

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET**

Decision Made: 11 January 2012

#### **REVIEW OF NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS**

##### **Issue for Decision**

To consider the outcome of the Neighbourhood Forum Review.

##### **Decision Made**

That Option 4, "Disband Neighbourhood Forums and support the community leadership role of elected members to achieve more effective community engagement and liaison" be agreed.

##### **Reasons for Decision**

On 12 August 2009, Cabinet made the decision to introduce Neighbourhood Forums on a one year pilot basis to help improve community engagement.

Following discussions with Kent County Council ("KCC"), four Neighbourhood Forums were set up for Maidstone Borough, namely Central and North East, Rural North and East, Rural West and South and South and South East.

Membership of the Forums was made up of County, Borough and Parish Councillors. In the areas where there are no Parish Councils, local community groups were invited to become members. At the first meeting of each forum the Members decided:-

- The Chairman;
- The Vice Chairman;
- Frequency and location of meetings;
- Time of meetings.

The terms of reference for the Neighbourhood Forums are attached at Appendix A to the report of the Head of Democratic Services.

The Forums were set up to be Member led and facilitated by Democratic Services at Maidstone Borough Council ("MBC") and an Officer from KCC.

An invitation was sent out via Voluntary Action Maidstone to community groups to become a Member of a Neighbourhood Forum. They had to meet certain criteria to become a Member, e.g. have a constitution. Borough Members were also asked to suggest local community groups,

residents associations etc. In the parished areas, the Kent Association for Local Councils held a ballot to elect the parish representatives. The full composition of each Forum is attached at Appendix B.

The inaugural meetings of each Forum took place in June/July 2010 in order to:

- elect the Chairman and Vice Chairman;
- agree the frequency of meetings, venues, and timings;
- discuss topics for future meetings; and
- collate suggestions of local community groups to be invited to join (where appropriate).

### Advertising

With the assistance of the Community Partnerships team, a central distribution list of over 70 community groups was compiled. Early notification of all Neighbourhood Forum meetings and the Agendas were sent to this distribution list with the request to forward the information on to their contacts/members. Two further smaller lists were compiled for the Central and North East and South and South East Neighbourhood Forums of community groups local to those specific areas as these cover mainly non-parished areas and these community groups were also invited to become a member of their local Forum.

A Neighbourhood Forum branding was designed and Posters were circulated to the above distribution lists, as well as County, Borough and Parish Councillors with the request to put up the Posters wherever possible in their local area, i.e. shops, parish notice boards, community halls, etc. Posters and Agendas were also placed at the venue of each meeting.

The Central and North East Neighbourhood Forum Chairman and Vice Chairman requested extra copies of the Posters and hand delivered them to houses in the local area of the venue for the meeting. It should be noted that public attendance at the Central and North East Neighbourhood Forum meetings was generally higher from the community than the other Forums.

Press Releases were sent out by the Council's Communications team detailing future dates and venues and an advert was placed within Borough Update in the Downs Mail. Details of the meetings were also sent to the Community News team at the Kent Messenger and some of the meetings were advertised in their section of the newspaper.

A section of the MBC website was developed for Neighbourhood Forums and KCC also developed a Neighbourhood Forum page which linked to the MBC website. Early notification of meetings, times and venues was advertised on the website, together with the Agendas and Minutes. A link to the website page was circulated to all distribution lists.

A dedicated email address was set up and advertised on the website, together with the contact details of the Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of

each Forum and an officer at KCC and MBC. Through all of the above means, the public were encouraged to submit topics of interest for future forum meetings.

### Attendance

Attached at Appendix C to the report of the Head of Democratic Services is a breakdown of the attendance at each of the Forum meetings and the topics discussed (an asterisk shows those topics that were submitted by a community group/member of the public).

The exceptionally high attendance at the Rural North and East Neighbourhood Forum on 20 January 2011 was due to the high profile topic of possible development at Junction 8 of the M20.

The average attendance for each Forum is set out in the table below:-

	No. of meetings	Total Attendance	Average Attendance per meeting	Average Public Attendance per meeting
Central and North East	3	74	24.66	11.66
Rural North and East	3	142	47.33	35
Rural West and South	3	57	19	5.33
South and South East	2	37	18.5	7

### Outcomes

At each Forum meeting, the public were given the opportunity to raise any issues. A list of these issues was kept and responsibility for any action required was assigned to a Councillor or Officer as appropriate. Updates for each of these outcomes was requested and fed back to the next meeting. A list of the updates was included in the Minutes and these were circulated to all members of the forum and members of the public attending the meeting who had requested them.

