

# Final Report of the Project Team to the Review Committee

## Area Committee Review



# REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

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## 2 Glossary

BC	Borough Council
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership

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## **REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES**

### **3 Introduction**

- 3.1 Since the introduction of the Area Committees to the Authority's decision making process the Review Committee has been considering the way they function and how they serve the community.
- 3.2 More recently, the general feeling from Council Members and the feedback that had been received from residents indicated that the current format of meetings was not enabling residents to feel satisfied that they were obtaining answers to the issues that concerned them.
- 3.3 It was, therefore, agreed at the meeting of the Review Committee on 3 June 2010 that a review would be conducted into the Area Committees in terms of their benefits to the public as a means of getting their issues and concerns heard. A team from the Review Committee was appointed for the purpose.

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### **4 Terms of reference**

- 4.1 To assess the operation of the Area Committees and consider their benefit to the public as a means of getting their issues and concerns heard by Councillors and other local officials.

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## 5 Methodology

- 5.1 The team contacted the Parish/Town Councils to obtain their views on the benefits of the Area Committees.
- 5.2 They contacted the members of the public who had attended previous meetings and registered with the Council, to obtain their thoughts on the benefits of the meetings.
- 5.3 They also contacted Members of the Council to obtain their input into the Review.
- 5.4 They examined other Authorities who also had Area Committees (or their equivalent) to see if they were engaging with their local residents in a more productive manner.
- 5.5 A questionnaire was prepared and this was used to obtain input from members of the public who do not currently attend Area Committee meetings. The questionnaire was circulated at various events attended by Council representatives and also posted on the Council's web site. The Council's Citizen's Panel was invited to complete it.
- 5.6 The team examined past reports relating to Area Committees and responses from participants at Area Committees.
- 5.7 The team also took into account information relating to the Government's forthcoming "Localism Bill."

## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

### 6 Findings

#### 6.1 Public Attendance at Area Committees

6.1.1 Below are two tables which detail the public attendance at the Area Committees for the last two Municipal Years.

6.1.2 It can be seen that, apart from a few meetings where the turnout was high due to localised issues being raised, average attendance has been relatively low.

##### Area Committee Attendance 2008 - 09

Area Committee	Venue	Date	Approx. Number of public Attending		
			Central	East	West
West	The Mill Arts & Events Centre, Rayleigh	12 June 2008			25
Central	Greensward College, Hockley	17 June 2008	11		
East	Rochford Primary & Nursery School, Rochford	2 July 2008		7	
East	Great Wakering Community Centre, Great Wakering	4 September 2008		16	
Central	King Edmund School, Rochford	11 September 2008	10		
West	Grove Wood Primary School, Rayleigh	17 September 2008			41
East	Canewdon Village Hall, Canewdon	8 October 2008		16	
Central	King Edmund School, Rochford	16 October 2008	7		
West	Salvation Army Hall, Rayleigh	22 October 2008			12

## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

East	Rochford Primary & Nursery School, Rochford	6 November 2008		20	
Central	Hawkwell Village Hall, Hawkwell	13 November 2008	160		
West	Edward Francis Junior School, Rayleigh	25 November 2008			91
Central	Hullbridge Community Centre, Hullbridge	6 January 2009	2		
West	The Mill Arts and Events Centre, Rayleigh	29 January 2009			23
East	St John Ambulance Headquarters, Rochford	12 February 2009		5	
Central	Hullbridge Community Centre, Hullbridge	3 March 2009	6		
West	Rawreth Village Hall, Rawreth	12 March 2009			55
East	Rochford Primary & Nursery School, Rochford	19 March 2009		24	
<b>Total</b>			196	88	247

### Area Committee Attendance 2009 - 10

Area Committee	Venue	Date	Approx. Number of public Attending		
			Central	East	West
East	St John Ambulance Headquarters, Rochford	11 June 2009		5	
West	Grove Wood Primary School, Rayleigh	17 June 2009			24

