

THE EXECUTIVE

1 AUGUST 2006

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES AND DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

This report is submitted under Agenda Item 3. The Chair will be asked to decide if it can be considered at the meeting under the provisions of Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 as a matter of urgency so as not to delay consideration of the matter.

Review Of Community Forums – Five Years On	For Decision
<p>Summary: This report sets out the results of a review of Community Forums five years after they were first established; assesses the extent to which Forums have met their purpose as defined in the Council's Constitution; and considers options for change to enhance community engagement.</p> <p>As part of the review extensive consultation was conducted in 2005 with a range of interested groups, the detail and analysis of which is contained in an appendix to the report.</p> <p>Surveys and analysis of consultative models in other Boroughs has also been undertaken to judge the value and relative success of Forums in Barking and Dagenham. This has included reviewing models of best practice in terms of "getting closer to communities".</p> <p>The legislative framework for establishing a model of Forums within Council decision making structures and a summary of Government expectations around community engagement is outlined together with details of approaches taken to meet those expectations. The report also notes the outcome of the Scrutiny Panel established to look into the value and cost effectiveness of community consultation and how Community Forums have fitted into that framework, including a financial summary of their costs to the Council.</p> <p>An assessment of the positives and negatives of the existing Forum structure is detailed together with a list of possible future options to enhance community involvement in local decision making. Alongside these are details of the existing methods of direct and indirect consultation taking place and other opportunities available to the local community to have their say and influence local decision making. The various options are presented on the basis of the overall responses to the consultation and an understanding of Government expectations around community involvement.</p> <p>Whilst there is no legal requirement to continue with Community Forums, it is clear that the Council must afford the local community the opportunities to be genuinely consulted, allow them to have their say, and have real influence in local decision making, as well as ensuring the Council takes account of their diverse needs when setting priorities and delivering services.</p> <p>Wards Affected: All</p>	

Implications

Financial:

Any decisions to do away with, or revise the structure of, community consultation through the Council's decision making process will have financial implications both plus and minus.

Legal:

There are no legal implications as Community Forums are not a statutory requirement.

Risk Management:

The report seeks to analyse the risk should the decision be taken to abandon the structure of Community Forums as part of the Council's decision making process.

Social Inclusion and Diversity:

The Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 places a requirement on local authorities to make an assessment of the impact of new revised policies in terms of race equality. This authority is adopting an approach of extending the impact cover gender, disability, sexuality, faith, age and community cohesion. Community Forums have already been the subject of a full impact assessment exercise.

Crime and Disorder:

There are no specific implications insofar as this report is concerned.

Recommendation(s)

The Executive is asked to consider the issues highlighted in the report and in noting the range and extent of existing methods of direct and indirect community consultation in place as well as the effects of the realigned Local Strategic Partnership, to:

- Review the way forward for future community involvement and participation within the context of local and strategic decision making, having regard to a number of options set out in the report ranging from no change to the existing structure of Community Forums to their abandonment and replacement with an alternative structure.
- In so doing to consider adopting in principle the suggestion of a ward or community area based neighbourhood management structure along the lines of that set out in the report under option 2. A fully costed proposal would then be presented in the autumn for a final decision.

Reason(s) To assess the value of Community Forums five years on in terms of fulfilling their original objectives, and in so doing to consider alternative approaches to involving the community more fully in decision making, which in turn will require at a future date the approval of the Assembly as it will necessitate changes to the Council's decision making structures as set out in the Constitution.

Contact Officer: John Dawe	Title: Group Manager, Democratic Services	Contact Details: Tel: 020 8227 2135 Fax: 020 8227 2171 E-mail: john.dawe@lbbd.gov.uk
John Barry	Team Manager – Democratic Services	Tel: 020 8227 2352 Fax: 020 8227 2171 E-mail: john.barry@lbbd.gov.uk

1 Review Process

1.1 The Council's Community Forums have now been operating in their current format for over five years. In view of this, opportune to carry out a review of the Forums and to bring forward any findings and options for change following the Local Elections in May 2006. The main purpose of the review is to consider the effectiveness and appropriateness of Forums as a vehicle of engagement and consultation with the community. The review includes:

