Agenda Item 12

Haringey Council

Report for:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 29 April 2013	Item Number:	

Title:	Area Forums/Committees – Interim Conclusions and Recommendations of Communities Scrutiny Panel Project

Report Authorised by:	Cllr Dave Winskill Chair, Communities Scrutiny Panel

Lead Officer:	Rob Mack, Senior Policy Officer (Scrutiny)

Ward(s) affected:	Report for Key/Non Key Decisions:

1. Describe the issue under consideration

1.1. The Panel has been undertaking an in-depth piece of work on area forums/committees. This has focused on the changes that were implemented as part of the response to the Governance review of 2010/11. This report summarises the evidence considered by the Panel and proposes recommendations to be made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. Cabinet Member introduction
N/A

3. Recommendations

That the following be recommended on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to the Cabinet:

3.1 That, pending further work on their development, confirmation be provided of how support will be provided for area forums and committees to ensure their continued operation;

3.2 That consultation be undertaken with residents, including hard to reach groups, to obtain their views on possible future models for local engagement;

3.3   That officers work with chairs of area forums and committees to develop proposals for alternative means of engagement with local residents for piloting in a number of wards of the borough and to evaluate the success of these; and

3.4   That, following the above mentioned pilot projects and consultation with stakeholders, specific proposals for the future of area forums and committees be developed for implementation following the 2014 Council elections and that these be based on the principles outlined within paragraphs 6.4 of the report and clear evidence of effective and cost effective approaches that have been adopted by similar London boroughs.

4.   Other options considered

N/A

5.   Report

Introduction

5.1   The Panel has been undertaking an in-depth piece of work to evaluate the   changes made to the Council's area based bodies following the Governance Review of 2010/11 with the replacement of area assemblies with area forums and committees.

Governance Review

5.2 The brief for the Governance Review included the following two objectives:

- "Increasing public engagement and ensuring that decisions are taken closer to local people; and

- Enabling all members to shape and influence the Council's policies and services and facilitating the community leadership role of members."

5.3 Amongst the findings of the Governance Review were the following:

- Area Assemblies provided a foundation for more engagement with local communities but some assemblies were more effective than others at engaging harder to reach groups and extending beyond prominent individuals and local vested interests; and

- There was an appetite for the devolution of some decision-making to a local level.

5.4 The Governance Review recommended the following:

"Area Assemblies

Build on the foundation provided by the current Area Assemblies by:

- Exchanging good practice and new ideas between the Area Committee chairs and the officers that support them;
- Providing a clear and transparent mechanism for the conclusions of Area assemblies to be fed into the Council's policy-making processes and for feedback to be provided on the outcome.
- Using the council's review of the neighbourhood management service and its support services to provide more cost-effective support for the assemblies.

Area Committees

Establish Area Committees to enable devolved decision-making:
- Covering the same geographical areas as the Assemblies;
- Comprising the Councillors for the wards which make up the current assembly areas

The remit of the Area Committees should bring together four sets of responsibilities:
- Varying the specification of environment and street scene services to reflect particular local needs and circumstances;
- Taking decisions about proposals affecting the area (for example local highway improvements and local by-laws);
- Formulating and influencing policy in relation to the area (such as local development orders);
- Formal consultative roles on planning, licensing and parking.

Each Area Assembly and Area Committee should meet four times a year with scope for the Area Committee to take decisions between meetings.

The geography of the Area Assemblies and the remit of the Area Committees should be reviewed after 3 years, at the end of the current administration."

5.5 The rationale for the two sets of bodies covering the same geographical areas as the assemblies was that the area assembly geography provided the best balance between localism and cost/economies of scale. The remit for area committees was envisaged as a starting point from which additional powers would be devolved in the fullness of time.

Council's Response

5.6 In response to the Governance Review's recommendations, area committees were set up by the Council. A number of responsibilities and decisions were devolved to them, including;

- The responsibility for developing three year area plans.

