

CORPORATE SERVICES POLICY & PERFORMANCE BOARD

REVIEW OF AREA FORUMS

June 2007

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CORPORATE SERVICES POLICY & PERFORMANCE BOARD REVIEW OF AREA FORUMS

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report sets out the findings and recommendations of a Review of Area Forums.

Area Forums were introduced across the whole Borough in 2002 to improve local decision making by bringing consideration of local issues as close to the community as possible, by working in partnership with others to tackle difficult issues, and to consult people at local level as part of the process of engaging people in local democracy.

The review examined how the practice of Area Forums has evolved, and identified options for further development. It looked at the role and purpose of Forums, their governance arrangements, how the seven Forums currently operate and what lessons can be drawn from what works.

The recommendations are intended to improve the ability of Forums to engage at local level with residents, and should increase resident satisfaction with opportunities to influence and participate in local decisions.

2. STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The report which follows sets out the national and local policy context for Area Forums, and summarises the evidence collected by the Topic Group from surveys and meetings with residents, officers, elected members and partners, and by visiting other local authorities. The last section draws conclusions and makes recommendations for improving the operation of Forums.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

3.1. National Policy

The Local Government White Paper and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, are built on the assumption that public services needed to be made more personal and so community engagement at the neighbourhood level is paramount. There are to be new powers:

- the Community Call for Action enabling Councillors to refer local issues to the Executive Board or Policy & Performance Boards
- greater focus on citizen engagement through a revised Best Value duty and refocused performance framework
- simpler processes for the formation of town or Parish Councils (and a presumption in favour of their establishment where communities request them)

And there is encouragement:

- to adopt neighbourhood charters
- to develop neighbourhood management
- to transfer redundant assets eg (buildings) to the community

One key feature of the White Paper and Bill is that there is no “one size fits all” prescription for neighbourhood working.

The White Paper and Bill place great emphasis on the role of the Local Strategic Partnership and on Local Area Agreements and on the importance of looking at all public services in an area rather than working silos.

This changing national picture is also influencing other public agencies in Halton. For example, there is a commitment to introduce neighbourhood policing across the whole country by April 2008. The health sector is also being encouraged to engage more locally, particularly in those neighbourhoods with the worst health inequalities.

3.2. Local Policy

The Council and the Halton Strategic Partnership Board have recognised through the Corporate Plan and the Community Strategy the need to look at the experience of our residents at neighbourhood level, and to close the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the rest. This is reflected in the targets we have agreed with Government in the Local Area Agreement. In order to deliver on this commitment, pilot neighbourhood management arrangements have been established with Government funding in these areas. It is hoped to learn from the pilots with a view to extending successful approaches across the Borough.

Service delivery is already devolved at a local level in some areas. For example, Streetscene, Community Development, and the Youth Service are delivered on an Area Forum basis. Neighbourhood Policing is also based around Area Forum boundaries. Services to Children & Young People, delivered through Halton’s 0-19 Children’s Centres, are being organised around Children & Young People Area Networks (CYPANs) which loosely reflect Area Forum boundaries over much of Halton.

3.3. Issues Arising

- a. Does the geography of our Area Forums reflect recognisable neighbourhoods? Are they a suitable basis for neighbourhood working? For example, are Beechwood and Hallwood Park part of what residents would recognise as the same neighbourhood? Likewise Halton View and Upton Rocks.
- b. How do Area Forums fit in with the three neighbourhood management pilots?
- c. How does the Council wish to respond to Government expectations of greater engagement with services at neighbourhood level?

4. SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

The Topic Group had collected evidence from a variety of sources.

- i. Elected Members (group discussion)
- ii. Support Officers (group discussion)
- iii. Partners and Council Service Leads (interviews)
- iv. Halton 2000 survey
- v. Focus groups drawn from attenders and non attenders at Area Forums
- vi. Discussions and a questionnaire at the January cycle of Area Forum meetings
- vii. Study visits to Knowsley and Tameside

Detailed records from all these sources are available on request. A brief summary of the main findings in each case is set out below:

4.1. **Elected Members**

Each Area Forum was invited to nominate at least one member to attend a meeting with the Topic Group. In all, 13 members were present.

It was apparent from the discussion that current practice varies quite widely between different forums. This was a surprise to some members who only had experience of their own forum. Views as to the success of current arrangements and the scope for improvement varied considerably. Some members clearly feel that what is already in place is working well and should not be tampered with. Others saw room for further improvement.

