

APPENDIX B TO ANNEX 5

To: City Executive Board - 13th April
Council - 18th April

Item No:

Report of: Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: **RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS
TO CHANGE THE DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS OF
THE COUNCIL**

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the comments and recommendations of the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee on democratic arrangement proposals

Key decision: No

Scrutiny Chair: Councillor Campbell

Executive lead member: Cllr. Price

Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s):
See the body of the report

Introduction

1. The Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee considered the City Executive Board's proposals to change democratic structures within the Council. The consultation document highlights that these changes are considered necessary to deliver proposals within the consultative budget for 2011/15. It was made clear by Cllr. Price that the changes proposed for Area Committees would have been considered regardless of budgetary constraints with the aim of providing a structure that allows for better and broader community engagement and influence
2. The committee decided to focus its debate around the change from Area Committees to Area Forums and with this in mind consulted City Councillors asking their opinions on:
 - What is good about the current system of Area Committees

- What is not so good about the current system of Area Committees
- How Area Forums should operate and develop, in particular as community engagement mechanisms

A report outlining all responses is attached at Appendix 1 this includes an introduction that draws out the “key themes” from all responses. The committee would like all these comments to be considered within the consultation process

Conclusions and Recommendations

3. The debate of the committee focused on:
 - What are the essential elements for a system of Forums aimed towards improving community engagement
 - Practical administrative processes and resources
 - Consultation

Many of the points raised are brought out in the document at appendix 1 but the committee wished to highlight some particular issues and make recommendations

4. Essential Elements

The current system of Area Committees has strengths and weaknesses. Highlighted particularly amongst the weakness is the lack of engagement with a broad cross section of the public within an area. It is accepted that this is variable from committee to committee but none could demonstrate that engagement with all key groups is good. For Area Forums to be an improvement this must be addressed by officers and councillors to produce a process that includes good outreach and flexible ways of working to encourage broad engagement from communities on the key issues for an area

Areas of the City are different and many of these differences are seen through the current system of Area Committees. What works for some communities may not for others. It is important that any standard or regular processes are complemented by structures that address these differences focusing on “what will work” for the area

Any structure set to engage communities has to be linked in with people and organisations of influence. Area Forums will be linked to their local ward members but they also need a right to be heard by those both within and outside of the Council making decisions or delivering strategies and projects in their areas. These links should be clearly articulated to avoid Forums becoming platforms for debate and complaint only

Recommendation 1

Any new system must be set as an improvement to current processes and in particular for better community engagement. The development of new systems and structures must have as key considerations issues of flexibility, broad engagement, and robustness of outcome for communities

Recommendation 2

To lay out clearly within a protocol the processes within which Area Forums operate detailing in particular any arrangements for them to be heard, responded to and rights of access

Recommendation 3

To review in December the operation of all new process and structures within the changed democratic arrangement against criteria to be decided now

5. Practicalities

It is understood by the committee that 4 meetings will be provided each year, in each area and ward members will have £1,500 each to spend within their areas. What is less clear is the overall resource (human and otherwise) available in the Community Development and Local Regeneration Team to support the inputs and outputs from these 24 meetings and any additional activities local members feel necessary to improve on current arrangements. Clarity in this area will help in developing structures locally that are realistic

The practicalities of organising meetings of any sort (booking rooms, producing any necessary paperwork, inviting interested parties, paying bills etc.) are small issues but important in making for a smoothly running process. It was not clear from the consultation documents or the discussion where this resource would come from. Once again reassurance around these administrative issues is called for

Recommendation 4

To detail the amount of staff time and budget available within the Community Development and Local Regeneration Team to support the inputs and outputs from Area Forums and the administrative processes necessary when running “meetings”

The last Area Committees are in May and it is hoped that there will be a seamless run into Area Forums in June. This was not clear from the proposal but reassurances were given by the Leader of the Council that this would be the case. To produce a workable solution requires a good degree of debate, problem solving and option consideration. It is hoped that work with officers and members on the details of working can begin in earnest

It would seem that any Area Forum structure is likely to have ward councillors at its heart. The committee would like to see briefings for councillors aimed at familiarising them with the new Area Forum system alongside other changed democratic arrangements

Recommendation 5

Implementation must happen in June. The committee want planning discussions to begin now , running alongside consultation, to ensure administrative process are sound and can be built upon as decisions are made

Recommendation 6

To provide in May a range of member briefings aimed at familiarising them with the new Area Forum system alongside other changed democratic arrangements

6. Consultation

The change from Area Committees to Area Forums is set at improving community engagement it is therefore important that we obtain as robust and broad a view as possible from individuals and organisations about what they think of proposals. The consultation documents only contain an outline of structures so “in principle” opinions accompanied by ideas and suggestions for working should be sought.

It was noted by the committee that a member working group is to be set to work on the details of these proposals. The committee requested that 2 of their members are part of this group. Cllr. Price agreed to this at the meeting

Recommendation 7

To provide a broad consultation process using all opportunities to reach a wide group of people. To included within the consultation opportunities for residents to not only comment on the principle but make suggestions on ways of working

Recommendation 8

To formally nominate Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson as members of the working group proposed and urge that this group meets as soon as possible

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Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 19th February 2011

Briefing note for Item 8: Democratic Changes, including proposals for Area Committees

Introduction

As Members will be aware, there is a budget proposal to abolish Area Committees and replace them with Area Forums that would meet quarterly.

As part of the wider consultation process, the Chair and Vice Chair felt it would be a useful exercise for the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee to consider this and make some proposals. Every Member of Council was contacted and asked to give their thoughts on the following three questions:-

- (1) In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?
- (2) In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?
- (3) Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?

In total 20 Councillors responded, as follows:

- Labour – 11
- Liberal Democrat – 7
- Green – 1
- Independent Working Class Association – 1

Below is a summary of the key themes emerging from the responses to each question.

Attached at Appendix A is the full list of responses received to each question.