- A role in influencing the specification of environmental and street scene services so that they reflect local need and choices

- In respect of local highway and transport improvements, area committees are able to submit ideas to the local implementation plan, asked to prioritise between proposed schemes in their area and consulted on the detailed design of successful schemes

- Receiving updates from Police ward panels and being consulted on local priorities.

- Introducing local by-laws

- A formal consultative role in respect of planning and licensing applications and parking controls.

5.7   Area assemblies were re-established as area forums in order to facilitate effective community engagement. The aim was that they would work in tandem with the area committees, with the committees providing a means for the conclusions of the forums to be fed into the Council's decision making process and for feedback to be provided on the outcome of discussions.

5.8   The Neighbourhood Management Service was dis-established in January 2011. Responsibility for supporting the new bodies was allocated to the Council's Single Frontline service.   They have had a specific role in assisting with the development of area plans. Local Democracy and Member Services also have a role in undertaking the administration associated with the bodies, such as drafting agendas and minutes of meetings. Each area committee is supported by a senior officer acting as an area champion who acts as a representative of the Council's Corporate Management Team and provides a link between the two bodies.

Communities Scrutiny Panel Project

5.9   The Panel's project has considered how the changes that were made in response to the governance review with the establishment of area committees have been implemented and whether they have met their objectives to date, with a view to making recommendations about how the changes may be embedded further.

5.10   In addition, the project has also looked at:

- How well the area forums and committees complement the Council's consultative and decision making processes and how best they can be used;

- Attendance and participation levels and ways that they could be increased;

- The responsiveness of the Council to issues raised at forums/committees; and

- The practices adopted by other local authorities, particularly neighbours.

5.11   The terms of reference were as follows:

Haringey Council

"To consider the implementation of area committees across the borough and, in particular;

- Whether they are meeting the objectives set for them;
- How they fit into the Council's consultative and governance structure; and
- How their effectiveness could be enhanced"

5.12 The Panel received feedback from;
- Area Assembly Chairs and Councillors
- Attendees at Forum/Committee meetings
- Officers and partners

5.13 Feedback was obtained through surveys of Councillors, residents, officers and partners. In addition, a number of focus groups were held with Councillors, including Area Committee Chairs.

Evidence Received by the panel

5.14 Whilst there was some variance in the responses to the consultation undertaken, there were a number of areas where there was consensus. Of particular note was the fact that there appeared to be an overwhelming view that, despite the flaws in the current arrangements, local engagement is something that the Council should be doing and that Haringey should continue to try to engage with residents and stakeholders to allow them a say in policy, as well as some control over their own environment/neighbourhood.

5.15 The vast majority of stakeholders that responded were not convinced that the new arrangements had so far been a success. Most respondents were either neutral in their response or felt that they had been unsuccessful. It was nevertheless clear that some area forums/committees are functioning better than others. This was evidenced by, amongst other things, higher attendance figures reported at meetings and better developed area plans. In addition, residents in some areas were less negative about their area forums/committees in their responses.

5.16 The perception of the majority of people was that the establishment of area committees had not yet resulted in any increase in local influence on decision making. It was also felt that area forums/committees were limited in their effectiveness in engaging with the community. Whilst those who attend the meetings were felt to be representative of the local community, this felt to be only to a limited extent. From the survey results, there would appear to be some justification to the claim that meetings attract the same people but there would also appear to be some truth in the notion that they often represent a wider constituency of people as a high percentage of residents who responded were active in voluntary and community organisations.

5.17 There was a view amongst many residents that the Council controlled the agenda and meetings as well as degree of cynicism about its motivations. The committee part of meetings could alienate residents and, rather than showing the deliberations of the forum being translated into action, residents often felt that it demonstrated the limits of their influence by excluding them from any decision making. Members reported that

responses by Cabinet Members and officer to issues raised at meetings could be slow and matters were sometimes not followed up.

5.18   The effectiveness of area plans appears is perceived as being variable and, in general, they are viewed as being ineffective. Most Members felt that they had not been useful in bringing about improvements in areas. Although residents were slightly more positive, a third of those who responded to the survey did not know what an area plan was. There was some strong support across the board for areas having small discretionary budgets. There was a lesser level of support amongst all groups for some devolution of power in the allocation of front line budgets.