- An assessment of the extent to which Forums have met their purpose as defined in the Council's Constitution. That is:
 - (a) to provide the opportunity for the Council to be formally accessible and accountable to local people as a means of improving consultation.
 - (b) to enable Ward Councillors and other agencies the opportunity to discuss issues of local importance with members of the local community and
 - (c) to enable the local community to question their Ward Councillors, and where appropriate other agencies, on issues of local importance.
- An evaluation of the strength of the links to other elements of the political structure and whether the Forums add value to the decision making process.
- Consideration of the role that Ward Councillors play and what extent the Forums enhance their role in the community.
- Research into alternative methods of engaging and consulting with the community, taking into account best practice elsewhere, and cost effectiveness.
- An understanding of Government expectations in this field, together with a risk analysis should Forums cease to exist.
- Appropriate consultation with all Councillors, the community, other agencies and officers.

2 Background

2.1 The Community Forums were established as part of the Council's modernisation agenda in response to the Local Government Act of 2000 and were seen as a key part of the new political arrangements insofar as community engagement was concerned. This aspect is currently being met also through:

- The Assembly: an agenda item covering local issues; designed to encourage public debate.

- Scrutiny/Policy Commissions: direct involvement through community representation.
- Executive: meeting in public.
- Development Control/Licensing and Regulatory Boards - direct public involvement.

2.2 Community Forums form the major contribution to public participation. They were designed to engage with and listen to the community rather than be a committee meeting in public, and be more likely to reflect local concerns and issues which are then fed back through the Council's decision making structures, for example, through regular reports to the Assembly.

2.3 Although established as informative and consultative bodies, the Council was always keen to see the role of Forums enhanced and one year into their operation decided to allocate the Forums small sums (£10,000, subsequently reduced to £7,500), administered through the Lead Officers, to be spent on small community supported projects. In addition, in seeking to involve the community more fully, Deputy Chairs (nominated and voted for by the community) were appointed at all six Forums and, increasingly, they have become involved in the way Forums operate. They attend pre and de-briefings as well as a Chair and Deputy Chair's quarterly briefing and also attend Scrutiny Management Board annually to express concerns and views from the community. This was recognised by the Board who in 2004 established an Anti-Social Behaviour Scrutiny Panel in direct response to the concerns being expressed through the Forums.

2.4 The establishment of the Chairs and Deputy Chairs briefings was about creating consistency and discussing best practice across all six Forums, albeit the structure of meetings enables Forums to operate in a manner that suits their own locality. The Corporate Management Team established consistency at officer level through a quarterly meeting headed by the then Director of Corporate Strategy (now Resources) with Lead Officers.

2.5 There is no legal basis for operating Community Forums within the Executive / Scrutiny model. The Local Government Act 2000 stated that Councils had a great deal of choice about area committees. They could choose to establish none at all, or several, with or without decision making powers.

2.6 The Government guidance for modular Council Constitutions at the time of the Act stated: "The Secretary of State recognises that area committees or Forums can have an important role to play in bringing decision making closer to people and give them a say in the way in which a local authority works. Indeed, the Secretary of State sees real value in area consultative Forums helping a local authority consult people. Accordingly, the Secretary of State encourages local authorities to consider the use of such decentralised arrangements for consultation, decision making or both."

3 Current Format

3.1 The existing structure of Forums was agreed in principle by the Council in October 1999. At that time there was overwhelming support for the concept of Forums as a way in which the Council could work towards getting "closer to the community". Understandably there were concerns expressed about the detail, particularly around

possible groupings which had been initially proposed by a Working Party of Members and officers.

3.2 So as to widen the debate all Members were canvassed as to their own views based on the principle that there should be a maximum of six Forums in order to strike a balance between the available resources to support them and establishing appropriate connections between wards. Each Member was encouraged to complete a survey that offered up two options for groupings (geographical/ regard for relevant social issues) or any other set of groupings considered appropriate. The results of the survey were presented to the Working Party and ultimately the full Council in March 2000 where, it was resolved to adopt the groupings that currently exist namely:

- Abbey Thames and Gascoigne
- Chadwell Heath and Whalebone, now known as Wellgate
- Eastbrook Heath and Alibon
- Eastbury Longbridge and Mayesbrook, now known as ELM
- Parsloes Becontree and Valance
- River Village and Goresbrook

3.3 That meeting also ratified the terms of reference by which the Forums would operate and that the name of each Forum should formally be agreed by the community. The above ward names were favoured by the majority with the exception of choosing Wellgate (a combination of Chadwell and Marks Gate to reflect the two principal areas within the Forum), and more recently the adoption of the name ELM to match the name of the corresponding Community Housing Partnership.

