

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1

Area Forums

Report of the Review Group

Members of the Review Group

Councillor B. Hall (Chairman)

Councillor A. Gray

Councillor D.M. Hancock

Councillor J.M. Khan

Councillor Mrs I. Jackson-Smith

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Further information on this review can be obtained from
Jonathan Slee, Scrutiny Support Officer: Tel 01388 816166 ext.4362.

CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

The Council introduced revised decision making arrangements as a result of the Local Government Act 2000. Area Forums were established as part of these changes with the aim of making them an important part of the Council's democratic process. The Council recognises the importance of keeping communities informed and involved, and sees both of these responsibilities as key roles of area forums. The Scrutiny Review Group has therefore examined Area Forums' operation to determine their effectiveness, and also with a view to making changes which strengthen community involvement.

The Review has been carried out by a small group of Councillors, supported by Officers from the Council's Democratic Services who have gathered the detailed information for the review. Information has also been obtained from officers involved in Regeneration. There has also been input from Council partners and from residents and tenants groups. Following a wide ranging review, a number of recommendations have been made for consideration by Cabinet.

I would like to thank all who have contributed to the review and look forward to developments arising from its conclusions and recommendations.

Councillor B. Hall,
Chairman of the Review Group

26th April 2006

SUMMARY

Membership of the Review Group

Councillor B. Hall (Chairman) and
Councillors A. Gray, D.M. Hancock, J.M. Khan, Mrs I Jackson-Smith

Objectives of the Review

- To examine the way in which Area Forums currently operate
- To determine their effectiveness and whether this can be improved

Contribution to the Council's Ambitions and Community Outcomes

The Council's Ambitions and Community Outcomes are shown in its Annual Corporate Plan. This Review contributes towards the Council's ambition of developing strong communities and the associated community outcome of engaging local communities.

Process/Methodology

The Review Group gathered information and evidence as follows:-

- a) Through seven meetings between September, 2004 and April, 2006.
- b) Through presentations by D. Anderson, Principal Democratic Services Officer, A. Crawford, Scrutiny Support Officer, R. Prisk, the Council's (former) Head of Regeneration and A Charlton the Council's Local Strategic Partnership Co-ordinator.
- c) By questioning the above Officers.
- d) By visiting Area Forum meetings.
- e) Through discussions with Council partners - namely representatives of town and parish councils, Durham County Council, the Police and the Primary Care Trust (PCT).
- f) Through discussions with Sedgefield Residents Forum and Sedgefield Borough Tenants Federation.
- g) Through analysis of responses to a questionnaire which was circulated to participants in Forum meetings and to all persons on the mailing lists for agendas.

Summary of Main Review Findings

- Area Forums have a key role to the success and delivery of the Local Improvement Plan and development of Local Area Frameworks.

- There is general support for the operation of Area Forums, and for what they are trying to achieve, from individuals and organisations who attend meetings.
- The Purpose for Area Forums is not widely understood
- Attendance from members of the public to Area Forum meetings is generally linked to specific agenda items or they wish to receive information.
- Few decisions appear to be taken which are significant to local communities.
- Agendas don't appear to be based around local issues and communities.
- Change is required to the operation of Area Forums to encourage greater attendance and involvement from established Community Groups.
- Durham Constabulary and Sedgefield Primary Care Trust endorse and support the operation of Area Forums and welcome the opportunity to review and further develop their organisations role.

MAIN FINDINGS

Background

Area Forums were established in June 2000 following the Council's introduction of new decision making arrangements under the Local Government Act 2000.

Five Area Forums were established – Area Forums 1,2,3,4, and 5 – based on the same geographical areas which were covered by the former Council Area Management Sub- Committees, as follows:-

Area 1	Spennymoor and surrounding area
Area 2	West Cornforth, Bishop Middleham, Chilton and Ferryhill
Area 3	Sedgefield, Fishburn, the Trimdons, Bradbury and Mordon
Area 4	Shildon and Eldon
Area 5	Newton Aycliffe, Aycliffe Village, Middridge and Woodham

The five meetings occur on an eight weekly cycle and are held in the evening at locations within each of the areas, with meetings rotating between venues in some areas. Chairs and Vice Chairs of the forums are Borough Councillors. Administrative support is provided by officers from Democratic Services. Members of the public and a wide range of Council partners are invited to attend forum meetings.