There was general agreement on a number of points:

- a. Area Forums provide an opportunity to listen to residents, to inform residents, and to use the Area Forum budget to fix local problems.
- b. There was support for increasing the involvement of partners, and for using forums to hold them to account on local matters. However, the experience of working with the Police had taken time to settle down.
- c. In the conduct of meetings and the decisions on funding allocation, the role of democratically accountable elected members was crucial.
- d. Attendance at meetings was variable from forum to forum and according to current local issues. They should be publicised more effectively, and meetings should be made interesting with a limit on the number and length of presentations.
- e. The timing and location of meetings could never meet the preferences of all residents.
- f. Youth involvement was important but there was no single view on the best way of facilitating it.
- g. The length of time between meetings creates a lack of continuity which is accentuated in those forums where venues rotate around the wards.

4.2. **Support Officers**

Each Forum is supported by a Senior Manager (usually an Operational Director). There is also an Area Forum Co-ordinator who helps all seven forums by progress chasing individual projects and keeping overall track of expenditure commitments. Legal and Member Services organise and service Forum meetings and pre-agenda meetings.

The Topic Group Chair led a discussion with four of the Lead Officers and the Area Forum Co-ordinator. The key conclusions of this group were:

- a. **Attendance** - generally felt to be poor. Mainly the same faces at every meeting. The exception is when there are controversial single issues typically based around planning or licensing applications. Given the generally low levels of attendance do Area Forums represent value for money?

- b. **Purpose** - Area Forums are:
- an opportunity for residents to become engaged
 - a way for members to hear community opinion
 - a way for the community to access funding
 - a way of providing information to the community
- c. **Allocation of funding** - some Panels tend to work on a first come first served basis rather than using objective criteria to prioritise bids. A significant proportion of funding proposals come from officers or members either directly or indirectly via members of the public. It is perceived that not many come fresh from the floor. More encouragement could be given to requests from the wider community. The decision making around funding may not always appear transparent to residents as decisions are often made by members outside the public forum meeting.
- d. **Timing and location** - Area Forum meetings are held at 7.00pm. Whilst this benefits those who work, (including elected members) it disadvantages those reliant on public transport and those who are reluctant to go out after dark. Some venues are difficult to find and some are remote. Town centre locations might be more accessible.
- e. **Frequency** - the frequency of Area Forum meetings could be seen as a measure of how important or not they are viewed by the Council.
- f. **Format** - the formality of the meetings discourage participation. However, a more informal drop-in approach could lead to them becoming extended members' surgeries.
- g. **Geography** - Area Forums cover wide and diverse areas. However, working at a more local level, for example, ward panels, was viewed as unworkable in terms of the staff resources that would be required to administer and support them.
- h. **Partner involvement** - increasing the attendance of partners especially the Police but also the Primary Care Trust and registered Social Landlords, would strengthen Panels.
- i. **Residents involvement** - including residents on the Panels would demonstrate the commitment and facilitate a more joined up community focused approach.
- j. **Presentations** - more thought is required to localise the content of presentations to make them area specific and to pitch them appropriately to the audience. If questions and local nuts and bolts issues were dealt with first on the agenda, and presentations dealt with later, it might emphasise the priorities of the Area Forum and increase a sense of local empowerment. There was concern that at some venues, it is difficult to see or hear presentations. Better use of IT and possibly a portable PA system might help to address this.
- k. **Publicity** - Forums need to be better publicised. Suggestions include sending out details of spend and achievement with Council Tax bills, publicising spend and achievements on the Council website, and badging Area Forum funded projects for example with signs or plaques to promote the work of the Area Forum.

4.3. **Partners and Service Leads**

Three members of the Topic Group met a number of partners and Council Officers individually or in small groups as part of an "enquiry day". This included representatives from the Police, Fire Service, PCT, Halton Voluntary Action Together, Cosmopolitan

Housing, Four Estates Ltd (a community group), the Council's Transport and Waste Management Services, and a group of young people.

In summary, the key points raised were:

a. Role of Forums

- Engagement, joint problem solving, for residents to influence service delivery (eg a Streetscene, CSOs) to initiate local projects, and to harvest ideas from residents.
- Consultation at local level about local and Borough wide plans
- To inform residents about services and about decisions
- To allocate Area Forum funds

b. Partners and Links

- Young people were keen to develop the links between Area Forums and Area Youth Forums
- Service providers acknowledged the opportunity to use Area Forums for specific consultations rather than organising separate events (for example quality corridors)
- One consultee was concerned about combining Police meetings with Area Forums but combined Police and RSL surgeries were suggested as an alternative.

Generally, partners were very positive about reducing the number of different forums by combining meetings (eg Police and registered social landlords). Partners with no area arrangements of their own see the potential to use Area Forums (Primary Care Trust, Fire & Rescue Service).

c. Attendance and Operational Arrangements

This generated the most comment.