4 Consultation

4.1 The following groups / individuals were consulted as part of this review:

- Elected Members (prior to May 2006)
- Chief Officers, Heads of Service and Lead Officers
- Regular officer attendees
- Police and Primary Care Trust representatives
- Deputy Chairs
- Persons on the Community Forum mailing lists
- Council For Voluntary Services/Community Empowerment Network incorporating the views of the LSP community representatives

4.2 An analysis of the responses received and the key issues is set out as Appendix A to the report.

4.3 Forums in Barking and Dagenham have tended to attract 30 – 40 people and a predominance of older people. As part of the review research into best practice examples of community participation and democracy was undertaken. This included contacting all London boroughs to find out how they operate Forums or their equivalent, whether they had been viewed as a success, and what, if any, changes boroughs might consider making to the way Forums operate to make them more effective within their overall decision making structures. They were also

asked whether new ways have been considered at engaging and encouraging the community to participate.

- 4.4 The Borough' responses demonstrated that where like for like Forums / area committees exist and are organised in a similar way, the experiences of Barking and Dagenham in terms of numbers and mix of attendees and content of meetings are broadly the same. The one striking difference in operation and style appears to be where some have opted to devolve powers at a local level to Ward Councillors such as around traffic management and planning. In truth however these examples appear less about engaging with and listening to the community and more about "committee" style meetings played out in public in a local setting, which was never the Council's intention for Forums when the current political structure was established.
- 4.5 The opportunity was also taken to visit Haringey and Croydon as Beacon status Council's for "getting closer to communities". Both put great store in consulting, planning and communicating with local people through a system of Area Assemblies in Haringey and Neighbourhood Partnerships in Croydon. The Haringey model is very similar to Barking and Dagenham's approach with the only notable difference being the amount of resources that appear to be given to the Area Assemblies particularly through the allocation of £50,000 to each to be spent on local projects proposed by residents. Croydon have established 10 Neighbourhood Partnerships based on groupings of electoral wards. They have neither operational budgets nor decision making powers and are essentially consultative. Numbers attending vary although depending on the subject matter average attendances are around 60. Typically most of these are representatives on existing groups such as tenants and residents associations and community groups etc. They are also attended predominantly by older people. The fundamental difference is that Councillors may not serve as Chairs to the Forums.
- 4.6 Finally, as part of the best practice review officers also attended a Ward working summit at the London Borough of Brent reviewing the way in which their current structure of five area Forums work, and in so doing reviewing a number of different approaches in other authorities as detailed below. Birmingham has opted for a system of devolution and localism as devolving powers to eleven districts and setting up mini local strategic partnerships to deliver. It is unclear how well this is working but considerable time and effort seems to be invested in supporting process. Newcastle City Council and Brent were both looking at promoting ward based forums with similar aims to those in Barking and Dagenham
- supporting work of local Councillors
 - making the Council's more sensitive and accessible to neighbourhoods
 - seeking to drive up performance
- 4.7 Newcastle had a greater focus on environmental issues that provided a 'man with a van' visiting local areas to tidy up environmental hot spots.

5 Government Expectations

- 5.1 The Local Government Act 2000 set the standard for a move towards more community engagement and direct involvement in decision making which in more recent times has been strengthened through the former Office of the Deputy Prime

Minister (ODPM) five year strategy, focusing on empowering local communities and giving Councils and Councillors a stronger role as community leaders.