The stated purpose of Area Forums when they were established was to provide an opportunity for communities to interact with the Council on issues of local importance. It was also envisaged that some issues would be referred to Cabinet directly from Area Forums.

Issues

The Review Group have carried out consultation with meetings with Durham Constabulary, Sedgefield Primary Care Trust, Officers from Sedgefield Borough Council, Town and Parish Councils, the Tennant's Federation and Sedgefield Residents Group.

Feedback from the consultation reported that communities consider that Area Forums have facilitated a positive community involvement in respect of the local area. In addition, both the local Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Durham Constabulary consider that Area Forums are most useful in assisting those organisations in achieving their community consultation and involvement objectives.

Through carrying out the review a number of issues have been highlighted that require attention. These are as follows:

- The purpose of Area Forums is not widely understood.
- Few decisions appear to be taken which are significant to local communities.
- Agendas don't appear to be based around local issues and local communities.
- Attendance/Membership does not always reflect the local communities.
- Change is required to the operation of Area Forums to encourage greater attendance and involvement from established Community Groups.

Current Developments

Throughout the review process the Review Group has taken into consideration initiatives that are currently being developed by the Council and partner organisations that will have an effect on community engagement.

- **Local Area Frameworks**

The Local Government Act 2000 requires all local authorities to produce a Community Strategy that sets out how public services, other organisations and local people will work together to improve the quality of life in the area.

Sedgefield Borough Council published its Community Strategy in November 2004, which sets out a ten-year vision for the Borough based on the aspirations, needs and priorities of local communities. The Community Strategy was developed following an extensive community appraisal and consultation process undertaken through the Borough's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The Strategy will be the main policy document for partners' work within the Borough and was launched at the LSP's second Annual Conference in November 2004.

The engagement and participation of local people in the delivery of the Strategy is vital to its success. Community participation will be promoted through the development of Area Frameworks aligned with the Council's five Area Forums that will outline contributions at a local level to the overall aims of the Strategy. This will enable Area Forum meetings to be focused towards achieving aims that are relative to the local communities.

- **Local Improvement Plan**

The Cabinet in September 2004 agreed a Housing Land Capital Receipts Strategy to govern the use of resources to support activities within the ODPM eligible expenditure definition of regeneration and affordable housing

The purpose of the Local Improvement Plan is to improve community assets and support community engagement in the regeneration of local areas. The Councils Area Forums will play a key role to determine a

proposed series of works against criteria agreed by Cabinet and make recommendations to Cabinet which schemes should be supported.

Area Forums will therefore have a key role to the success and delivery of the Local Improvement Plan and enable greater focus on local issues and priorities.

- **StreetSafe Review**

Members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3 have undertaken a review into the Councils role with the StreetSafe initiative. The StreetSafe Review Group recommended *'that the Area Forum Review Group be requested to consider how Area Forums could be used as a means to raise awareness of the StreetSafe initiative and help engage with local communities in order to support its aims.'*

This recommendation could be delivered through partnership working with Durham Constabulary and coherently identifying links with the Local Improvement Plan and development of Local Area Frameworks.

Proposals

The Review group through consultation and current developments have identified the following proposals to focus Area Forums to meet their aims and objectives.

- **Purpose**

Established in June 2000, the main purpose of Area Forums is for communities to interact with the Council and tackle issues of local importance to each area. Interaction will relate to the Councils ambitions detailed within the Community Strategy. The Local Area Framework will be developed in order to deliver these objectives to ensure that they are applicable within local communities and supplemented by Parish and Town Council Plans.

