

HAMBLETON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report To: Cabinet
11 December 2012

From: Scrutiny Committee 2

Subject: TASK AND FINISH GROUP - POLICY REVIEW – AREA FORUMS AND AREA PARTNERSHIPS – FINAL REPORT

All Wards

1.0 SUMMARY:

1.1 Between April 2012 and November 2012 the Task and Finish Group undertook a review on Area Forums and Area Partnerships. This report sets out the Group's findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION:

2.1 Area Forums and Area Partnerships was regarded as an appropriate topic for review as effective community engagement is a vital role for the District Council.

2.2 The Task & Finish Group as a whole undertook the review and the terms of reference were to examine:-

- The current priorities contained within the delivery plans for the Area Partnerships and the basis for their establishment.
- How the delivery plans are resourced and how decisions are made on expenditure.
- The evidence of community benefit from the delivery of projects
- The current structure, delivery approach and relationships across the District for Area Forums and Area Partnerships and options for future delivery.

2.3 The following evidence, arranged through the Enabling Officer, was provided at meetings of the Group:

16 April 2012

- Agreed Project Plan.

14 August 2012

- Evidence gathering

14 May 2012

- Evidence gathering.

3 October 2012

- Evidence gathering.

12 July 2012

- Evidence gathering.

1 November 2012

- Concluded review.

3.0 OTHER EVIDENCE

3.1 The following Council officers and external witnesses also attended meetings of the Group to give evidence:

- Sandra Walbran, Director of Customer Services, Hambleton District Council (HDC);
- Nicole Patterson, Business and Communities Manager (HDC);
- Peter Cole, Business and Community Officer (HDC);
- Yvonne Rose and John Noone (Bedale & Villages Forum);
- Brian Taylor (Easingwold Villages Forum);
- Sally Anderson (Northallerton & Villages Forum);
- Mrs Bridget Fortune, John Fletcher and Phil Henderson (Stokesley & Villages Forum);
- Councillor C A Les (Chairman, Bedale Area Forum, HDC);
- Councillor M J Prest (Chairman, Northallerton Area Forum, HDC);
- Councillor Mrs M S Skilbeck (Chairman, Stokesley Area Forum, HDC);
- Councillor M S Robson (Chairman, Thirsk Area Forum, HDC);
- Dave Goodwin (Director of Leisure and Health, HDC);
- Mick Jewitt (Director of Housing and Planning, HDC); and
- Neil Irving, Assistant Director (Policy and Partnerships), NYCC.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 The terms of reference of the review were aimed at answering the following key questions:

- What is the current policy of the Council and why is this so?
- Who is the policy aimed at, who is intended to benefit and how is this measured?
- What is central to the delivery of the policy (resources, stakeholder involvement, etc)?
- Is the current policy working (is it delivering the stated outcomes and do the recipients benefit)?
- Does the policy need to change – is it still valid?
- Can the policy and the service be improved – if so how?
- What impact will the policy have on other partners?

4.2 Based on the written and oral evidence presented, the Committee's findings were as follows:

4.2.1 The Group wanted to identify the current priorities contained within the delivery plans for the Area Partnerships and the basis for their establishment. The Group ascertained that Area Partnerships had emerged from the Community Investment Prospectus in 2001. The District Council and Yorkshire Forward invested money into creating them to bring together communities and organisations with the aim of improving the quality of life across Hambleton. They were not decision making bodies. There were 5 Area Partnerships based on the Market Towns and their surrounding villages. There were also sub-groups such as cycleways and transport.

4.2.2 The Group established that the priorities of the Area Partnerships were to:-

- support and delivery Local Action Plans
- deliver Sustainable Community Strategy
- engage directly with key public, private and voluntary sector partners
- seat on Hambleton & Richmondshire Strategic Forum
- support community led projects.

4.2.3 The Group also established that the priorities of the Area Forums were to:-

- improve community engagement with the Council
- give more local delivery of priorities
- monitor the Council's policy and performance.

