

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW COMMITTEE

24 September 2019

Agenda Item 6

Area Committees Working Group - Update

Report author: Bob Pullen – Policy and Performance Officer

Recommendations

That the Committee:

- (i) **notes** the consideration already undertaken by the Area Committees Working Group on the possible introduction of area committees

1 Purpose of report and executive summary

- 1.1 Policy Development and Review Committee established a working group to take forward consideration of whether the Council should introduce area committees as part of the constitutional review. This report updates the Committee on what the working group has considered to date.

2 Background

- 2.1 Improving public engagement in council decision-making is a major part of the constitutional review. At the last Policy Development and Review Committee a paper was presented which stimulated a discussion around the introduction of area committees.
- 2.2 Cabinet asked the Committee to investigate the reasons Swale might want to introduce area committees, what their purpose would be and what areas they would cover. The Committee resolved to establish a working group, consisting of Committee members and co-optees, to consider this further.

3 Discussion

- 3.1 The first meeting of the working group was held on 3 September and the members are as follows:

Councillor Benjamin Martin (Group Coordinator)
Councillor Mike Dendor
Councillor Alastair Gould
Councillor Ken Ingleton
Councillor Ken Rowles (sent apologies)
Councillor Julian Saunders.

- 3.2 The group considered what role area committees should have and what it was they were being established to achieve.

- 3.3 The group considered the questions in the proposed public consultation on area committees and suggested various changes which had been incorporated into the version which was published on 4 September with a deadline for responses by 2 November. The survey questions are at Appendix I.
- 3.4 The group discussed whether area committees should have delegated powers and resources in order to be able to make a difference on the ground. It was suggested that funding for public realm projects such as those envisaged for the Special Projects Fund could potentially be agreed by Area Committees. The prospect of available resources for local projects should also serve to boost interest, engagement and attendance. It was important to remember that whatever membership areas committee had, it would still be the responsibility of the Borough Council to take decisions on the allocation of its own resources.
- 3.5 The working group considered what other matters area committees might cover. It was noted that individual planning applications would not be suitable for discussion because of issues around predetermination and the likely frequency of meetings would not correspond. Spatial planning was also discussed and this would probably sit more appropriately with an area committee system.
- 3.6 It was noted that area committees could form a useful role in enabling the gathering of views for areas that were unparished.
- 3.7 The group also considered how many area committees there might be and which area should be covered by each committee. The two possible models put forward in the public consultation are:
- a three committee model with the wards based around the town centres and surrounding rural hinterland for Faversham, Sheppey and Sittingbourne; and
 - a four committee model, with the Faversham and Sheppey areas defined as above, but with two committees covering Sittingbourne, one urban and one rural.
- 3.8 One alternative to this, to reflect that the urban areas within Sittingbourne were unparished, would be to create a sub-committee for the Sittingbourne unparished wards under a main Sittingbourne area committee in the three committee model. However, it was noted that this might create disparity between a Sheppey area committee as some parts of the Queenborough and Halfway ward were unparished. The group also discussed the importance of the relationship between area committees and parish and town councils.
- 3.9 In terms of public participation and attendance, it was agreed it was important to provide the impetus for people to want to attend, and for all those who wanted to participate to be able to do so. In that respect, it would be important to adapt the format of the committees to provide a meeting in which the public felt comfortable to speak, while still following the legislative requirements under which all council committees operate.

- 3.10 In terms of frequency of meetings, the group felt that two or three per year would be a good starting point.
- 3.11 The groups initial considerations will need to take into account responses to the public consultation which closes on 2 November. A summary of initial responses to the consultation will be tabled at the Committee for members' consideration.
- 3.12 The working group is scheduled to meet again on Tuesday 8 October.

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 It is recommended that the Committee notes the consideration already undertaken by the Area Committees Working Group on the possible introduction of area committees.

5 Appendices and background papers

Appendix I: Public consultation survey on area committees

6 Officer contacts

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