To deliver the main purpose of Area Forums the Council are to work in partnership. Durham Constabulary and Sedgefield Primary Care Trust support Area Forums and their input is to continue but with greater focus on each community area. In order for Area Forums to successfully tackle strategic issues we must consider formalising membership of the Area Forums to ensure that it is representative of the communities, which it aims to serve.

- **Membership**

Area Forum membership is to be reflective of the Communities which it seeks to serve. Currently Area Forums are an open forum for any members of the public to attend, with the purpose to engage with residents of the borough. However, this has led to attendance of Area Forums not being fully representative of local communities. Whilst the Review Group does not wish to exclude people from attending Area

Forum meetings, emphasis should be placed on the attendance of relevant groups and associations to the community it is to serve.

The Police and PCT report to the Area Forum meetings but do not have appointed members. Members are represented from Durham County Council and all Town and Parish councils, including appropriate local councillors, they are sent copies of the agendas for meetings. The public and any interested organisations receive copies of agendas upon request and are placed on the relevant mailing list on the same basis.

The Review Group recommend to formalise membership of Area Forums to include:- Sedgefield Borough Council Members, Members of Town/Parish Councils, Members of Durham County Council, Established Community Groups, Regeneration Partnerships, Durham Constabulary and Sedgefield Primary Care Trust. Officers attending Area Forum meetings from the Borough Council, Primary Care Trust and Durham Constabulary will not have a vote when making decisions or recommendations.

Enclosed in Appendix 1 is a table identifying organisations that have attended Area Forum meetings during 2005. Findings from Appendix 1 concluded that the proposal to formalise membership would not adversely affect attendance at Area Forum Meetings, as attendance from members of public is low.

The recommendation to formalise membership does not include members of the public who do not represent a community group. Guidance and best practice from professional advice recommends that engagement with the community will be of greater effect through Residents Forums and Community Groups and strategic community engagement is best delivered within the Area Forums.

The Review group has identified that attendance from members of the public to Area Forum meetings is generally linked to specific agenda items or they wish to receive information from Councillors and Officers at the meeting.

- **Public Question Time**

Formalising membership of Area Forums will have a positive effect and ensure representation from the communities it serves. Members of the public are welcome to attend Area Forum meetings and it is proposed that a thirty-minute time allocation at the start of the meeting is to be used for public question time. Following question time, members of the public may, if they wish, remain for the rest of the Area Forum meeting as observers.

Members of the public may submit a question prior to the meeting, this will endeavoured to be answered at the meeting. However, a question posed at the Area Forum meeting may not receive a full response until a later date if further information is to be sought.

- **Chairman & Vice-Chairman**

The Review Group were of the opinion that Area Forums continue to have a Chairman and Vice-Chairman from Members of Sedgefield Borough Council. This is due to their experience and expertise to chairing meetings. In addition there should be a non-councillor appointed as Vice Chairman to reflect the importance of community involvement.

- **Agenda**

Evaluating the business of Area Forum meetings, the Review Group have established that agendas are not always focused on local issues and priorities. Agenda items are, in the main, presentations or reports for information with the general exception being appointment of Forum Members to the Local Strategic Partnership. Excluding minutes of the previous meeting, two standard items appear on each Area Forum agenda. These are presentations/updates from the Police and from the Primary Care Trust (PCT). Other agenda items vary from meeting to meeting. A number of consultees referred to meetings being too long, particularly when there is more than one presentation, or when detailed presentations are followed by a number of other agenda items. In terms of agenda content there is generally little input from members of the local communities, with items generally being placed on the agenda by the Council, PCT and the Police. Agenda items are seldom specific to a local community or area, but are usually more general in nature – for example, updates on the possible transfer of the Council’s housing stock, or Council policy on abandoned vehicles.

If greater involvement from Community Groups is to be achieved, agenda content should place a greater emphasis on local issues, with the Community Groups being encouraged to bring items forward for inclusion on the agenda.

