

Council Meeting	
Meeting Date	21 June 2023
Report Title	Area Committees Achievements Report
EMT Lead	Larissa Reed, Chief Executive
Head of Service	Philip Sutcliffe, Communications & Policy Manager
Lead Officer	Janet Dart, Policy & Engagement Officer
Classification	Open
Recommendations	To note the report

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 To provide Councillors with a summary of the achievements of the four Area Committees since they were implemented in September 2020.

2 Background

- 2.1 One of the objectives of the administration, which was formed at Swale Borough Council (SBC) following the 2019 local elections, was to diffuse power among Members and improve public engagement in decision-making. The administration put in place arrangements to establish Area Committees in Swale in order to help meet this objective.
- 2.2 Membership includes all ward Members in the area and the Committees' boundaries are aligned with those of the wards it covers. Substitute Members are not permitted on Area Committees and only those councillors who are Members of SBC are able to take decisions.
- 2.3 However, public attendance and participation in the Area Committees is an important feature of them. The Council have incorporated provisions in the Constitution for there to be a session for members of the public or local organisations, including Parish and Town Councils, to propose items for future agendas for consideration by the Committees to ask relevant questions and make relevant comments to the Committee.
- 2.4 The purpose of the Area Committees is to enhance the quality of life and of Council services in the relevant area and to bring local insight to bear in Council decision-making. Their terms of reference are to:
- develop a work programme to enhance core services within the area and take a report to Council on an annual basis to provide an update on progress;
 - agree spending decisions in relation to specific funding allocated to Members of the Area Committee;

- provide area intelligence to the Policy and Resources Committee and Heads of Service, and assist with policy development on relevant matters; and
 - make recommendations to Full Council, Policy and Resources Committee or any Service Committee on issues in the Committee's area and respond to any other specific matter referred to it by Full Council, a Committee or a senior Council officer.
- 2.5 The first round of Area Committees took place in September 2020 and due to the Coronavirus pandemic legislation, the meetings took place remotely via Skype. This continued until restrictions were relaxed and the September 2021 round of meetings were the first to take place face-to-face in community/village halls. As remote attendance had proved to be popular with members of the public and Parish/Town Councils, a remote conference call device was purchased so that hybrid meetings could take place in external venues. This has been very effective and allows for wider engagement with people across the Borough, regardless of their accessibility needs, giving them the choice to participate either in person or remotely.
- 2.6 As mentioned in paragraph 2.4, each Area Committee was allocated funding which equated to each member receiving an identical amount. This was established in each Annual Council budget and to be allocated to projects in consultation and agreement with the Area Committee at large. When allocations were made during the first year 2020/21, there were some occasions where some Area Committee Members were not able to vote on funding decisions as they had declared an interest in one or more applications. Following this, an Area Committee Review Working Group was established which put together a recommended process to avoid the need for members to recuse themselves from voting. This process is set out in Appendix I. Eastern, Sittingbourne and Sheppey Area Committees decided to adopt this process, but Western Area Committee found it was not necessary for their approach to allocating funding.
- 2.7 Before each funding scheme was launched, the Area Committees set work programmes where priorities were agreed on how funding should be allocated each year. The majority focussed on schemes that improved the appearance, environment and facilities of the areas along with contributing to Swale's strategic priorities. As local needs became apparent these priorities were refined to take into account the 'cost-of-living crisis' and how residents could be supported. Each Area Committee could support interventions that were most appropriate to the residents in their area. They were also able to bring forward planned projects within their areas by funding them so that residents could benefit from them sooner. Some examples are improvements to closed church yards, conservation area reviews and replacing street lighting.
- 2.8 A total of £534,000.00 was allocated by the four Area Committees over the period September 2020 to May 2023 to a wide variety of projects overseen by both external organisations and internally led projects managed by SBC. Appendix II lists all allocations made over the three years.

- 2.9 As part of the budget setting process for 2023/24, Members agreed at the Full Council Meeting in February 2023 measures to address the budget gap. This has resulted in funds no longer being available to allocate to the four Area Committees. Officers will work with Chairs and the new administration to develop a new approach to achieving Area Committee priorities without funding and where necessary amend the Terms of Reference in the SBC Constitution.

3 Achievements

- 3.1 The Area Committees quickly established themselves as a mechanism for residents, Parish/Town Councils and community groups to bring matters to the attention of their Borough Councillors. Regular updates have been given about ongoing projects and residents, Parish/Town Councils have been consulted on proposals within their area. Partner organisations such as Kent County Council (KCC), the Police and Southern Water, have attended meetings to discuss ongoing issues in the areas and also to consult on proposals they are considering.
- 3.2 Many of the Area Committee's achievements so far have been as a result of Members, Parish/Town Councils and members of the public identifying issues within the area which needed escalating, with a view to resolving, either with SBC or partner organisations. Some examples of these are listed below:

Eastern Area Committee

- 3.3 Highlighting the importance of defibrillators in public places being maintained and registered on relevant databases.
- 3.4 Specific anti-social behaviour problems were brought to the attention of the Police and the SBC Community Safety Unit to be monitored with a view to determining what wider action could be taken.
- 3.5 Tackling the increasing incidence of flooding at Faversham Recreation Ground by involving the local MP Helen Whately who set up meetings with relevant agencies to identify an action plan. The Area Committee also liaised with KCC, Southern Water and officers at SBC to ensure that plans were put in place to resolve this issue. Work is still continuing and regularly reported back to the Area Committee.
- 3.6 The problems resulting from a change in the KCC travel provider for pupils with special educational needs were raised with the KCC Cabinet Member.
- 3.7 The lengthy waiting lists for families and children awaiting diagnosis for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism was raised with the KCC Cabinet Member.

Sheppey Area Committee

- 3.8 The issue of lack of coach parking on the Isle of Sheppey was raised and taken to the Community Committee where a three-year trial for chargeable coach parking in Minster was agreed.
- 3.9 The condition of the Queenborough Guildhall was brought to the attention of the Extraordinary Regeneration & Property Committee. A condition survey was recommended and carried out.
- 3.10 A group of horse owners requested the horse-riding ring at Scrapsgate Field, Minster be brought back into use. This matter was considered by the Environment Committee and it was agreed that regular grass cutting for an informal horse-riding area on Scrapsgate Field, along with reducing maintenance elsewhere on the site would take place. The success will be reviewed after a year.
- 3.11 Problems residents were having with parking in Trinity Road were resolved after they were raised at an Area Committee meeting.
- 3.12 The state of Blue Town was raised and the issues were addressed by the relevant SBC teams.
- 3.13 A site meeting with SBC, the Parish Council and the Environment Committee was arranged to look into flooding issues at Warden. Actions were agreed to clear the channel next to the village hall of overgrowth.

Sittingbourne Area Committee

- 3.14 Improvements to lighting in the Milton Regis town are being investigated.
- 3.15 Actions were put in place to brighten up the Roman Square and square opposite Swale House.
- 3.16 Safety concerns about ponds in Swale were raised with the Kent Fire and Rescue Service which have been escalated to their Education/Safety team to see what education programmes can be put in place in schools.
- 3.17 Residents raised an ongoing issue of vandalism taking place in the alleyway to the rear of their houses. SBC are continuing to work towards a Public Space protection Order to gate the alleyway.
- 3.18 Potential improvements to bus services in Sittingbourne are regularly discussed.
- 3.19 Difficulties connected to engagement with the Police were raised due to the Sittingbourne area being unparished. The Community Committee appointed two Members to sit on the Swale Community Safety Partnership, both are members of Sittingbourne Area Committee and can raise strategic issues through that mechanism.

3.20 Problems with e-scooters were highlighted and reported to the Police.

Western Area Committee

3.21 The increased incidence of flooding in rural areas due to changing weather patterns was raised and subsequently discussed by the Environment Committee. The Chair of the Environment Committee wrote to the Government to ask that a funding package be provided to deal with the issue.

3.22 The impact on surrounding roads/villages due to the improvement works at the Stockbury roundabout (M2 Junction 5) was raised. The Chair gathered details about the impact before writing to KCC, the Police and Highways England.

3.23 A resident raised an issue about reduced funding for bus services and how this impacted residents living in villages. The Chair of the Western Area Committee wrote to the KCC Cabinet member for Highways and Transport who replied to explain the financial situation following budget cuts and to advise that funding has been made available to support Parish Councils and other Community groups if they want to find local solutions to transport needs in their area.

3.24 Following a matter raised by a Member, the Chair of the Western Area Committee wrote letters to Medway Council and KCC highlighting the implications of implementing the proposal to prohibit HGVs on the A2. Medway Council responded to say they would take the Committee's comments into account and KCC responded clarifying their position.

3.25 A Member raised concerns about the run-down state of the Western Area, highlighting footpaths, litter in hedgerows and road signs as particular issues. The issues were escalated to the partner organisations and SBC teams responsible who took action to resolve the issues.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

4.1 As this report is for noting there are no alternative options to be considered.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

5.1 The four Area Committee Chairs were consulted when preparing this report.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The achievements of the Area Committees support the Corporate Plan priority “ <i>Renewing local democracy and making the Council fit for the future</i> ”.
Financial, Resource and Property	This report is for noting but the funding awarded to the Area Committees since 2020 has been allocated and spent in line with the Terms of Reference as set out in paragraph 2.5.5 of the Constitution.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	None identified at this stage.
Crime and Disorder	None identified at this stage.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	None identified at this stage.
Health and Wellbeing	None identified at this stage.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified at this stage.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None identified at this stage.
Equality and Diversity	The implementation of hybrid meetings held in community venues ensures that people with varying needs are able to attend and participate in a way that is most suitable for them.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified at this stage.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Area Committees funding process
- Appendix II: Area Committees funding allocations 2020-2023

8 Background Papers

There are no background papers.