Key Themes

Question 1: In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

Councillors identified the following key themes as positive aspects of the current Area Committees:-

1. Cross party working – Councillors from all parties are able to come together and work on issues of local concern;

2. Accountability – Councillors are accountable all year round, not just at election time. Allows Councillors and the public to meet regularly;
3. Regular contact with service providers such as the Police, the County Council and the Council's street scene and parks teams, A good way to ask questions and receive information from them;
4. Accessibility – venues are in the local areas, not in the Town Hall.;
5. Openness – the Open Forum in particular provides somewhere for people to raise issues of local concern and obtain answers. Decisions are made openly in a public meeting;
6. Targeted funding meant that grant aid is given in an open and transparent manner to help very local causes. Area Budgets have been especially useful in this respect;
7. Public engagement – direct contact between Councillors and the public on a regular, pre-programmed basis;
8. Community involvement - allows the public to comment on major issues that are of concern across the City, for example the proposed closure of libraries;
9. Local knowledge – especially in the case of planning decisions which are made in the local area by people who know the it intimately;

Question 2: In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?

Councillors identified the following key themes as negative aspects of the current Area Committees:-

10. Over dominance by planning items. These frequently take up too much time to the detriment of other items on the agenda. The public often attends only for these items and then leaves, showing that they are not truly engaged with other issues being discussed;
11. Public awareness – this still is not high and there is often insufficient attendance by the public generally. However there may be insufficient publicity for the meetings;
12. Insufficient engagement with all communities - there is a lack of diversity in the public attending the meetings;
13. Over dominance by some individuals. There are regular attendees at some Committees who raise the same issues repetitively, use meetings as a platform, and can be intimidating towards Councillors and other members of the public;

14. Too bureaucratic and rigid in approach - meetings can be too long and too formal and appear uninteresting and unfriendly in their layout. In particular it is hard for the public to understand the change in formality needed when planning items are considered;
15. Area Committees are too large – they cover too wide an area and find it hard to engage with issues on a ward basis;
16. Unsuitable items on the agenda – too often they are used as a consultation method on policy items that affect the whole City, and this can be complex and intimidating for the public (and on occasion, for Members), and produce no useful feedback.

Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?

Structure of Working for Area Forums

17. The Structure should fit local ward(s) circumstance so not formulaic. Local members will know what works in their communities so need to guide the overall structure;
18. Use a variety of structures depending on the issues and the target groups...work shops, on line debates etc.
19. Either run on a local ward basis or allow for real ward focus within the make-up and business;
20. Residents and communities should take the lead on agendas/topics for discussion;
21. Issues should be kept local and relevant but where strategic or city wide issues are discussed these should be presented or portrayed in a way that is meaningful to that community..."this is what it means for you". In any circumstance local issues should dominate
22. No set dates – local issues do not present themselves to a timetable. Residents and local councillors should call for a meeting. A general perception that quarterly will not be enough;
23. At all times informal but with the possibility of the local member running the business and discussions;
24. Remove all bureaucracy and apply the greatest degree of flexibility. Maybe apply time limits to encourage focus, resolution and co-operation;

25. Have the ability to call City and County Officers and Councillors and representatives from other Partners to account and scrutinise what they deliver in their area. Suggestion of using well being powers to achieve this;
26. Try to combine or co-ordinate with other local groups e.g. TRAs and NAGs if possible to get better outcomes for local areas;
27. Ensure that debates/discussions are linked into other pathways e.g. scrutiny, senior officer, CEB. Local people want to feel they are democratically involved;
28. Have individual City Officers attached to them;
29. Proposal of a very specific structure:
 - a. Ward meetings/discussions/debates – Lead by local councillors and residents
 - b. Consideration of issues arising from ward meetings at a quarterly meeting of a forum consisted community representatives and those with power from councils and partners
30. Make the forum a mini LSP for that area

Influence and Engagement

31. Consider carefully how they can really engage and influence what happens and is delivered in their area and at the Council and by partners. Without any real influence they will become platforms for complainants and frustration;
32. Must have a local revenue budget to respond to demand;
33. Local people must be able to see they are making “decisions” that influence;
34. Consider local involvement in the delivery and spending on projects
35. Hold local partner provider to account through Forums. Provide better training to achieve this
36. Consider consultation and influence on contentious planning applications in the area
37. Consider giving more if the process proves successful;
38. Better publicity of the structure, concept and process (suggestion of news letters);
39. Better engagement with the local media;

40. Local strategies to engage a wide section of local people and to encourage the less confident (enable people to feel included and take part);
41. Conducive and welcoming meeting places;
42. Meeting times and places that are convenient guided by the discussion points.

APPENDIX A: All responses received.

Question 1: In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

- I had the opportunity to engage directly with residents (on the rare occasion that residents turned up!). I also had the chance to engage in constructive, face to face debate with opposition councillors. Unlike Full Council, where councillors are overseen by their Group Leadership, Area Committees afforded councillors the opportunity to forget the party line and give honest, common sense, personal responses to local issues.
- I think the good thing about Area Committees was that they provide a place for people to question their local Councillors and have an input into decisions. The problem is that they don't do this well enough.
- It was useful to have a forum in which to ask questions of service providers working in our areas. The police reports are useful as are those of wardens along with the opportunity to make enquiries of street scene or parks officers. Such opportunities to meet people involved in day to day stuff in your ward are important particularly for new councillors. Revenue budgets have also been very useful in giving the committee an opportunity to make some decisions and support local groups.
- Some agenda items relating specifically to the area such as Local Transport Plan 3, car parking charges were helpful to allow collective discussion of an area matter. On the other hand these could have been covered in a less formalised way in a regular community forum without the costly overburden of formal papers, committee service coverage etc.
- A good opportunity to meet fellow councillors and hear about some local issues
- Making decisions in public

- Regular and formalised meetings, well publicised, and with support by Democratic Services.
- Whatever the arguments about Planning at ACs, there is no doubt that it attracts the public;
- Monthly opportunity for residents to meet and challenge local councillors.
- Opportunity to deal with local issues like libraries, playing fields, post offices, etc.
- Even though they are small, the AC budgets have allowed some local independence.
- There are some residents who believe they are very successful, these are I would consider in the minority. I would consider this to be related more to planning issues.
- Nothing!
- Area committees provide regular engagement with a range of valued community representatives and individuals. In doing so, they act to support councillors in maintaining strong relationships with key actors in local neighbourhoods
- Community involvement, particularly on planning issues, but also community centre, leisure and parks matters. Attendance has reached 100 on occasions. The area committees also provide an efficient means for volunteers to follow what is happening in their neck of the woods.
- Allow both Councillors (especially those in Opposition and/or on the backbenches) and their constituents to raise local issues, get problems fixed, and campaign for better services; and to do so locally, at easy-to-get-to venues, in an atmosphere that encourages people to take part;
- Ensure that planning applications which directly affect people living nearby to be decided or commented on by Councillors who know the area and understand their constituents' needs;
- Are a proven pillar of effective local democracy, making Councillors locally accountable all year round, not just once in four years at election time;
- Give members of the public access to their local Councillors in open forums at an early stage of decision making, with officers present for advice and action – including police, and also county officers by invitation;

