

Subject: Strengthening Area Fora

Status: For Publication

Report to: The Cabinet

Date: 6th June 2007

Report of: Head of Planning, Legal and Democratic Services

Portfolio

Holder: Health and Wellbeing

Key Decision:

No

Forward Plan

General Exception

Special Urgency

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The report outlines a number of options for the Cabinet to consider which will strengthen the role of Area Fora and bring local decision making closer to communities.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 2.1 The matters discussed in this report are directly linked to the following corporate priorities:-
- o Delivery of quality services to customers
 - o Equipping members to fulfil their role as leaders in the community

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There is a risk to the reputation of the Council if Area Fora are perceived to be poorly performing.

4. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

- 4.1 A central theme running throughout the Government's modernisation process is the continuing drive for more effective engagement of local communities in decisions that affect them.
- 4.2 The Council has a leading role to play in promoting local democracy in Rossendale. Area Fora are an integral part of this process and represent an opportunity to engage with members of the public.

4.3 Area Fora have been in place in Rossendale since 2002. There are a number of drivers, both national and local, for reviewing the effectiveness of Area Fora.

- The Government white paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities encourages diversity and creativity, giving local council's the freedom they need to respond and meet their communities' needs. There is a continuing driver from Government to encourage community involvement in local democracy.
- The Community and Involvement and Engagement report undertaken on behalf of the Council by Rossendale Enterprise Anchor Limited (REAL) identified the requirement to review Area Fora to ensure that they amounted to a consistently effective community engagement mechanism.
- The Community Leadership Policy Statement and Action Plan approved by the Cabinet in November 2006 identified the need to develop strong links between the Council and the local community
- The publication of the Community Involvement and Engagement Strategy identified the need to review Area Fora

4.4 Working effectively, Area Fora can give real meaning to the Council's Community Leadership role and to developing involvement in decision-making and governance at a local level.

4.5 An analysis of the comments received during the development of the Community Involvement and Engagement Strategy has identified the following:

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on local issues • Enables information to be shared on Council matters • Feedback on reports from the Police and NEAT Teams is good • Partnership working with the County Council and the Police • Developed mechanism to link to Lancashire Local so that County Council matters are fed through their decision making processes 	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No decision-making powers • Limited agendas • Meetings often seen as too long
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of partners • Responsive to local needs • Local Members acting as Community Leaders • Involvement of Whitworth Town Council on Whitworth Area Forum • Effective Community Leadership 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on issues raised at the meeting • Lack of clarity of role for Area Forum

4.6 The Way forward for Rossendale

The Cabinet are asked to consider the approach set out below as a way forward. As part of the refresh of Area Fora Members are asked to consider re-branding the Area Fora as Neighbourhood Fora, linked to the Neighbourhood Agenda and the development of Neighbourhood Plans, discussed elsewhere in the Cabinet's agenda.

4.6.1 Publicity

There are several ways in which to publicise the meetings as set out below:

- Posters prepared by Democratic Services in consultation with the Communications Manager and to be distributed by Elected Members and NEAT Officers
- Advertise on neighbourhood notice boards
- Advertise through local media by way of press releases etc
- Promote on the events page of the Council's website
- Use of pupil post in schools, where schools are used as meeting venues
- Banners where appropriate

4.6.2 Budgets

The Grants Advisory Board are recommending the option detailed below, to implement the Council's decision allocating resources to the Fora.

The Council have granted a total budget of £20,000 in the next financial year for each Area Forum to carry out local works and activities in line with the needs of local communities. It is proposed to allocate the £20,000 between the four Area Fora based on population per Ward which would equate to the following:

Neighbourhood Fora	Populati on No.	Budget £
Bacup	14,191	4,320
Haslingden (including Edenfield and Helmshore)	20,393	6,220
Rawtenstall	23,805	7,260
Whitworth	7,263	2,200

Other options, such as a total per Ward, per Councillor or equal amounts per Forum are available. However, each of these contains some degree of inequity, while the suggested option is relatively simple and can demonstrate a greater degree of equity.

The Cabinet are requested to consider the management of those budgets and the suggested approach is set out below:

- An application form would be developed and bids could be submitted up to a maximum value of £750.
- Applications would be fed through a Ward Councillor and would have to be championed by that Elected Member.
- A Working Group of each Area Forum would be established comprising three Elected Members and two community representatives. The Groups would be facilitated and supported through the Head of Community and Partnerships. The Neighbourhood Manager would be asked to comment on any grant application including attending the Working Group Meetings when required. Specific Terms of Reference would be prepared for the Working Groups.
- The Groups would consider the applications relevant to their Area Forum and report recommendations to the next meeting of the Area Forum for agreement. Applicants would be asked to attend the meeting

If this approach is agreed by the Cabinet an amendment to the scheme of delegation would be required whereby delegated authority would have to be given to the Neighbourhood Fora to determine bids received.