5.19   It was felt that the areas covered by area forums/committees did not always reflect the "sense of place" of areas. Many respondents were of the view that the areas that they covered were too large.

5.20   Publicity was raised as an issue by a number of respondents with several raising concerns. There is a total budget of £3,000 (£107 per meeting) for publicity for all of the area forums/committees which covers production of flyers and posters to promote meetings. Other activities, such as press releases and web updating have no specific budget but are covered within existing resources. It was felt that publicity was also hindered now by the lack of a local paper for Tottenham and problems in the distribution of Haringey People in some areas of the borough.

Other Boroughs

5.21   The Panel also received evidence that many other boroughs had reviewed their structures for area based bodies, such as area committees or forums following the 2010 local elections. The drivers for this appear to be ensuring that structures reflect the priorities of the new administration and the need to make budget savings. Similar to Haringey, there appears to have been a view shared by several boroughs that their area based bodies were often poorly attended, did not always mirror natural communities and frequently attracted the same people. Several boroughs have also looked at additional ways of facilitating better engagement between local Councillors and their communities through, for instance, the use of on line tools such as web portals which supplement and complement the use of meetings.

5.22   There appear to be two general models that have been adopted by nearby London boroughs. These are;

- Area based bodies covering a number of wards which work on a formal basis and often have some delegated powers, particularly in relation to local planning issues. This approach is followed by, amongst others, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey.

- Less formal ward based bodies; This is a relatively recent phenomenon with several boroughs abolishing their area based bodies and replacing them with these. These are less formal and are considered to provide a more flexible approach which is not entirely meetings based. A number of authorities have

recently moved towards this model including Camden, Hackney, Islington and Waltham Forest.

Localism

5.23 Another significant development has been the implementation of the Localism Act. This established a right for local residents to set up neighbourhood forums to draft neighbourhood plans. The plans are intended to establish a vision for an area as well as general planning policies for the development and use of land in a neighbourhood. The community in any area can instigate a neighbourhood plan and they can cross local authority boundaries, although they should not overlap with adjoining neighbourhoods who may also wish to prepare a plan for their area.

5.24 There is potentially scope for overlap with the role of area based bodies established by local Councils, which may also have a role in developing local plans that include planning issues. The existence of different bodies with similar names and roles may also be a potential source of confusion. To date there has been one application for neighbourhood forum status in Haringey. This covers the whole of the N6 area of Highgate and therefore more than one borough. Preliminary feedback is the Highgate Neighbourhood Forum has been very successful so far at engaging with local residents and developing a local plan. It reportedly attracted over 100 residents to an early meeting, many of whom appeared to be new faces. It is also possible that it may diminish the relevance of the area forum/committee for the N6 area.

Attendance at Meetings

5.25 Attendance of residents at meetings so far during this Municipal Year shows the following:

Forum/Committee	Jun/Jul	Sept/Oct	Jan/Feb	Total	Average
St Ann's and Harringay	45	25	35	105	35
West Green and Bruce Grove	40	30	18	88	29
Muswell Hill, Alexandra, Fortis Green and Highgate	67	52	20	139	46
Northumberland Park and White Hart Lane	24	14	12	50	17
Tottenham and Seven Sisters	42	36	27	105	35
Wood Green	15	28	15	58	19
Crouch End, Hornsey and Stroud Green	35	10	24	69	23
Total	268	195	151	614	204
Average	38	28	22	88	

5.26 The above figures are not exact as not all residents always sign the attendance sheet. They are therefore partially based on best estimates but nevertheless give a general impression of overall attendance levels. January meetings were also affected by inclement weather which may have reduced attendance levels.

