

Title of Report:	Review of Area Forums	Item 11
Report to be considered by:	Council	
Date of Meeting:	23 September 2008	
Forward Plan Ref:	C1642	

Purpose of Report:

To provide feedback on the consultation into the review of Area Forums and to consider the recommendations of the Area Forum Task Group.

Recommended Action:

That Council be requested to adopt the recommendation of the Area Forum Task Group set out below.

The Task Group recommended that:

- (a) District Parish Conferences to be enhanced and three or four meetings to be held per annum at different localities across the District and where appropriate arrangements be made for localised discussions to take place.
- (b) A new Public Engagement Model based on Members (both parties) and Officers attending and having a high profile presence at five events / locations a year to be introduced.
- (c) Individual Town and Parish Councils or groups be requested to consider whether they would wish to enhance their own public engagement model should they consider this to be relevant or appropriate.
- (d) In relation to participatory budgeting, further work be undertaken into the feasibility of introducing a locality based service delivery model to those areas in line with Corporate Priorities across the District.
- (e) Subject to the results of (d), the Executive be asked to review the existing Capital Grant system to enable resources to be directed in line with Corporate Priorities.
- (f) Further work be undertaken in relation to establishing Virtual Forums.
- (g) Any new engagement model introduced be subject to a review in eighteen months time.

- (h) **That Policy and Communication staff introduce appropriate measures to manage outstanding Area Forum actions and that Area Forums, in their current format, be discontinued forthwith.**
- (i) **The Overview and Scrutiny Commission be asked to monitor and review the outstanding Area Forum action plans to ensure completion.**

Reason for decision to be taken:

To ensure that the most appropriate public engagement model is in place which affords a larger number of residents to engage with the Council.

Key background documentation:

- Minutes of the Area Forum Review Task Group 04 June 2008.
- Minutes from the Area Forum Review Task Group on 17 July 2008
- Minutes of the Area Forum Review Task Group 26 August 2008
- Correspondence from Parish Councils and residents
- Developing the Kennet and Pang Area Forum to increase the involvement of the public and partner organisations. Evaluation of the pilot on Thursday 16th February 2006. (report to Corporate Board)

The proposals will also help achieve the following Council Plan Outcome(s):

CPO12 - Including Everyone

CPO13 - Value for Money

CPO15 - Putting Customers First

The proposals contained in this report will help to achieve the above Council Plan Themes and Outcomes by:

Agreeing innovative ways for the Council to engage Parish and Town Councils and local residents in the democratic process

Portfolio Member Details	
Name & Telephone No.:	Councillor Graham Jones Tel: (01235) 762744
E-mail Address:	gjones@westberks.gov.uk
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	1 September 2008

Contact Officer Details	
Name:	Andy Day
Job Title:	Head of Policy and Communication
Tel. No.:	01635 519459
E-mail Address:	aday@westberks.gov.uk

Implications

Policy:	No policy implications but the relevant sections of the Constitution will need to be amended.
Financial:	There will not be any additional financial implications for the Council. The cost of the new engagement model and additional District parish Conferences will be met from within existing Area Forum budgets. Should members be minded to adopt Ward Based or Locality Budgets these will be incorporated into the 2009/10 budget setting process.
Personnel:	No additional staff will be required.
Legal:	None
Property:	None
Risk Management:	None
Equalities Impact Assessment:	None

Is this item subject to call-in?	Yes: <input type="checkbox"/>	No: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If not subject to call-in please put a cross in the appropriate box:		
The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Considered or reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Commission or associated Task Groups within preceding six months	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Item is Urgent Key Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At Annual Council on the 08th May 2008 a Motion was proposed and adopted requesting that a review of how effectively the Council was engaging and consulting residents takes place. A Task Group, comprising seven Members, was set up to review the effectiveness of the current Area Forum format.
- 1.2 The Democratic Services Manager wrote to all Parish and Town Council Clerks and asked them to comment on the effectiveness of Area Forums and any additional comments they would like to make. In addition comments were sought from residents via the individual forums and on the Council's website.
- 1.3 Despite attempts to engage all parishes in reviewing the effectiveness of Area Forums, only 14 of the 62 Parishes responded. Although some of the feedback supported the retention of Area Forums, other Parishes recognised the need to change the current model if greater public involvement was to be achieved.