Members are asked to note that any individual can submit an application for funding and it is recommended that prior to the adoption of neighbourhood plans, preference should be given to those applications showing clear links to the Council's priorities. Following the adoption of neighbourhood plans preference should be given to those applications that are linked to the plans and priorities for the neighbourhood.

It is recommended that regular update reports should be given to the Area Forum meetings on the use of these resources.

4.6.3 Membership of Fora

The Cabinet are requested to consider the following option in terms of Membership of the Area Fora:

- All Elected Members for the Wards covered in the Fora
- A County Councillor. This will strengthen two tier working with the County Council and build on existing practice and links to Lancashire Local Rossendale.
- A Whitworth Town Councillor to serve on Whitworth Neighbourhood Forum (in line with the recently adopted Charter)
- Police Representative
- Two Community representatives on each Neighbourhood Forum which should be members of recognised community groups that are members of the Community Network

4.6.4 Format of Meetings

Surgery Sessions

In addition to the public question time session held at each Area Forum meeting an option for the Cabinet to consider is whether to hold an informal surgery prior to each meeting. This could be held from 6.30pm with refreshments being provided and would enable members of the public to meet ward councillors on an informal basis prior to the start of the meeting and items of individual concern could be raised at this time. This would increase opportunities for engagement and support Elected Members in their community leadership role. It is suggested that this be piloted at the next round of meetings and reviewed thereafter.

Public Question Time

A transparent process for raising and answering questions needs to be developed. This will include capturing questions that cannot be answered at the meeting and timescales for written responses should be provided in accordance with the customer services standards. It is suggested that where questions cannot be answered directly at the meeting, the member of the public is requested to write their contact details on a feedback form to ensure a response can be sent.

There should be an expectation that if written questions are submitted in advance of the meeting they will receive a response during the meeting. However, if the greatest benefit is to be obtained for the public it is suggested that they should be able to raise questions without notice as is current practice.

There also needs to be a mechanism for ensuring the response is accessible to all who were present at the meeting and it is suggested that the current mechanism whereby feedback sheets are circulated at each meeting is continued. Clear guidelines will help to manage public expectations.

Hot Topics

Through the Business Planning process Heads of Service will be asked to identify hot topics of public interest which could be focused on at each meeting. The Head of Planning, Legal and Democratic Services feels this approach should be piloted in the next cycle of Forum meetings.

Cycle of Meetings

It is recommended to maintain the current quarterly cycle of meetings.

Agenda Management

Firm agenda management will be critical to ensure meetings do not become overlong and there will need to be flexibility in the agenda if there is a burning issue that needs to be addressed.

Venues

It is recommended that the Members of each Forum be consulted on the selection of either a single meeting venue, or a limited number of venues.

4.6.5 Clarity on Role of Neighbourhood Fora - Objectives

Information Exchange

The main aim of the Fora is to include the community in the decision making process, to share information with local communities and to understand the key issues of local communities in Rossendale.

Member Role

Elected members have a key role to play as community leaders and have the ability to influence how corporate strategy is developed in relation to their local communities and it is proposed that their main role at the meeting is community engagement.

5. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

5.1 The financial implications have been accommodated in the 2007/08 budget.

6. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

6.1 As set out in the main report.

7. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

7.1 There are no immediate human resource implications arising from this report.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Strengthening the role of Area Fora will play a key part in supporting Members in their Community Leadership role.

9. RECOMMENDATION

9.1 That the report be agreed.

9.2 That Area Fora be re-branded as Neighbourhood Fora.

9.3 That the budget of £20,000 allocated to each Neighbourhood Fora as set out in the report be agreed.

9.4 That the Council be recommended to amend the Constitution to grant delegated authority to the Neighbourhood Fora to determine bids received, and to accommodate the proposals relating to changed membership set out in this report.

10. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

10.1 Neighbourhood Management Project Team

Contact Officer	
Name	Heather Moore
Position	Committee and Member Services Manager
Service / Team	Democratic Services
Telephone	01706 252423
Email address	heathermoore@rossendale.gov.uk

There are no background papers to this report