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Central	Hawkwell Village Hall, Hawkwell,	25 June 2009	19		
Central	Hullbridge Community Centre, Hullbridge	10 September 2009	25		
West	Rayleigh Methodist Church, Rayleigh	15 September 2009			24
East	Canewdon Village Hall, Canewdon	16 September 2009		5	
East	Great Wakering Community Centre, Great Wakering	14 October 2009		5	
Central	Hawkwell Village Hall, Hawkwell	15 October 2009	50		
West	Warehouse Centre, Rayleigh	22 October 2009			6
East	Rochford Library, Rochford	11 November 2009		16	
Central	King Edmund School, Rochford	18 November 2009	6		
West	Rayleigh Methodist Church, Rayleigh	24 November 2009			30
West	Grove Wood Primary School, Rayleigh,	14 January 2010			8
Central	Greensward Academy, Hockley	19 January 2010	5		
East	Rochford Library, Rochford	28 January 2010		4	
West	Rawreth Village Hall, Rawreth	4 March 2010			24
Central	Hullbridge Community Centre, Hullbridge	11 March 2010	7		
East	Canewdon Village Hall, Canewdon	17 March 2010		9	



## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

<b>Total</b>			112	44	116
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### 6.2 Costs associated with Area Committees

6.2.1 The following tables provide a breakdown of the total costs associated with each of the Area Committees for the 2010/11 Municipal Year:-

#### **Central Area**

<b><u>Cost</u></b>	
Refreshments	£415
Sound system	£1,745
Venue Hire	£395
Chairman & Vice Chairman Allowances	£2,550
<b><u>Total</u></b>	£5,105

#### **East Area**

<b><u>Cost</u></b>	
Refreshments	£415
Sound system	£1,745
Venue Hire	£368
Chairman & Vice Chairman Allowances	£2,550
<b><u>Total</u></b>	£5,078

#### **West Area**

<b><u>Cost</u></b>	
Refreshments	£415
Sound system	£1,745
Venue Hire	£388
Chairman & Vice Chairman Allowances	£2,550
<b><u>Total</u></b>	£5,098

Central	£5,105
East	£5,078
West	£5,098
Total cost for all three Committees	£15,281

6.2.2 The above figures do not take into account officer time in arranging and organising the meetings or any remuneration associated with officers / others attending the meetings.

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### 6.3 Advertising of Area Committees

- 6.3.1 Each meeting is advertised on the Authority's web site and dates and venues are included in the Committee Management Information System.
- 6.3.2 Area Committee agendas contain details of future meeting dates and venues for the rest of the Municipal Year. In addition, book marks are prepared at the start of the year for each of the Area Committees containing details of the dates and venues of all the meetings. These are given out at the meetings so that anybody attending one meeting will know of the details of the meetings for the rest of the cycle.
- 6.3.3 At the start of the year all Parish / Town Councils receive a notice for their notice boards relating to the Area Committee relevant to them. This notice includes all the dates and venues for the forthcoming year. Each Area Committee is represented by a different colour. Each Parish / Town Council receives a notice of meetings schedule once a month which also contains details of any Area Committees that are being held that month.
- 6.3.4 Details of forthcoming meetings are included in the Council's newspaper, Rochford District Matters.
- 6.3.5 A press release is prepared for each meeting and issued to the various Media. The release contains details of topics being covered and usually appears in either the Yellow Advertiser or the Echo, and sometimes both.
- 6.3.6 In addition, all the businesses on the local business register are emailed a copy of the posters and asked to display them in their windows. The communications team also contact Doctors and Dental surgeries in the District to try to arrange for the posters to be displayed in the waiting rooms.

### 6.4 Analysis of Questionnaires

#### 2010/11 Survey Responses

##### Area Committee Questionnaire – District Councillors

		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
1	The venues that the Area Committee uses enable the public to attend local meetings.	57%	33%
2	The Area Committee that I attend has allowed me to fully hear and understand local issues.	71%	24%

## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

3	The general public have been able to obtain adequate answers to those local items that cause them concern.	43%	48%
4	The input of the Police has been of interest to me as a Member of the Committee.	81%	14%
5	The input of Essex Highways has been of interest to me as a Member of the Committee.	86%	5%
6	The spotlight issues are relevant and of interest to the local Community and me as a Member of the Committee.	81%	14%
7	The Community Forum is proving a good way of enabling local residents to have their say.	43%	48%

6.4.1 Where the percentage totals do not add up to 100% it means that the person completing the questionnaire left the answer blank.

