

AREA COMMITTEE BOARD

20th November at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Simmons (Chair); Councillors P. Chapman and Johnston

13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (REF: 1)

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Magill, McGarvie and Skepelhorn.

14 MINUTES (REF: 2.1 and 2.2)

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Board held on 12th April 2006 and 18th May 2006 be taken as read, approved as correct records and signed by the Chair.

15 AREA COMMITTEE DEVELOPMENT - UPDATE (REF: 7)

The Head of Local Democracy updated the Committee on the Development of Area Committees.

He reported that a significant amount of work had been undertaken in this area and meetings had taken place with Corporate Directors, the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.

The Head of Local Democracy thanked the Area Committee Support Officer for his hard work and dedication and commented that progress achieved was in the main, due to the efforts of the Area Committee Support Officer.

In considering the future development of Area Committees, Members recognised many factors were involved, such as the Government's White Paper entitled "Strong and Prosperous Communities" and Neighbourhood Partnerships (a report on this subject would be considered by the Executive at its meeting on 27th November 2006). Members commented that it was essential to achieve joined up working between Area Committees, Neighbourhood Partnerships and various other agencies to ensure best use of resources and co-ordinated activity.

All Members were in agreement in respect of the necessity of taking Area Committee/Neighbourhood Working forward, but the mechanics of how this would be achieved were still not yet clear. All agreed that there was significant work to be done, and further agreed that required actions must be prioritised and taken in organised, manageable chunks.

Members considered that significant improvements had been achieved in respect of Area Committees over the past 12 months, due in part to the fact that the meetings were now more aimed at meeting the public's agenda rather than the Council's i.e. Area Committees were no longer used as tick boxes in the

public consultation arena on matters which were of very little or no interest to the public. A very clear message had been received from the public that generally it was local issues that were of interest.

Members considered that the Ward Forums rather than the Area Committees were of greatest interest to the public, and it was widely accepted that in general, people were primarily interested in issues specific to their own very localised areas. Members agreed that Officers should be encouraged to attend the Ward Forums as a matter of course, particularly from areas such as Street Services and Engineering and Transport, as these were service areas about which many of the public's concerns arose.

The Head of Local Democracy commented that there had been a noticeable reduction in questions put to the Police at the main Area Committee, as the Police dealt with the majority of issues during the Ward Forums.

With regard to the role of Corporate Directors and Area Committees, the Chief Executive explained the concerns the Corporate Directors had raised, namely the additional time pressures incurred by activities related to Area Committees. He further commented that although the benefits of Area Committees were clearly recognised, the benefit of attendance by the Corporate Directors themselves, rather than suitable substitutes was unclear. Members commented that given that Corporate Directors were employed to serve the citizens of Luton, it was vitally important that Corporate Directors got to know Luton and its diverse communities, particularly given that none of them actually lived in Luton.

A Member commented that given the high profile roles of Corporate Directors, they should attend the Committees and the Forums to share their vision, expertise and experience with the local communities they were employed to serve. Attending Area Committees gave Corporate Directors a chance to be seen at the "rock face" and also presented a learning opportunity for them.

Members considered their future roles and a comment was made that the Government's White Paper was "woolly" and in places contradictory. With regard to Members being seen as community leaders, they commented that this was in theory a good idea, but consideration would need to be given to the practicalities.

For many Councillors, the role of Councillor was in addition to full time employment, so the issue of support would be key. The Head of Local Democracy commented that it was important to professionalise the role of Councillors both strategically and in terms of community leadership. It was also pivotal that Councillors should serve their communities, and not the Council. Members and Officers should channel their skills together to let the Council know public feelings. It was also considered that the creation of Area Committee Plans would be very beneficial.

An enquiry was made if it would be beneficial for Members to have additional responsibilities in seeking solutions to issues raised at Area

Committees. The Area Committee Support Officer commented that he would welcome Members support in chasing up issues raised in Forums etc, and further commented that pressure applied by Members in their roles as community leaders could speed up the process of getting results.