- 5.2 Key proposals within the strategy include empowering communities to improve services through a “Neighbourhood Charter” with further action against Anti-Social Behaviour. The role of Council’s as local leaders, and of Councillors as Neighbourhood advocates will be strengthened through Local Area Agreements (LAA’s). In June 2005 the Council successfully achieved LAA status in a second round application bidding process organised through the ODPM. LAA’s seek to embody a new contract between central and local government and partners to improve service delivery against national, regional and local priorities. These shared goals will be delivered through strong local leadership and effective support from central Government and are expected to achieve greater efficiencies through local authorities and their partners working through their Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP).
- 5.3 More recently the LSP structure has been reviewed and realigned to produce a more outcome focused management approach, with the LAA being the key driver. The Community Empowerment Network (CEN) are responsible for engaging the community through the LSP, as they have done in their working with appointed community representatives through the Community Forums. Whether the Forums continue in the present format has no bearing on the CEN’s responsibilities towards engaging the community through the LSP structure on the various sub groups now established. This is in addition to anticipated enhance community involvement with the full Partnership Conference that now meets twice a year which aims to stimulate wider debate around local issues and look at practical ways to improve services and the Borough as a whole.
- 5.4 The concept of the LAA’s came out of an earlier publication issued by the ODPM entitled “Why Neighbourhoods Matter”. This sought to stimulate ongoing discussions regarding community engagement. At present there is no government position on how best this might be achieved, however they advocate a “no one size fits all approach”, where neighbourhood arrangements can be created to reflect local community needs. Whilst therefore there is no requirement to operate Community Forums or their equivalent, there are obligations about involving and consulting the community as part of the Council’s decision making structures.
- 5.5 The discussion document outlined five key principles around neighbourhood arrangements, the most important for the purpose of this debate, being that “all Councils, in partnership with other service providers, should provide opportunities and support for neighbourhood engagement through appropriate arrangements so they can respond to the needs and priorities of neighbourhood communities.” Depending on the activity involved, neighbourhood arrangements can range from informal Forums or ad-hoc meetings to formal bodies having devolved responsibilities for the delivery of certain services. In that respect, LAA’s are seen as a useful means for Councils and local service providers and neighbourhood partners to agree on shared outcomes and delivery plans.
- 5.6 Next year’s Corporate Assessment under the CPA will be assessing how effectively the Councils, with its partners, understands its communities and takes into account their diverse needs when setting priorities and delivering services.

- 5.7 If Community Forums are not to be seen as the way forward it is clear from the Government's "localism" agenda that there needs to be in place appropriate mechanisms, whether that be through the Council, or other bodies such as the LSP, to enable meaningful community engagement to take place. A further key principle of the need to ensure consistency of any neighbourhood arrangements with local representative democracy, which gives legitimacy to Government institutions, and places elected Councillors as the leading advocates for their communities, in line with democratic accountability.
- 5.8 It is worth reflecting on the significant work the Council has already undertaken towards achieving local planning to date. In 2002 using Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) the Council piloted two approaches to neighbourhood management in Mark's Gate and Abbey, Gascoigne and Thames (ACT). Independent Consultants have evaluated both programmes with a view to exploring options for the future of the neighbourhood management approach. The outcome of the evaluations are referred to further in the options section of the report.
- 5.9 NRF was insufficient to allow the same model to be introduced across the borough. Accordingly the Council recognising the success of area action plans in supporting communities to bid for external funds decided to appoint Groundwork East London to develop what has become known as Community Action Plans (CAP) in the four remaining Forum areas. The idea behind the plans was:
- to be led by the local community through Steering Groups reporting to the Community Forums
 - to improve services/develop ideas based on local priorities
 - to help communities to develop bids for external funding
 - for the Council and other public service providers to work in partnership with the community to deliver.
- 5.10 Groundwork's remit was to gain an insight of local issues through engagement with the wider community, develop the role of individual residents and explore funding opportunities for projects put forward by the community. Alongside Neighbourhood Co-ordination the CAP's were viewed as the first steps for Forums to develop beyond their information and consultative roles. Unfortunately although the plans have stimulated a considerable amount of local interest, and engaged the community one to one in drawing up projects, a combination of a lack of funding and resources hindered their progress.
- 5.11 Finally the development of Barking Riverside has led to emerging ideas to establish a Community Development Trust to manage the public realm, public spaces, community centres (if any), private communal spaces, street wardens etc. In the short term the developers would envisage establishing a contract with the Council for them to provide services beyond a given specification and then pay for the additional services. The CDT would get its funding partly from buildings i.e. an endowment, and partly from a service charge on householders. This would cover Barking Reach and ideally the Thames View estate. A similar approach is likely to occur as part of the Gascoigne Regeneration, and there is a possibility it could be rolled out across the whole Town Centre in time.
- 5.12 These Trusts would involve Members, local residents, business representatives and the voluntary sector. Some representatives would be elected and there would be

either six monthly or annual meetings with a wider cross section of local people. In time this approach could be rolled out across the Community Forum areas and would fit in with the new government localism ideas and devolving power to the community. As Barking Riverside is not expected to be up and running before 2007/8 and Gascoigne a year later, it is highlighted in this report as not being an immediate option, but something for the Council to consider in the longer term for engaging with the community.

