
Report to: Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 23 June 2016

Subject: The Future of the Area Committees

Report of: Head of Regulation & Compliance

Wards Affected: All

Is this a Key Decision? Yes

Is it included in the Forward Plan? Yes

Exempt/Confidential No

Purpose/Summary

To update members on the recent consideration of the operation of Area Committees following the reports to the three Area Committees in December 2015 and January 2016 and the comprehensive public engagement exercise that was completed during February/ March 2016.

Recommendation(s)

Cabinet is recommended to :

- 1) Consider and take account of the results of the consultation and engagement process set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- 2) Consider possible next steps as outlined in Paragraph 4 of the report

How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Objectives?

	<u>Corporate Objective</u>	<u>Positive Impact</u>	<u>Neutral Impact</u>	<u>Negative Impact</u>
1	Creating a Learning Community		x	
2	Jobs and Prosperity		x	
3	Environmental Sustainability		x	
4	Health and Well-Being		x	
5	Children and Young People		x	
6	Creating Safe Communities		x	
7	Creating Inclusive Communities		x	
8	Improving the Quality of Council Services and Strengthening Local Democracy		x	

Reasons for the Recommendation:

To facilitate further development of options regarding the future of the Area Committees

What will it cost and how will it be financed?

A) Revenue Costs

There are no direct costs arising from the content of this report. However depending upon the outcome of this report a financial evaluation of the proposed methods of engagement will need to be reported at a future date.

(B) Capital Costs

Nil

Implications:

The following implications of this proposal have been considered and where there are specific implications, these are set out below:

Legal – These are included in the report.
Human Resources - Nil
Equality
1. No Equality Implication <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Equality Implications identified and mitigated <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. Equality Implication identified and risk remains <input type="checkbox"/>

Impact on Service Delivery:

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?

The details are contained in the report and Annex 1

The Chief Finance Officer (FD4204/16) has been consulted and notes there are no direct financial implications arising from this report. It is also identified that depending upon the decisions made in respect of the report, a financial evaluation of the proposed methods of engagement will need to be reported at a future date.

The Head of Regulation and Compliance is the author of the report (LD3487/16)

Are there any other options available for consideration?

To not continue with any further consideration of the future of Area Committees

Implementation Date for the Decision

Following the expiry of the “call-in” period for the Minutes of the Cabinet

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Background Papers:

There are no background papers.

1. Background

- 1.1. Members will be aware that a report was considered by each of the three Area Committees during the December 2015 and January 2016 meeting cycles to consider the future of the Area Committees. The report can be accessed through the following link:

<http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s64283/Future%20of%20Area%20Committees%20Report%20JC%20RA%20v2.pdf>

- 1.2. Following consideration of this item by the Area Committees, the Public Engagement and Consultation Panel determined a consultation approach at its meeting on 29 January 2016, the report for which can be found through the following link:

<http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s65169/Agenda%20Item%204gArea%20Committees%20Proposal.pdf>

- 1.3. That engagement process has now concluded and the results of that process have been analysed. Attached at Appendix 1 is the consultation report dated May 2016. The consultation and engagement process took place over an 8 week period from 1 February to 31 March 2016. A wide range of methods were utilised including:

- On-line surveys
- Community events
- Street Surveys/vox pox
- Promotion through the Council's website and wider communications
- Articles in the local newspapers

- 1.4. A number of key themes, issues and questions arose during the pre-consultation dialogue and the consultation and engagement process itself. These have been captured below. Before considering the detail of the consultation, it is important to note the context of the consideration of Area Committees.

1.5. Context of consideration of Area Committees

- 1.6. Area Committees were set up in 2000 as a response by Sefton Council to the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000. Councils were obliged under the Act to replace the traditional committee structure established under the Local Government Act 1972 and have a clear split between the Executive and Regulatory functions of the Council where decisions can be made and the Overview and Scrutiny function was introduced. Councils could introduce Area Committees, and not all Councils have Area Committees.