The Review Group recommends that agendas include:

- Public Question Time
- Development of Local Area Frameworks
- Monitor progress on tackling issues highlighted in Local Area Frameworks
- Local Improvement Programme – Consider Applications and Monitor progress
- Items from Sedgefield Primary Care Trust, Durham Constabulary and Community Groups.

- **Identity & Publicity**

With greater focus and emphasis on community engagement and local issues and priorities, the Review Group recommend that Area Forums are re-named as ‘Community Forums’ and replace the existing number

with a name. The identity of Community Forums will reflect the Community it seeks to serve and membership of the Forum.

At present dates for Area Forums are publicised and advertised through the Council's Community newspaper Inform. Posters are also distributed fairly widely these include local shops, post offices and social clubs. Any revised meeting procedure and launch of the new identity could also be publicised through Inform.

CONCLUSION

Since creation of Area Forums in 2000, the Review group have identified that Area Forum's have facilitated a positive community involvement in respect of the local area. During this time partnerships have been established with organisations that contribute to the operation of Area Forums.

Building on these firm foundations, partnerships could be strengthened with Area Forums having greater focus on local issues and priorities. To achieve this will require formalising membership and focusing agenda items to reflect the Local Improvement Plan and development of Local Area Frameworks.

A re-launch of Area Forums as 'Community Forums' will give an identity that forums have greater focus and continue to deliver positive community involvement on the Communities that it seeks to serve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Area Forums be re-named and re-launched as 'Community Forums' to reflect a greater emphasis on community involvement and the number be replaced with a name that reflects the area.
2. Agenda items to be based on local issues identified through the development of Local Area Frameworks and Local Improvement Plan.
3. Membership of Area Forum be formalised to be representative of the Communities to which it aims to serve.
4. Implement a Public Question Time at the beginning of each Area Forum meeting.
5. Terms of reference for Area Forums be amended to reflect changes from the Review.

APPENDIX A

Attendance at Area Forum Meetings Area Forum 1

Name of Organisation	14/2/05 Town Hall Spennymoor	4/4/05 Community Centre, Middlestone Moor	6/6/05 Community Centre, Kirk Merrington	5/9/05 Council Chamber Spennymoor Town Hall	24/10/05 CR 1 Council Offices, Spennymoor	12/12/05 Community Centre Middlestone Moor
Sedgefield Borough Council - Councillors	7	8	6	11	9	8
Durham Constabulary	2	1	1	1	1	1
Councillor Durham C.C.	2	2		2		
Sedgefield Primary Care Trust	1	2	2	2	2	
Spennymoor Town Council	1	2	2	3	2	2
Local Resident / Member of Public	2	2	2	6	2	2
Eden Residents Association				2		
MARG					1	
St Paul's Residents Association			3			
Greenways Residents Association					3	1
Spennymoor Learning Shop						
Spennymoor Youth & Community Association						
Middlestone Moor Community Centre		1				1
Tudhoe Community Centre			1	1		
Kirk Merrington Village Hall						
Byers Green Village Hall						
Neighbourhood Watch*	1					
Tudhoe Grange School Council*			2	2	2	

* Organisation not listed on the Sedgefield Borough Area Forums Terms of Reference

Attendance at Area Forum Meetings Area Forum 2

Name of Organisation	11/1/05 Chilton & Windlestone Community College	22/2/05 West Cornforth Community Centre	19/4/05 Chilton & Windlestone Community College	21/6/05 Dean Bank & Ferryhill Literary Institute	6/9/05 Ferryhill Leisure Centre	1/11/05 Chilton & Windlestone Community College
Sedgefield Borough Council - Councillors	4	4	6	5	10	5
Durham Constabulary	1	1	1	2	2	1
Councillor Durham C.C.	1		1			1
Sedgefield Primary Care Trust	2	1	2	2	3	2
Cornforth Parish Council	1					
Chilton Town Council	8		3	2	1	5
Ferryhill Town Council	1			1	7	2
Local Resident / Member of Public	4		1		4	7
Castle Residents Association						1
Chilton West Residents Association	1	1				1
Dean Bank Residents Association				1	2	2
Ferryhill Station Residents Association						1
Lakes Residents Association						
West Cornforth Residents Association						
Cornforth Partnership						
Ferryhill Town Partnership						
Chilton Community Partnership	2					
Cornforth Community Centre						
Bishop Middleham Community Centre						
Ferryhill Ladder Centre						
Ferryhill Literacy Institute						
Chilton Henderson House						
Mainsforth Community Centre						
Ferryhill Allotments Association*					2	