- Attendance levels were considered to be poor (frequently mentioned, but not all Forums and not every meeting). The overwhelming view was that to secure better attendance, residents need to feel that they have influence over decisions. It was noted that Area Forums are just one method of engagement, and we can gather local opinion by other means (surveys, using frontline staff etc). Not all residents want to engage, and of those that do, not all want to go to meetings. Therefore, low attendance is not necessarily a problem provided there are alternative methods of engagement in place.
- Setting agendas - it is important to get the right balance between giving information and listening to residents. It should be easy for residents to put items forward for the agenda. We should involve partners in agenda setting and put on joint presentations (for example anti-social behaviour). Questions should be allowed without prior notice, provided that it is understood that there may not be an instant answer on the night.
- Young people - consideration needs to be given to different ways of involving young people of meetings and outside meetings in other settings. We could give the Youth Forums an agenda slot on every Area Forum meeting. It would help to give

maximum advance notice of agenda items to allow issues to be taken to the Youth Forum first so that their representatives at the Area Forum can come with a considered view (the same comment was made about community groups).

- Feedback - it is important to inform the community about what the Forum is doing. Options include:
 - regular progress reports on projects for example by the website
 - an annual newsletter from each Forum focussing on its achievements
 - local leafleting or publicity in the vicinity of particular projects as they are carried out.
 - Promotion of meetings - more needs to be done for example including a schedule of meetings in the refuse collection calendar (but there is a timing problem with this); use schools to publicise meetings to young people and their parents.

Time and place - the benefits of local -v- central venues and day time -v- evening meetings were discussed without any clear consensus emerging. It was suggested that an annual day long event be held every year for each Forum to identify the priorities for that area for the coming year.

- Frequency - more meetings were suggested enabling more than one meeting to be held in each ward every year (for those forums that rotate venues).
- Layout - the top table format was commented on. Suggestions included a circular format or members sitting with residents. Refreshments such as tea and coffee would make for a more friendly and flexible approach.
- Facilities - need to ensure that Powerpoint is available when needed and adult sized chairs in schools would be appreciated.

d. Governance and Funding

There are variations in practice between Forums as to how decisions are made on funding allocations. It was suggested that in all cases proposals should be put to a Forum for comment before being approved by Members, and that all decisions should be publicly reported and progress tracked. The potential for devolving budgets was discussed with Officers, but there was some concern that it might result in areas of greatest need (in a technical sense such as areas with the most clapped out street lighting) would not get the funding they required. Administration of these budgets by seven different Area Forums would require increased technical support.

4.4. Halton 2000 Survey

Halton 2000 is a Citizens Panel which is surveyed on a range of topics four times a year. In January 2007, questions were put to the Panel about Area Forums. The key results were as follows:

- i. Awareness - could be better
 - of 1,367 responses, 52% were not aware of Area Forums

- 84% had never seen any publicity for Area Forums.
 - The preferred method to receive information about Area Forum meetings was by leaflets delivered to the household (58%). The next most popular methods of receiving information were notices or adverts in local papers (44%) and information in the Council magazine (26%).
- ii. Willingness to attend - 61% of respondents said that they would attend an Area Forum to discuss issues or raise a question.
- iii. Reasons for attending - for those who had attended an Area Forum, the main reason was to find out about what is going on in their area (62%). A further 20% had wanted to raise a particular issue.
- iv. Reasons for not attending - of those aware of Forums but who have not attended, the main reasons given were:
- not knowing when/where the meetings are held (27%)
 - not knowing enough about them (27%)
 - times are inconvenient (27%)
- v. Preferred topics. The following topics are those which residents would like to raise or that might encourage them to attend an Area Forum meeting.

Topic	% Interested
▪ To find out about long term plans for the area	63%
▪ To find out more about the reasons behind decisions affecting the area	54%
▪ To raise specific problems such as fly tipping or anti-social behaviour	44%
▪ To be involved in making decisions	40%
▪ To meet other agencies such as the Police or Health Service	39%
▪ To raise issues about the way that money is spent in the area	36%
▪ To raise issues about the level and quality of Council services	35%
▪ To work with people in the area to make it a better place to live	34%
▪ To meet my local Councillor and let him/her know about my views	29%

note: % adds up to more than 100% - respondents were allowed to select more than one answer

- vi. Timing - most people (68%) would prefer evening meetings.
- vii. Location - most people (61%) would prefer the meeting to be held within the Area Forum area rather than centrally
- viii. Mode of travel - most people prefer to meetings by car (57%). Of the rest, 30% would prefer to walk and 11% to use public transport.

As a baseline for measuring the future success of Area Forums, when asked, 51% agreed that they could influence decisions in their area and 65% agreed that by working together, people in their neighbourhood could influence decisions affecting the neighbourhood.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this survey are that we should:

- Improve publicity about where and when meetings take place and what they are about.