2. Proposals

- 2.1 The Task Group, at its third and final meeting, concluded that as there is no statutory duty to hold Area Forum meetings an alternative model for engaging more broadly with the community should be adopted.
- 2.2 The Task Group's proposals are:
 - To enhance the District Parish Conference and increase the frequency of these meetings;
 - To adopt a New Public Engagement Model based on Members and Officers attending and having a high profile presence at a range of events and locations;
 - Town and Parish Councils enhancing their own public engagement models where they consider this to be appropriate;
 - Further research take place into introducing a locality based delivery model;
 - Further work be undertaken in relation to establishing Virtual Forums;
 - Officers continue to manage outstanding actions that have arisen at previous Forum meetings; and
 - The Overview and Scrutiny Commission review the outstanding Area Forum Action List in twelve months time.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 The Task Group agreed that Area Forums, in their current format, should be discontinued forthwith and that the effectiveness of the new model should be reviewed eighteen months after its inception.

Executive Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council agreed to establish four Area Forums in July 2000 based on the existing Area Planning Sub-Committee boundaries (an additional forum meeting was established in 2004).
- 1.2 An Area Forum Task Group was set up in June 2003 to review if the Area Forums had accomplished what they had set out to achieve and to propose amendments to the Area Forum's Terms of Reference. The Task Group identified three critical success factors for Area Forums namely:
 - (a) Increasing the level of attendance and interest from members of the public;
 - (b) Improving interest from local councils;
 - (c) Positively encouraging attendance.
- 1.3 At Annual Council on the 08th May 2008 the following Motion was proposed and adopted: "The Council wishes to consider the most beneficial ways of engaging and consulting with residents, and therefore intends to review the effectiveness of the current processes including the Area Forums. It is therefore proposed that the Area Forum meetings already publicised in May and June should continue as planned within the existing structures, pending the outcome of the proposed review which will be presented to full Council in September."
- 1.4 Following the Council meeting a Task Group, comprising 7 Members (5 Conservative and 2 Liberal Democrat) was set up with the following terms of reference:
 - Ascertain the extent to which the functions of the forums as set out in the Constitution are being met;
 - Ascertain the effectiveness of the current working arrangements of Area Forums;
 - Establish the level of engagement from partner organisations;
 - To establish whether Area Forums provide Good Value for Money (Council Plan Outcome);
 - Consider other vehicles which engage residents and Parish/ Town Councils
- 1.5 In considering the critical success factors identified by the 2003 Task Group the following conclusions were reached:
 - (a) Public attendance is variable from a handful to up to on occasions 60 people but that attendance across the five forums is generally low.
 - (b) With the exception of Thatcham Area Forum the majority of attendees at meetings are from Parish Councils. It should however be noted that the District Parish Conference which is currently held twice a year attracts 80 to 90 attendees.

- (c) Despite a range of attempts to increase attendance at meetings, within a limited budget, the level of attendance at meetings has remained fairly low.

1.6 Part 2 Article 9 (Paragraph 2.9.4 of the WBC Constitution) sets out the role of the Area Forum as follows:

- To be responsible for the preparation of an Area Action Plan in consultation with local people. This Action Plan to be incorporated as part of the development of the community planning process.
- To consider, monitor, scrutinise and make recommendations to the Executive or Policy Development Commissions and Overview and Scrutiny Commission, as appropriate, with respect to service delivery / performance of local services and facilities.
- To receive regular monitoring reports on service delivery in the area.
- To be consulted by the Council on major policy issues or changes to existing policies which have a significant impact on the area.
- To provide the opportunity for public participation and engagement by acting as a forum for discussion on matters of local interest and, in particular, to elicit/hear the views of local bodies, organisations.
- To foster, in relation to the area and its people, a close working relationship with Town and Parish Councils and other relevant agencies and bodies.
- To determine small grants to voluntary bodies operating primarily in the area and within the budget delegated to the Area Forum.
- To consider local minor highways issues falling within the Council's existing policy and within the Transport Management Works budget delegated to the Area Forum. (The budget for 2008/09 set by the Council on 4th March 2008 does not include any provision to allow Area Forums to implement schemes previously listed on the Traffic Management Works Programme.)
- To appoint to governing bodies of schools within the area of the Forum.
- To appoint representatives to outside bodies operating primarily within the area of the Forum.
- To promote liaison with local youth and community management committees in conjunction with local Area Youth Teams.
- To receive summary OfSTED reports for local schools.
- To consider proposals relating to the operation of local recreation facilities.
- To consider local community safety issues.
- To consider public questions and receive petitions about issues local to the Area.