### Results from 2008/09 survey responses

		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
2	The Area Committee that I attend has allowed me to fully hear and understand local issues.	80%	15%
3	The general public have been able to obtain adequate answers to those local items that cause them concern.	50%	45%
4	The input of the Police has been of interest to me as a Member of the Committee.	90%	10%
5	The input of Essex Highways has been of interest to me as a Member of the Committee.	95%	5%
6	The spotlight issues are relevant and of interest to the local Community and me as a Member of the Committee.	90%	10%
7	The Community Forum is proving a good way of enabling local residents to have their say.	75%	15%

6.4.2 The 39 Members of the Council were asked their views and 21 responded. In the 2008/09 Municipal year 21 responses were also received.

6.4.3 Due to the low number of questionnaires received back in each canvassing it only took a few to significantly influence the percentage. Therefore, the results need to be treated with caution.

6.4.4 No comparison was possible with the first question as this was not asked of Members the last time they were surveyed.

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### **Parish/Town Council responses**

6.4.5 The Parish /Town Councils were all contacted and asked for their comments on the following subjects:-

- Venues used for the Area Committee your representative attends
- Public awareness of the existence of the Area Committees
- Public participation with the Area Committees (in particular the reasons for the lack of attendance seen)
- Topics discussed at the Area Committees
- Any other comments relating to Area Committees

6.4.6 Of the 14 Parish/Town Councils, 7 responded and the issues that were raised have been summarised below:-

- Lack of advertising (4)
- Meetings too formal (4)
- Centralisation of venues appropriate (5)
- Length of time for public speaking too short (4)
- Public participation too restricted (5)
- Format of meetings (5)

### **Public responses**

6.4.7 Those Members of the public who had previously attended an Area Committee meeting and had provided an address were contacted for their views on the Committees. 71 members of the public were contacted and 19 responses were received. Questionnaires were also made available at the September meetings of the three committees for any members of the public to complete.

6.4.8 A number of comments were registered by the public who have attended an Area Committee meeting. These were:-

- The lack of advertising
- Did not need a speaker system
- Need more public attendance
- Need to keep costs low
- Topics covered should be more local to the area the meeting is taking place in
- Centralisation of venues (Civic Suite mentioned for West Area)
- Community forum not achieving purpose

## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

- Public participation should be longer
  - Lack of responses to questions
  - “Fast Track” issues as they arise
- 6.4.9 In addition, questionnaires have been made available at various Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) organised information days, on the web site and to the Citizen’s Panel members that had expressed an interest in issues around local democracy.
- 6.4.10 88 surveys were completed from these sources and, of these, 59 of the respondents were unaware of the existence of the Area Committees. Of the topics that were of most concern to residents crime came first, followed by planning and then highways.
- 6.4.11 74 respondents said that they would attend an Area Committee meeting if their choice of topic was being discussed.

### 6.5 Options relating to Area Committees

- 6.5.1 The project team considered a number of options for Area Committees in the context of comments received from the consultations. The options considered are listed below:-

Option 1 – No change to Area Committee meetings

- 6.5.2 This option would not deal with any of the issues raised by the participants.

Option 2 – Change venues for the meetings and advertise more

- 6.5.3 While this option would cover a few of the issues raised it has already been tried over the last couple of years without making any significant difference to the public attendance at the meetings.

Option 3 – Continue with Area Committees but remove the Community Forum element.

- 6.5.4 This option would possibly allow all meetings to be held at the Civic Suite and so cut the costs of the meetings. It would probably mean that fewer members of the public would attend and there would not be any community involvement with the meetings. Residents concerns would not be heard and concerns around public participation at the meetings would not be dealt with.