- Ensure that the agendas include topics important to residents
- Continue to hold meetings in the evening in the Area Forum areas

4.5. **Focus Group of Non-Attendees**

A focus group was held in January 2007 for residents who had not attended an Area Panel. Participants were drawn from the Halton 2000 Panel and the focus group was conducted by Merseyside Information Service to ensure independence from the Council. The key findings were:

- i. **Awareness** - only one of the participants knew anything about Area Forums. On hearing about them, others were keen to go and see what forums were like.
- ii. **Improving attendance**
 - No one time suited all participants and 7.00pm was as good a time as any
 - length of the meeting was not a strong factor in determining attendance
 - improved publicity via newspaper adverts would be seen as adequate by many, but for those who do not read the local paper a leaflet would be preferred
 - knowing what is on the agenda beforehand would help participants to decide whether to attend or not
 - preferred location for meetings would be in the Area Forum area
 - there were mixed views on frequency of meetings: some felt quarterly was enough others said monthly would give more choice of attending
 - a large meeting was seen as intimidating by some and therefore they would like the opportunity to express opinions in writing or in smaller discussion groups
 - seeing positive action taken as a result of discussion at the forum would encourage future attendance
 - topics that participants would find interesting ranged from the lack of local shops through to transport. They recognised that Area Forums can only deal with local issues but could also act as the first step in bringing wider issues to the attention of the relevant department or organisation.
 - Decision making - the role of Area Forums in making decisions was seen as limited because Forums only represent the views of a minority
 - Information - respondents would like feedback on progress with issues raised at the forums, and for dates to be set for outcomes, and for the publication of minutes.

4.6. Focus Group of Area Forum attendees

A focus group of people who had attended meetings was drawn from the Council's Area Forum contact list, and conducted by Merseyside Information Service to ensure independence.

- i. **General** - Area Forums were regarded as "very good" and provided a means of two way communication and an opportunity to air complaints, to receive information and explanation of decisions.
- ii. **Presentations** - there was a mixed view on presentations made to Area Forums ranging from "spot on" to suggestions that they should be shorter, made relevant to the local area, and the presenters should avoid the use of jargon.
- iii. **The agenda** - there was a desire that participants should be able to contribute to the setting of the agenda for example by asking at the end of the evening what issues those attending would like to see on the next forum agenda. To improve accountability, contact details of Council Officers attending the meeting should be included on the agenda. Agendas should be simplified into questions from the floor, items with information that is presentations and feedback or progress reports. Participants in the focus group would like feedback on progress between meetings. It was suggested as a minimum that the minutes could be mailed out in between meetings rather than waiting for the agenda of the next meeting to go out.
- iv. **Asking questions** - there were mixed views about the process of submitting questions: some were pleased with the results others were not. Participants would like to be able to ask cold questions on the night.
- v. **Area Forum budgets** - the Area Forum budgets are viewed positively by those who are aware of them.
- vi. **Decision making** - the focus group participants recognised that Area Forums can only deal with matters over which Council members have powers, but do expect that issues that the Council cannot deal with should be passed on to the relevant body rather than simply saying it is nothing to do with us.

It was suggested that a system for monitoring progress on items not fully dealt with at a previous meeting should be introduced. Some participants in the focus group did not view forums as being primarily for decision making but mainly for information and to make recommendations. Litter, traffic, parking, youth, vandalism, and nuisance were seen as areas upon which Area Forums might make decisions.

- vii. **Use of Halton Direct Link** - it was felt that if Halton Direct Link receives several complaints or questions about a particular issue in an area, this could be fed through to the Forum for consideration as part of the agenda.
- viii. **Influencing Service Delivery** - as a means of influencing service delivery, forums can highlight failures, and can publicise good work as a positive way of promoting forums and influencing service delivery.
- ix. **The conduct of meetings** - there were mixed views about chairing meetings. One suggested that a lay person should chair the meeting, others like having the same Chairman at every meeting and some preferred the Chairmanship to rotate. Some participants in the focus group referred to issues that are raised at Forums but not taken up by the Forum and they felt that the decision whether or not to pursue a matter should

be for the whole forum not just for the members. Participants would like an open Any Other Business item at the end of the agenda. Comments were made that seating arrangements with a top table was not felt to be conducive to participation in the meeting.