1.7 In relation to the above roles and responsibilities, the Task Group will know that over time Area Forums are either no longer responsible for or other governance structures have been introduced for the following areas:

- (i) Safer Communities – The introduction of NAGs has seen many issues of Speeding traffic and Anti Social Behaviour being picked up by these community based groups.
- (ii) The determination of small grants to voluntary organisations is now undertaken by the Strategic Funding Group.

- (iii) The Transport Management Works Budget is no longer aligned with Area Forums.
- (iv) The appointment of School Governors is able to be determined by virtue of the Council's Individual Decision Making Scheme.
- (v) OfSTED reports are no longer considered by Area Forums.
- (vi) In relation to the preparation of area Action Plans this has now been integrated into the Parish Plan process and the Area Forums only role is to adopt them.

- 1.8 At its first meeting on the 04 June 2008 the Task Group reviewed the effectiveness of Area Forums and considered that a new model for public engagement was necessary in order to ensure that as many West Berkshire residents had the chance to ask questions or be appraised of particular issues within their locality.
- 1.9 Officers were also asked to provide feedback from the consultation, options for consideration in respect of the locations for the 'roadshows' and also to consider introducing a process for managing the continuity of outstanding actions.

2. Feedback from Consultation

- 2.1 All Parish and Town Councils and Meetings were asked to provide feedback on the effectiveness of Area Forums and any comments they would like to make. The closing date for comments was the 31 July 2008 and responses were received from 14 of the 62 Parishes. A table setting out these comments is attached at Appendix A.
- 2.2 The responding Parishes stated, in the main, that the Area Forums provided a useful opportunity for communities and Councils to interact but acknowledged that attendance at meetings was low. It was noted that local government meetings did not generally attract residents though. Some of the Parishes suggested that perhaps the function of forums had not been clearly articulated to residents and many residents therefore viewed their Parish Council as the first point of contact and did not realise they had a similar vehicle at District level.
- 2.3 A number of Parishes suggested that specialist subject meetings might prove more popular. Comments also suggested that the formality and length of meetings might deter residents from attending.
- 2.4 Furthermore it was felt that the current area forum boundaries did not promote communities of interest which might impact negatively on attendance.
- 2.5 Parishes felt that wider publicity was needed to boost attendance at meetings. It should however be noted that posters advertising the forums are sent to all clerks to place on their noticeboards, meeting dates regularly published in the West Berkshire News (now 'A Great Place to Live'), press releases sent to the local newspaper and meetings, which are set annually, advertised on the Council's website. In addition agendas are sent to all attendees that sign in at meetings and indicate that they wish to receive them.

