

Report to:	EXECUTIVE
Relevant Officer:	Carmel McKeogh, Deputy Chief Executive Mark Towers, Director of Governance and Regulatory Services
Relevant Cabinet Member:	Councillor Simon Blackburn, Leader of the Council
Date of Meeting:	22 nd June 2015

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 Following the decision of Annual Council, this report is to consider the role of Area Forums along with other forms of community engagement which had been explored in the last 18 months. To also explore the opportunities for public involvement, which allow sufficient opportunities to engage, consult and develop communities.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 That subject to Council approval, Area Forums are discontinued with effect from 1st September 2015.

2.2 That the 'Council Couch'/Summits/Citizens Panel and Residents Survey are promoted as the routes to engage with the organisation.

2.3 That the Community Representatives be invited to be members of the Blackpool Citizens Panel and to invite them to assist in its formation and recruitment of Panel members, as set out in paragraph 5.7.

2.4 That Partners are consulted to identify further opportunities for joint working on consultation and engagement work to ensure a cohesive and joined up approach. (generally residents are not aware of the finer detail about which public sector organisation is responsible for their services and often it is not important to them.)

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 The Council at the Annual Meeting agreed not to schedule meetings of the Area Forums for the June/ July cycle but wanted to look at other forms of community engagement and public involvement before considering their future. This report seeks to look at the different forms of community engagement currently in practice.

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| 3.2a | Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? | No but the Area Forums are part of the Council's constitution and require a Council decision to disestablish them. |
| 3.2b | Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? | Yes |

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:

To continue with the Area Forums and not pursue the other forms of community engagement, either on a reduced meeting cycle basis or by the merger of the seven forums to a smaller number, as suggested by the community representatives.

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 The relevant Council Priority is "Create safer communities and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour" and "Deliver quality services through a professional, well-rewarded and motivated workforce".

5.0 Background Information

5.1 The creation of long-term, productive interactions between delivery organisations and citizens can be very challenging. Citizens often dip in and out according to the circumstances they find themselves in. This makes it difficult to create a shared vision and understanding between the local authority (and wider public sector) and the community. Naturally, citizens are more likely to see the benefits of engagement at times when they are at odds with the Council or relevant public sector organisation or feel dissatisfied with the service provided.

5.2 Generally unless people have a strong sense of civic responsibility and probably therefore are already engaged, they do not interact with public sector services. This often only changes if they need the Council or have cause to complain. As a result, historical methods have meant that the Council has had regular conversations with the few rather than the many.

In 2014, the Council started on a journey towards greater public engagement. A range of innovative and fresh ideas were introduced to help us engage with citizens

more holistically. It was recognised that not all members of our communities want to attend formal meetings and some did not want to engage with the Council at all. This is completely valid, but it is also important to create a range of opportunities so that when they do want to talk to the Council, there is a mechanism in place to allow that conversation to take place.

5.3 **Area Forums** - sought to engage residents by aligning them to their local community.

Area Forums:

- are geographically spread;
- allow interaction between councillors, Council Officers, other public sector officers and the Public;
- are at a local level which allows issues pertinent to a particular locality to be addressed;
- are attended largely by people who already engage with the Council, or other public sector organisation via other means.

They have served a purpose and have engaged with a range of people during their life time. However, it is recognised their effectiveness as a community engagement tool is very limited. Generally the same people attend time after time and are in most cases already known to the Council and already engage via other routes. The number of community representatives has also reduced over time and there are now only 30 out of a possible 42.

A look back at attendance shows that they have been limited at attracting new audiences unless there are controversial issues for discussion. People who are regular contributors to the Blackpool economy, users of services but who are not already engaged in a conversation with the Council remain disconnected. This has possibly been an area which has been the most challenging and frustrating in seeking to make the Forums more effective.

5.4 **Pilot Projects - Engagement**

During 2014, the Council's Community Engagement Team undertook a number of pilot projects, many of which were delivered in partnership with Public Sector Partners. All of these projects proved to be highly effective at engaging with a wide range of people.

These are summarised below:

- **Council Couch** – Over 6 weeks the 'Council Couch' was located within the heart of different Blackpool communities. Chief Officers and the Community Engagement Team had conversations with over 700 people, most were not previously known to the Council. It was a highly effective tool for speaking to people in a relaxed and informal environment.

- **Summits** – There have now been two Children’s/Teenagers Summits and one Older People’s Summit. They have attracted a combined total of nearly 200 participants who have taken part in the events. This provided an opportunity for them to pose questions to the top five Public Sector Officers responsible for delivering the services they receive. These were highly effective events, which received very good feedback from everyone involved.

5.5 **Consultation**

In addition to the need to engage with people, to understand their priorities and enter into meaningful discussion about their town and their lives, it is also essential that the Council consults with them when shaping services and deciding priorities. In essence the more engagement there is, the more synergy there will be between their priorities and aspirations and the Council’.

Effective consultation can be achieved through:

- **Citizen’s Panels** – By creating and maintaining a group of around 1,000 residents who commit to completing regular consultation surveys via telephone, post or email on a range of topics, the Council can improve the quality, timeliness and representativeness of consultation undertaken. In the recent residents’ survey, 520 people (71% of respondents) expressed interest in being asked their views by the Council on an ongoing basis in line with the proposed citizens panel arrangements. This would also allow the Council to work with our public sector partners to include relevant topics of interest to them, reducing consultation fatigue and resource duplication. People will be able to opt-in to the citizen’s panel at any time should they want to get involved;
- **Residents Surveys** – These are a widely-used research tool and an essential counterpart to citizen’s panels and ensure findings which are representative of the population of Blackpool as a whole. Residents are invited to participate at random, answering questions which measure key public service performance indicators such as satisfaction with Council services, or which generate social research data – such as internet access, personal health and wellbeing and service awareness and take up.