4.2.4 The Group wished to examine how the delivery plans of the Area Partnerships were resourced and how decisions were made on expenditure. The Group was informed that some Officer support was provided through the District Council to support the Partnerships

in delivering the plans but much of the work was undertaken by members of the partnerships on a voluntary basis. The Area Partnerships agreed the projects and prioritised them. Each Partnership had received a budget in 2012 of £2400 from the Strategic Forum to support the delivery of projects. Any other funds required had to be sourced from external funding.

- 4.2.5 The Area Forums did not have a dedicated budget and were supported by Officers of the District Council. As such, the Area Forums were not a decision making body. Any recommendations from the Area Forums on any requests for expenditure would have to be approved by Cabinet. There had been no instances of the Area Forums requesting Cabinet approval for any expenditure.
- 4.2.6 The Group wanted to establish the evidence of community benefit from the delivery of projects and it was noted that since 2001 the Area Partnerships had a good record of successfully delivering projects within the community, such as:-
- X-Nihilo Youth Centre in Bedale and free wi-fi in the High Street; Seamer Village Hall Carpet Bowls Club; River Leven Jubilee Bridge; Great Ayton Boxing Club; Chopsticks; Northallerton Shopmobility scheme; Thirsk Sensory Garden; Ginnels; Northallerton Town Square.
- 4.2.7 It was clear from the evidence gathered that the projects contributed to the sustainability and well-being of the local communities and had benefited a range of different groups as well as building the confidence of the partnerships themselves. The Group suggested that perhaps there needed to be more awareness and feedback to the Council to report the good work that the Area Partnerships were doing. It was noted that monitoring did take place and it was suggested that there needed to be a mechanism to report back to the Council. The Task and Finish Group accepted that the Area Partnerships were a valuable operation in the Council's community engagement and recommended that there be greater scrutiny/monitoring regarding the value for money these Partnerships present to the Council.
- 4.2.8 The Group also accepted that the Area Forums enabled a low level community engagement with the District Council. The Forums were an opportunity for the Council to inform the community of what the Council was doing and for issues to be raised, if they had not satisfactorily been resolved through the appropriate channels.
- 4.2.9 The Group explored the current structure, delivery approach and relationships across the District for Area Forums and Area Partnerships and options for future delivery. The Group recognised that there was limited interaction between the Area Partnerships and Area Forums. They operated independently from each other. The members of the Area Partnerships were mainly community volunteers and District Councillors and were focussed on delivery of community projects and sustainability of the community.
- 4.2.10 The Area Forums were a constituted body of the Council and although not a decision making body, could make recommendations to Cabinet. They did receive reports on the Council-led activities which supported the aims of the Sustainable Community Strategies. These strategies had evolved with the input of the various Area Partnerships.
- 4.2.11 In relation to the Area Partnerships, it was accepted that they worked well in their current format. They had good attendance figures and their informal approach to business generated interest and enthusiasm.
- 4.2.12 The Group recognised that the Thirsk Regeneration Initiative (the Thirsk and Villages Area Partnership) was not operational at present and it was suggested that options be explored to ascertain whether there was any interest in re-establishing an Area Partnership within the Thirsk area.

- 4.2.13 The Group also commented that the different names of the individual bodies caused confusion. It was suggested perhaps introducing a common naming theme would help overcome this. It was accepted that within the District Council these bodies were commonly known as Area Partnerships and that the naming of the individual Partnerships was not a matter for the District Council but for the Partnerships themselves.
- 4.2.14 Evidence showed that the Area Forums were less successful. They had low attendance figures and it was felt that the more Council based approach did not create interest or encourage participation. Although issues from the Parishes and community may be raised, it was felt that, where an issue was not a direct responsibility of the District Council there was a lack of ownership in order to bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion.
- 4.2.15 In order to generate more interest in the Area Forums, it was suggested that perhaps meetings should take place more ad-hoc when issues of interest arose, rather than being scheduled into the diary. Lack of agenda items resulted in meetings being cancelled at short notice and the content of the agenda was considered to be lacklustre and needed to be refreshed.
- 4.2.16 The Group recognised that the practice of calling ad-hoc meetings already existed and recommended that the quarterly meetings of the Area Forums cease as soon as practicable provided that there is a mechanism in place for ad-hoc meetings to be arranged when matters of public interest require discussion in a public meeting.
- 4.2.17 In order to gain a perspective about how other Authorities carry out Parish Liaison, Mr Neil Irving, Assistant Director (Policy and Partnerships) North Yorkshire County Council, attended a meeting of the Task and Finish Group to provide information on the joint Parish/District/County Council Forums that were in operation.
- 4.2.18 The following points were noted:-
- meetings were not public meetings
 - meetings helped educate Parishes so that there was a greater awareness about who was responsible for what services and who should be contacted if there were issues that needed to be dealt with;
 - it was felt that there was more accountability at these meetings for Officers and Members to take issues on board and deal with them;
 - informal approach encouraged participation;
 - attendance indicated that the meetings were successful.
- 4.2.19 The Task and Finish Group were mindful to support the participation of the District Council as part of these meetings and suggested that this be explored further.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS:

