, and that the Council

would be throwing away something that was good. The best from the Area Committees should be taken and used in any new scheme.

Councillor Darke said that he saw the proposals as dealing with local issues by giving Ward Councillors the choice on how best to deal with the issue in their area. He acknowledged that the proposals need to be more precise, but said that one size did not fit all.

Councillor Hazell said that under the proposals the new Planning Committees would allow for Councillors to appoint substitutes, as she felt that under the current system she was frustrated that Councillors were not able to be advocates for their communities in case they were seen to be fettering themselves. With regard to open forums, she said that in many cases issues raised in the Open Session part of Area Committees, could have been raised and dealt with earlier and not left till the Area Committee meeting. She felt that there was a role for bigger and wider issues to be dealt with at a meeting, but on that particular issue, as she felt there would be more engagement.

Councillor McManners said that there was nothing perfect about Area Committees and gave an example that in Wood Farm there could be a body that met and dealt with the minutia of area issues, but he felt that the North East Area Committee was better to deal with strategic issues.

Councillor Baxter said that his views on Area Committees were mixed. He saw the benefit of wider strategic issues at the Area Committee level, but felt that planning was not best served by Area Committees as not being able to act as advocates for the local community was difficult. There was little diversity in attendance at Area Committee meetings and he pointed out that no one had approached him with views on the proposals.

Councillor Wilkinson felt that the Committee should make a recommendation on the remit of the Area Forums. Councillor McManners said that whatever the outcome a structure had to be in place before the Area Committees were abolished if that was the final decision. Councillor Rowley suggested that if the changes go ahead that the Members of the North East Area Committee agree to hold quarterly Forums.

Councillor Darke also felt that there needed to be a place to discuss strategic issues and that this should be quarterly, and said that there were many ways in which local issues could be dealt with.

The Committee agreed:

- (a) To forward all of the comments made by the public and Members of the North East Area Committee to the City Executive Board and Full Council as the response to the consultation from the North East Area Committee;
- (b) To note that some Members felt that there needed to be at least quarterly meetings to discuss and consider strategic matters;

- (c) To request the Head of Law and Governance to submit to the North East Area Committee a report detailing the outcome of the consultation exercise currently underway on the proposed democratic changes to allow the Area Committee to consider further the proposals prior to the Full Council meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2011 where the final decision would be taken.

### **East Area Parliament – 16 March 2011**

#### **110 DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning proposed changes to the current democratic arrangements.

Public speaking: Vivienne Alexander urged everyone to respond to the consultation. She felt that consultation leaflet was flawed and badly designed, and that the impression was given that the decision to abolish Area Committees had already been made. She also expressed concern at the prospect of single member decision making.

#### **Comments from members of the Area Parliament:**

- The decision had been made via the Budget, but consultation should have been carried out first;
- It was felt that the decision had been made to abolish the Area Committees, and that the consultation was to establish what came next;
- The consultation leaflet/form didn't have a place for the name of the sender, so anyone could make multiple returns and attempt to skew the result;
- Consultation was needed at the right time in order to make a major change such as this one – it was felt there was case law on this;
- This change, especially the suggestion of single member decision making and the strong leader model, was the start of the drift into the placing of power in the hands of one person;
- There was concern at the loss of area planning and the ability of areas to give community grants;
- Democracy was about more than casting a vote once every few years. It was about the engagement of people at all levels. These suggestions seem to be giving democracy away;
- Little things that the Area Committees do can mean a great deal to small community groups;
- Area Forums will not have the same power as Area Committees. Power will go elsewhere. Even if there was lots of participation in Area Forums, they would still have no power to act;

- However, the process was not exhausted yet. The shape of the budget was decided but the changes were not defined as yet. There was very little space on the consultation form for comments and suggestions on new arrangements;
- There was disquiet about the proposed new planning committees, in that there would be only 2 and at least 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of all ward members would be removed from the decision making process. They would not be able to represent their constituents' views. It was likely to be costly, there would be more site visits, and the proposed division of the city into two put East Oxford in the wrong group (with north and central parts of the city).
- Forums would be unelected and unaccountable;
- If there were issues with the structure of Area Committees, wouldn't it make more sense to reform or restructure them to address the issues, rather than abolishing them altogether?
- There were fears that Ward member budgets would be "slush funds". But they would also be ineffective, because £1,500 would not give members much spending power, and a lot of this money was likely to go on the costs of arranging meetings;
- Single member decision making was a move towards centralisation, and would not be democratic;
- The Executive Board would not have in depth knowledge of what local people really wanted;
- The proposals were of concern because they were less democratic and had no room for ordinary members of the public to be involved and have their say;
- Planning was a worry, because it was proposed that 12 signatures would be needed to call anything in. This would make it impossible for the smaller parties, such as the Green Party, to call in a planning decision without cross party co-operation.

Resolved to note all comments made and pass them on as part of the consultation process.

## **Meeting with Parishes – 28 February 2011**

### **1. Democratic arrangements / Area Forums**

Councillor Price explained that the City Council was seeking to move to a quarterly Area Forum system, rather than the current Area Committees, as it was believed that this would improve and increase community engagement. The system would be flexible enough to allow each area to adapt it to serve its needs. The changes were out for consultation and the form could be completed online or by filling in a hard copy of the form. Thoughts from the Parish Councils would be helpful. Jeremy Thomas added that there would also be single member budgets, 2 area planning committees and single member decision making.

Gordon Roper (Blackbird Leys PC) stated that he found South East Area Committee to be an excellent meeting, which residents did attend; and he feared



that its abolition would be a retrograde step. He thought that a quarterly meeting would be much too infrequent, that it was important for the public to be able to meet Councillors, and that any discussion and decisions were properly minuted.

Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager) advised that she was trying to establish much more neighbourhood management, which would seek to resolve problems in the present but also make plans for the future. She was happy to discuss this further. It was intended that officers from the Communities and Neighbourhoods team would be available to take up issues, and there should be more dedicated resources to assist Parish Councils. However, there might not always be officers at every meeting, as there were other ways in which to communicate. Councillor Price echoed this, adding that the intention was to review the system during its first year of operation.