6 Consultation arrangements and Forum costs

- 6.1 Following a Call-In in September 2005 concerning the tender for the Citizen's Panel and other consultation projects, the Scrutiny Management Board decided to set up a Scrutiny Panel to look into all the community consultation methods being used within the Borough and in so doing to have regard to the costs of these methods and the value they bring.
- 6.2 One of the Council's Community Priorities is developing rights and responsibilities with the local community. To measure this objective the Council has developed the indicator of the % of people who feel consulted and involved. Consultation is therefore regarded as a key tool to the effective management of the Council, and delivery of services, all which comes at a cost.
- 6.3 The CPA action plan has identified the need to make consultation and equalities part of the "day job" through the implementation of various equalities and consultation strategies, of which a range of methods have been developed over the last few years. In this respect Community Forums are only one strand in an overall Council consultation strategy. They are aimed primarily at encouraging community participation and involvement in the Council decision-making processes, and whilst Forums are not necessarily representative of the local community as a whole and therefore not used to undertake representative sample surveys, what they do provide to both elected Councillors and officers is an insight into community perceptions through the debates and comments that come up at meetings.
- 6.4 An assessment of the cost of Community Forums was undertaken in 2004 as part of the then budget review. This suggested direct costs of around £80,000 a year to support the existing structure. It should be noted that since the suspension of the Community Forums Democratic Services resources have been refocused to support the administration of the realigned LSP structures, which in turn have freed up other staff in Democracy and Partnerships to support other aspects of the LSP. There are also indirect costs associated with the operation of the Forums which relate to a number of officers across the Council who attend meetings and follow up action. It is difficult to cost this but it is fair to say that certain individuals particularly from the key front line service areas have put in a considerable amount of effort to support the Forums.

7 Findings

- 7.1 Community Forums have now been operating for approximately five years. Taking into account the various consultations that have taken place and the working experience of Forums, their functions/achievements both from a positive and negative standpoint can be summarised as:

Positives

- Forums provide a link between the community and the Council's political structure.
- Forums are used to pass on information from the Council and other organisations to seek views on matters generally.
- Forums provide a platform for presentations by other organisations and the regular attendance of representatives primarily from the Police and to a lesser extent the PCT, help broaden discussions beyond just Council services.
- The survey of the community referred to in section 4 shows that of those attending Forums who responded to the questionnaire 67% feel that the Community Forums are a good way of learning about what the Council and others are doing, or are planning to do, and 53% regard them as an opportunity to have a say about Council services.
- Community representatives from the Community Forums are also members of the Barking & Dagenham Partnership. They seek to provide a link between the community and the Council and other partners through the LSP.
- One of the CPA measures is the Council's ability to engage with and lead their communities. Previous reports from the Audit Commission have recognised the positive steps taken by the Council towards achieving greater community engagement with the establishment of the Forums. The CPA process is now looking at the Council's approach to community planning and how local context and needs are being considered. The latest methodology of the CPA places a far greater emphasis on the community strategy and joint priorities and the localism agenda.

Negatives

- If Community Forums are viewed merely in the context of attendance levels their value for money is questionable.
- Like so many meetings of this kind, there is a tendency to see the same faces. A lot of effort has gone into attracting more people particularly from harder to reach groups to attend, but with limited success.
- Similarly there are always going to be those individuals who feel that they will benefit personally or jump the queue if they "shout the loudest".
- Officers can often become tied up with reactive work rather than planned work based on agreed Council strategies.
- Meetings rarely go beyond the "problems in my back yard". Little success in focusing discussions on wider issues affecting the community as a whole.
- The public survey showed that only 24% believed that their views influence Council services and policies, whilst 81% felt that the Council could improve the way that it consults its residents through the Forums.

- Very low turnouts at meetings when compared to the overall numbers who live/work in the areas.
- The community linkages to the Local Strategic Partnership through the Forums is not understood by the wider community.
- Not all ward Members have found the Forums an effective way of engaging with the community.