5.6 **Fairness Commission**

The Fairness Commission provides many opportunities to engage with people and arguably this is one of the biggest strengths of the Fairness Commission. Currently the Fairness Commission is delivering a number of key projects which are essentially community engagement projects at their core:

- Blackpool Dementia Action Alliance
- Fairtrade

- Loneliness Project
- Buddy Project

5.7 **Community Representatives**

Even though the numbers have reduced, the greatest strength within the Area Forums is the dedicated number of Community Representatives. If the Area Forums are to be discontinued it would be a shame to lose the passion and commitment contained within this group – there is a definite role for them to play at the heart of the community. The proposed citizen’s panel arrangements will still allow these representatives to have a voice and engage with the Council on key issues which affect them or the area in which they represent. The Community Representatives have been appointed on a term of office which expires at the end of April 2016 and it is suggested that those representatives who wish to still be involved, be invited to work with the community engagement team to assist with the transition and help recruit citizen panel members between now and the end of December for which they will continue to receive allowances. This arrangement will also seek to ensure that Community Representatives are key in shaping the framework for future engagement in Blackpool. This work will also seek to include their views and recommendations on how the Council communicates and engages in feedback with residents more effectively.

5.8 **Conclusion**

The pilot projects were very successful and effective. The Council Couch revealed that the majority of citizens are generally happy with the service they receive. People would like the opportunity to talk to the Council, informally at a time and place that suits them, but they generally are not motivated to attend meetings or actively seek the Council out unless something concerns them.

Area Forums have served their original purpose and in times of austerity can be seen as a less effective model of engagement which delivers limited returns for the amount of resource invested in them. The pressures on the organisation and on the community mean that a greater range of more responsive tools is required. Members are also reminded that in setting this financial year’s revenue budget the Council agreed to cease the Area Forum ‘grant’ funding in the sum of £158,000. The issue of grants by forums was an important part of their role, which no longer exists.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information?

No

List of Appendices:

None

6.0 **Legal considerations:**

6.1 The Council should seek to consult with people directly affected by any review and as such held a meeting with 19 community representatives on Monday 8th June 2015. The decision on the future of Area Forums will need to be taken by Council as it is that body which established them.

7.0 Human Resources considerations:

7.1 There has been a full time officer in Democratic Governance and a full time officer in the Community Engagement Team who have both taken voluntary redundancy in this current financial year and will not be replaced. Both teams support the Area Forums and a reduction in staff will make the task of supporting Area Forums going forward extremely challenging if they were to continue. (Additionally, these two teams also lost a full time officer each last financial year which led to the ceasing of the Area Panels, following consultation with the Community Representatives and the agreement of Council).

8.0 Equalities considerations:

8.1 More options to engage with the community will ensure that less people will be disconnected with the Council and different methods of engagement will prevent discrimination and promote diversity and inclusivity for all groups of people.

9.0 Financial considerations:

9.1 There will be a saving of approximately £18,000 from the Area Forum budget which covers allowances to Community Representatives, hire of rooms, teas and coffees etc. Savings will also be made in terms of officer time and also in not replacing the two members of staff mentioned in paragraph 7.1. There is budget available to pay allowances for Community Representatives up to the end of December to assist with the transition period as stated in para 5.7.

9.2 The Council as part of its budget approval process this year has previously agreed to cease the Area Forum 'grant' funding totalling £158,000.

10.0 Risk management considerations:

10.1 Ineffective engagement will mean that the Council is making its decisions on unrepresentative information. The Council needs to be assured that the engagement and consultation it undertakes is as effective and representative as it can be.

11.0 Ethical considerations:

11.1 The Council has to be accountable and act with integrity in regard to its decision making and effective and representative engagement will help achieve this.

12.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

12.1 The Council has held a consultation event with the Community Representatives and 19 were in attendance on Monday 8th June. The Community Representatives on the whole acknowledged that Area Forums had to change but they still believed that they were a viable way to engage with the community. It was acknowledged that the other forms of community engagement which had been introduced recently added to the engagement process. Some of the options put forward by the Community Representatives were to merge the Forums, to have for example three Forums covering Blackpool or to rethink the Forum's agenda to make it more engagement focused, to see if this would be more relevant to local communities. There was also a common view that the Forums were not just about giving grants but sought to engage with local communities.

13.0 Background papers:

13.1 None.

14.0 Key decision information:

14.1 Is this a key decision? No

14.2 If so, Forward Plan reference number:

14.3 If a key decision, is the decision required in less than five days?

14.4 If **yes**, please describe the reason for urgency:

15.0 Call-in information:

15.1 Are there any grounds for urgency, which would cause this decision to be exempt from the call-in process? No

15.2 If **yes**, please give reason:

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

16.0 Scrutiny Committee Chairman (where appropriate):

Date informed: N/A

Date approved: N/A

17.0 Declarations of interest (if applicable):

17.1

18.0 Executive decision:

18.1

18.2 Date of Decision:

19.0 Reason(s) for decision:

19.1 Date Decision published:

20.0 Executive Members in attendance:

20.1

21.0 Call-in:

21.1

22.0 Notes:

22.1