- 2.6 In October 2005 a pilot meeting of the Kennet and Pang Valley Area Forum was held in an attempt to increase attendance at the meetings. The purpose of the pilot was to consider the impact of a revised format and additional advertising on attendance. The meeting included an open session or "surgery" section where the public had the opportunity of having their issues dealt with face to face by representatives from the Council, Thames Valley Police and Voluntary and Community based groups. Despite vast numbers of leaflets being dropped through local residents' post boxes only 35 residents attended this meeting. It was therefore concluded that the amount of public who attended did not warrant the amount of staff resource and cost expended. Information received from the feedback forms returned did however suggest that the respondents judged the surgery style event to be either good or very good in terms of usefulness in accessing information
- 2.7 In addition comments from residents have been requested via the individual forums and on the Council's website. The Democratic Services Manager received 2 letters and a series of email from a resident addressed to the Leader of the Council. A summary of their comments is set Appendix B.
- 2.8 It should also be noted that at the Thatcham Area Forum meeting held on the 22 May 2008 "Members of the public voiced their strong disapproval and disappointment at the immediate suspension of the Forum. When asked if they opposed the suspension of the Forum it appeared that there was a consensus in favour of their continuation. Sue Everett proposed a petition and circulated it around the Forum; the petition would be placed at Thatcham Town Council if anybody else wished to sign it." (see Draft minutes from the meeting). This petition has not been submitted to West Berkshire Council for consideration.
- 2.9 It can be seen that despite attempts to engage all parishes in reviewing the effectiveness of Area Forums, only 14 of the 62 Parishes responded. Although some of the feedback supported the retention of Area Forums, other Parishes recognise the need to change the current model if greater public involvement was to be achieved.

3. The Way Forward

- 3.1 A number of proposals for the future of Area Forums were discussed at meetings of the Review Task Group. It has been accepted that Area Forums should not continue in their present format as they have failed to capture the imagination of the vast majority of West Berkshire residents. Although the cost of running Area Forums is relatively low they do require significant human resources. The Task Group has concluded that, as there is no statutory duty to hold these meetings the Council needed to seek an alternative model for engaging more broadly with the community.

The proposals are set out below.

(1) District Parish Conference

The reintroduction of District Parish Conferences has greatly enhanced the relationship between the Council and the Parishes and regularly attracts 80/90 people for each meeting. Inadvertently the success of the conferences may have resulted in a slight decline in Parish Councillor attendance at Area

Forums. The Task Group noted a request from Parishes that they would like to 'retain the element where Parishes in small groupings could interact with Members and Officers' and will therefore put arrangements in place to hold localised discussions in smaller groups at the Conferences where this is deemed appropriate.

Recommendation (a):

Parishes Conferences to be enhanced and three or four meetings to be held per annum at different localities across the District and where appropriate arrangements be made for localised discussions to take place.

(2) New Public Engagement Model

Attendance at forum meetings remains relatively low. It is felt that the formality of the meetings and the location and accessibility issues could be a contributory factor. The Council having a local presence at a range of events and locations across the District may address this issue. Based on existing resources Officers have suggested limiting this to five key events per annum.

Suggested events include:

- the Crafty Raft Race in Newbury
- Royal County of Berkshire Show in Newbury
- Good Friday Open Day in Lambourn
- Holybrook Festival
- Hungerford and District Community Arts Festival

Suggested locations could also include:

- Kennet Centre in Newbury
- Kingsland Centre in Thatcham
- Markets (such as Farmers Market in Hungerford)
- Sainsbury's, Calcot

Members will consider the above list, make any further suggestions and then prioritise the events and locations that they would like Officers to explore further. A maximum of five events is recommended.

Recommendation (b):

A new Public Engagement Model based on Senior Members (both parties) and Officers attending and having a high profile presence five events / locations a year to be introduced.

(3) Town and Parish Council Hosted Forums

One of the issues raised by Parishes in respect of Area Forums is that the boundaries do not always reflect the communities served. In addition residents tended to refer matters directly to their Parish Councils that provided them with an immediate local connection. It was therefore

suggested that Parish and Town Councils could continue to run their own forums possibly held at the start of formal meetings which would provide public interface sessions if they so wished. Relevant Officers could attend when invited to do so.

Recommendation (c):

Individual Town and Parish Councils or groups be requested to consider whether they would wish to enhance their own public engagement model should they consider this to be relevant or appropriate.

(4) Ward Based Budgeting

The Task Group agreed that Ward Based Budgeting should be considered as a possible option for the Council. Further research is needed to examine such an option. Models, governance and financial implications would need to be considered outside of the Task Group. Any proposals relating to finance would have to be considered as part of the 2009/10 budget and approved by Council.