- x. **Encouraging participation** - suggestions for encouraging attendance and participation included:
- improved marketing
 - more frequent Area Forums (every two months)
 - no change to time or venue
 - arrange for a bus to pick up residents on the night of the forums
 - encourage all age groups to attend

4.7. **Survey at Area Forum Meetings**

The review of Area Forums was included on the agenda of all seven forums in January 2007, and questionnaires were distributed to all attendees. In total, 49 questionnaires were returned, of which 38 came from just three forums, so the results must be treated with care. The key findings were:

- the majority (82%) attended to find out what was going on in the area
- the preferred method of finding out about forums was by direct mailshot (55%) followed by information in the Council magazine (43%), leaflets to the household (41%) or email shots (37%)
- the vast majority preferred an evening meeting on a weekday (95%) within the Area Forum area
- respondents were very willing to travel one or two miles (92%) and 57% would travel up to five miles to attend a meeting
- the majority (70%) would travel by car and 23% on foot
- of nine suggested topics or issues, seven were of interest to at least 2/3 of respondents suggesting that there is no one topic of greater importance
- the majority (84%) felt forums should have a budget
- asked for one suggestion as to how forums could be improved, a range of answers were given. These included:
 - better publicity marketing (13)
 - fewer/shorter presentations (4)
 - more information about how the budget is spent, and more say in budget decisions (3)
 - involve more young people (1)
 - less formal layout, facilitate discussion between people who attend (2)
 - consult on what should be discussed/last agenda item to be suggestions for the agenda for the next meeting (2)
 - better sound/microphones and AV equipment (2)
 - time limit for questions (1)

- other comments were:
 - could meetings be rotated to Appleton and Riverside
 - have public questions first instead of last
 - Police, Housing and Youth Service to be invited to attend

There were also many positive comments supporting the concept and the current arrangements

4.8. **Study Visit to Tameside MBC**

Tameside is a Beacon Authority for “getting closer to communities”. It has nine district assemblies based on old townships such as Ashton and Hyde, with delegated budgets for local roads, footpaths, street lights, parks, gardens, open spaces, street cleansing, play provision, youth services and certain community safety initiatives. District assemblies consist of all Ward Councillors, a standing Chair and Vice Chair. They are supported by an advisory group of residents, businesses, and young people elected by local secondary schools. The Advisory Group sits with Councillors at the public assembly meetings and they also meet with them outside these formal meetings, but have no voting rights. The Police, town patrollers (Wardens) and Fire Service all attend the meetings. The PCT does not regularly attend but the health sector has made presentations on specific issues.

The Assemblies concentrate on “cleaner, greener, safer issues” but do have wider responsibilities based on the key core priorities. Each Assembly has a town plan. The Droylesden Plan for example has action plans for the environment, community safety, local liaison, and young people with two lead members for each priority theme.

The nine Assemblies are supported by three full time, Township Managers each of whom has secretarial, administrative and project management support. Each assembly has a nominated Democratic Services officer, and named contacts in key services (eg engineering, youth services).

Each Assembly has its own style, the common features on all of the agendas are:

- i. a town scene report describing what has happened in the locality since the last meeting
- ii. a “What’s On” report highlighting future events
- iii. agenda slots for the Police, Wardens and Fire Service and
- iv. an open question session

Meetings are widely publicised by poster campaigns, street banners in the week before the event, press notices, website, and Council Newspaper.

4.9. **Study Visit to Knowsley MBC**

Knowsley used to have Area Public Forums very similar to Halton’s. However, over the last 12 months, these forums have been replaced by “Concept Knowsley” which is based on a Neighbourhood Management approach. Areas are managed by Area Partnership Boards and services are restructuring around devolved delivery. Area Partnership Boards are constituted like a mini LSP with representatives from key partner agencies, resident representatives, a business representative, and one Councillor for each ward, giving overall

board membership of between 12 and 15. The Area Public Forums only meet now if commissioned by the Area Partnership Board to consult on a particular topical theme.

The six Area Partnership Boards are supported by six Area Relationship Directors and small area based teams. The area based teams comprise of an Environmental Manager, a half time Communications Officer, two Partnership Engagement Officers, a Neighbourhood Warden Manager and 12 Wardens, a Highways Inspector for one day a week, a hot desk to the Police and Social Care. Each Partnership communicates monthly through a newsletter.

The initial area of focus for the Partnerships has been Streetscene and environmental issues. Area Partnership Boards have no budgets of their own.

5. CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

There is government encouragement to develop neighbourhood engagement, and neighbourhood management. Area Forums may not provide the best geography for that, but have the advantage of being established, and service delivery has been designed around them. Three strategic options are available:

Option 1 - map out neighbourhoods which residents would identify with and reconfigure Area Forums onto these boundaries. This could lead to a large number of smaller forums. It would only be worth doing if we could resource it and had a clear vision of how to operate on a neighbourhood basis.