Option 4 – Discontinue Area Committees but keep Community Forums

## REVIEW OF AREA COMMITTEES

- 6.5.5 This option could save up to £15,281 per year depending on how the Community Forums were organised.
- 6.5.6 A Community Forum could consist of a 'top table' with relevant Portfolio Holders and Heads of Service. In addition, a representative from the Police and, possibly, PCT or its new equivalent could also be at the table. The rest of the venue could be given over to seats for the audience, made up of residents, Parish/Town Councillors and District Council Members. The audience would be able to ask those at the table questions with the relevant person being able to answer.
- 6.5.7 Meetings could be themed to attract people; for example, crime. The public would still be able to raise other issues.
- 6.5.8 Portfolio Holders and officers could take back issues to the Executive/Ward Members where necessary.
- 6.5.9 Residents could attend to ask questions or ask their Councillor to champion an issue on their behalf. No questions would be submitted in advance, but at the meeting itself. A list of questions and answers could be posted on the web site for information purposes. If a question could not be answered at the time it would be necessary to feed the information back to the questioner after the meeting.
- 6.5.10 If the Police and other partnership bodies, such as Health, could be encouraged to share the meeting then this would save all the partners money and be seen as a good example of partnership working.
- 6.5.11 This option would satisfy the majority of the issues raised by Area Committee attendees in that it would keep costs low, removing the majority of associated costs – venue hire, sound system, refreshments etc. It would enable more freedom / a longer time for the public to ask questions and, with the relevant Portfolio Holders/lead officers in attendance, the public should be able to obtain an answer at the meeting rather than waiting for a significant period, as can currently be the case.
- 6.5.12 All respondents have mentioned the format of the Area Committee meetings and how the public do not like the formality of them. This option would satisfy such concerns, both in terms of meeting content and venue layout. It would effectively remove all the restrictions inherent in operating a Committee meeting within the framework of the Local Government Act 1972 and associated legislation.
- 6.5.13 One of at least three distinct approaches could be taken to option 4:-

### Align Forums with existing Area Committee venue arrangements

If a Community Forum was aligned with the three areas as now, there would still be venue hire charges and charges for the sound

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system. If there was no change in the frequency of meetings they would still cost in the region of £8,000.

Whilst some of the issues around public participation would be resolved, the comments about difficulties travelling to venues and the location of venues would not be overcome. Problems of residents knowing which meeting was for their area may also persist.

### One Forum for the District

If there was only one Community Forum for the whole of the District it could be held at the Civic Suite. Even if there were 5 or 6 meetings they would not cost anything from a premises point of view. However, only one forum at the Civic Suite would mean that residents from the east of the District would have to travel to Rayleigh and, if numbers were high, then accommodation could become a problem.

### One East and one West Forum

Rather than hold all the Community Forums at the Civic Suite, it would be possible to hold meetings at both the Civic Suite and at a site in the vicinity of Rochford. This would mean that residents in the East of the District would be able to attend meetings without travelling too far. The eastern venue could be fixed so that all residents would know that the meetings were held in the same place each time and there would not be the confusion as to which venue was going to host the meeting that can occur at the present time. This option would not realise the full savings of dissolving the Area Committees in that you would have the costs of hiring a venue and, possibly, providing a sound system.

This option would cost approximately £1500 per annum depending on the venue selected for the East Forum and the number of meetings held.

### Option 5 – Separate the Area Committee meetings from the Community forums

- 6.6.14 This option would meet some of the issues raised by all participants. Area Committee meetings could be held at the Civic Suite as and when required to exercise delegated authority and to be a conduit to the Executive. Community forums could be held purely for residents to ask questions about services and issues within the District. The Area Committee Chairman and Vice Chairman could attend along with relevant Portfolio Holders and Heads of Service. Any issues requiring

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consultation and feeding back to the Executive could be taken forward by the Area Committee Chairmen. Two Community Forums in each area could be held a year, with the possibility of additional meetings if required. Meetings could be themed to attract the maximum number of public possible. It might be possible to combine with some of the LSP partners such as the Police, Essex County Council and the PCT and see if they were agreeable to share the costs of the meetings. The role of Parish Councillors on Area Committees would need to be considered. In that Parish/Town Councillors would be able to attend Community Forums and ask questions this may not be an issue.

- 6.6.15 There would be some savings on this option but the cost of the venues and arranging sound systems would still mean that the savings to the Authority were not significant.

### Option 6 – Discontinue Area Committees

- 6.6.16 This option would mean that all of the £15,281 cost per annum for the Committees would be saved.

- 6.6.17 This option would not, however, meet all the issues raised by the participants and would reduce the facilities available to the public to be consulted or be able to ask questions of representatives of the District Council and its partners.



