

Meeting	THE COUNCIL
Date	28 February, 2013.
Subject	Area Committees.
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Background

This report is submitted following the Council's decision on 21 June 2012 to hold further discussions on the position of the area committees.

1. The discussion on the future of the area committees started in parallel with the discussions on establishing area forums as part of the work on empowering communities. The aim was to empower the local member, to improve engagement with communities, to obtain better outcomes for the area and to make better use of member and officer resources.
2. A comprehensive discussion was held in the full Council on 21 June 2012, and it was agreed to establish a cross-party working group with representation from each area to develop firm proposals for arrangements that would meet members' requirements, and to also consider how to give more power to the area committees.
3. It was agreed to establish area committees for each of the areas of Arfon, Dwyfor and Meirionnydd for a specific period of six months, and to discuss the matter in this meeting of the Council.

Considerations

4. The cross-party Working group has met on two occasions in order to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the area committee bearing in mind the new governance arrangements that we must work to , and it is evident that a number of members feel strongly that the Area identity should be retained, along with the right to discuss matters from this perspective.
5. The working group has noted its views on a number of the Area Committee's strengths, which can be summarised as follows:
 - An opportunity to hold a political discussion based on a sufficiently extensive area but in a smaller forum than the whole Council where no meaningful discussion can take place.

- An opportunity for members to learn about services where they are not a member of the relevant scrutiny committee.
 - Retain the identity of historic areas.
 - A way of applying a local viewpoint when challenging services, rather than the general county view exercised by the Scrutiny Committees, in order to forward any concerns to the relevant Scrutiny Committee or Cabinet member.
6. However, it was also evident that there were some frustrations regarding the area committee arrangements, such as:
- The constitutional reality that they did not have decision-making rights.
 - The difficulty and occasional unwillingness to identify items and submit reports.
 - The impression that it was a 'talking shop' in the guise of a committee.
7. Therefore in looking to the future, the working group considered how the current area committee strengths could be further enhanced, while also addressing any associated hindrances.
8. The working group considered the following options:
- Option 1 - abolish the Area Committees with nothing to replace them.
- Option 2 - abolish the Area Committees and replace them with Area Forums.
- Option 3 - continue with the Area Committees in their current form.
- Option 4 - continue with the Area Committees in modified form.
9. There was unanimous support for Option 4, and the following changes to the existing Committees were agreed in order to add value:
- More informal sessions should be held within areas (without the usual committee shackles) in order to hold a real dialogue and a discussion on an area level.
 - In order to reinforce this, they should be renamed "Area Assembly" in order to recognise the difference between them and the Council's formal committees that can make decisions on issues within their remits.

- In light of the fact that the Arfon Forum is too large to hold a meaningful dialogue it should be changed to 4 areas (2 in Arfon) so that the two “Assemblies” in the Arfon area become similar to Dwyfor and Meirionnydd in terms of size.
- They should act on the basis that a Cabinet Member submits an annual report on what is taking place within his/her service from the perspective of the specific area (unless this is going to happen in the Council) with any action points addressed by the Cabinet Member or referred to a Scrutiny Committee.
- These arrangements should be utilised for training purposes.
- They should be used to consult with members where there is a need to give all members of a specific area an opportunity to provide input to the development of a policy or procedure.
- They should hold annual meetings with community councils/local businesses to act as a bridge between these bodies and the Council.

How would this work in practice?

10. The practical arrangements for calling and managing the Area Assembly would be a matter for the individual area assembly itself to be managed in accordance with general law – it would need to elect a Chairman to chair the meeting and arrange the agenda with the officers but it would be a matter for the Area Assembly to decide the frequency of its meetings (even from meeting to meeting) and what they discuss (bearing in mind that the area committees do not have the power to make decisions on behalf of the Council – their role is to influence)
11. The members support officers would be available to call the meetings (either by e-mail or letter) and note the main issues discussed and the main action points and then to circulate those points to all the members.
12. The shackles of formal Council meetings would not prevent the discussion of urgent items e.t.c.
13. Practically, if a Cabinet Member wanted to develop a scheme that was relevant to a specific area (e.g. the Meirionnydd Employment Plan; Meirionnydd Secondary Schools; Re-organising Public Transport in Dwyfor) the Cabinet Member could use the Area Assembly to work through the aspirations and wishes of the area in developing proposals.
14. If a member wished to raise a service matter relating to that area only (e.g. home care in Arfon) then it would be possible to invite the Cabinet Member to come to the Area Assembly meeting to work through the

problem and to consider whether something can be done about the problem.

Recommendation

15. It is recommended that the Council approves the Cross-party Working Group's unanimous proposal to abolish the Area Committees in their existing form, and move to establish Area Assembly arrangements, to be developed and implemented immediately.

Note

16. This report was discussed at a meeting of the Business Group, February 18, 2013 - and the recommendation was approved. They have also approved that the matter needs to be evaluated again within a year.