5.1 What is the current policy/practice/procedure of the Council and why is this so?

The Area Partnerships, supported by the District Council, operate successfully under their own Constitutions. The Area Forums, which are a constituted body of the District Council, are less successful and consideration has to be given regarding their future operation.

5.2 Who is the policy/practice/procedure aimed at, who is intended to benefit and how is this measured?

Area Partnerships bring together communities and organisations with the aim of improving the quality of life across Hambleton. Area Forums are a method of engaging the community with the District Council.

5.3 What is central to the delivery of the policy/practice/procedure (resources, stakeholder involvement, etc)?

The support given to the Area Partnerships by the District Council helps ensure delivery of their plans. The commitment of the voluntary participants of the Area Partnerships is essential in driving the work of the Partnerships forward. The Area Forums are supported by Officers of the District Council.

5.4 Is the current policy/practice/procedure working (is it delivering the stated outcomes and do the recipients benefit)?

Evidence shows that the Area Partnerships are very successful in delivery projects and driving their agenda forward and that the Area Forums are less effective.

5.5 Does the policy/practice/procedure need to change – is it still valid?

The Area Partnerships operate very successfully under their own constitution. It is suggested that the Area Forums, which are a constituted body of the District Council, cease operation as they are not effective.

5.6 Can the policy/practice/procedure and the service be improved – if so how?

Alternative methods of community engagement with the District Council needs to be explored.

5.7 What impact will the policy have on other partners?

It is envisaged that replacing the Area Forums with an alternative method of community engagement will improve the liaison between the County/District Council/Parish Councils and the community.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

6.1 To recommend to Cabinet that:-

- (1) it be acknowledged that the existing Area Partnerships operate very successfully but that Officers explore whether there is interest in re-establishing an Area Partnership within the Thirsk area;
- (2) a mechanism of raising awareness of the successful work that the Area Partnerships carry out be explored;
- (3) that greater scrutiny/monitoring regarding the value for money these Partnerships present to the Council be undertaken;
- (4) Area Forums cease operating in their present form as soon as practicable provided that there is a mechanism in place for ad-hoc meetings to be called as and when issues of community interest arise and alternative methods of community engagement be explored, including the proposal of a joint County/District/Parish Liaison meeting.

COUNCILLOR R HUDSON, VICE-CHAIRMAN

Background Papers: None

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Memorandum of Evidence

The Committee took evidence from Sandra Walbran, Director of Customer Services; Nicole Patterson, Business and Community Manager and Peter Cole (Business and Community Officer) Hambleton District Council (HDC)

Nicole and Peter gave a presentation to the Committee, a copy has been previously circulated and is available as part of the Committee's records.

Area Partnerships

Peter provided background information of the formation of the Area Partnerships. They emerged from the Community Investment Prospectus in 2001. The District Council and Yorkshire Forward invested money into creating them to bring together communities and organisations with the aim of improving the quality of life across Hambleton. They are not decision making bodies. There were 5 Area Partnerships in the Market Towns and they did include the villages. There were also sub-groups such as cycleways and transport.

The Task & Finish Group wished to know how ideas were developed when there was no resources and was advised that the resources (not financial resources) of the District Council were utilised to help deliver the projects and turn ideas into reality but support was needed from the rest of the Community. Funding could be secured from organisations such as the Lottery Funding.