- 1.7. The purpose of establishing Area committees is well rehearsed in the previous report considered by the Area Committees in December 2015 and January 2016.

- 1.8. When Area Committees were set up the world of communication was very different to today.

- In 2000, emails were only just beginning to be used at both work and at home,
- There were no universal social media services such as Facebook and Twitter
- The increasing use and reliance upon mobile technology which has changed rapidly from simply being a telephone to internet access through which people can email, Facebook, tweet, snapchat etc.
- Traditionally members of the public expected to access councillors through attendance at meetings, phone calls, surgeries and/or letter. Now expectations have altered and councillors are expected to engage electronically with their communities as well as the more traditional methods of engagement.

- 1.9. Analysis of the attendance of members of the public at the area committees tells us that this has declined in recent years. Many would attribute that to the relatively recent reconfiguration of the Area Committees themselves. Anecdotally staff who attend Area Committees would confirm that there are generally 2 types of attendee at Area Committees, namely the very small number of members of the public who attend Area Committees regularly (circa 6-8 members of the public for all of the Area Committees) and those that attend for a particular issue/question. The numbers can vary on this second type of attendee. There is an odd exception to this pattern of attendance when there is a significant issue of importance which will generate local interest. A recent example was the extra-ordinary meeting of the Southport Area Committee to consider the Nextdom report.
- 1.10. Work, life balance can mean for many members of the public that it is difficult to attend a Council meeting. Child care commitments, work shift patterns and lack of familiarity with the environment of a formal committee meeting can be off putting to people wishing to attend. Area Committee can assume a level of mobility to attend the committee meeting, which for the Sefton Central Area Committee needs to be a high level of mobility to accommodate the number of venues used.
- 1.11. The communication channels such as Facebook, Twitter and websites etc. offer much more extended communication reach for citizens to know what is going on within a council, how to communicate with it and to raise queries, concerns. A programme of training for councillors to optimise these channels is planned for the new municipal year. Further optimisation of the thousands of email addresses held by the council for residents is being considered as a way of contacting residents. Consideration is also being given to reactivating the citizens' E panel as a formal tool for consultation in future.
- 1.12. Vital statistics to support these areas of work include the fact that the Council has 36,000 followers on Facebook, over 12,000 followers on Twitter and over 21,000 email addresses of our residents in our library service alone.
- 1.13. Face to face contact with the Council and councillor's still exists and remains a useful way to do business. For the Council, the primary face is through its One Stop Shops which offers a wide range of service information and transactions through a well-regarded service. Co-location of services in our libraries and leisure centres has increased contact opportunities. A number of forums exist where members of the public can attend such as the Dementia Forum and Adults Forum.

- 1.14. The Public Engagement and Consultation Panel use a well-established consultation framework set out in **Appendix 2**. The Panel, recognising the limited attendance at the Area Committee meetings has infrequently used the Area Committees to effect that important engagement and consultation work.
- 1.15. Consideration of the Area Committee has resulted in consideration of wider issues affecting both the Council and councillors. The issues are:
- Communication between the Council and its citizens
 - Communication between the Councillors and their communities
 - Consultation and engagement between the Council and its citizens