8 Future Options / Alternatives

- 8.1 It is clear from the comments made as part of the consultation last year that, in particular, some Members felt that the Forums were not fulfilling their planned intentions and have become “jaded”, and that change is required.
- 8.2 There is no one single way or structure to achieve both the Council’s and Government’s intentions of ensuring that the delivery of local services is increasingly influenced by the wishes of the community, although the Council is constrained by the level of available resources. To that extent a number of alternatives are put forward. Other ideas may begin to emerge as the “localism” agenda develops, for example the Barking Riverside CDT model.

8.3 Option 1- Existing model

- 8.3.1 To retain the current six Forums and their existing terms of reference i.e. that they remain ostensibly information and consultative meetings. However in order to develop community involvement and reflecting the comments out of the public consultation survey around how better to consult and engage the community through the Forums, it is suggested that:
- a greater focus be made on community engagement through the Council’s scrutiny and policy commission functions, with ideas for both, and representation, being sought through the Forums together with appropriate feedback
 - regular workshops to become a feature of the Forums, with ideas steered by elected Members in consultation with the community
 - more focus on positive outcomes being fed back to the Forums to prove their value in the Council’s and others’ decision making processes, such as the LSP
 - enhanced role for community development officers who could facilitate greater participation of groups in the community through networking and personal support

8.4 Option 2 – Ward/community area based neighbourhood management

- 8.4.1 This reflects a number of comments from the community and elected members suggesting that the existing model of 6 Forums is covering too wide an area, and that issues of a local nature are of interest to only a small proportion of attendees.
- 8.4.2 In 2002 the Council using Government funding established two pilots programmes in Abbey, Thames and Gascoigne (ATG) and Wellgate areas; with the aim of improving local facilities and services and co ordination, tackling issues specific to the local neighbourhoods.

- 8.4.3 Both programmes are now in their final year of funding, and therefore the Council commissioned an independent evaluation aimed at exploring the impact and value at both a borough wide and local neighbourhood level, and to put forward recommendations that can shape the future of neighbourhood management across the whole Borough.
- 8.4.4 The conclusions of the recent reviews are that overall both programmes have largely delivered their initial aims, although in the case of ATG, the geographical size of the areas has limited the perceived impact. Neighbourhood management has played a key role in bringing together the Council, residents, community and voluntary organisations and service providers to co-ordinate activities and to address identified problems facing local communities.
- 8.4.5 In recommending the continuation of both programmes (albeit reducing the size of ATG), the independent evaluation suggests that the Council should look at adopting the same approach across the borough at a ward/community area level.
- 8.4.6 Should Members favour the principle of establishing a borough wide model of neighbourhood management, then the precise detail of how this might work, the resource and funding implications, and how such a model would link into the wider strategic decision making of the Council and LSP, would be subject to detailed work over the coming months, and be the subject of a further report.

8.5 Option 3- Combine with Community Housing Partnerships on a ward basis

- 8.5.1 As has been highlighted by some Members through the consultation and previously, in theory Community Forums and Community Housing Partnerships could be combined on a ward basis. It would mean an increase in the combined number of meetings per year from forty eight to sixty four. Subject to a detailed analysis of workloads it is envisaged that the administrative support could be maintained through the existing staff in Resources and Customer Services Departments. The focus and format of both meetings differs considerably with community representatives elected on the Boards working alongside ward members on exclusively housing related issues in a business like fashion; as opposed to the more open style of Forums. That said conceivably meetings could be split into two sections to accommodate both approaches. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of this option are set out below:

Advantages

- Agendas likely to be more relevant to people attending and therefore attract more people
- Venues are more likely to be assessable
- Members are more accountable
- Transport costs will be reduced
- Better links between Forums and CHP's
- Enhance the Community champion role of ward members
- CHP's become less formal and more relevant to the local area

Disadvantages

- Meetings only look at detailed local issues

- Officers from other depts/ other agencies may find it difficult to support so many extra meetings
- Even greater emphasis on street management issues, stretching appropriate officer resources
- Unclear whether there is sufficient capacity to run CHP's in each ward and provide effective discussions at Forums
- A danger in smaller areas to promulgate political minority views
- Insufficient venues in each ward
- Increased venue and publicity costs

