

COMMITTEE	DWYFOR AREA COMMITTEE
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TITLE	AREA FORA
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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 In the Council's Three Year Plan a project has been established to facilitate community empowerment as part of the wider agenda to improve community engagement. One of the work streams identified in order to achieve this is the idea of creating area fora in order to ensure that we have a structured methodology for giving citizens of various areas a voice and assist in shaping solutions to problems specific to their areas.
- 1.2 A Project Board has been looking at the concept and has also been endeavouring to integrate the idea with the need to establish new democratic arrangements. Similar arrangements have been used effectively by some authorities over the border in England.
- 1.3 The principle & the proposed model has been discussed with the Transformation Programme Board; Chairs & Vice-Chairs of the Area Committees Forum; the Member Services Working Group and the Principal Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.4 Discussions have also taken place with members at 8 workshop sessions which have taken place at various locations in order to ensure the attendance and input of as many members as possible.
- 1.5 The purpose of the sessions was to discuss the principle of establishing the Area Fora. To provide context & background to the workshop, the principles behind the proposals were explained along with some thoughts on the practical application.
- 1.6 Following the workshops on the members Services Working Group's recommendation, the Principal Scrutiny Committee decided to recommend to the Council that we should establish a network of Area Fora to replace the Area Committees in the new Council from May 2012 on the lines noted in the report which they considered.

- 1.7 Following that decision concern was expressed regarding the concept by some members at the Council, and that the Area Committees had not had the opportunity to discuss the matter and the Council therefore decided to further consider the idea of establishing area fora to take the place of Area Committees in order to allow the area committees to consider the issue.
- 1.8 The three area committees will consider the issue in March with a view to submitting their views to the new Council in May.
- 1.9 It would appear that there are two issues which need to be considered –
- The principle of establishing area fora;
 - Should they be in place of or in addition to the area committees;

and these two issues are considered separately below

2.0 The principle of establishing Area Fora

- 2.1 Fundamentally, the Council's purpose is to deliver quality services to our citizens and in doing so we should know what it is that creates public value for them – that is to say what matters to them. Quite often, an especially at times of financial retrenchment solutions have to be found to problems which entail difficult choices and there is some evidence that better solutions are found having also aired the matter with the communities affected.
- 2.2 The problem with the current way in which public services are provided is that they tend to develop from top down considerations of what is best for our citizens with the result that services tend to be fixed & standardised, without recognising that what matters to our citizens can vary from individual to individual and from area to area.
- 2.3 The nature of our society is also changing to the extent that the traditional model of representative democracy is not acceptable and there is an expectation for us to change to the model of participatory democracy.
- 2.4 We should bear in mind the view expressed by Gwynedd's citizens in the MORI survey in which 29% indicated that they would wish to have a greater say in the decisions which affect their local area with a further 59% indicating that they too would like a greater say depending upon the issue in question.

- 2.5 The purpose of the area fora would therefore be to ensure that we give them this opportunity and to try and develop local solutions to local problems by working together with the local community. In doing so, it is envisaged that more of Gwynedd's residents & communities will feel that the Council is doing its best for them in addition to encouraging more of Gwynedd's residents & communities to have the confidence to develop their own solutions and be more self-sufficient.
- 2.6 The local councillor obviously has a key role to play in any participatory democracy framework as well as the more traditional representative democracy framework. In creating a caucus of members who can represent a local area, it should strengthen the local member's ability to be a key bridge between the local community and the Council and to be local leaders.
- 2.7 One of the key objectives for the Fora would therefore be to provide 'business intelligence' for the Council (and other agencies) and to try and produce solutions for those issues which have local importance. In the longer term, if they are successful, the intention would be to consider whether we could also provide resources so that the Fora themselves could spend on local priorities.
- 2.8 In general, the benefit which would accrue to the areas from these arrangements would be a structured procedure for ensuring that the local voice is heard when establishing Council activities, and at the same time it would strengthen the role of the local member as a leader within their particular area.