2. Findings arising from the Consultation carried out in February/March 2016

- 2.1. Over 230 people and/or organisations involved themselves with the consultation and engagement process through the various channels. In combination, over 50% of participants wanted to retain the Area Committee forum, but not necessarily in the way that it currently operated or on the same geographical footprint. Anecdotally of those that responded, many were previously unaware of the existence of those Area Committees. No direct question was asked in that regard and hence it cannot be statistically verified, but it was a common observation to staff carrying out the public consultation and engagement work.
- 2.2. The details of the consultation exercise are set out in **Appendix 1** and the key findings arising from the exercise are as follows:
- a) Southport Area Committee attracts the best attendance and the public raises issues at the Area Committee.
 - b) Attendances at South Sefton and Central Sefton Area Committees have declined since the last review of the frequency and geographical base for Area Committees was conducted 3 years ago.
 - c) Police attendance at the Area Committees was beneficial but it was thought that this could be achieved through alternative means.
 - d) The highest response to keep the Area Committees came from the respondents in Southport and the highest response not to keep them was from South Sefton area.
 - e) Generally members of the public are not aware of the existence of Area Committees but there was an expressed desire to see their retention. The Committees were seen as a way for members of the public to raise issues and to engage with the Council and Councillors
 - f) If Area Committees did not exist then the preferred methods of engagement were to contact the Council directly, contact with their ward Councillors directly or MP either by telephone, email or a visit to the One Stop Shop. The answer to this question was influenced by age group of respondent, with older generations seeking more telephone and face to face contact.

The key issues mentioned in the comments of the responses can be categorised as follows:

- The character of and attendance at the three area committees
- Southport's Area Committee was created following a local referendum to have a town council.
- The ability for members of the public to ask questions of and have contact with of elected members
- What might happen to the budgets associated with the area committees
- The role of Town and Parish Councils
- Local issues to be considered by local councillors
- Police attendance and information

2.3. Attendance at the Three Area Committees

It is fair to reflect that the character and attendance of each of the three Area Committees is very different across the borough.

The Southport Area Committee has been established on its larger geographical footprint for far longer than both the Central and South Sefton Area Committees. This amongst other factors means that the forum of the Southport Area Committee operating in the way it does, is better understood and awareness of this Area Committee was higher in the local populace and overall attendance was higher.

Both Central Sefton and South Sefton Area Committees have only been established on their current geographical footprint for three years. Particularly for the Central Sefton Area Committee, it was considered that the areas that had been joined together were too geographically disparate, involved too many councillors with the combination of borough and local parish/town councillors and attracted very low attendances from members of the public.

South Sefton survey results demonstrate a willingness to relinquish the Area Committee forum, commenting at times that they were unnecessary or other opportunities could be utilised to achieve the same outcome.

Given these factual differences, a number of those responding felt that the Southport Area Committee should be given special consideration. It was considered that a one size fits all response to the future of Area Committees would not suit Southport.

2.4. Southport's Area Committee was Created Following a Local Referendum to have a Town Council.

Much has been made of the previous referendum held in the Southport area which offered three options. Those three options were to retain the existing model of 3 Area Committees in the Southport area, to merge the three Area Committees or to opt for a Town Council. Given the options available of no change or a change that will levy extra tax on individuals, it is unsurprising that the public opted for change but with no direct cost implications i.e. merge the three area committees. It is unusual for the geographical footprint of an area committee to be established through these means.

From the historical reports reviewed which established the referendum process, it can be seen that this referendum for Southport was not done in isolation and that the

referendum was conducted for a number of reasons, including whether to establish or not as the case may be, town or parish councils.

To establish and to disestablish an area committee need not be legally done by way of referendum in accordance with the local government review procedures that were in place in 2003 or indeed that exist to date.

Members of Cabinet will note that a subsequent report was asked for and supplied to the Southport Area Committee to detail the current legal process to establish a town or parish Council. Details of this report can be found at:

<http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s66282/0014-Report%20Area%20Committee%20re%20parish.pdf>

This report outlines the main ways in which a review can be held to form, merge or disestablish a town or parish council. Since this is not what is in question re the future of Area Committees, it is not considered that the same route need be utilised to change, merge or disestablish an Area Committee.

2.5. The ability for members of the public to ask questions of and have contact with of elected members

Accessibility to members and the ability to ask questions either through formal or informal channels has been prominent in the responses that have been submitted and has been expressed in a variety of ways. For example some have expressed frustration with the rules of the Area Committee and feel that they cannot participate at key parts of the meeting/debate. Others have felt that this is their only chance to have contact with local councillors and to see them in action within their locality.

