
Community Forums

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	21 September 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Tony Vickers
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	13 September 2023
Report Author:	Sarah Clarke
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4427

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The Council is committed to proactively engaging with the communities that we serve to ensure the best outcomes for all. The Council therefore intends to establish Community Forums, where residents and others will be invited to participate in discussions with Members and senior officers at in-person meetings.
- 1.2 The Portfolio Holder for Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity has indicated that meetings of the Environment Advisory Group be more open. This report sets out proposals for an Environment Action Group (EAG) Open Forum that seek to facilitate this proposal.
- 1.3 This report sets out the considerations that will be relevant to the operation of Community Forums, and seeks views regarding the same. The potential resource implications are also highlighted.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that Executive note the establishment of Community Forums on the basis of the following operating model:
 - (a) Community Forums will take place as and when the need arises, but at least quarterly
 - (b) These will be attended by a Member of the Executive
 - (c) The Chief Executive or relevant Executive Director will attend and be supported by the relevant Service Director or senior manager depending on discussion topics
 - (d) These meetings should take place at various locations across the district on a roving basis with invitees attending in person, but must have the ability to be operated in a hybrid format

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- (e) Topics for discussion will relate to matters of interest to communities in all or part of the district, which must be approved by the Leader
 - (f) A Community Forum Webpage will be developed to promote the meetings and to provide feedback and updates on items discussed at meetings
- 2.2 Executive are asked to note the Community Forum Terms of Reference, produced at Appendix B.
- 2.3 Executive are also asked to note the EAG Open Forum Terms of Reference, which can be found at Appendix C.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	<u>Community Forum:</u> If meetings take place in locations across the district, fees may be incurred for venue hire. Details will need to be considered, but it is hoped that any such costs would be limited.
Human Resource:	<u>Community Forum:</u> There is no existing resource to support Community Forums and the impact of these on existing resource will need to be monitored. In addition to the administrative support required, senior officers will need to support this in advance of, during, and following meetings to ensure that any actions are followed up. <u>EAG Open Forum:</u> This proposal will result in additional responsibilities for officers to support these meetings. There will be additional work for both Democratic Services in the administration of the meetings, and for the Environment Team who will need to consider and respond to proposals that are brought forward by interest groups.
Legal:	There is no legal duty to hold Community Forums or the EAG.
Risk Management:	None
Property:	None
Policy:	This proposal aligns with the Council's commitment to engage with and listen to our communities.

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	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		
Environmental Impact:		X		
Health Impact:		X		
ICT Impact:		X		
Digital Services Impact:	X			Delivering the meetings in a hybrid format will enable more people within the community to access the same.
Council Strategy Priorities:		X		
Core Business:		X		
Data Impact:		X		

Consultation and Engagement:	This proposal will result in enhanced engagement with our communities.
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4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 Following the successful Community Forum event held on the 17th August, this reports sets out details for the future operation of Community Forums. In summary, it is proposed:
- (a) Community Forums will take place as required, but at least on a quarterly basis
 - (b) These will be chaired by a Member of the Executive
 - (c) The Chief Executive or Executive Director will attend and be supported by the relevant Service Director depending on discussion topics
 - (d) These meetings should take place at locations in the communities with people invited to attend in person, but also using a hybrid format
 - (e) Topics will relate to matters of interest to communities in the district
 - (f) A Community Forum blog will be developed to promote the meetings and to provide feedback and updates on items discussed at meetings
- 4.2 The Executive have expressed a desire to engage with our communities in this manner, and Community Forums will therefore be established as detailed in this report.
- 4.3 A review will be undertaken 12 months after the first meeting, to review the effectiveness of the operating model.
- 4.4 The Portfolio Holder for Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity has indicated that meetings of the Environment Advisory Group should be more open, by inviting relevant interest groups to give presentations and participate in debate on relevant items.
- 4.5 It has been suggested that this should take place up to 6 times per annum, and the meeting will enable information and expertise to be effectively shared by both the Council and interested parties for the benefit of our communities.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 The Administration committed to the establishment of Community Forums, and to opening advisory groups to public scrutiny, and this report sets out details of how they will do so.