- Promote effective cross-party working in the common interest, and transparent decision making;
- Bring an area's City and County Councillors together to cooperate in a local, accessible forum – hugely beneficial while Oxford is a second-tier authority;
- Allow targeted funding of local resources, and value-for-money delivery of real change to local communities through the locally elected Councillors.
- Area Committees provided a local forum for raising local issues and for local people to raise any issues that concern them – including in fact citywide issues which have local effects, such as plans for the city centre. They are a much more accessible 'forum' than the Town Hall. Officer support is vital if the emotions are to be useful and not just talking shops. Local planning applications are a big draw whose importance should not be underestimated. And regular once-a-month meetings mean that people know when the next meeting will be and can prepare accordingly. Monthly is the right frequency so issues are topical, not already decided. Local budgets to address local problems hugely useful and appreciated. Police presence and reporting much valued – by members as well as the public
- ACs can be occasionally engage local people on big planning issues and particular matters of concern such as the recent item at NEAC about libraries (even though NEAC has no responsibility for this issue). Mostly though, ACs are only good for the small group of people who attend each meeting.
- Area Committees are good because they serve as democratic forums for the presentation of very local concerns with the possibility of the issue being resolved quickly by the body people are attending. The present Area Committees have officer time and money that they may wish to deploy to address the issues raised.. A forum which has neither resource will not be in a position to do this offering only a platform of complaints that may be passed on to a more central distant authority for possible action at some time in the future.

Example : Small grant to the Friends of Aston Eyot to eliminate Chinese Knotweed in Aston Eyot Nature Reserve.

- Knowing they have powers to act generates credibility and willingness to attend and strengthens people belief in local government and the benefits for community engagement. People feel they are more in control of their lives and that grass roots involvement is worthwhile. Powers to act rather than a talking shop strengthens local democracy.
 - Area Committees help identify more precisely local issues which are crucial to the quality of life , healthy living, address poverty, improve a sense of community and can help to address wider environmental concerns.

Examples: East Oxford Car Club started with EAP seed funding providing access to modern low emission vehicles and making a major contribution to alleviating local parking problems.

Example : East Oxford Farmers Market initially organised by the EAP who provided start up funding .The Farmers market now runs as a successful community and environmental initiative providing access to low cost locally produced quality food

Example: The EAP funded additional trees and bike racks across East Oxford along main streets and side roads. The EAP knew where best to place these improvements.

Example : The EAP provided funding for local youths who were unable to take part in sports activities. Their very local and specific needs where met in a locally focused forum.

Example: The EAP funded playground improvements encouraging healthy exercise amongst local children and knew what improvements were really needed.

Example: St. Mary and St. John Churchyard turned from a crime blackspot into a community green space when the EAP funded lighting and lowering of high walls to open out the space.

Example: The EAP funded innovative solar lighting at Manzil Way playground reducing crime and helping make more community use of facilities.

Example : The EAP secured funding from local businesses and the County to create the first new Public Square' by closing a road in East Oxford.

- Having the power to grant or refuse planning permission via Area Committees not only ensures that the councillors who make the decision are the people who know the area intimately and can assess the impact of the proposal better than any centralised forum but also means that local people feel the process is transparent and they have easy access to the planning process.

Example : 190 Iffley Road and the Planning application to turn this Arts and Craft house into a student accommodation block.

It is untrue to suggest that locally determined planning applications give greater opportunities to local people against any form of development (NIMBYs) and as a consequent halt much needed development. By enlarge planning applications are approved and often where they have been refused this has been endorsed by the independent planning inspectorate. Centralised planning consent will be viewed as alien by local people .

- Area Committees with their resources of officer time and devolved budgets can serve as ideal structures to address what local people see as THE most important

issue in their area .This may be to focus on alleviating poverty, improving care for the elderly, protecting green spaces etc etc.

- In the East Area Parliament area, a major theme has been developing a wide range of crime prevention measures.

Example: Cycle Bobbies introduced for the first time in East Oxford.

- The localism aspect of the Area Committees gives people a sense that the immediate major local problem or development that they encounter every day is being addressed by the Neighbour Committee and the issue is not lost in a sea of other priorities in the centre. With officer time and monies available Communities feel confident that their priority will be addressed by elected councillors that reflect their major priority.
- Area committees with their devolved budget and officer time as presently constructed are administrative structures with the capacity to launch and sustain initiatives that will benefit their area and are unique to their locality . Consultative forums will not have an organisational administrative base to take on project work or to supervise any initiatives. Practical creative and community support will be lost.

Example: Community grant every year to support the Cowley Road Carnival

- Giving local councillors a tiny allowance to spend on community initiatives (£1,500 suggested) will have virtually no impact and will not sustain major local programmes. The idea will without doubt lead to money being given to political cronies and could even end in fraud cases something that will only serve to undermine people's trust in local democracy .
- All council monies given to community groups campaign organisations should be made in an open collective forum where it is clear why the money is being given, to whom it being given and the community advantage that will result .
- The Area Committees can also serve as a debating forum to define the local neighbourhood stance during consultations launched the City, the County Council, the Police Authority or any public body presenting a development or reform of their services. The pro and cons of the suggestion can be debated by those present and view established as to what this particular neighbourhood thinks of the proposals.

Example: County Council, consultation on a proposed controlled Parking Zone (2009)

- It could be argued that a powerless neighbourhood forum could undertake this task however without the rich array of other reasons for being at the Local Committee (i.e. items 1-4) the turnout to such activities would be very poor. The wide variety of practical reasons for being there generates an audience who would not otherwise turn out for such general consultations.