Some respondents have asked for arrangements about councillors' availability to be more widely available such as surgery times etc. Others have said that the Area Committees are the only chance for local councillors to have any say over local issues. There is a perception by some respondents that there is a lack of interest/engagement in other/northerly parts of the borough by Sefton's leadership who are based in the South of the borough.

What is clear and obvious going forward is how the Council interacts with its citizens, how often, what channel(s) it uses and what good/modern practice of council to citizen communication looks like needs to be appraised, understood and adopted where possible.

The process of consultation and engagement on the subject of Area Committees seems to have become the focal point for this conversation and it is the wider issue that needs to perhaps be determined. This would cover the less formal channels of communication between a Council and its citizens.

In hand with that, a review of citizen interactions through the formal business of the Council should also be considered. This would be a constitutional review of methods of interaction such as, petitions, opportunity for members of the public to attend meetings and ask questions etc. Consideration could be given to other Council's means and modes in this regard.

In both of these instances, optimum advantage should be taken of electronic means but not exclusively and not so as to 'disenfranchise' sectors of the borough's communities.

2.6. What might happen to the budgets associated with the area committees?

Some concern was expressed by respondents about the management of the budgets if Area Committees were to cease.

As previously stated, it is not a legal requirement for Councils to have Area Committees. Therefore there are tried and tested methods available through other Council's as to how local ward councillors are allocated money and how expenditure is agreed between in those local ward councillors.

Examples from elsewhere are web pages linked to the Councillors details to say how much money is available in the locality that they represent, what it has been spent on in the past, how applications for the money can be made, how they are approved and what the criteria might be.

Some Councils have it that each councillor has a set amount of money and it is a matter for the Councillors as to whether they combine their money to spend it on an issue within their locality.

Any such expenditure is normally approved by Head of Communities (or some such similar post holder) in conjunction with Finance officers. Such approval is given so as to ensure that the criteria are being adhered to and that no long term commitment is being entered into which at a future date the Council would be expected to honour.

In other words Area Committees do not and have not existed so as to approve local expenditure by ward councillors. No reductions would be made to the allocation of funding as a result of this report.

2.7. The role of Town and Parish Councils

About 30% of the population of Sefton enjoys an additional level of representation and bureaucracy through a Parish or Town Council. These bodies were quite rightly vocal throughout the consultation and engagement process. There was a degree of similarity in some of the responses in that many felt that a closer connection should be had between the Borough Council and their Parish Council. Many referred to the Parish Charter in this regard and did not feel that it was given due regard or sufficient publicity amongst both borough councillors and officers of the council.

The Charter can be found at

https://www.sefton.gov.uk/media/519242/parish_and_town_council_charter.pdf

Some of the respondents offered to co-ordinate meetings with Borough councillors in their locality and some thought that the previous structure of more geographically centred meetings was a better approach that should be reviewed and offered again.

It would seem in these areas particularly that there is a strong framework for meetings to take place outside of the Area Committee structure that could largely achieve the same aims. Such an approach could have the added benefit of achieving more of the aims and ways of working as set out in the Parish Charter.

2.8. Local issues to be considered by local councillors

The question of geography was a common issue across many of the respondents. The geography of the Central and South Sefton Area Committees seemed particularly troublesome; did not seem to have settled down over the three year period and had left members of the Committees feeling that the Committee was too large, unwieldy and in some instances undemocratic.

In the Central Sefton Area Committee area, responses on this issue seemed, perhaps due to the passage of time since the establishment of the Committee, to have been either overcome or it was never an issue at all.

In the Central Area Committee area, it was felt that the larger footprint of the committee had led to a significant reduction in attendance of members of the public at the meetings as the agenda's reflecting the geography were too cumbersome or that the committee had become too intimidating to attend. Due to the parish councils in this location, the number of Borough and Parish Councillors attending this meeting if all attended is 38.

2.9. Police attendance and information

The police interact with the Council through a number of forums including Area Partnership and Operational Groups. In addition the police regularly attend parish council meetings.