Resolved: (i) That with immediate effect, Ward Forum feedback be removed from Area Committee Agendas, with an additional 15 minutes to be allocated to the Ward Forums prior to the commencement of the main Area Committee meeting.

(ii) That with immediate effect, Corporate Directors be advised that they may send substitutes to attend the Ward Tours on their behalf, but it was the express wish of the Area Committee Board and Chief Executive that they attend their allocated Area Committees, including the Ward Forums, and participate actively in the meetings.

(iii) That the Area Committee Support Officer be requested to undertake a “mapping” exercise to establish:

- Organisations working in local communities and
- The services provided, including details of
 - How and where and to whom the services were provided
 - Frequency of meetings
 - Why they provide particular services

(iv) That the Area Committee Support Officer be thanked for his hard work and dedication in improving the Area Committees for the benefit of local communities.

16 AREA COMMITTEE PROGRESS (REF: 8)

The Area Committee Support Officer reported on the progress of the Area Committees.

In respect of the Area Tours, Members were advised that these had now been arranged up to April 2007 and details had been circulated appropriately.

The Area Committee Support Officer advised the Area Committees budgets currently held healthy balances, but advised that the Executive had expressed concern with regard to the low level of expenditure from two of the Area Committees. A Member commented that in some of the more affluent areas, very few requests for funding from the Area Committee budgets were received.

Members considered it was important to utilise available budgets, as carry over to the next financial year of remaining budgets could not be guaranteed. It was agreed to ask attendees at the next cycle of Ward Forums what they thought the budget available should be spent on. The Head of Local Democracy commented that requests should be for “one-off” awards, as recurrent spending

from Area Committee budgets could not be guaranteed. It was further stressed that Area Committee budgets were not a replacement for services that should be provided by the various service areas.

A Member suggested that databases of local voluntary organisations could be contacted, but this was decided against as this could “open the floodgates” for requests and Voluntary Organisation grants were already available. The Area Committee Support Officer commented that requests from small community organisations only should be considered.

In respect of Ward Forums, the Area Committee Support Officer advised Members in respect of the difficulties faced in securing suitable venues and commented that although it was a cause for concern for some Members, it was not always possible to hold Area Committees in the scheduled host ward. Some venues including schools refused to allow the Area Committees to take place at all, and Members commented that this was very disappointing as Area Committees were an important aspect in involving local communities.

The Area Committee Support Officer highlighted the difficulties faced in securing facilitators at the Ward Forums – only a very small number of people offered this support. He advised that Gold Managers had been approached to offer assistance, but to date, only one expression of interest had been received. The Chief Executive commented that work was underway on reviewing the Gold Managers modules, and an element could be included to make facilitating a compulsory module. The Area Committee Support Officer further commented that in many instances, it was appropriate for Members to facilitate for their own wards, as they would have the best knowledge of what was going on in the local area.

A Member enquired how the Area Committee Support Officer arrived at the number of attendees present at the Area Committees, and whether the figure included Officers. The Area Committee Support Officer responded that a head count in each of the Ward Forums took place of the public only. He drew attention to the fact that some members of the public only stayed for the Ward Forums, and others did not sign in at all.

The Area Committee Support Officer reported on a request by two Areas Committees for a move towards e-communications. The Chief Executive advised Members that a Council-wide approach with regard to e-communication was being developed (the Information Management Strategy -Matrix) and that a significant level of transactions currently took place on-line.

The Head of Local Democracy commented that e-communication was a way forward, but it was essential that access to information remained multi-channelled.

The Area Committee Support Officer commented that all documents relating to Area Committees and Ward Forums, including Project Proposal

Application Forms, were available on the Council's website which was regularly updated.

Resolved: (i) That the report (Ref: 8) be noted.

(ii) That the Area Committee Support Officer be requested to report to the next meeting of the Board the view of Ward Forum attendees in respect of desired areas for budget expenditure.

(Note: The meeting ended at 7.50pm)