- The three positive aspects of the AC system have been:
 - **The Open Forum, which has allowed local residents and others to raise issues that they felt needed attention - e.g. in CSWAC , flooding and the management of the allotments; this has also been mis-used by people raising trivia and/or matters which would better have been raised directly via email or phone with a Ward member because they were highly individual in nature.
 - **The reporting by the police and street scene staff on local issues allowing questioning and debate that is closely related to the area and to specific local concerns e.g. busking/peddlers in Cornmarket, graffiti in Jericho, trade waste in the city centre etc
 - **The occasional discussions on local topics linked to applications for funding or to wider policy issues e.g. the response to flooding post- 2007, the development of Frideswide square

- Good points:-
 - **Local democracy in action – place where local people can get involved and see decisions being made;
 - **Public having a voice and feeling included – being able to speak in open session, see the point properly minuted, making it more likely that action would be taken;
 - **Enables residents to contribute information and make informed decisions;
 - **Accountability of Councillors – finding out what they are really like, seeing them in action;
 - **Helps people understand why decisions are made – gives some understanding of the rationale behind decisions;
 - **Regularity and frequency of meetings – less that monthly would be too infrequent;
 - **Involvement of Parish and County Councillors;
 - **Local venues – rotation of venues shows attempt to be inclusive;
 - **Popularity – lots of people give up their time to attend;
 - **Involvement of other agencies, e.g., Police, Thames Water, City Cleansing department;
 - **Planning – local knowledge of Councillors responsible for planning decisions, decisions made openly, high visibility of planning matters;
 - **Identification and funding of local projects;

- The greatest single benefit has been the consideration of planning applications by councillors who know the area. There is seldom need for a site visit, and objectors are assured that their views were heard, even if the decision went against them. In addition, the monthly opportunity to raise concerns and receive reports is seen as valuable.

- On the plus side, I have appreciated area committee revenue budgets, and especially, to be honest, think we have got good value out of some of the small items of expenditure - small things which can make a difference but which would be hard to cover from elsewhere.

- The relationship with the neighbourhood street scene manager has been excellent, though this has usually been pursued outside the formal committee setting.
- Police reports have been helpful, and I hope there is a way we can incorporate hearing from the police at the new forums.

Question 2: In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?

- Planning - which often concerned only a small minority and took up too much time.
- Area Committees function according to rules that give members of the public only a limited opportunity to put across their points of view, with long periods spent listening to Councillors talking. If anything it should be the other way round, and it is not surprising that people are put off by the procedures and there is a very low turnout, unless there is a particular planning application of concern (and in those cases members of the public could have exactly the same input at a dedicated planning committee).
- Another problem with Area Committees is that they are at set, infrequent times and cover a set area so it is not possible to respond in a timely way to a big local issue that arises and which local people rightly expect their representatives to take action on. These issues are sometimes left up to the initiative of individual Councillors in conversation with individual residents - which can work very well, but Ward Councillors being able to organise meetings individually or in cooperation could significantly increase accountability here. Residents could air their views and Councillors would have to say in public what they were going to do.
- Very little public participation/audience confined to the monthly one or people who probably take numerous opportunities to voice their concerns in any case. The public participating are usually outside of my or the adjacent ward and as such this never feels like a useful opportunity to address public concerns in my ward. Likewise meetings can be heavily dominated by planning decisions these can be very procedural and applications rarely fall in my ward this is not to negate my responsibilities but I rarely have much to contribute.
- Low attendance on many occasions. Often Open Forum was used for people with the same parochial concerns month after month where they get the same answers month after month and do not listen or simply come along to say something against the administration or against Council processes because implementation of spending decisions do take time and this is often not understood by members of the public. These people often left soon after making a grandstanding contribution in Open Forum and seemed to have no interest in the

generality of matters before the area committee. Sometimes attendance was greater for a tricky planning application than for the main agenda items. I think across the city that Area Committees have made some pretty disastrous planning decisions where local interest outweighs the general interest of the city. I think this is particularly shown by many East Ayr Parliament decisions where the openly party political nature of decisions seems to have taken precedence over all the probity advice for more than a decade which says that planning decisions should not be so decided and that they should be treated as quasi-judicial with strategic planning policy to the fore. Efforts to get a more strategic focus on development control decisions by a enlarged focus into , say, two development control committees in the city now proposed, would take the heart out of the monthly area committee agenda and leave a rump of disparate business. And, of course, it is sometimes used by committee members for grandstanding both on general items and planning application debates (no names no pack drill - but the AC also includes County Councillors and Parish Council reps as non-voting members).

- The meetings are often very long. They are sparsely attended by the public. They are expensive to run
- Most residents are still unaware of their existence or having attended found them boring, too formal and get very cross that the one thing they have turned up for (usually a planning application) has to wait so that the regular attendees have their say.
- Some of the few that turn up regularly use the area committee as a political platform and repeat the same thing each month, sometimes they are abusive towards members of the committee.
- Some venues are not suitable and difficult to get to. For example, Risinghurst has never been able to host a meeting of NEAC because of the limited size of venue and availability.
- Timing so that most councillors and residents can get there (i.e. evenings Monday to Friday) makes travelling difficult at rush hour.
- There is no flexibility in arranging meetings; they are fixed and therefore unable to respond to issues that crop up.
- They are not the best use of time for officers and councillors alike to address local concerns
- Too bureaucratic and, perhaps, formal. Possibly intimidating for an "average" resident wishing to raise an issue. Some boring reports on items that are not of general interest.
- Small turnout for most non planning items. Despite efforts of councillors and officers we have failed to attract and engage public on a regular basis