9 Conclusions

- 9.1 There is no statutory requirement placed on local authorities to operate Community Forums. However there is a strong expectation voiced through the Local Government Act 2000 and more recently in the emerging "localism" agenda that Councils should through their structures ensure the local community have a real say and the opportunity to influence decision making. To that degree the scope in which that is achieved is wide ranging.
- 9.2 The Council itself wants to engage with its community and putting the Community Forums aside there is already significant evidence that Barking and Dagenham has made considerable efforts towards achieving this through a combination of methods involving direct and indirect consultation, providing platforms for stakeholders to have their say and influence the direction of decision making, as follows:
- Citizens Panel
 - New Consultation Approach
 - Engagement through other meetings in the core political structure such as the Assembly, Executive, Scrutiny, Policy Commissions, Development Control and the Licensing and Regulatory Boards
 - Community Housing Partnerships inc the Annual Participation Week
 - LSP network inc work through LAA and twice yearly conferences
 - Issue based Focus Groups
 - A range of Council supported Forums targeting unrepresented groups
 - Members Surgeries
 - General information contained in the Council's Citizen Magazine delivered to all households
 - The "Tell Us" campaign
- 9.3 The range of community consultation methods and opportunities for information gathering and feedback already in place should be considered alongside the adoption in principle of a ward/community area based neighbourhood management model across the whole Borough. In noting the potential links of such a model to the Council's decision making and the realigned LSP structures, could form the basis of an overall approach towards engaging the community, to the extent that if Members wished to disband the current forum structure, they would still deliver against the Government's emerging "localism" agenda".

Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:

Local Government Act 2000

Council Constitution

Public survey/questionnaire

Consultees

Leader of the Council

Chief Executive

Corporate Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive

Assistant Chief Executive (Democracy and Partnerships)

Summary of Consultation

A Elected Members

14 Members responded to the consultation with a variety of views, approximately a 50-50 split of positive and negative comments which can be summarised as follows:

Positive Views

- Several Members felt that Forums present an opportunity for the public to have their say and to have their views considered.
- There was evidence that some Members felt more confident in dealing with the public as a result of their involvement with Forums, and that it allowed them to engage more fully with the community. This involvement is not easily gauged although one Member did comment that there was a link between the Forums and a noted reduction in the concerns raised at their surgeries.
- Another common response was that the Forums presented an opportunity to strengthen links within the community, bringing together the Police, the Health Services, Council Officers and elected Members.

Negative Views

- Several Members had concerns around attendance, in particular that the Forums are not diverse enough and do not attract new members of the public. The low attendance led some Members to conclude that this is an indicator that people find the Forums boring (and indeed some Members even commented that officer presentations can be very dull).
- Another common complaint was that not enough officers attend Forum meetings and as a consequence, officer representation is insufficient to deal with all the questions raised. It was also suggested that Directors and the CE should attend meetings regularly.
- The other main concern expressed was that the format at present is wrong and that they cover too large an area. Similar comments suggested they should be linked with CHPs or Resident's Association meetings.

B Chief Officers, Heads of Service and Lead Officers

Positive Views

- There should be six meetings a year to allow for continuity and adequate time for topics to be discussed.
- The present style works and the Forums have been successful.
- Additional funding should be found to promote the Forums e.g. producing a DVD to attract more interest.
- As a result of the Community Forums, the Council are held to account more fully than they might be if they did not exist.
- They are a means of local residents knowing who their Councillors are and ensuring they are held to account over some issues.
- Whilst not always ideal and they vary across the Borough, they are useful as one part of a barometer of how local people are feeling.

Negative Views

- Concerns that the links to the political structure and the decision-making process is generally restricted by the levels of attendance from both officers and the public.
- The Council tends to be too passive and would benefit from benchmarking our arrangements against those of excellent Councils.
- Closer links should be made with the LSP/LAAs.
- Members do not attend in sufficient numbers.
- Not a feeling of 'done in one' at the meetings.
- Often used as a tick box for consultation.
- Not truly representative of the community.
- Community Forums could benefit from the recommendations recently made to the Scrutiny Management Board regarding CHPs (that the structure is also supported and supplemented by higher quality literature, surveying and alternative and more progressive methods of seeking our tenants' and residents' views).
- Danger that Forums are used by certain pressure groups to push their agendas.
- Members viewed as being too close to officers on issues that affect residents.
- Not sufficiently funded

C

Regular Officer Attendees

Positive Views

- Meetings are well organised, well attended and informative.
- Good attendance by Ward Councillors.
- An opportunity for the public to raise their concerns.
- Seen as a positive initiative by residents.
- Achieves its purpose.
- Budget Groups give residents a sense of empowerment.
- Finds out the real concerns/issues of residents.
- Good support from the few officers that do regularly attend.
- Develops the public through the role of the Community Forum Deputy.
- Councillors can meaningfully contribute when they attend.
- The Q&A sessions can be very productive.
- Chairs tend to run the meetings well.