Recommendation (d):

In relation to participatory budgeting, further work be undertaken into the feasibility of introducing a locality based service delivery model to those areas on most need across the District.

Recommendation(e):

Subject to the results of (d), the Executive be asked to review the existing Capital Grant system to enable more resources to be diverted in those areas in most need.

(5) Virtual Forum

In an effort to reach residents that do not currently attend forums and that may not want to or have the opportunity to interact face to face with Members and Officers the possibility of hosting online forums on the Council's website to be investigated.

Recommendation (f):

That further work be undertaken in relation to establishing Virtual Forums.

(6) Review of Effectiveness of New Model

The Task Group has agreed that the effectiveness of any new proposals should be reviewed in eighteen months of their inception.

Recommendation (g):

That any new engagement model introduced be subject to a review in eighteen months time.

(7) Providing Continuity

The Task Group has agreed that Policy and Communications staff would manage outstanding Area Forum actions through to the end to ensure they were satisfactorily concluded. Some actions were long-term, others could be dealt with quite quickly. A database would be put onto the website, and would be managed by Policy and Communication.

Recommendation (h):

That Policy and Communication staff introduce appropriate measures to manage outstanding Area Forum actions and that Area Forums, in their current format, be discontinued forthwith.

Recommendation (i):

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission to monitor and review the outstanding Area Forum action plans to ensure completion.

Appendices

Appendix A - Summary of Parish Council Comments

Appendix B - Summary of Residents' Comments

Consultees

Local Stakeholders: All Parish/ Town Councils, Area Forum Attendees

Officers Consulted: Moira Fraser

Trade Union: Not consulted

PARISH COUNCIL COMMENTS ON AREA FORUMS

Name	Parish Council	Comments
Bill Scott Clerk	Aldermaston Parish Council	The issue was discussed at its meeting on the 10 June and Councillors agreed not to make any comment.
Jackie Boxall Chairman	Brightwalton Parish Council	<p>I have only been chairman of Brightwalton for a year, so have only attended two forums.</p> <p>I found their use to me to be very limited. Understandably, there is so much that is not relevant to a small parish. As most people on the PC work, it is a big commitment to spend the whole evening for only one or two items of interest.</p> <p>Therefore, I suggest that it be made more flexible - easier to arrive and leave for just one or two agenda items. At the moment it is very formal - refreshments, formal presentations with slides etc. which makes it hard to dip in and out.</p> <p>Also, the presentations are poor - you can't read the slides and presenters just read the script off the slide - all very old fashioned and boring. You don't get away with that in business!</p> <p>So, less formal, able to come and go for items of interest, more discussion and fewer slides.</p>
Sandi Ackrill Clerk	Chaddleworth Parish Council	The PC is concerned about the possibility of the demise of Area Forums, they find them to be informative and a great source of communication,
John Perou Member of Parish Council	Chaddleworth Parish Council	I would only add that for me the Forums really are the way for communities and councils to connect, raise, discuss and resolve issues to the collective benefit. So much better and effective for all parties, rather than being bombarded and overpowered with one way communication of endless reports, surveys.
Denise Hudspith Clerk	Cold Ash	Further to your letter sent to all Parish and Town Councils on 2 June, Cold Ash PC regularly attends the Area Forums and feels strongly that these should continue. We do believe, however, that the forums are under-utilised as a vehicle for the public to air its views and feel this is due in part to poor publicity. Parish Councils encourage parishioners to attend their Council meetings to put their points of view across or raise a matter of concern, but we believe not many members of the public realise they have a similar vehicle at District level. Perhaps they could be better advertised in the local newspaper or by leaflets in the same