The Task & Finish Group commented that there was an impression that these groups may be syphoning off the financial resources of the District Council and asked for clarification. The Task & Finish Group was advised that this needed clarity on how this was explained and how money was raised and where it came from.

The Task & Finish Group requested clarification in relation to the operation of the Thirsk Regeneration Initiative (TRI) as it appeared that this Partnership had almost ceased functioning unless more money became available. The Group was advised that The TRI ceased in September 2011. This Partnership worked slightly differently to the other Partnerships. Economic regeneration using Yorkshire Forward money and officers were employed to deliver projects in the Thirsk Area, not necessary community projects. It was suggested that perhaps the TRI needed a different perspective but this was up them to decide.

The Task & Finish Group commented that the Partnerships all had different names which was confusing. It was suggested that if they had similar names this would help avoid confusion.

The Task & Finish Group enquired as to where the funding came from and was advised that it came from various sources, such as lottery funding.

Area Forums

Nicole provided background information on Area Forums and Area Committees. The Area Forums were introduced in 2008 by the District Council as part of the new Political structures. They were Chaired by Council Members and were supported by an Assistant Director. Elected Members were invited to attend Area Partnerships to ensure effective communications between the two bodies. The former Safety & Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee commenced a review into the Area Forums which had been encompassed into this review. The Area Forums did not have a specific budget allocated to them.

The Area Committees were run by North Yorkshire County Council. There were 7 Committees, one of which was the Hambleton Area Committee. The District Council was represented on this Committee by Elected Members. The Area Committees feedback to the Executive, they do not have community involvement and they do not support delivery of community projects.

The Area Partnerships tried to deliver community aspirations, they did not decide policy. They brought together the community and acted as the 'eyes and ears' for local communities. They provided guidance. The benchmark for how successful they were was how many projects were delivered successfully. Each Area Partnership received a budget of £2400. The meetings were open to anyone who wished to attend.

Other Issues

The Task & Finish Group also raised the following concerns:-

- communication and advertising of meetings. This was deemed to be a significant issue and it was suggested that this be improved.
- Engagement with the community needed to be addressed – perhaps take a step back and look at how the District Council engaged with different parts of the community, ie youth.

The Committee took evidence from Yvonne Rose and John Noone (Bedale and Villages Forum); Brian Taylor (Easingwold Villages Forum); Sally Anderson (Northallerton and Villages Forum); Councillor Mrs Bridget Fortune; John Fletcher and Phil Henderson (Stokesley and Villages Forum)

Stokesley and Villages

The Task & Finish Group were informed by various representatives of the Stokesley and Villages Forum that the Partnership was extremely successful with good discussions taking place and very good relationships between the partners. The Partnership assisted in 'getting things done' and allowed others to participate and spread messages through the various contacts. Also, another good point was that there was no bureaucracy.

An induction pack had been produced in 2001 which was still up to date, a copy of which was available as part of the Groups records. It was reported that at the last AGM of the Group they had been awarded £2400 for community projects which would help lots of good successful projects. Particular thanks were given to Nicky Smith and Peter Cole for their support and guidance.

Northallerton and Villages Forum

The Task & Finish Group was advised that Northallerton had been given the Renaissance Market Town status and had received resources, support, programme management and delivery support from Hambleton District Council and Yorkshire Forward. It is well supported. The Evolution Centre came from work done around the Masterplan and involved a wide range of representatives from the Parish Councils, District Council, voluntary groups, etc.

Issues were brought to the Forum that were community issues raised by 'people'. The members wore lots of hats, bringing in ideas and taking them forward to make a reality, ie "reels on wheels" a mobile cinema – this project was started and had been successfully sustained and was now a much bigger project and was used at the Hambleton Forum.

The strength of the group helped take projects forward. The group had to be pragmatic and some projects did get dropped off the list but the group continued to keep an eye on issues.

Lots of good projects had been successfully brought to fruition, such as Chopsticks and the Town Square development.