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### 7 Conclusion

- 7.1 Whilst each category of attendee thought that the engagement between residents and the Authority was a good thing, a number of responses indicated that they did not feel that the current Area Committee arrangements were assisting residents in this regard.
- 7.2 An initial review of the Government's draft 'Localism Bill' has indicated that, whilst there is no compulsion to hold Area Committees, there is a need to provide some form of interaction between Local Authorities and their residents.
- 7.3 It is clear from the research undertaken by the team that this is a common problem across the country. There are always difficulties when meetings are being split into formal and informal parts. Residents attend these meetings to obtain answers to the questions they raise and would rather the forum part of the meeting was extended to enable more questions to be raised.
- 7.4 Following consultation with District Councillors, Parish/Town Councils and the public it is clear that the same issues were being raised by all the parties, namely :-
- Lack of attendance by public
  - Lack of advertising
  - Formality of meetings
  - Time taken to obtain responses to questions.
- 7.5 The project team feels that the most appropriate option is to cease Area Committees at the end of the Municipal Year for the following reasons:-
- The meetings are not best fulfilling purpose
  - The public do not feel that they are able to obtain satisfactory answers to their questions
  - The cost savings of at least £15,281 per annum that could be achieved.

### Recommendation No 1

It is recommended that the Area Committees cease at the end of the Municipal Year.

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- 7.6 The project team recognise that there needs to be a way of communicating with residents which allows residents to have their questions answered and also minimises bureaucracy.

### Recommendation No 2

It is recommended that Community Forums are established from the start of the next Municipal Year.

- 7.7 In order to allow as many people as possible to attend the Community Forums the project team felt that two should be established, one on each side of the District.

### Recommendation No 3

It is recommended that there are two Community Forums for the District. The East Forum would be held in or near Rochford, and the West Forum would be held at the Civic Suite Rayleigh.

- 7.8 It was felt that the Forums should be held at least three times a year with provision to hold additional if necessary.

### Recommendation No 4

It is recommended that each Community Forum is scheduled at least three times a year.

- 7.9 To enable any questions asked at meetings to be answered the project team felt that the Forum panel should comprise relevant Portfolio Holders and Heads of Service. As there will be no need for prior consultation with a Chairman, the role of Panel Chairman could be fulfilled by either the Portfolio Holder whose area of responsibility relates to the theme of the Forum or be agreed by the Panel prior to the start.

### Recommendation No 5

It is recommended that relevant Portfolio Holders and Heads of Service sit on the Forum panel to answer questions and the role of Panel Chairman is fulfilled by either the Portfolio Holder whose area of responsibility relates to the theme of the Forum or be agreed by the Panel prior to the start.

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- 7.10 In a number of cases residents' concerns do not relate to areas within the Authority's influence and, therefore, the project team felt that the Forum panel should include a member of the Police, a representative from the County Council and a Health professional if possible. As meetings would assist these partners in meeting their own public engagement needs it is hoped that they could be prepared to assist with any funding required to host meetings.

### Recommendation No 6

It is recommended that the Council's partners are approached to see if they would wish to attend the meetings and join the Authority as hosts/to contribute financially.

- 7.11 During the existence of Area Committees it has been recognised that there needs to be some agreed procedures around questions that are put forward. This enables the Chairman to control the meetings and avoids individuals monopolising meetings. The project team have, therefore, made the following recommendation in line with existing rules for Area Committees.

### Recommendation No 7

It is recommended that the Chairman of the Community Forum will be able to reject a question submitted by a member of the public if it is substantially the same as a question that has been asked at a Forum in the past six months.

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### 8 Summary of Recommendations

#### Recommendation No 1

It is recommended that the Area Committees cease at the end of the Municipal Year.

#### Recommendation No 2

It is recommended that Community Forums are established from the start of the next Municipal Year.

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It is recommended that there are two Community Forums for the District. The East Forum, would be held in or near Rochford, and the West Forum, would be held at the Civic Suite Rayleigh.

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#### Recommendation No 7

It is recommended that the Chairman of the Community Forum will be able to reject a question submitted by a member of the public if it is substantially the same as a question that has been asked at a Forum in the past six months.