- I regularly check other area committee meeting minutes and note the attendance....some meeting only achieve attendance in single figures and regularly attendance levels are poor for the high cost of providing a venue, officers, equipment etc
- The attendance is very poor at ours, except when we manage to arrange a topic that is of interest in the area of the meeting (our venues rotate) e.g. flooding in the Botley Rd area or the canalside site in Jericho, and when we manage to advertise it well. It's not a good idea to hold a councillor meeting in a public place -- we should be listening to the public, not to one another.
- Whilst I found that the Area Committees did attract the public in some small number, they did not bring in many people from my ward. The demographics of those attending was mainly middle class, white and middle aged/elderly. I almost never saw lower income groups, BME groups, young people, working people, families or high users of public services attend. This was a major flaw and I think needs to be addressed in the future structures.
- I also feel that the issues discussed were often geographically or socially removed from residents in my ward. Broader strategic issues affected residents in my ward but these issues are issues that people find difficult to identify with. Issues that are more relevant to 'neighbourhoods' tended to be parochial and less relevant for residents that did attend. I think this may be partially a reflection of the large area covered.
- Planning issues and cases dominated both attendance and agenda, to the extent that other issues were squeezed out.
- I often felt the layout and 'feel' of the meetings were over formal and encouraged a 'them and us' feel. I also think the method of public engagement puts off all but the more confident members of the public.
- But, with such a large area, I found that too few people from Barton or Sandhills attended when the committee met away from my ward. Further to this, the inclusion of planning often meant that all those with direct interest in the applications waited for quite some time while the community business and reports were debated. Those with no interest in planning packed up and left well before the end of the meeting, leaving only members of the public with a direct interest in an application. Then there is the matter of the change of protocol required for planning. Some are confused having listened to an earlier debate within a flexible protocol and wish to speak even though all of the allotted time for a proposer or objector has expired. I do feel planning should be somewhere else and that business could be more efficiently processed if it was at a meeting solely for planning and a meeting run under the one protocol.

- Lack of engagement by county council representatives, even when major transport and strategic planning issues are being discussed. Also, on occasions, difficulty in getting senior city council officers to engage with area committees, for example in regard to development of outdoor leisure facilities. A lot of time has been wasted over the years in "consulting" with Area Committees about complex major policies affecting the whole city equally. This has bulked up the agenda and intimidated members of the public (and some councillors) without producing any worthwhile feedback.
- In my experience, what is not-so-good about Area Committees is that they need a stronger constitution. Under the present rules
 - a) Over-indulgent Chairs can and do allow members of the public to
 - (i) Register to speak at any time during the proceedings – instead of allowing only those requests to speak which are submitted before the start of the meeting;
 - (ii) Over-run their allotted five minutes – which itself is too generous in many cases and would be better reduced to three;
 - (iii) Raise several issues in the course of a single address, which both negates the purpose of addresses to tackle specific issues, and confuses discussion;
 - (iv) Raise 'non-issues' or resurrect/restate issues already dealt with at previous meetings;
 - (iv) Intervene in councillors' deliberations from the floor;
 - (v) Get into conversations with officers;
 - b) Members' seats can and are arranged in a very shallow curve facing the public and not each other. This
 - (i) Makes it difficult for councillors to discuss issues with each other in the proper way – they are effectively addressing the public, not the chair;
 - (ii) Makes it difficult to catch the Chair's eye – especially if the Chair is inclined to be overly-politically in the order in which they allow members to speak;
 - (iii) Turns a legally constituted and in some issues quasi-judicial meeting of a committee of the council into a 'town meeting'.
 - c) The Order of Business is not rigorous enough.
 - (i) Dealing with the minutes first allows meetings which should take an hour to run for two or three hours – sometimes longer – because of umpteen matters arising;
 - (ii) Having the Open Session (addresses by the public) early in the meeting has the same effect. If it was last, there would be greater pressure for more discipline and despatch.
 - (iii) Planning applications and other important issues are consequently pushed back, often to a time when everyone is starting to get tired, and when members of the public have begun to go home.

- Less good is the bureaucratic inclusion of indigestible reports- which Area Committees do not need to consider but have been forced upon them. Local budgets very good but inadequate. Publicity needs to be improved to ensure residents know they can come along – the city council should be funding this and developing ways to inform people better.
- Firstly, there are only a limited amount of people from my ward who ever attend.
- The agendas are often dominated by planning or issues not relating to my ward.
- There is a very select number of people who attend AC meetings who are generally unrepresentative of our communities as a whole.
- There is a lack of strategic planning or co-ordination to AC meetings.
- The major problem with Area Committees in Oxford is that there is little attempt to promote them and advertise their meetings or the issues under debate. The consequence of this is that attendance is much lower than it should be.
- The system relies on passive involvement i.e. those who have an interest in a specific planning application or direct involvement in a particular issue. Real community engagement needs to be worked on with leaflets, posters, promotions on the council Website and involvement of community groups.
- With declining amounts of many to support community initiatives and ever declining officer time being made available the capacity to help launch or help local initiatives and community groups has steadily declined and as a consequence the credibility and authority of the Area Committees has been eroded as they no longer able to provide the support and development they once did. Communities will only engage with local Government if they feel it is worthwhile and they see results. Talking shops will fail.
- Minimal community engagement and attendance except for planning issues - and the people turning up for planning items didn't stay for the rest of the agenda; those who attend ACs for planning applications will I suspect also attend the new Area Planning committees as they feel strongly about the applications concerned
- Agendas dominated by consultation documents from the City and the County which don't excite any interest - e.g. LTP3, Highways maintenance under s.42, etc
- No sense of pro-activity in shaping the Areas
- Covering too large an area for there to be a genuine sense of community between the various components e.g. Jericho, West Oxford, St Ebbes/Thomas' , City centre/University, Grandpont

- Many items seem to be on the AC agenda for reasons of completeness and hardly we ever got discussion (such as planning performance reports etc.) or were discussed almost exclusively by members (such as NAG reports which members had already seen at their NAGs anyway).
- Not so good aspects:-
 - **Poor chairing;
 - **Sometimes too much input from Councillors and not enough from the public;
 - **Poor knowledge of Councillors (especially in planning law);
 - **Not local enough – some areas too vast, not everything in one part of the area is relevant for residents of another;
 - **Length and timing of items on the agenda – can be overly long, people might have to wait some considerable time for their item to be reached;
 - **No right of reply for residents;
 - ** Lack of power of Area Committees;
 - ** Some venues inadequate – can be cold, or suffer from inadequate technology;
- I have not seen many problems, and those I have seen have been due to human error rather than the structure.
- On the minus side, I really don't think area committees worked as a form of community engagement. The south east area is not, in fact, an area at all, and consists of a variety of different communities, some of which have little in common, and there's even some mutual antagonism. I think much is said by the fact that we get more interested members of the general public at meetings of Villiers Neighbourhood Watch (covering perhaps 300 people), Rose Hill TRA (covering around 2000) and Friends of Iffley (about 800) than we do at SEAC (covering 16,000 plus). The profile, necessarily, has also not been representative of the wider population in terms of gender, ethnicity, age etc

Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community

- Maybe we could have themed meetings around topic local issues (on top of the usual agenda) and make it clear in the advertising literature that residents will have the opportunity to influence council policy by airing their views at the meeting
- I hope there will be some flexibility in the calling of Area Forums, perhaps with one of the four annual Area Forums being on a "floating" date so it can be arranged out of turn if it is felt there is a local demand for a large-scale public meeting. The high level of public concern about

library closures could be an example of an issue that would cause such a forum to be called; alternatively Councillors in the wards affected could use their personal budgets to organise meetings and help set up local action groups, preferably resident-led with Councillor support.