Like any other organisation the police also offers communication for residents, councillors and council officers alike, through:

1. Meetings
2. Telephone calls
3. Emails and letters
4. The police website
5. Police and public contact
6. MerseyNow
7. Twitter
8. Newsletters
9. Have Your Say quarterly meetings
10. Homewatch and Residents groups.
11. Drop in Surgeries

Attendance at all of these forums inevitably means that there is some duplication for the police. It is also fair to say that by the making the Area Committees larger, it has meant that police colleagues can have several Inspectors at an Area Committee meeting at any one time, which can be a drain on their resources.

Much of the information conveyed by the Inspectors at the meeting can be found on the

<https://www.police.uk/merseyside/> website which allows all to access to crime data about a particular locality. This data is not as up to date as the data presented at the Area Committee but is nonetheless useful.

3. Outstanding Issues

Looking at the issues identified in the paragraphs above it seems important to consider these issues in turn:

- Communication between the Council and its citizens
- Communication between the Councillors and their communities
- Consultation and engagement between the Council and its citizens
- Communication between Councillors, partners and citizens

Communication between the Council and its citizens

The opportunities are as follows:

1. Face to face through appointments, meetings, transactional and information points such as libraries and leisure centres
2. Emails and letters
3. Facebook and Twitter
4. Website
5. Numerous informal opportunities as many of the Council's officers are in fact its citizens.

Communication between the Councillors and their communities

The opportunities are as follows:

1. Face to face through appointments, meetings and surgeries
2. Emails and letters
3. A number of councillors actively use either or both Facebook, and Twitter.
4. Numerous informal opportunities where councillors are involved in ward work, charity work, governor or other trust positions etc.

Consultation and engagement between the Council and its citizens

The Council adopted a Public Engagement and Consultation Framework in 2009, which has been used to consult on major and minor issues since. The Panel ensures that the identified standards are adhered to. The Framework also has been extended to a number of partner organisations and they are detailed in paragraph 1 of the document contained in Appendix 2.

Notably the Area Committees have not regularly formed part of the toolbox used for public engagement and consultation.

The Council needs to be flexible in the way that it consults with its communities in the future. This is needed more and more given the journey of reductions that is going to be required in the public sector in the future.

Sometimes this public consultation and engagement will need to be very subject based such as the Carers strategy was recently, or it might need to be very locality based such as the closure of a school. An Area Committee footprint might be the very footprint that is needed to deliver a face to face consultation opportunity – or it might not be.

Communication between Councillors, partners and citizens

The main forum other than Area Committees are the Operational Groups and the Area Partnership Boards. These fora are not universally available across the Borough. This network is supplemented by the existence of the parish and town councils.

Notably a number of the Borough councillors are now twin hatted councillors in that they are also parish/town councillors. This can serve to strengthen the connection between borough and those entities.

At the area partnership boards and the operational groups the relevant partners are present to consider issues of concern in a particular locality, with a view to allocating resources appropriately and to avoid duplication/overlap where necessary.

Operational groups currently operate in Southport and Litherland and Ford. Other areas have stopped/ did not start operational groups. The Operational groups were set up when Community Safety Partnerships were disbanded. The groups work on agreed actions, usually agreed in the meeting, and in line with Area partnership priorities and Area committee requests. The Chair of the Operational group is usually the Chair of the Area Committee.

The role of the Neighbourhoods department within Area Committees has changed since their introduction in 2000. Initially Neighbourhoods officers would attend the Area Committee meeting, where discussions around ward issues and Ward funds were held, and these discussions were then acted upon by the officer. Over time the Neighbourhoods team has evolved, there is a close relationship with ward councillors and issues are discussed daily, and Ward funds are allocated without having to be presented at the Area Committee first. The Area Coordinator compiles a Budget Monitoring and Area Committee update report for the Committee Meeting and also supports the Clerk of the committee in obtaining responses to questions posed in the public forum section of the meeting.