The Task & Finish Group asked for a view on the effectiveness of the Area Forums and Area Partnerships and. Sally Anderson replied that, in her view, the Area Forums were part of the governance of the District Council. The Community Forum was a much wider non-political organisation. The Community Forum enabled co-ordination for projects, the Area Forums had not been very beneficial in this. There had also been successful projects in the surrounding villages such as Morton on Swale Village Hall; Brompton Pavilion; Osmotherley Minibus and also help to those doing Parish Plans such as Osmotherley.

The Task & Finish Group enquired as to what the future of the Group was not that there was no access to funding and was advised that the Group agreed it still had a role. They could raise funding through grants, etc and give support for projects. It was a pragmatic and visionary role – they could influence the future.

The Task & Finish Group also enquired as to whether they had been more successful because of the funding they had received and was advised that the Group had proved that you do not need money to be successful, there were other ways and means. We had had to bid for money – there was a process we had to go through for each project and had to have reasons for why we needed it.

The Task & Finish Group asked how projects were prioritised and was advised that project proposals were accepted as they stood. We can say whether the project is in line with the Community Plan principles and then with group support at the Community Forum they can apply for funding elsewhere. There has never been a pot of money, the Group had to evidence the need for funding for each project.

Bedale and Villages

John Noone commented that there was not much duplication between the Area Forums and Area Partnerships. Some worked better than others. The Delivery Team were 2nd to none, they helped raise lots of funding and offer lots of assistance. The main difference between the Area Partnerships and Area Forums was that there was no input into the Forums. In his opinion, the Area Forums either needed to change or be disbanded or be merged with the Community Forums.

Yvonne reported that Bedale had developed a Community Plan and in 2003 it became a Renaissance Market Town. The Group worked well with other forums who assisted each other with projects. Successful projects included the Heritage Partnership Scheme which received £750k funding and another £750k of match funding. The Bedale and Villages Forum existed before the Strategic Partnership and they still had a role independent of the Forum. The Area Forums did not appear to know what their function was. The Partnerships were successful because they were not constrained as a result of the democratic process.

Easingwold Villages Forum

Brian Taylor was in attendance as the Chairman was not available to attend. He paid tribute to Peter Cole, Lisa Wilson and Nicky Smith for the help and support they gave. There were representatives from various organisations involved in the Partnership such as churches, community organisations, book clubs, etc. Projects included one stop shop, community policing and safe cycle roads. Dr Snape had also attended meetings regarding the health services. In his opinion, the Easingwold Villages Forum had achieved much more than the Area Forum had.

The Group asked for the Partnerships opinions of how well represented were elected Members at those Groups.

Bedale - 2 elected Members attended; Easingwold was well supported; Stokesley was well supported and Northallerton – some interest – various attendees.

The Chairman asked whether there was a statutory duty to have Area Forums and was advised that this was not the case. Area Forums replaced the annual meeting for Town/Parish Councils and replaced the Local Plan Committees of the time. The Area Forums were meetings that were taken out to the Community and public were invited to attend. The District Council recognised that they have not been successful which was the reason for this review. It is also recognised that the Area Partnerships were working well and appeared to be very successful. The Council needed to look at how the Area Forums are operating.

Councillor Bardon commented that there was nobody in attendance to speak on behalf of Thirsk and felt that he must say something. There was a group in Thirsk, the Thirsk Regeneration Group. This group received funding and then when all the money had been spent the group stopped their meetings – it is in suspension. The Thirsk Area Forum is one of the more successful Forums but perhaps this is because there is not a successful Partnership in operation.

The Chairman asked hypothetically if the Area Forums ceased to be, would the Area Partnerships be prepared to invite elected Members to feed in as representatives from the District Council and was advised that some Members already attend and cascade information; it was also commented that if elected Members were to attend 'mob handed' it may change the operation of the meetings. The elected Members had used these meetings on occasion to inform on certain issues such as the library closures. If this was a proposal it would need discussion amongst the groups as it may affect the roles and effectiveness of these groups and the constitutions may need to change.

The Chairman wished to commend all the representatives of the various Partnerships that had attended and contributed to the discussions. They appeared to be very effective and were successful in their own right, with very little resources.