Background

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- 5.2 Although there is no legal obligation for the Council to operate Community Forums, communication and engagement with the community is an essential element of ensuring that the Council is operating effectively. The Local Government Association (LGA) undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge of the Council in 2019, and among its recommendations noted that the Council needed to improve its communication and engagement with residents. Whilst significant improvements have been made in this regard, particularly during Covid, it is considered that further opportunities for improvement exist.
- 5.3 The Council previously operated Community Forums, which were originally aligned to the same geographical areas as the then (four) area planning committees, with a fifth Area Forum introduced in 2004.
- 5.4 Attendance at those meetings by residents was variable, ranging from a few individuals up to 60 and a cross party Task Group set up in 2008, made a recommendation to Council, which was approved, to discontinue the Area Forums.
- 5.5 The consultation which took place prior to that recommendation being adopted, was largely supportive of Area Forums continuing.
- 5.6 The following issues were some of the issues identified by the consultation:
- (a) Only one or two items of interest on each agenda
 - (b) Format of meetings too formal
 - (c) Attendance low due to poor publicity
 - (d) Overloaded agendas with long reports
 - (e) Clarity needed on the purpose and powers of Area Forums
- 5.7 Some of the suggested improvements included:
- (a) Helpful to enable members of the public to have their say
 - (b) Helpful mechanism by which the Council can receive feedback
 - (c) Each forum should have a theme
 - (d) Forums could relate to a topic of concern / interest
 - (e) Forums should take place in the communities
- 5.8 As a result of Covid, West Berkshire Council made changes to the manner in which it operated public meetings for decision making bodies, moving initially to on-line Member meetings, to a hybrid style which remains in operation now. Although decision makers must physically attend meetings as required by law, hybrid meetings enable other participants to attend remotely. This gives those individuals greater flexibility to be 'present' for their item of interest only.

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- 5.9 The level of engagement with the Council's democratic processes was significantly enhanced by the ability to enable public participation remotely. All public meetings now continue to be live streamed, and recordings of the meetings are made available after the event. Enabling interested parties to attend remotely has improved the accessibility of meetings, and has also delivered environmental benefits, as people are no longer required to physically travel to meetings in order to participate.
- 5.10 It is considered that the feedback provided in the surveys undertaken regarding the previous Area Forums, provides helpful information regarding what an effective Community Forum may look like. For example, these could be organised by reference to a community of interest or theme, rather than as a geographically linked community as was the case historically. The digital technology that we now possess will enable us to travel to our communities to hold Community Forums, and to facilitate remote participation at the same time.
- 5.11 It is proposed that each Community Forum have a theme or limited number of themes for discussion. These may be given times on the agenda, to enable people to attend for items of interest to them. Officers could give a short presentation, followed by questions from those in attendance in person or remotely.
- 5.12 The early sessions could be used to obtain feedback from residents and other participants regarding themes or topics for consideration at future meetings. Discussion topics could also be selected by a combination of means: i.e. survey data, feedback, voting on the night for the next session etc.
- 5.13 The Council will promote the launch of the new Community Forums and specific events, via the Councils Newsletters, and via its social media channels. This will help to raise awareness and interest. Community Forums will also be promoted via the Council's website.
- 5.14 The Council held its first Community Forum on the 23rd August 2023, on the subject of proposed sports provision at Faraday Road. That event demonstrated the benefits of Community Forums, and provided a platform for many voices and opinions to be heard. This has also enabled the community to inform the Council of their aspirations for the future use of the Faraday Road facility.

EAG Open Forum

- 5.15 As a result of discussions with the Portfolio Holder for Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity, a draft Terms of Reference for meetings of an EAG Open Forum have been developed, and these are attached at Appendix C.
- 5.16 The proposal put forward is that relevant interest groups be invited to participate in such meetings. Although members of the public will not be invited to attend these meetings, the proposal is to record the meetings, and for the recordings to be made available for the public to view which will enable more effective scrutiny of the business of the advisory group to take place.
- 5.17 It is considered that the EAG provides an important forum in which the Portfolio Holder can discuss the development or progress of sensitive policy or projects with other Members of West Berkshire Council. It is not therefore proposed that this body should

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cease to operate. It is proposed that EAG will therefore meet immediately before the EAG Open Forum. This will enable any confidential updates and discussions to take place, prior to the Open Forum.

5.18 The first EAG Open Forum was operated very successfully on 31st July, and a recording of that meeting has been published.

Proposals

5.19 It is proposed that the new Community Forums be noted.

5.20 It is also proposed that the operation of the EAG Open Forum be noted.

5.21 It is recommended that the operation of these Forums be reviewed after the first year.

6 Other options considered

6.1 A review of similar activities in other authorities was undertaken, and details of the terms of reference for those bodies is included at Appendix D.

6.2 The Council could do nothing, and continue to operate as it is now. This is not recommended for the reasons detailed in the report.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The Community Forum and the EAG Open Forum will strengthen community engagement and help to ensure that the Council operates effectively, working with the communities it serves.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Review of Area Forums – Report to Council 23/09/2008

8.2 Appendix B – Terms of Reference – Community Forums

8.3 Appendix C – Terms of Reference – EAG Open Forum

8.4 Appendix D – Open Forum – Other examples

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: No:

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval

Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council

Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position

Community Forums

Considered or reviewed by Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees,
Task Groups within preceding six months

Item is Urgent Key Decision

Report is to note only

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