In other words the Area Co-ordinator does not wait for work to be generated by the Area Committee but actively ensures matters are progressed within the relevant locality.

As a result, the Area Committee receives an Area Management update and a budget report.

Observations about the Area Committees

What is clear from the work done to date is that:

- a. Residents can ask questions at an Area Committee meeting provided they do so in advance but cannot participate in any debates.
- b. Police reports can be heard at the meetings
- c. Local Councillors are visible to those attending the meetings and seen to be in action discussing operational matters of local importance
- d. Ward related issues are considered at the meetings but it is not focussed on one or 2 wards.
- e. The decisions that the Area Committees make can be considered and determined in other forums as detailed in the report referred to in paragraph 1.1 above.
- f. An analysis of agenda items shows that beyond the items that constitutionally need to be referred to the Area committee that agenda are quite varied. They are varied to the extent that reports are commissioned from officers to advise and inform on various matters of local interest, some of which could be resolved without the need for a report through proactive ward work with local councillors and officers.
- g. The original purpose of area committees was to provide a forum of consultation to take place. An objective analysis on any level can only say that this is partially effective at this time due to the level of public engagement with the committees per se.
- h. A further purpose of the Area Committees was to provide the opportunity for members to make decisions on environmental, transport and planning matters. On paper this sounds like a valid and important forum. A review of the terms of reference for and the work of the Area Committee does not fully support this statement. With respect to environmental matters, these can and are considered in other forums such as Overview and Scrutiny and the Licensing and Regulatory Committee. Environmental concerns such as grot spots, litter etc. could be dealt with outside the committee through councillor/officer interaction or through public/officer or business/officer interaction and are often considered on the Operational Groups or through the work of the Area Co-ordinators.

Planning matters re applications and enforcement are already considered through the formal channel of the planning committee and planning policy is referred to Council to for consideration. These are not and cannot legally be determined by the Area Committee and by history they have not.

The three Area Committees have historically been a channel through which consultation has taken place, but due to attendance numbers are not currently used in this way. Finally the mention of transport issues seems to have centrally become a matter for considering passing comments on the making of traffic regulation orders. Whilst the Area Committee is again an important consultation step, this is not one that could not be achieved through other means.

A number of other ways of working were cited in the original report referred to in paragraph 1.1 above. Any one of those ways working could be adapted to suit the needs of Sefton's communities, councillors and the Council itself so as to achieve the important aspect of democratic participation in Council business both by members of council and by members of the public. How that democratic principle manifests itself in Sefton will need to be considered as part of the next steps identified below.

Whilst the ambition of the review of the Area Committee has never been about saving money, even in these difficult times, consideration has been given to the possibility of reducing the amount of officer time spent attending the meetings and/or writing preparing reports given the plethora of other ways of working and communicating.

What is clear is that the way that the Area Co-ordinators work, in daily contact with councillors, partners etc. would not change. Area Co-ordinators currently prepare budget reports for the Area Committees to consider. This could be reported in other ways to councillors, communities and generally.

4. Possible Next Steps

- i. Review modern methods of engagement between councils and their communities and councillors and their communities
- ii. Review the Council constitution with a view to ensuring that methods for citizens to formally engage with its Council are made as simple and effective as possible through petitions, questions attendance at meetings etc.
- iii. Review ways of communicating information about councillors' expenditure in their wards and associated decision making processes.
- iv. Consider whether a system of escalation for the public where a councillor cannot be contacted, does not respond to contact or does not make themselves available for surgeries etc. can be developed.
- v. Develop a programme of communication training for members emphasising the social media aspects of modern communication.
- vi. Develop an e-panel for consultation
- vii. Review links between council websites and partner's websites, tweets Facebook etc. to make sure links are optimised and up to date.
- viii. Consider whether further examination of Area Committees could be undertaken by way of a Scrutiny Review.