3 How would the Fora work ?

- 3.1 Whilst the actual areas are a matter that need to be discussed with the members, in general it is foreseen that this would create between 8 and 12 areas in order to strike a balance between ensuring that the areas represent natural "communities" and small enough to represent local opinion whilst at the same time being of adequate size to ensure that we do not have too many of them.
- 3.2 Whilst considering the fora's composition, considerable thought was given to their size and nature together with the experiences already gained in the regeneration field along with experiences of other authorities and the obvious wish of members in Gwynedd to ensure that the democratic covenant of the elected member is retained.
- 3.3 Forum membership was discussed and several options were noted.

- Council Members only
 - Council Members + co-opted members from the community
 - Anyone in the community that wished to be a member.
- 3.4 In order to ensure that we respect the fact that the local member has been elected by the electorate to represent them, the favoured model was one where the local members formed a core group with the support of a senior officer who would be tasked with establishing the aspirations and wishes of the locality giving members the main role of leading more extensive meetings which included anyone with an interest in attending a meeting (or meetings) to discuss specific issues being considered.
- 3.5 The Forum would therefore be the attendees of the meetings, and the role of the local members would be to listen to and distil the observations received at such meetings, and to ensure action in conjunction with the appropriate Senior Officer.
- 3.6 This would happen by members meeting informally with a Senior Officer from time to time in order to establish what actions need to be taken and to discuss progress. We would need to ensure that issues raised were actioned and in order to ensure that such was the case, it is hoped that a Head of Service would possibly be responsible for one forum each and work with the members for that area to ensure that action is taken and accountability to the Forum.
- 3.7 The appendix to this report illustrates what would happen to an issue depending on the issue in question.
- 3.8 If the format of the area fora can be kept more informal (bearing in mind that the aim is to ensure local dialogue to express aspirations and wishes rather than having a series of formal committees) we should also be able to minimise the administrative burden.
- 3.9 In establishing Area Fora therefore –
- We are able to ensure that we have a structured process for giving citizens the opportunity to have a say in the issues which affect their area;
 - We would also build upon local members’ ability to act as a bridge between local aspirations and Council policies;
 - This would also lead to better quality decision making;
 - It could also lead to a better understanding amongst our citizens of the constraints with which the Council is faced and the reasons behind decisions;

- It would improve members' ability to ensure that action is taken on problems which are identified and as a result improve the experiences for our citizens.

4 Should the Fora take the place of Area Committees ?

4.1 In the new governance arrangements which will apply in the new Council, some of the area committees' current work will be undertaken by the Cabinet.

4.2 Of the functions currently undertaken by the Area Committees, it is likely they could continue to receive information on what is happening in the Council's services and represent the area's aspirations.

4.3 The idea is that the Area Fora will be able to better represent area aspirations as they will concentrate on smaller and more homogeneous areas creating a smaller group of members who can sit around a table in an informal environment in order to discuss what needs to happen in their area rather than the more formal arrangement of working by committee.

4.4 The experience gained over the past few years suggests that working in small working groups does work effectively.

4.5 If a matter arose which was relevant to a wider area then it would be possible to bring areas together of course.

4.6 In the new governance arrangements, services will be expected to have arrangements for disseminating information on what is happening in their services (possibly on the basis of regular electronic bulletins) and cabinet members will also be expected to have more detailed information and ownership of developments within the portfolio area. They will be expected to convene regular meetings or surgeries and this will allow members to receive information and challenge what is happening in their own areas.

4.7 As a result it is considered that continuing with area committees will only duplicate the provision and in view of the need to ensure that we do not leave any stone unturned in our pursuit of more efficient ways of working if we are to continue to provide quality services to our citizens in times of severe financial constraints, the Principal Scrutiny Committee agreed with this view.

AREA FORUM – FLOW OF ISSUES WHICH COULD ARISE