Resourcing

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5.27   The budget for area forums/committees in the last two financial years is as follows:

	Full salary basis		Apportioned salary basis	
	11/12	12/13	11/12	12/13
	£k	£k	£k	£k
SFL - staff	160	147	144	74.5
SFL – Non-staff	3	3	3	3
Local Democracy – staff	40	40	40	40
Local Democracy – non staff	6	5	6	5
Communications	3	3	3	3
Total	212	200	196	125.5

5.28   The apportioned salary figures reflect the actual cost of the service as they take into account the amount of time spent by relevant staff in Single Front Line (SFL) in supporting area forums/committees. This was 90% in 2011/12 and 50% in 2012/13

5.29   The Panel noted proposals in the 2013/14 budget for the deletion of the 4 posts in the Single Front Line Service with a role in supporting area forums/committees. It was estimated that the ongoing staffing requirement to update distribution lists, send out agendas and assist with the development of area plans was approximately one full time post. Whilst some support will still be provided by Democratic and Member Services, the matter of who facilitates the upkeep of distribution lists and assists with area plans had still to be resolved. This uncertainty was in itself seen as an indicator of the importance attached to area forums/committees by the Cabinet

5.30   The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has already made the following resolution in respect of this proposal;

"In view of Haringey's stated commitment in the last Governance Review to devolving decision making and greater involvement of the communities in the Borough, the Panel is greatly concerned that the possibility has emerged of withdrawing the funding for a significant portion of the support currently available for area forums and committees. It recommends that, before any decision is made, clarity be provided on how the functions that directly support the work of forums/committees that are undertaken currently by the team to be deleted will continue to provided"

5.31   The view of the Single Front Line (SFL) service is that the level of activity relevant to their service is lower than originally envisaged and that issues raised at forums/committees tend to be more focussed on corporate issues. In addition, a large portion of the work on the development of area plans has already been completed.

6. Conclusions/Recommendations

6.1   The Panel has reached a number of conclusions based on the evidence that it has so far received.

Haringey Council

6.2 Decisions need to be made about the Council's commitment to area forums/committees and their form as, with the reduced resources that there are likely to be for them, it will be a challenge to sustain them as they are currently arranged. If distribution lists are no longer maintained and information not sent out to residents, this could lead to lower levels of attendance at meetings and less effective engagement. Area plans that have been completed will also be more difficult to implement in the absence of dedicated officer support. In addition, plans will need updating and renewing at some stage which will require the assistance of officers.

6.3 The clear consensus was that area based bodies should continue in some form or other and we would therefore recommend that support for them be confirmed by Cabinet. However, if such a commitment is made, the necessary resources need to be provided to enable them to function. Responsibility for resourcing the area forums/committees should be corporate rather than focused on one particular service. Forums/committees cover a wide range of issues at their meetings and are part of the Council's governance so it would therefore be appropriate for support to resourced accordingly.

6.4 Arrangements for area based bodies need to be sustainable and proportionate to the level of support available to them. The Panel is not yet in a position to recommend a specific format for them but would nevertheless propose that it is based on the following principles:

- Any changes made must be made with regard to the high level objectives of the governance review. They must also have regard to the wishes of stakeholders;

- Efforts must be made to engage with a larger and more representative group of residents that reflects our communities and does not exclude different groups;

- The arrangements should form part of a move towards an integrated model of engagement that is less reliant on traditional meeting formats and instead utilises a wider range of tools by which residents may feed into the decision making process;

- An approach where engagement is more actively sought is required rather than the current more passive approach of expecting residents to come along to meetings;

- The Council's current area based bodies are variable in their effectiveness and some of them may be affected by the setting up of neighbourhood forums. The bodies therefore should work in a way that best suits local conditions and is flexible and adaptable.

- Should area based bodies continue to meet, it should be recognised that there are inherent limitations to the number of people who are likely to attend them on a regular basis and it is unlikely that any configuration will be able to achieve major increases.

6.5 The Panel are of the view that any changes to area forums/committees should not be implemented until after the next Council elections as there is unlikely to be the political will to completely review how the Council formats this type of engagement before this. However, this will provide almost a year to try out new and novel ways and evaluate what works and what does not and discuss new ways forward with the 2014 intake of Councillors.