A copy of the Outcomes and Updates for each Forum is attached at Appendix D to the report of the Head of Democratic Services.

### Consultation

At the meetings held in the first quarter of 2011, KCC provided an electronic voting system which was used to gather feedback from those present at the meeting. Three main questions were asked:-

- Have you found this meeting useful?
- Would you recommend to neighbours and friends that they attend these meetings?
- These meetings are on a one year trial – would you like to see them continue?

A full breakdown of the results is attached at Appendix E to the report of the Head of Democratic Services.

It should be noted that the overall response from those present at each meeting was very positive, with over 70% voting "yes" to all three questions asked (details shown at Appendix E to the report of the Head of Democratic Services).

In addition, a Review Form has been circulated to all County, Borough and Parish members requesting their feedback on the Forums (a copy of the Form is attached at Appendix F to the report of the Head of Democratic Services).

17 responses have been received and the results to the first three questions are set out below:-

Member Responses	Yes	No	N/A
Did you attend any of the Neighbourhood Forums?	12	5	
If Yes, did you find the Neighbourhood Forum useful?	6	6	5
Would you like to see the Neighbourhood Forums continue?	5	9	3 (unsure)

Of the 12 respondents that attended, 6 found the Forum useful and 4 would like to see the Forums continue.

A survey was added to the Neighbourhood Forum website. However, to date, only 4 responses have been received and the results to the first three questions are set out below:-

	Yes	No	N/A
Did you attend any of the Neighbourhood Forums?	3	1	
If Yes, did you find the Neighbourhood Forum useful?	2	1	
Would you like to see the Neighbourhood Forums continue?	1	2	

### Rural Economy Review

At its meeting on 8 June 2011, the Cabinet considered a report of the Leisure and Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee (as it was called at that time) regarding recommendations within the Rural Economy Review.

Two of the recommendations were regarding Neighbourhood Forums as follows:-

- i) That the Neighbourhood Forum meets with the business forums from time to time to help lobby the Council with issues as a community;

- ii) The Cabinet Member should review the possibility of adapting the Borough's Neighbourhood Forums using Merton Council as an example.

Consideration of i) above should be taken if the Cabinet decide to continue with Neighbourhood Forums.

With regard to ii) above, in the review of Community Forums 2010/11 undertaken by Merton Council, it is stated that "Instead, the council will promote an annual, high profile event in each Community Forum area – probably in the autumn – to coincide with the budget and business planning process."

The first of these annual meetings was held in September/October 2011 and the total attendance at these meetings was 168 which is a lower turnout than the total forum figures set out below.

Information regarding Merton's and MBC's Forum meetings are set out in the table below for comparison purposes:-

	<b>MBC</b>	<b>Merton</b>
Electorate (as at May 2011)	111,990	130,419
No. of Forum Meetings Held	11	15
No. of Public in Attendance	170	246
Average for all meetings	15	16

Merton has given the option to Councillors for them to continue Community Forums in their area if they wish. However, the Councillors would need to service the meetings themselves. Two of these Community Forums decided to continue meeting during the year and held meetings in June/July 2011. The total attendance at these two meetings was 50 (40 and 10 respectively).

Cabinet could include this as an option for MBC's Neighbourhood Forums, if they so wish although the strengths and weaknesses of the forums are considered to be as follows:

#### Strengths

- It is the only forum where all 3 tiers of local government are in attendance;
- There has been good support as well as a pro-active input from local community groups;
- There were outcomes such as at Pepper Alley where agreement has been reached with Whitman's, Natural England and the Environment Agency to manage the overflow into the river and raising the level of the bottom of Pepper Alley with the local County Councillor using part of his devolved budget to fund this scheme.

## Weaknesses

- The forums are too large spreading over significant geographical and population areas and therefore still being remote from local communities;
- There has not been total commitment from Councillors of all tiers;
- There is a lack of real results/outcomes for the local community;
- Poor attendance from the public;
- No direct funding available for locally identified projects/schemes.