Option 2 - move towards a neighbourhood management model in each Area Forum area, with a Partnership Board replacing the Area Forum. Forums could be convened as a consultation mechanism for the Partnership Board. This approach would imply significant investment and the reconfiguration of services (the Concept Knowsley model).

Option 3 - retain current Forum arrangements, but develop their role to increase participation by residents and partners.

Given our current arrangements, it would make most sense to follow Option 3 for the time being. Once the three Neighbourhood Management pilots have become established and some lessons begin to emerge, we could then evaluate whether there were any improvements which could be rolled out across the whole Borough.

The remainder of this section is based on Option 3 - that is improving current Forum arrangements.

5.1. The Role of Area Forums

In the course of its research, no single view of the purpose of Area Forums emerged. It is important that residents know what to expect, and that Officers and Members are clear about the purpose of Forums.

It is **recommended** that

- i. *the following Statement of Purpose be agreed for Area Forums, and that this statement be incorporated into the Constitution, displayed at meetings, and publicised through other appropriate means:*

“the role and purpose of the Area Forum is:

- *to **listen** to the concerns and problems of residents and to engage in joint problem solving*
- *to **inform** residents about what is going on in their area, and about decisions of the Council and its partners*
- *to enable residents **to influence** the planning and delivery of services*
- *to **commission improvements** using the Area Forum budget.*

5.2. **Involvement of Partners**

In discussion with partners, some expressed willingness to become more involved in Area Forums. Some partners hold their own local meetings (for example residents forums organised by landlords, PADS and CAMS organised by the Police). There has been mixed experience of linking Area Forums to PADS and the Cheshire Constabulary are in the process of reviewing their approach to neighbourhood Working.

It is **recommended** that the Borough Council:

- i. formally invites the Police, Fire Service, registered social landlords, and Youth Service to attend Area Forum meetings regularly*
- ii. provides space on the agenda for updates from each of the key partners subject to advance notice being given of issues that they wish to cover*
- iii. regularly invites partners to put forward suggestions for future agenda items*

and that:

- iv. members and the lead officer from each Forum identify meetings organised by other partners in their area and explore the scope for combined meetings, but the joint meetings with the Police be not pursued at this stage pending their review of their own neighbourhood arrangements.*

5.3. **Involving Young People**

With the support of the Youth Service, Youth Area Forums have been established mirroring the Council's Area Forums. Two representatives from the Youth Forum attend Area Forum meetings. The extent and manner in which they are encouraged to contribute varies from Forum to Forum. It is important that the voice of young people is heard at Forum meetings.

It is **recommended** that:

- i. the attendance and participation of young people, including the member of the Youth Parliament, representatives from Youth Forums and from all school councils at all Area Forum meetings be welcomed and encouraged*
- ii. that once a year, a joint meeting of the Area Forum and the Youth Forum be held*
- iii. the Youth Forum to be invited to put forward items for inclusion in future forum agendas*

5.4. Governance

Area Forums are established in the Council's constitution (Article 11 2006/07). Their activities are reported to Corporate Services Policy & Performance Board to provide accountability. However, there is a lack of clarity about how decisions are made (particularly with respect to Area Forum expenditure). To clarify this, it is **recommended that**

- i. *the Constitution be amended to clarify that whilst Area Forums are not decision making bodies, the Lead Officer has delegated authority to authorise expenditure of Area Forum funds in consultation with Members.*

Practice varies between Forums as to where and when funding commitments are made, and how such decisions are publicised. Whilst it is appropriate for Forums to adopt their own way of working, in order to ensure transparency, it is **recommended** for the avoidance of doubt that:

- ii. *any decisions made outside of a public meeting of the Forum about the allocation of forum funds should be reported to the next public meeting*

It is important that if members are unable to resolve issues raised at an Area Forum, they can, when it is a matter of sufficient significance, refer it to Executive Board or the appropriate Policy & Performance Board. This clarifies current custom and practice. It is **recommended that**

- iii. *the Constitution be amended to make it clear that Area Forums may refer matters of significance which they are unable to resolve to the Executive Board or to the appropriate Policy & Performance Board.*

5.5. Neighbourhood Charters

The Topic Group considered the merit of producing area plans as seen in Tameside. Area Renewal Plans were produced in Halton in 2003, but it proved difficult to encourage "bottom up" engagement from residents. Given the resources required to do this properly, the Group concluded it was not appropriate at this stage to revive this process. However, some value was seen in producing a Neighbourhood Charter setting out what levels of service residents could expect in each Area Forum area. It is **recommended that**:

- i. *the production of Neighbourhood Charters be investigated and a further report made to Corporate Services Policy & Performance Board about the feasibility of this proposal.*