6.6 Suggestions for possible new approaches are as follows:

- Pop up meetings - on high streets, in parks, outside schools, in shops, in leisure centres;
- E-meetings - online sessions with members and officers;
- Cabinet member debates - proposed policies open to public scrutiny before they go to Cabinet;
- Sharing the chair with residents for specific agenda items;
- Fully handing over the chair to residents - why can't we trust them to run these meetings?;
- More training for Members in chairing skills;
- Encouraging local groups to have a presence - stalls, agenda items, parish pump box etc.;
- Shorter more focused agendas.

6.7 Proposals for alternative means of engagement with local residents should be developed in consultation with area forum/committee Chairs and trialled in a selective number of wards of the borough and subject to full evaluation. Following this and after consultation with stakeholders, specific proposals for the future of area forums and committees should be developed and these be based on the principles outlined above as well as clear evidence of effective and cost effective approaches that have been adopted by similar London boroughs.

6.8 Consultation with residents on proposed alternative means of engagement should include hard to reach groups who would currently appear to be under represented at area forum/committee meetings. There are various definitions of what constitutes a hard to reach group. The Home Office's *Developing Practice* report into delivering services for such groups suggests that a working definition might include;
- Minority groups (e.g. minority ethnic communities, asylum seekers);
- People whose needs may slip through the net (e.g. carers); and
- The service resistant (e.g. people who may be suspicious or even hostile to services).

6.9 The following outline timetable is suggested:

Spring 2013: Proposals for piloting new approaches developed including selection of areas to be included.

Summer/autumn 2013: Pilot projects to be undertaken.

Winter 2013/14: Pilots projects to be evaluated and engagement with residents and stakeholders undertaken.

Spring 2014: Options for future development formulated.

Summer 2014: Final decision taken by new intake of Councillors.

Autumn 2014: New arrangements implemented.

Haringey Council

7   Comments of the Chief Finance Officer and financial implications

7.1   The report has already noted in paragraph 5.28 the deletion of the 4 posts in Single Front Line with a role in supporting area forums/committees. This saving of £147k in 2013/14 was agreed as part of the 2013/14 – 2015/16 Medium Term Financial Plan. The cost of developing alternative means of engagement for piloting in a number of wards and consultation with stakeholders over the next year can be managed within existing resources. Once specific proposals have been developed the financial implications will need to be re-assessed at that time.

8   Head of Legal Services and Legal Implications

8.1   The Overview and Scrutiny Committee can make reports and recommendations to the Cabinet in respect of the discharge of functions delegated to Area Committees.

8.2   The Guidance issued on the executive arrangement under the Local Government Act 2000 acknowledge that area committees or forums can have an important role to play in bringing decision making closer to people and in helping give the people a say in the way in which a local authority works. The Panel's conclusions/ recommendations are intended to support the arrangements for Area Forums and Committees and to improve on local engagement in the functions of Area Committees.

9   Equalities and Community Cohesion Comments

9.1   Area forums/committees are a means by which the Council engages with the local community. There is some evidence that attendance at meetings is not fully reflective of the diverse communities within the borough. Young people are also under represented amongst those who attend meetings. The recommendations of the project address these issues through proposing that they be considered fully in the development of proposals to improve the current arrangements.

10 Head of Procurement Comments

10.1 N/A

11 Use of Appendices
      N/A

12 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

Haringey Governance Review 2010/11

Current Area Forums/Committees

Area Forum/Committee	Wards covered	Chair
Crouch End, Hornsey and Stroud Green	Crouch End, Hornsey and Stroud Green	Cllr Paul Strang
Muswell Hill, Alexandra, Fortis Green and Highgate	Muswell Hill, Alexandra, Fortis Green and Highgate	Cllr Gail Engert
Northumberland Park and White Hart Lane	Northumberland Park and White Hart Lane	Cllr Kaushika Amin
Tottenham and Seven Sisters	Tottenham Green, Tottenham Hale and Seven Sisters	Cllr Lorna Reith
West Green and Bruce Grove	West Green and Bruce Grove	Cllr Joe Ejiofor
Wood Green	Bounds Green, Woodside and Noel Park	Cllr Joanna Christophides
St Ann's and Harringay	St Ann's and Harringay	Cllr Zena Brabazon

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