- Forums would be better on a more ad-hoc basis organised when particular issues arise such meetings need to be better advertised and with the high profile issues should be better attended right now they do not provide much opportunity to address or hear from the public. Perhaps a less frequent meeting of service providers, councillors and the public should be provided though planning should be removed so this does not impact. Some sort of revenue budget needs to be retained so councillors can spend some money locally on projects that might be ignored by the larger council.
- There are very good examples of ways to have something of the same intended effect without the current overburden of bureaucracy and procedure. I set up the Headington Forward group under the auspices of NEAC. HF has now been meeting for more than a year and brings together community leaders with representatives of major employers and institutions in Headington (universities hospitals etc.) under my chairmanship. It is a great success by bringing important local players (who would not come to area committee because they would have to sit through hours of stuff in which they had no interest) face to face with the community via its reps round a table in a good atmosphere of collaboration not confrontation to discuss issues which are of direct relevance in a short, usually constrained time period (of a couple of hours every two months or so). I understand a similar type of arrangement exists in the city centre. This type of forum seems much more effective at getting to the heart of local issue and concerns. Of course, it is not possible to be formulaic about this. The option for local members to take the initiative and suggest forms and procedures relevant to their locality and the flexibility this gives is a real benefit if members are willing to get out of the habit of the formal committee.
- They should be flexible, involve more members of the public and take up local issues as they arise
- I would like to be able to arrange meetings to respond to local issues as and when necessary even on Saturday mornings!! The best meetings I have organised myself have been just that.
- I would like to be able to represent constituents at planning meetings.
- Through regular contact with constituents an effective councillor will know what the local issues are, they have their own methods in keeping in touch with them. Street or static surgeries for example. Most times a formal meeting is not the best way to achieve resolution. Our Community development team will be there to help councillors.

- We used to have a Jericho area forum, which worked well. Can you find the old minutes? The forums should perhaps be held when needed, rather than regularly, unless the public say they want a follow-up meeting. The 2 ward councillors can decide where and when and what the topics should be, probably only one or two in the first meeting, with plenty of time for general questions and survey forms for people who prefer to write.
- Ideally there should be a long lead-in time, so that we have time to advertise the meeting in local newsletters, as well as on posters.
- There should be refreshments and a friendly, more informal atmosphere, so that people feel welcome.
- My 'vision' for an area forum would be for a 'neighbourhood' forum or board, call it what you like, that meets regularly with key members of the ward with a specific remit to carry on projects locally and provide a sounding board for local issues. Perhaps chaired by a local member. Ideally this would combine with the NAG, TRA, community association meetings etc. I would imagine that this neighbourhood forum would then report to a quarterly area forum that may have some power to involve people in authority (city council, county council, PCT, police etc). This could be done through wellbeing powers or some aspect of the localism agenda?
- I would see area forums as a focus for items of importance to the neighbourhoods and feel that as little other business should be conducted. It should be an opportunity to be called to account, an opportunity to listen and an opportunity to question officers about projects with impact locally.
- In North Oxford, I think the only natural "Area" is the whole of north Oxford. I can see no obvious role for an Area Forum different from the Area Committees.
- I can not answer these questions without knowing the proposed composition, competence and governance arrangements of Area Forums.
- However, I should be alarmed if Area Forums were not composed only of elected members. The inclusion of interest groups in decision-making is insidious – it was, after all, the way the fascist state in Italy was constituted. Self-selecting groups with powers are open to undemocratic manipulation; without powers they can only be talking shops or consultative at best.
- I am very concerned about the proposal to transfer planning powers from Area Committees to two Planning Committees, one for North and West Oxford, and another for East. In addition to my points about the

positive nature of Area Committees in relation to planning, I would add that:-

- (i) The proposal to include East Area with the North and West of the City disregards the area's natural affinities – which are with the rest of the east and south of the city, primarily with Cowley and also with Headington;
- (ii) The proposed political composition of the two committees, both reflecting the overall composition of the council across the city, is contrary to the requirement that planning decisions be made by councillors as individuals and not following a group line;
- (iii) It also disenfranchises the area's electors to the extent that this political composition may well have the effect of removing most if not all of their local elected members from the planning process. East Area has five Green Party councillors and one Liberal Democrat. With five members out of 48, one Green Party councillor from East Area may be given a seat on each of the proposed eight-seat committees, but it is not certain, since Labour will want four, if not five, and the Liberal Democrats are only just short of the number of councillors to assure them three.

- They should be Area Committees, meeting monthly, funded and supported by council officers. Members should discuss with officers how to improve residents' involvement - may be different in different areas. They need to have Area budgets which are decided LOCALLY, not by reference to a central committee or officers.
- I'd like to see far more community-based neighbourhood meetings so local councillors can engage more closely with their wards rather than other wards
- The Area Committees should not be abolished and replaced with talking shops.
- To strengthen local democracy Area Committees should retain their planning powers and be given an enlarged budget. Each Area Committee should have specific officers attached to their own Committees.
- The Committees should be given extra powers over green space management, nature reserves, children's playground equipment, certain leisure activities, community centres capital funding, historic memorials, waste collection systems and licensing in their area. (My experience of Middleton Township which had these extra devolved powers was that it create an effective local 'team' of officers who really cared for their area with the capacity to act.)
- Far from backing away from, devolved government and moving decision making into the hands of small, centralised elites the Council, should move to more democratic systems
- Invite all the representative community stakeholders (mini LSPs)