5.6. Frequency of Meetings

Area Forums currently meet three times a year. For Forums which rotate meetings around wards, this typically means one meeting in each venue per year. The gaps between meetings generate discontinuity. It was felt desirable to increase the frequency of meetings. However, the Topic Group is aware of the already heavy workload of members, and so it is **recommended that**:

- i. *the frequency of Area Forum meetings be increased to four a year from the 2008/09 municipal year, including joint meeting with the Area Youth Forum.*

5.7. Area Forum Budgets

The Area Forums have a total budget of £600,000 per year, divided between the Forums on a per capita basis. Of this total, £300,000 is funded by the Council, and £300k is contributed

by the Halton Strategic Partnership from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF). The Government's commitment to NRF ends in March 2008 resulting in a potential 50% reduction in funding to Area Forums. The Topic Group felt that the Area Forum funding is a valuable tool for forums to address local problems, and **recommends**:

- i. that consideration be given in the 2008/09 medium Term financial strategy and budget to replacing any loss of NRF from the Council's own resources.*

5.8. Time and Place of Meetings

The review clearly revealed that there is no time of day which suits everyone. Overall, there is a clear preference for continuing with the current practice of evening meetings. However, this does present difficulties for some groups of residents (for example, the elderly and those reliant on public transport). To help residents to access meetings, a dial-a-ride service could be provided, although costs would have to be met from Area Forum budgets. It is also possible to engage with groups of residents who find it hard to attend forum meetings by other means. It is **recommended** that:

- i. the normal time for forum meetings continues to be 7.00pm*
- ii. the cost and effectiveness of a dial-a-ride service to transport residents to meetings be investigated*
- iii. the existing practice of some forums in holding additional meeting with particular sections of the community at suitable venues and times be commended to all Forums*

The location of meetings was also covered in the review. Some Forums hold all meetings in one place, other rotate around venues in different wards. During the review, the option to use a central venue more easily reached by public transport was investigated. There is a clear preference that Forum meetings should take place in the area, and it is **recommended** that:

- iv. no change be made to the current choice of venues*

5.9. Format and conduct of meetings

Whilst each Area Forum has its own style, the majority adopt a "top table" layout with some or all of the elected members sitting at a table facing the audience. Meetings tend to be conducted in a formal manner. Some Forums only take questions submitted in advance. The general feedback from residents during the review was that this could be a little intimidating and a more informal approach would be preferred. In some venues, it can be difficult to hear what is said. As each venue is different, it is not appropriate to be prescriptive, but the following approach is **recommended**:

- i. a less formal room layout be adopted with as few barriers as possible between residents and Councillors*
- ii. partners and youth representatives be invited to sit with Councillors*
- iii. investigate the provision of microphones and amplification where necessary;*
- iv. questions can be accepted on the night up to the start of the meeting, provided that they are in writing with the questioner's name and address provided*

- v. *where feasible, tea and coffee should be provided to help to create a more relaxed atmosphere*

5.10. **Agenda Setting**

The agenda for meetings clearly influences attendance, and the effectiveness of the Forum. Residents would like the opportunity to influence agendas, and would like updates on progress from earlier meetings. They would also be interested to hear from partner organisations. It is **recommended** that every agenda should include:

- i. *feedback on progress with items raised at the last meeting and on progress with projects funded by the Forum*
- ii. *updates from key partners (eg Police and Fire Service) on their activities in the area*
- iii. *an opportunity for the Youth Forum to bring items to the Area Forum*
- iv. *an opportunity for the residents to put forward suggested items for the next meeting*

To assist with public understanding of proceedings, and to emphasise the importance of resident's contributions it is **recommended** that:

- v. *agendas be split into:*
 - *questions from residents*
 - *items and presentations for information*
 - *feedback and progress reports*
- vi. *that wherever possible the residents questions be considered as the first item on the agenda, with a time limit*

There was a mixed response to the practice of formal presentations to Forums, but the consensus was to keep them brief and to the (local) point. It is **recommended** that:

- vii. *presentations be kept brief (normally not more than 10 minutes) and made relevant to the particular Area being addressed.*

Area Forums vary considerably in length. In the interest of maximising attendance and participation, the aim should be to avoid running on too late. It is **recommended**:

- viii. *that meetings should finish by 9.00pm*

It has been suggested that if there is a pattern of service requests or complaints in an area, this might be included on the Forum's agenda. It is **recommended** that

- ix. *the possibility of identifying particular local issues being dealt with by Halton Direct Link be investigated*

5.11. **Publicity and Promotion**

One of the most frequently raised issues during the review was the lack of public awareness of Forums. It is vital that this is addressed so that residents can at least choose whether to attend or not. Some promotional activities will have resource implications, and funding will need to be provided from the Area Forum budgets. It is **recommended** that