## Kent County Council View

Neighbourhood Forums in Maidstone have been a great opportunity to trial a method of community engagement that has brought all three levels of local government together for the general public to access at the same time.

There have been a number of issues raised that have had positive outcomes and, in addition, issues raised that have generated a reasonable representation from the public.

KCC uses a range of engagement techniques across the county in partnership with District Councils. There is recognition that one size does not fit all and Neighbourhood Forums have been more successful in some areas than others. The commonality for all the Districts though is that they have taken time to establish and have become a trusted way for the Council to engage with and listen to local residents.

The administration behind the forums over the past 12 months has been efficient and comprehensive. It has been a challenge at times to identify issues that motivate the public to get involved and the frequent changes of locations may have prevented the public from getting a real grasp of what the forums were trying to achieve.

KCC and Swale Borough Council have been running 'Local Engagement Forums' for a number of years now (along with other districts) and they prove to be effective and the most important channel for the public to have access to local councillors and officers around issues that are important to them. Over the last 12 months, 4 meetings have been held and attendance was as follows:-

25 January 2011	24
8 February 2011	47
19 July 2011	51
18 October 2011	43

In the development of Locality Boards over the next 12 months, those Councils who have effective and well established local forums are planning to integrate these as the primary focus for the public with Locality Boards.

## Options for the Future

The pilot period for the Neighbourhood Forums was twelve months at which point they were to be reviewed before considering future options. A range of options are set out below:-

### Option 1

#### Do nothing and continue with existing pilot

There have been a few positive outcomes arising from the recent pilot of Neighbourhood Forums but these have generally been of a minor nature and have not made any significant change each of the individual communities that feed into these forums.

As time has gone on a view is starting to be expressed that, whilst the discussions at these forums and the information given are very useful and can be fed back into the community, they do not actually take any issues forward and the forums seem to be talking shops rather than a body for change.

This could be because of the view that there are no resources available to the forums, though in reality this has not been greatly tested. As mentioned previously, one KCC Member has used his devolved budget to fund improvements to an area of flooding. The design of the forums, namely 4 large geographical areas, has led to them not taking a lead in identifying ideas to bring to the constituent partner authorities which could be taken forward to make changes in their community. Each Forum covers a large area which has meant the meetings have been held in various locations to ensure all communities are covered and this has led to a lack of continuity which, in turn, seems to have led to a lack of trust that anything will be done. The areas that each of the Forums cover include many communities that have differing issues. This could have led to a view that there is no drive from the forums to make changes for the benefit of their community.

This could change over a longer period of time as both the community and the constituent authorities within the forum become more used to its workings and start to develop ideas through the forum. However, this will be very difficult to achieve if the view has started to emerge that these forums are talking shops and nothing else.

### Option 2

Each constituent authority could put resources into the Neighbourhood Forums and that could encourage ideas for their use from the community. This could produce a momentum of change with communities coming forward with ideas and then resources allocated to take these ideas forward. That momentum could then lead to the stimulation of further ideas.

However as each of the forums covers a large area there is unlikely to be sufficient resources to cover the whole area and therefore, resources could be centred in one or two areas leaving other areas with no allocation or spread too thinly without any discerning effect. Additionally, the forums have to date represented a very narrow band of people and the ideas that go forward may not be representative of the total community view.

### Option 3

#### Disband Neighbourhood Forums with no replacement

Disbanding the forums and not putting anything else in their place would seem to run contrary to the localism agenda and leaves a vacuum in terms of community engagement and support for the provision of community services.

### Option 4

Disband Neighbourhood Forums and seek to establish the most appropriate Community Engagement approach via the Locality Board. Maidstone's Locality Board has recently been established and comprises all three tiers of local government as well as key partner agencies and representation from business and voluntary community sector. Community Engagement is likely to be a key priority for the Locality Board and identifying an appropriate community engagement mechanism to replace the Neighbourhood Forums would ensure that their original objectives and purpose would be achieved.

### Conclusions

Option 4 is considered to provide the most appropriate way forward in establishing appropriate Community Engagement.

### **Alternatives considered and why rejected**

Alternative options are set out above.

### **Background Papers**

Record of Decision of the Cabinet 12 August 2009 – Communities in Control – Improving Community Engagement

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Head of Change and Scrutiny by: <b>19 January 2012</b>
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