The Committee took evidence from Councillor C A Les (Chairman, Bedale Area Forum); Councillor M J Prest (Chairman, Northallerton Area Forum); Councillor Mrs M S Skilbeck (Chairman, Stokesley Area Forum); Councillor M Robson (Chairman, Thirsk Area Forum); Dave Goodwin, Director of Leisure and Health and Mick Jewitt, Director of Housing and Planning, Hambleton District Council

Stokesley Area Forum

Councillor Mrs Skilbeck informed the Task & Finish Group that she had been Chairman of the Stokesley Area Forum for 1 year. In her opinion, the Forum was not operating very well. The Forum was always looking for items to go onto the agenda. Public attendance had doubled in the last meeting, but this was due to a contentious issue regarding Anti Social Behaviour at Silver Street. Various partners had been in attendance such as the Police and even Planning Training had been held to try and encourage a greater attendance. There was no relationship with the Stokesley Rural Regeneration Group at all, except that elected Members may try to attend both. More time needed to be spent on the Forum to improve it.

Bedale Area Forum

Councillor C A Les informed the Task & Finish Group that he had been Chairman of the Bedale Area Forum since it was formed in 2008. Two meetings had to be cancelled – one because of lack of business and one because he wanted to hold the meeting as a merged meeting with the Community Group but was advised that because of this review this would be premature. Councillor Les' opinion was that this had been a mistake as it would have provided evidence on whether the two could operate together as a merged 'forum'. The Forum always had agenda items and there was always a police presence at the meetings. Also, because of the nature of the Forum, there was good representation from the County Councillors and therefore any issues that

were raised that were County issues were always dealt with or taken on board – this was seen as good public engagement. Parish Councils also put items on the agenda. There were cases of the same item appearing and recurring at each meeting and unfortunately some issues just could not be progressed.

Audiences tended to be the same at each meeting although a few new faces were appearing. Some attendees could be the same as those that had attended the Area Partnership the week before and the same items could be discussed, this was duplication and competition. Not all areas were represented at the Area Partnership but they were at the Area Forums because the District Councillors tended to be present.

Thirsk Area Forum

Councillor M S Robson informed the Task & Finish Group that he had been Chairman of the Thirsk Area Forum for the last 2/3 years, the previous Chairman was Councillor Gareth Dadd. Generally meetings were well attended with approximately 12 members of the public in attendance. Except for contentious issues, there was not generally a problem with the agenda. It may be that some issues should be dealt with by the Parish/Town Council or direct with the Ward Member at an earlier stage rather than it waiting until the Area Forum. The audience tended to be the same. The Area Forum believed it had value although accepted that some issues should be dealt with by more appropriate channels.

Northallerton Area Forum

Councillor M J Prest informed the Task & Finish Group that he had been Chairman of the Northallerton Area Forum for about 5 years. Although there was the ability to put items on the agenda, the public were not being attracted to attend the meetings, except when controversial issues featured. Community Questions had to be limited to 3 per family member due to increasing amounts of questions being submitted by one person. The audience tended to be the same with some Parishes/Parish Councillors attending regularly. The District Council was well represented by the elected Members. The biggest problem appeared to be the lack of something to do – the Forum needed a purpose – it did not seem to achieve very much. The Northallerton and Community Villages Forum had got their own projects but the members were unelected and unaccountable. There was no liaison between the two and they could work closer together for the good of the community.

Meetings of the Forum had been cancelled due to lack of business and sometimes it was questioned why the elected Members attended when the same things appeared on the agenda all the time. The public would not attend unless there was a controversial issue.

Easingwold Area Forum

In the absence of the Chairman, Councillor M Rigby informed the Task & Finish Group that he had attended a few of the different meetings and Easingwold Area Forum did not appear much different to the others. He did not believe that any meetings had to be cancelled due to lack of business. The Forum did not attract a large audience. Some issues that appeared on the agenda were difficult to progress but the Forum intervention appeared to have helped resolve the issues or helped progress them. The main difference between the Community Partnerships and the Area Forums was that there was very strong enthusiasm on behalf of the Community Partnerships to be there and achieve something.