*Organisation not listed on the Sedgefield Borough Area Forums Terms of Reference

Attendance at Area Forum Meetings Area Forum 3

Name of Organisation	12/1/05 Trimdon Colliery Community Centre	2/3/05 Mordon & Bradbury Village Hall	27/4/05 Ceddesfeld Hall, Sedgefield	6/7/05 Fishburn Youth and Community Centre	14/09/05 Community Centre, Trimdon Colliery	9/11/05 Oldham Room, Ceddesfeld Hall, Sedgefield
Sedgefield Borough Council - Councillors	5	5	3	3	5	5
Durham Constabulary	1	2	1	1	1	1
Councillor Durham C.C.						
Sedgefield Primary Care Trust	1	2	1	2		1
Mordon Parish Meeting		2	2			
Sedgefield Town Council		1				2
Trimdon Parish Council				1		1
Fishburn Parish Council				2	1	1
Local Resident / Member of Public		2	1		2	4
Trimdon Village Residents Association						
Trimdon 2000						
Joint Trimdon Community Partnership				1		
Trimdon Grange Community Association						
Trimdon Colliery Community Association						
Trimdon Community College						
Trimdon Village Hall Association						
Sedgefield Development Partnership			1			
Sedgefield Community Association						1
Ceddesfeld Community Association						
Sedgefield Community College Association						
Fishburn Community Centre						
Mordon Community Centre						
Trimdon Colliery Community Centre*	1					
Sedgefield Residents Association*				1		

*Organisation not listed on the Sedgefield Borough Area Forums Terms of Reference

Attendance at Area Forum Meetings Area 4 Forum

Name of Organisation	18/1/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre	8/3/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre	3/5/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre	19/7/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre	20/9/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre	15/11/05 Shildon Sunnydale Leisure Centre
Sedgefield Borough Council - Councillors	3	3	2	4	1	5
Durham Constabulary	2	1	2		2	1
Councillor Durham C.C.					1	1
Sedgefield Primary Care Trust	2	2	3	2	2	3
Shildon Town Council						2
Eldon Parish Council			1	1		
Local Resident / Member of Public	2	2	1	1	6	1
Sunnydale Residents Association						
Jubilee Fields Community Association		1	1			
New Shildon Residents Association	1	1	1	2	1	1
Shildon Housing & Community Resource Centre						
Shildon Centre						1
Midridge Village Hall						
Shildon Community Safety Group*		1	2			1
Shildon Jubilee Community Centre*						1

*Organisation not listed on the Sedgefield Borough Area Forums Terms of Reference

Attendance at Area Forum Meetings

Area Forum 5

Name of Organisation	25/1/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe	15/3/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe	10/5/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe	26/7/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe	27/9/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe	29/11/05 Town Council Officers, Newton Aycliffe
Sedgefield Borough Council - Councillors	8	7	7	8	11	10
Durham Constabulary	3	1	1	1	1	3
Councillor Durham C.C.					1	1
Sedgefield Primary Care Trust		2	1	2	1	2
Great Aycliffe Town Council	5	4	3	5	1	5
Local Resident / Member of Public	1		2	3		2
Linden Place Residents Association						
Williamfield Residents Association						
Dales Residents Association		1	1	1	1	1
Burnhill Residents Association	4	2	1			
Agnew Community Association						
Silverdale House						
Aycliffe Learning Shop						
Woodham Community Association						
School Aycliffe Community Centre						
Aycliffe Village Community Association						

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