- Set up agendas that are relevant to community concerns and allow enough time for presentation and real discussion/ debate/decision
- Break down into smaller community areas and engage directly in place shaping, feeding proposals back into Scrutiny, CEB, officers
- If the individual budget allocations work well and aren't abused, increase the amounts available as resources permit
- Newsletters to the community
 - Quarterly will not be responsive enough
 - Must include more community bodies (they need to be actively invited) like schools community groups, religious groups, residents groups, other user groups
 - No dreary reports and death by bvi (the reports should however be available on request and pref. at no/low cost) for those with an appetite for such things.
 - Need to be much less formal - no top table etc., ideally blocks of theatre style seating and a chair in the shape of an MC maybe moving about among people
 - Decent sound system that works - really important and cut out all the messing about moving people/mics etc
 - Proper engagement with local media (this needs to be a project for someone!)
 - Greater engagement with public consultations , but quarterly would not be responsive enough or have enough time to do justice to this role;
 - Identify and investigate local needs – think Big Society agenda, Area Committees should have a leading role in the development of local leads into local needs. Better use of non Government and non-politically motivated funding for projects and provisions, which would be beneficial to local communities;
 - Hold themed meetings around a key local issue;
 - Avoid duplicating the content of other meetings – a forum could duplicate and destabilise the work of Residents' Associations;
 - Wider local engagement – local workshops on local issues working with Residents' Associations and other local groups;

- Empowerment – greater emphasis on making Parish Councils accountable to better run local government matters;
 - Meetings more frequent than quarterly – would be loss of local focus, issues would have lost topicality by the time they reached the forum, and could be longer, despite not having a planning section.
 - Bring back planning – or Area Forums could become toothless talking shops.
- Better engagement with public.
 - Deal with issues chosen by public and not by Council.
 - Quarterly meetings are too infrequent (if there is a major issue, we need to be able to have a meeting).
 - How can we engage with a variety of individuals and groups and not just the regular attendees?
 - Who will chair/lead the forums?
 - Area Forums need to meet monthly at a specified time and place. Since the Area Committees provide excellent contact with the community I do not see the need for change. The crucial issue is the local consideration of planning applications. I do not believe there will be any real savings in the proposed new arrangements, since there will be a considerable increase in the need for site visits. In human terms, the Councillor's time needed to consider applications will increase, since the number of applications to be considered will not change, while the size of the committees will increase.
 - I think we need to have a sharp focus on working with existing community groups, and supporting new ones to develop where there is local interest; ensure that some funds are available to support community projects (the ward Councillors' budget should help in this regard), and retain the important links with the area street scene manager and the police (the NAG might be sufficient for the latter).

31/1/2011

Appendix 1 continued (late responses)

Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee – 10th February 2011

Item 8: Democratic Changes

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS RECEIVED SINCE THE AGENDA WAS PRINTED.

Question 1; In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

- I have rarely thought that area committees are a useful way to expend council resources or councillor and officer time. Having said that, there are a number of frustrating ways of working associated with being a councillor; having to attend an area committee is by no means the worst. The committees have always been excellently clerked, and, in recent years, our committee has had excellent support first from an acting area co-ordinator and then from the communities and neighbourhoods team leader for our area. I also appreciated the ability to make unwilling or recalcitrant county council officers appear in the evening on an estate on the outskirts of Oxford to explain the ways in which their proposal, whatever it was, would disadvantage residents of our wards and our city. However, I tended not to find that this process resulted in positive change to the proposals in question, although there was a certain grim self-satisfaction inherent in it.
- The 6 Area Committees -- and I have been to several different ones -- allow local communities to contribute to the debate as local councillors discuss and decide issues, both parochial and citywide . They allow lobbying before meetings and contributions during , and that point applies not only to planning issues that draw the largest audience , but to the whole range of issues that arise . One comment that I heard was " I had no idea that councillors discussed and decided so many different issues " At the January North Area Committee meeting , the hall was packed , with standing room only , for the debate / discussion on the future of Summertown Library -- and most contributions came from the audience .

Question 2: In your experience, what was no-so-good about them?

- I have a number of concerns about the way that area committees functioned and the role that they play.

Firstly, the meetings as currently set up are a nonsense: nearly all of the matters could be more usefully dealt with elsewhere. For example:

**All parts of the city are covered by a neighbourhood action group, which receives the quarterly police report. Reports are produced on a NAG-basis (usually the size of two wards) in order to inform a high-quality discussion between engaged residents and professionals in a

dedicated meeting. It appears unnecessary to duplicate that meeting with a broader less-focussed repetition of the same report for two or more NAGs at area committee.

**Councillors regularly use the area committees as a forum for raising their casework issues. Casework should properly be dealt with via email take-up with the appropriate officer, rather after a delay of some weeks aired publicly, often in a forum where the detail cannot be discussed and appropriate action cannot be decided.

**Consultation on administration proposals should be carried out with scrutiny committees and in party groups. Consultation on behalf of other organisations (for example, the county council) should be held centrally for the city, to enable all members to attend and to increase the quality of information on offer.

**Planning matters – usually centred on un-strategic issues affecting only a couple of streets – regularly take up disproportionate amounts of time. In my area, large side extensions to houses in Littlemore form the bulk of planning applications before our committee; there have been, I would venture, fewer than ten key planning applications affecting Rose Hill and Iffley ward which genuinely required local input from the ward councillors, as opposed to being generic applications for generic decision; I am satisfied that the new structures would allow me to either advocate for residents or substitute myself in for a decision affecting my ward if necessary.

- It's also worth noting the attendance at area committees: at our area, the attendees who are not city or county councillors tend to be:

**Parish councillors – and I gather that meetings of the parish councils in our area are always attended by a city councillor, so there is a more appropriate route to resolve city issues

**Chairs or officers of residents' and tenants' associations – I certainly attend all meetings of the TRAs in my ward, and would expect other councillors do likewise, so there is a less formal route to seek changes in the local area

**People with a particular concern, repeated on a number of occasions – for example, our area committee has for the past several meetings been addressed by those wishing to keep Temple Cowley Pool open, despite the pool not being in our area and those speaking not being from our area, and despite the area committee having no powers in respect of the decision about the pool

- As an example, I point interested parties towards this blog post, talking about a meeting of the North-East area committee when it discussed library closures in Headington: <http://oxfordsos.org.uk/?p=370>. The writer is, unfortunately disillusioned by the experience:

"I attended the North East Area Committee meeting on the 18th Jan as a private individual, in the same way as I attended the meeting the week before in Summertown, looking for answers about the proposed

Library closures. I did not hear them. I heard a lot of comments in support of libraries and a lot of talk about consultation. But this was the consultation that is going to take place after the budget is set. This is the consultation about communities putting in bids to run local libraries not consultation about the closures. County Councillors are keen for communities to work with them to submit bids to ensure that they will get a share of the monies that the Council has set aside to support these bids. Although volunteers were asked for, none came forward. This was from a community where 200 people braved the snow to protest and 300 turned out for a public meeting. But maybe the community did not know that question would be posed to them at this meeting.”