Negative Views

- Lack of diversity in attendance.
- Presentations too long and not interesting enough.
- Absence of crucial officers.
- Similar types of questions raised at meetings.
- Some issues should be referred on e.g. Housing matters to the CHPs.
- Can be taken over by non-elected spokespeople for the community.
- Q&A session very challenging for officers.
- Too often a 'tick-box' exercise in consultation.
- Possible overlap with other community meetings (e.g. resident groups).
- Little understanding of the Barking & Dagenham Partnership.
- Residents not fully onboard with the Community Action Plans.

- More publicity needed.
- Forum Reps not acknowledged.
- No strategic direction.
- Lack of Member support.
- Some presentations delivered poorly.
- Apathy from the community.
- Lead Officers role not properly defined.

D Police

Positive Views

The Police particularly value Forums highly and say that they influence their strategies and operations to the extent that have realigned their structures around Forum areas.

Negative Views

None stated

E Primary Care Trust Representatives

Positive Views

- The PCT have a designated Director/Head of Service for each Forum to cover the Health & Social Care agenda, and their attendance is shared with Social Services Officers.
- They acknowledge there have been difficulties in attending all Forums.
- They value the Forums as a means to present the Public Health Director's Annual Report.

Negative Views

- Health & Social Care not a significant part of the agenda.
- Little interest from the community about health issues.
- Forum attendees not representative of the community.

F Deputy Chairs

Positive Views

- Residents get to know their Councillors, officers and local community Police.
- Opportunities of airing grievances, receiving information and being able to join in with consultations.
- Residents partake in presentations, leading to knowledge of what is taking place in the borough.
- They're cost effective in informing and consulting with residents.
- The Forums are a good way of influencing Council Services and raising issues of importance.

Negative Views

- The number of presentations should be restricted to two/three per meeting.
- People's questions need to be more relevant and topical.
- The community is confused by the Barking & Dagenham Partnership and the CEN.
- Meetings are not representative.

G Persons on the Community Forum mailing lists

Positive Views

- The majority of those that attend do so because they are interested in local issues (30%), are interested in finding out what is happening across the Borough (25%) or what the Council is doing (27%). Only 18% cited that they came to the Forums to raise a question.
- Over 78% thought that the current format for meetings was right.
- 75% of people felt that through attending their Forum they had found out more about what the Council is doing or planning to do.
- 60% felt that they had been given the opportunity to discuss Council services and policies openly at the Forums.

Negative Views

- The majority of people felt that the Forums need extra publicity (54%).
- Over 62% felt that if they received an agenda in advance of the meeting they would attend more often.
- Whilst 66% had heard of the Barking & Dagenham Partnership, only 35% knew what it does.
- Similarly, more than 68% of people did not know what the CEN does.
- 40% felt that their views had not been listened to.
- 81% felt that the Council could improve the way that it consults with local people.

H Council for Voluntary Services

Positive Views

None stated

Negative Views

- Too focused on parochial issues.
- Same attendees.
- Variable attendance numbers.

I Community Empowerment Network

Through consulting with the Barking and Dagenham Partnership Community Forum Representatives, the CEN provided a detailed and constructive critique of the Forums, making several suggestions for improvement. They also undertook a SWOT analysis of the Forums, the results of which reflects the views put forward in their report:

Strengths & Opportunities

- Ability to consult and share information with residents.
- Sense of community involvement.
- Chance for residents to get to know Councillors and officers.
- Residents get to know what the Council is doing/planning to do.
- Chance for residents to raise issues or concerns.

- Increased awareness of the Barking and Dagenham Partnership and how residents can be involved.

Weaknesses & Threats

- Lack of follow up to questions from Council officials.
- Meetings/Issues can be dominated by Chairs of Forums.
- Lack of attendance/diversity.
- Information given can be seen as selective.
- Meetings taken up by irrelevant issues.
- Commitment or ability to listen to and take issues on board.