Name	Parish Council	Comments
		way as the services of Streetcare are promoted? Cold Ash PC does post the notices on its notice boards but we would guess that many more people read newspapers than our notices! We hope you find this comment useful and look forward to hearing the outcome of the review.
Rachel Sinton Clerk	Compton Parish Council	The parish Council supports Area Forums as they believe them to be positive for the community
Anne Ray Clerk	Lambourn Parish Council	Thank you for updating Council about the review of Area Forums in West Berkshire. Lambourn Parish Council discussed the review at its meeting last week. It deplored the potential loss of Forums as they are a useful way to put parishioner's views direct to the District Council. It is recognised that there are problems with the current running of the Forums and Council proposed that officials should not overload the agenda with long reports, thus shortening the meetings and is leaving enough time for questions from attendees. I hope that these comments are of use to you.
Angela Sutton Parish Plan Co-ordinator and Parish Clerk	Leckhampstead Parish Council	In response to your letter of 2 June, it seems likely that our Parish Councillors will be responding individually. From my perspective, they would appear to have been useful in getting action taken on a number of issues. It is very difficult to get ordinary members of the public involved and, in any case, if there are issues then the correct place to go is first to your Parish Council and then to your district councillor. If this procedure is not adhered to then there is the distinct risk of actions being agreed without the Parish Council being notified which surely cannot be correct. Is there an element of trying to find things for the Area Forums to take on? Do we need another layer of authority? Probably not! Liaison and accessibility with West Berkshire Council has improved a lot over the last four or five years and particularly as a result of the involvement by WBC with the Parish Plan process and the surgeries which have been held. Hope these comments are useful.
Graham Hunt Chief Executive Officer	Newbury Town Council	<p>At its Council meetings last night, Newbury Town Council made the following suggestions with regard to the future of Area Forums. It was a long discussion and I've tried to pick out the key suggestions (recorded in no particular order) to help move the debate forward.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) A forum of some sort is required to enable members of the public to have their say (or ask questions) on any topic. (b) A forum is a useful way of the Council getting feedback. (c) The boundaries should reflect the communities served. (d) Each forum should have a theme – but not be constrained by it. (e) Forums could be created on demand around topical issues (i.e. not a rigid timetable)

Name	Parish Council	Comments
		<p>(f) Some kind of appropriate budget to support the work of the forum is required – to encourage action.</p> <p>(g) It would be useful if more meetings could be out and about in the community – closer to the public.</p> <p>(h) It should reflect and cater for the other meetings that take place – in some cases with similar purposes.</p> <p>(i) Their needs to be even greater/wider publicity to encourage greater attendance.</p> <p>(j) Ward Councillor attendance should be required, not optional.</p> <p>(k) Like the presence of senior officers.</p> <p>(l) Can the Town help in any way – we are keen to help – and work in partnership.</p> <p>(m) More open petition processing.</p> <p>(n) Two part format does not engage well with the public.</p> <p>(o) Reduce the formality – make it easier for the public to express themselves.</p> <p>(p) Be open to ideas.</p> <p>(q) There is no harm in trying things again – even if they haven't worked before.</p> <p>Newbury Town Council would like to be consulted on any final options proposed before implementation.</p>
Rick Jones, Chairman	Purley on Thames Parish Council	<p>Felt that the purpose of area forums was twofold namely to bring the District to the people and to focus on local needs and priorities.</p> <p>Accepted that attendance at meetings was low</p> <p>Urged the Council not to lose local focus when attempting to engage the public. Noted that local government meetings did not attract residents unless there was something controversial on the agenda</p> <p>Felt that the forums were not as well recognised as a place for the public voice as the District of Parish Council.</p> <p>Felt that NAGs had taken over the Community Safety role locally very well</p> <p>Would like to retain the element where parishes in a small grouping could interact with Members and Officers to enable local issues to be addressed</p> <p>To enhance public engagement they suggested specialist subject meetings and dissemination of information and consultation by post</p>
Mrs Jayne Kirk Clerk	Stratfield Mortimer Parish Councillor	<p>Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council have asked me to write to you in reply to your letter of 2 June regarding the review of Area Forums. The Council would like the Area Forums to continue as they feel they are a good conduit between the electorate and the District</p>