- i. *a Communications Strategy for Area Forums be developed with costs and brought back to the Corporate services Policy and Performance Board for consideration to include:*
 - *promotion of Forums in Inside Halton and the Council website*
 - *publicity for the achievements of Area Forums*
 - *a leaflet distributed to all households in each Forum area once a year with an annual report and calendar of future meetings*
 - *the use of press releases and paid for advertisements*
 - *suitable acknowledgement by projects funded by the Area Forum (“badging”)*
 - *promoting the involvement of young people in conjunction with the Youth Forum, possibly through schools*
 - *the use of other Council publications such as the Council Tax leaflet and the refuse collection calendar*
 - *the use of prepaid envelopes to encourage questions and funding suggestions to be returned*
- ii. *the random mail out of agendas to 45 residents adopted by Appleton, Kingsway and Riverside Area Forum be trialled with other Forums and the results monitored*
- iii. *feedback on progress be available to residents between meetings via the website and the early production and circulation of minutes*
- iv. *scope for joint promotion with partners (and joint funding) be investigated*

5.12. **Information About Council Services**

One of the main reasons given for attending Area Forums is to “find out what is going on in my area”. It is therefore **recommended** that:

- i. *a selection of leaflets about forthcoming activities and key Council services be displayed at Forum meetings*

5.13. **How will we know if it works?**

We need to be able to judge the success (or otherwise) of these changes. The most obvious measure is attendance and the numbers of questions asked. However, there are two weaknesses in this.

- i. There are many reasons why residents may not attend, not everyone wants to go to a public meeting, and there are other ways of engaging with the Council.
- ii. Attendance on its own is not sufficient to say we are successful - residents must feel it was a worthwhile experience.

Other indicators we could use are the extent to which residents believe they can influence decisions, and satisfaction with opportunities for local participation in decisions.

We could also survey the satisfaction of the residents attending the meetings.

As part of the development of these proposals, a clear set of measures and baselines needs to be established and members might like to consider setting targets.

It is **recommended** that

- i. a performance framework be brought back to Corporate Service Policy & Performance Board for approval.*

TOPIC GROUP FORUM MEMBERS

Cllr Bob Gilligan (Chair)

Cllr Alan Lowe

Cllr Chris Inch

Cllr Paul Nolan

Cllr Mark Dennett

Cllr Sue Blackmore

Advisors

Rob Mackenzie

Ian Grady

TOPIC BRIEF

Topic Title:	Area Forums
PPB Responsible:	Corporate Services
Officer Lead:	Rob Mackenzie
Start/end:	September 06 – February 07

Description and scope

Area Forums were introduced across the whole Borough four years ago. They work towards improving local decision-making by bringing the consideration of local issues as close to the community as possible, working in partnership with others to tackle difficult issues; and, to consult people at a local level, as part of the process of engaging people in local democracy. This topic would examine how the practice of Forums has evolved and identify options and recommendations for further development. It will also consider the impact of relevant proposals in the local government white paper to be published in the autumn.

The review will address the following issues:

1. Role and Purpose:
 - What are Area Forums for?
 - What are the implications of the Local Government White Paper for Area Forums
 - What is the relationship of forums to the emerging neighbourhood management arrangements?
 - How do area forums link in to other engagement arrangements e.g Youth Forums, PADs, Older Persons Engagement Network
2. Governance:
 - How do Area Forums feed into and influence the policy and decision making processes of the Council (PPBs, Executive Board) and partners?
 - What is the process for allocating and reporting the allocation of Area Forum funds
3. How do the 7 area forums currently operate, and what lessons can we draw about what works?
 - Time and place of meeting
 - Publicity and communication
 - Agenda setting
 - Format and conduct of meeting
 - How are decisions made?
 - Support arrangements
 - Resident involvement, including specific groups like young people and older people
 - Partner involvement

Why chosen

After 4 years it is timely to review progress, particularly in the light of the forthcoming Local Government White Paper and the emerging policy context for local governance.

Outputs/outcomes

A set of recommendations on strengthening the role of Forums may be expected, with a view to strengthening the community leadership role of members and enhancing community engagement with the Council..

Strategic Priorities

Community leadership and good governance is one of the underpinning principles of the Council's Corporate Plan. As such it contributes to all strategic priorities and the achievement of the Councils vision for Halton

PPB Input/Mode of operation

Member Task Group to examine current practice and issues from across the borough. Receive evidence from members, officers, partners and residents on current practice; emerging neighbourhood management arrangements and policy development from Government expected in the White Paper in the autumn; and, look at examples of best practice from outside the borough. Scrutiny by full Board at February meeting. .

Agreed and signed by: -

PPB Chair Officer

Date Date