Mick Jewitt, informed the Task & Finish Group that the views he would give were based on personal opinion. In order to look at the success and effectiveness of the Forums we have to look at the original objectives that were set in 2008 – improving community engagement; providing a basis for local delivery of services and to enable Ward Members to take a more active role in community leadership. It was recognised that community engagement was patchy and generally

experience low attendance unless there was a contentious issue but we could deliver that by having specific meetings on those issues as they arose. In his opinion, the Forums had failed to catch the public imagination and although the Town and Parish Councils were involved, village involvement was low. They may have preferred to keep the old District Parish Liaison meetings. More needed to be done to improve community engagement but this would take time. Marketing and publicity was often criticised – the agenda needed to be more interesting and challenging. There was an issue of time and how you could make them a success in line with the Council priorities - as a Council Officer they are kept ticking over but time could not be devoted to them to fulfil the original objectives.

Local delivery was key to getting people there and they would not attend unless they felt they could influence but there was no decision making at the Forums. Links were weak – there were no reports back to Cabinet generally. This could be strengthened but again it would take time. The Forums were a good idea and you could not argue against the principles but there was only a limited amount of resources available.

Dave Goodwin also informed the Task & Finish Group that the views he would give were based on personal opinion. Attendance at the Bedale and Thirsk Area Forums, which he had been Lead Officer for, tended to be made up of a core audience but big attendance was issue driven. He had held specific meetings for specific issues such as the Thirsk TIC, this had been very successful with a large turnout. The community questions worked well and the flexible approach from the Chairmen to allow questions on the night worked well for the community.

The public clearly wanted somewhere to discuss issues that were important to them regardless of who was responsible. They did not differentiate between what was District Council or County Council responsibilities. The Forum could deal with these issues fairly and at Bedale they valued the police presence and also the police valued the opportunity to attend. There was duplication, the same issues arose at the Community Groups and then were later discussed at the Area Forums. These Forums should not be about chasing money – there were other mechanisms for that. They should focus on strategic issues and not about dishing out grants. We needed to revisit the original objectives – if the view was that they would not work why perpetuate them?

Councillor Mrs M Skilbeck agreed that publicity could be improved and perhaps the agenda revitalised by highlighting issues for discussion on the posters and making them stand out to attract interest.

Other Discussion

- There was a perception that the Area Forums had the weight of the District Council behind them to get issues resolved.
- It was reiterated that issues should not be waiting to get dealt with by the Area Forum, if they were being reported through the right mechanisms they should be getting dealt with anyway.
- The Northallerton Area Forum did not have a police presence but they tended to attend the Town/Parish Council meetings. Consideration should be given to amalgamation with the Northallerton & Villages Forum, also the Area Partnerships needed a common name to avoid confusion. Revamp the Forums or say 'that's it'.
- The meetings did appear to be a talking shop – perhaps there was scope to have ad-hoc meetings when there was something to discuss. Community engagement was needed and the Council was very accessible to everybody through various means, such as electronically.
- The general feeling of the Area Forum Chairmen and Directors was that ad-hoc meetings of the Area Forums in response to significant issues could be a feasible option. It was not felt that allocating a budget to them was appropriate. If the Forums were to remain in their present

format, they would need revamping to make them more appealing for the number of attendees to increase and advertising would need to be improved significantly in order to generate more interest.

The Committee took evidence from Neil Irving, Assistant Director (Policy and Partnerships), North Yorkshire County Council

Mr Irving attended the meeting to provide information on joint Parish, District and County Council Forums. Mr Irving had submitted a briefing note which had been circulated to the Group, a copy of which is available as part of the Task & Finish Group's records.

The following points were highlighted during the discussions:-

- the meetings were not public meetings
- meetings helped educate Parishes so that they know who is responsible for what services and who they should contact if there were issues that needed to be dealt with;
- it was felt that there was more accountability at these meetings for Officers and Members to take issues on board and deal with them;
- informal approach encourages participation;
- attendance would indicate that the meetings are successful.

The Task and Finish Group were mindful to support the participation of the District Council as part of these meetings.