Name	Parish Council	Comments
Angela Bates Community/ Civic Manager	Thatcham Town Council	<p>Council.</p> <p>The issue was discussed at an extraordinary meeting held on the 23 June 2008. The Town Council resolved that Thatcham Town Council registers its strong disapproval of the decision by West Berkshire Council to suspend the Area Forums before the Review Group has been able to see the Forums in action and urges West Berkshire Council to reinstate the cycle of Forum meetings until the Review Group presents its report. And RESOLVED that Thatcham Town Council demands that the Thatcham Area Forum itself should not be discontinued until a major public consultation exercise has been undertaken.</p>
Richard Crumly District and Town Councillor for Thatcham Central	Thatcham Town Council	<p>Believes Area Forums should be discontinued. Two incidents immediately spring to mind. In Harts Hill Road there was a petition presented to the Area Forum for a build out at the entrance to Bradley Moore Square, passed by vote and then put into effect. There appears to be no other democratic process. It was certainly at no time ever presented to Thatcham Town Council. The first we knew about it was when the blooming thing was erected. Area Forums therefore seem to bypass established democratic institutions. As far as I know, the matter was not further considered by West Berks Council.</p> <p>There was a petition presented to Thatcham Area Forum on or about 22nd May for another crossing and another build out is proposed further down Harts Hill Road at the junction with Vincent Road. Once again, it went before the Area Forum and was passed and the presumption then was that it would be put into effect. It did come before Thatcham Town Council Planning for comment and observation and collectively we were against a build out and we are currently in correspondence with the officer over a counter proposal.</p> <p>In my view, any proposals such as this should originate with the Town Council and be considered by the District Council and officers and signed off by the appropriate portfolio holder. Therefore, I am of the view that Area Forums should be stripped of both their powers and their budgets.</p>
Miss M.J. Rueth Clerk	Theale Parish Council	<p>Felt that forum meetings which addressed subjects that engaged the attention of local residents were well attended but accepted that some forums did not have a larger attendance</p> <p>Felt that wider publicity was needed in order to boost attendance rather than eliminate</p>

Name	Parish Council	Comments
		forums. Felt that forums were one of the few events where the public had the opportunity to address Councillors, Council Officers and Police Officers
Liz Best Clerk of the Council	Tilehurst Parish Council	My members made the following comments at this week's full Council Meeting:- The cost of running the forums appeared relatively low. Is a means of providing localised funding for small projects although it is recognised that some of this is now dealt with by Neighbourhood Action Groups. Would be useful for an advance schedule of meeting dates and venues.
David Hunt, Chairman	Welford Parish Council	Feel that Area Forums serve a useful purpose, Feel it is valuable to meet Parish and District Councillors from a similar rural area Improvements could be made by a clearer idea of the function of forums, better advertising and larger venues if you want to attract public, clearer picture of requests that go through forums and those that should go directly to the District Council, purpose of forums having their own monies needs to be explained There is real difficulty in engaging people in local issues, the PC provides an immediate local connection with local residents and they would therefore not expect the forums to attract many residents Welcome initiatives to maximise their efficiency.

Residents Comments:

Resident	Summary of Comments
Mr Dunn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The main objective of the existence of Area Forums is as venue for public input. • Request that Area Forums are reconvened.
Mr Knight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to substantially increase and protect the position of the Ward Councillors as the prime focus for community contact. • Ward Members credibility and influence is substantially diminished by special or sectional interest groups who are able to avoid the normal democratic process by going directly to the Executive. • Case in point is the introduction of NAGs, these have laudable aims and can exert a positive influence, however membership appears to be restricted and their constitutions are created outside the usual democratic process and they can therefore not claim to be the voice of the people. • The power of the Ward Member should not be eroded.
Mr Bovington	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewed them as a vital mechanism for members of the public to find out about local issues, be able to ask questions of their councillors, to also be able to question council officers and to be able to influence local issues. Without these forums I am not sure how members of the public will be able to do this. Surely the council should be encouraging more interaction with the public rather than trying to remove it. • At the forum last night we were able to hear from the council officers who are planning and co-ordinating flood alleviation works and also question officials from Thames Water who are also undertaking works. As such I was able to find out a great deal more of what is being done and passed on this information to a number of my neighbours who couldn't make the meeting. Surely this is how local democracy should work. • Have no issues with a review taking place, though I believe such forums or similar mechanisms are necessary.