Understandably there were few answers for this concerned resident at a meeting of city and county councillors, all of whom are opposed to closing public libraries, and none of whom have any power to change or vary that decision. A formal area meeting of the city council, to which county councillors are invited but which holds no status in formal county council structures is never going to be an appropriate forum for consultation about an issue for which it has no responsibility, or for resident participation in a decision in which no participation is sought by the deciding authority.

- If resident consultation, engagement and participation are to be genuine, rather than tokenistic, then, they need to be systematic and focused on things that are able to be changed. A good example of consultation is the police area priority-setting, which involves street surgeries and door-knocking to determine local priorities, which are then reported back on to communities in newsletters and notice-board announcements. At the city council, we have an excellent consultation team who help us meet our legal obligations with regards to consultation, and we also have centres of expertise in other teams who deal with specialist consultation. We do not have the resources to undertake ongoing meaningful dialogue with every community – but in those of particular importance, such as regeneration areas or areas close to major developments, we need to develop the flexible staff resource through our communities and neighbourhoods team to seek a higher and more systematic level of participation. This will include setting up TRAs where we have none, as the key local building block for participation.
- Moving on, one might sensibly reply that the solution to the problem of a lack of power of area committees to change things in the areas they cover is for them to have increased power and resource; perhaps. But under the council's constitution area committees have enormous powers, none of which to my knowledge have been used. For example, despite formally being expected to do so they do not manage community centres, parks or street-scene on behalf of the council. If we wished to move to neighbourhood management, with groups of ward councillors controlling these services, we could do so under the current

delegated powers; the fact that we have never done this seems to me to make it clear that members of this council prefer these functions to be exercised centrally and do not wish to increase the powers of area committees.

- As councillors, we seek to place-shape, to improve our communities: my argument is that this is better done at the neighbourhood level, utilising existing groups working to recognisable communities that people live in – in my ward, then, this would be Rose Hill estate, Iffley Village, and the area of Iffley borders and Rose Hill main road. Each of these areas has its own representative groups, and my work as a ward councillor is far better performed working with and through these groups. I have always thought of the role of city councillors as being that of ringmasters – particularly when they represent a regeneration area. For me and Ed, getting the housing development off the ground, managing the spending of major (£450k) Section 106 funding, working to ensure the survival of existing organisations like the advice centre or helping set up new ones like the junior youth club, dealing with major ASB problems alongside the police – all of this has been outside the area committee rather than through it.
- The concern for area committees seems to me to reflect a misunderstanding of the role of being a ward councillor: no longer is real, meaningful business conducted in formal meetings. Instead, the work that matters is brought about through relationships, through community leadership, through playing that ringmaster role, holding local public services accountable, leveraging money into your ward. Formal decisions may be taken in public at CEB, but the preparatory work and negotiation happens informally. No longer do we operate a committee system in local government where the only contact with officers is in the meeting, and nor would we wish to return to that; ward councillors must take responsibility for using their influence with key staff and in partnerships to seek change for the area they represent.

Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?

- I see no need for area forums per se. A quarterly meeting between senior managers, CEB and councillors for an area to discuss area issues might well be useful – particularly if key partners are involved. Will it enhance the ability of ward councillors to be effective if the meetings are in public? I think not, to be honest; rather, a NAG-like attendance would be most appropriate. Small focussed groups able to take action rather than further opportunities to grandstand would be most welcome. We should, though, be clear that whatever process results will be asymmetric: regeneration areas and areas where major development is going on will for obvious reasons receive greater attention than other areas, and some areas may choose not to have

Forums at all. I can't see many common issues across the area known as south-east, for example, and would not be surprised if there was no south-east area forum.

- Engagement with the community should be primarily through existing neighbourhood groups – parish councils, TRAs, neighbourhood watches etc. We have a vastly-expanded communities and neighbourhoods team who will be able to support councillors in their activities, where they coincide with wider council priorities, but primarily this is the role of councillors.
- The one real concern I have about the abolition of the area committees does not concern them in particular, but instead the funding that they hold. It is deeply regrettable that a very useful source of flexible local funding is to be reduced; however, with (disgracefully) the national funding settlement the way it is, funding which is “nice-to-have” rather than essential must necessarily be considered for reduction. I am glad that funding is to be delegated to individual councillors, with as few strings as possible; I hope in future that this will be able to be increased, so it can play, with fewer bureaucratic constraints, a similar role to that for which area committee funding was used in the past. The concern in recent years to make applicants complete application forms for this money has been a real brake on the responsiveness of the funding for councillors, and occasionally misunderstands the relationship between the council and the applicant: many applicants are not supplicants, but partners, and funding them will meet the council's priorities.
- Moving planning applications to 2 committees at the Town Hall will reduce the public's ability to attend and contribute to the debate, by reducing audience size and reduce the valuable feeling of local issues being debated and decided locally, by local councillors. Some applications will be decided by councillors with no local connections or knowledge.
- Area Forums -- ill thought that they are, with little published ideas of organisation or management, will be much less well attended, and become just talking shops -- particularly in city areas where Area Committees are poorly attended anyway.
- Grants to outside organisations will become non-existent since the allowance for each councillor will be swallowed up by the expense of hiring a venue , paperwork and officers' time
- Centralising planning applications will not necessarily save any costs since planning committees will wish to travel to unfamiliar sites and / or there will be more formal site visits - with more travel expenses and officer time etc .

- This is an ill-considered measure that sits badly with the expressed wish --of all parties nationally -- to see government devolved as far down to local areas as possible