

GETTING CLOSER TO COMMUNITIES

LOCAL AREA FORUMS:

DRAFT CONSTITUTION, TERMS OF REFERENCE AND OPERATING ARRANGEMENTS

A BACKGROUND

- 1 Local decision-making has been part of the County Council's structure since 2000. At various stages since then, our arrangements have evolved, as learning and confidence in the benefits of this way of working has grown. The former Local Area Committees have played a central role in this evolution. The establishment of Local Area Forums (LAF) is the next stage on this journey and will meet one of the objectives in the Getting Closer to Communities Programme (GC2C).
- 2 The increased focus on locality working is becoming the norm for all local authorities. In developing the framework for LAFs we have had regard to examples from elsewhere and will continue to draw on best practice and innovation where this meets our needs.
- 3 Locality working and community involvement in shaping service planning and delivery is also becoming increasingly important as we prepare for the Comprehensive Area Assessment which will be in place from April 2009. The County Council was praised for its vision with regard to its GC2C programme at the last Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) inspection and it will be of greater importance for the future as we aim to put the needs of different communities in Bucks at the centre of our service planning and delivery. The GC2C Strategy has recently been revised and the five Aims reaffirmed, with some changes to the linked objectives. One of the key proposals for implementation during 2008 is the roll out of Local Area Forums (LAFs) across each of the 19 local areas. This has been embedded in the refresh of the Corporate Plan. The LAFs will also be the "Level 2" forums within the Pathfinder (the Agreement to improve two tier working across the County and District Council in Bucks) Community Engagement pilot for the Wycombe district area (and any other Pathfinder pilots). In Wycombe District LAFs will be known as Local Community Partnerships (LCP); the term LAF is used throughout this document to also apply to LCPs, subject to any local variations agreed as part of the pilot
- 4 The need to understand and measure outcomes for local communities is also an important aspect of the new Local Area Agreement (LAA) framework. Our understanding of local community needs will be the starting point for the LAA, service planning, budgetary processes and central to our performance management.
- 5 The 19 Local Area Forums will replace the 4 District based Local Committees. The County Council is using the 19 local areas as building blocks to plan and deliver services. In addition, with the District Councils and other partners as appropriate, the LAFs will also be used to draw together various forms of

community engagement taking place within the area (ie: the LAFs will have an overview of community engagement for local community planning purposes but will not be the principal means of undertaking this locally). It is, therefore, sensible to base local decision making around the same areas.

B CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP

6. The *****Local Area Forum is a joint forum of the three tiers of local government in Buckinghamshire, the County Council, *****District Council and representatives of the following Parish Councils:

- XXXXX
- XXXXX
- XXXXX

In law, LAFs are unincorporated associations with written constitutions

Membership also comprises the following other partners (to be agreed locally)

- XXXXX
- XXXXX
- XXXXX

C THE PURPOSE OF LOCAL AREA FORUMS

7 The **purpose** of the LAFs is to strengthen local democratic accountability by empowering locally elected Councillors to take decisions, shape and influence service delivery and Council priorities in the local community area. There will be one Local Area Forum for each of the 19 local community areas

8 The **basic principles** governing the operation of the LAFs are as follows:

- Within the agreed corporate framework for LAFs set out in this paper, the freedom and flexibility exists for them to deliver on the needs of the local area
- The operation of the LAFs should be tailored to meet local needs, this may require cross-LAF working (eg: across district boundaries or for the whole of a district) on certain issues
- Success will require effective and tailored local partnerships and an inclusive approach to engagement
- In particular, the operation of the LAF will need to be sensitive and complementary to existing arrangements for local community engagement and community planning (this will require discussion and agreement at the appropriate local level)
- LAFs should focus on consensus building around local needs and identify what can be delivered locally from the list of local aspirations
- Collective ownership of the delivery of local community priorities across the various partners will be essential to achieve credibility with local people and to make things happen
- LAFs will need to operate with a sense of realism about what can be delivered (particularly in the early days) and to manage community expectations

- All BCC Services (and partners where possible) will be expected to devolve functions and budgets for local decision making where this makes sense
- LAFs should encourage local community engagement and participation within and outside meetings, ensuring that all voices are heard.

D FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL AREA FORUMS

9 The GC2C Strategy sets out three broad roles for LAFs:

- **Local Community Planning:** shaping responses to the needs of the local area
- **Empowered Local Decision Making:** within the delegated functions and delegated budgets
- **Influencing and taking action on local issues**

10 Based on these broad roles, the functions of the LAFs are set out in the Table below:

LOCAL AREA FORUMS – FUNCTIONS	
1	<p>Setting Priorities for the Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop, as the basis for collective action, a shared understanding of local issues and priorities for improving the quality of life of the area. • To agree a Local Community Plan for the area, which reflects local priorities, the delivery of County and District Community Plans and the Local Area Agreement within the area. • To oversee the effectiveness of public services within the community area in meeting local needs, informed by residents' feedback, and to recommend changes to service policy as appropriate. • To consult and engage local people and local stakeholders on the priorities and policies of local service providers, including the desired level and range of services and major service developments affecting the area and annual budget proposals. (<i>Note: examples of this would be waste, major development proposals, school closures</i>).
2	<p>Empowered Decision Making with Funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To take decisions on matters devolved* from the County Council, District Council and other partner organisations, including town and parish councils. • To take decisions on budgets allocated* by the County Council, District Council and other partners. (<i>*Note: this will be subject to negotiation with Services and partners</i>) • To inform the relevant organisations on changes to the allocation of funding in the local community area to more effectively meet local needs
3.	<p>Taking Action on Community Issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To oversee community engagement* in the area, to co-ordinate local consultation events, to promote and extend community empowerment in the area and to ensure feedback on issues raised.

(*Note: this is defined as levels 1 and 2 in the Community Engagement Pathfinder project)

- To refer issues of local concern to the relevant organisation or partnership for attention, to monitor action and negotiate the resolution of issues.
- To undertake a local scrutiny role on service policy, performance or issues of local concern*, including co-option onto local **overview and scrutiny committees** for specific reviews and dealing with **Councillor Calls for Action** and local petitions. (*Note: the local scrutiny function will need to be exercised proportionately and with regard to the programme of Overview and Scrutiny Committees to avoid duplication)

E OPERATIONAL MATTERS

16 Joint Forums

The LAFs will be joint forums of the County Council with the District Councils, local councils and other partners. This is entirely consistent with Pathfinder objectives. The basic principle is equality of voice and participation in the LAFs. However, under present Government legislation, for the Forum to be a properly constituted committee, parish councils and other partners cannot be **formal** members of LAFs for the purpose of voting on the allocation of funding. The County Council is seeking a change in the law to remove this anomaly. (See further below on voting).

A list outlining the specific functions to be included along with the relevant Head of Service and Local Authority is attached as Annex A

17 Membership

Local Authority Membership: all of the County Councillors and District Councillors in the local community area will be invited to attend meetings of the LAF. Representatives of town and parish councils for the area will also attend LAFs (see further below)

Other Members: representatives of police, fire and rescue and health, voluntary and community sector and other key local organisations (eg: local businesses) would also attend the LAFs .

In relation to the attendance of parish and town councils, the County Council is looking at good practice elsewhere and working with Bucks Association of Local Councils (BALC) to develop the arrangements to allocate representatives of local councils to local area forums. One option might be that each Local Area Forum might decide the appropriate number of PC representatives for their area – these then might be nominated by BALC or the Local Area Association.

In keeping with the principle of reflecting local needs, in addition to the suggested core membership. The local county councillors and the LAFs will be able to determine membership of their forum. The LAFs will also be free to invite other partners and stakeholders to meetings as appropriate for specific topics. However they would not necessarily be members of the Committee but (at the Chairman's discretion) might be invited to speak on relevant issues

18 **Chairmanship:**

In the initial phase, the Chairman will be a County Council Member with the Vice-Chairman normally being a member of the District Council. The intention is to move to rotating chairs in subsequent phases, for example, where a District Council also devolves functions and budgets to the LAFs

19 **Voting**

The basic premise of the LAFs is to reach consensus on the issues affecting the local area and it is hoped that voting will not be required. However, in the event that voting is required on issues relating to devolved budgets and services. The basic principle is equality of voice and participation in the LAFs. The legal responsibility for monetary allocations devolved by either the County Council or the District Council is devolved to the relevant Head of Service. Therefore, whilst it would be inappropriate for a formal and binding vote to take place in relation to those sums, the Chairman will ensure that the views of the Forum are conveyed to the appropriate Council, who will not normally act against the Forum's wishes

20 **Unparished areas**

Only a small amount of the County is unparished, the town area of High Wycombe.. However, in the unparished areas in High Wycombe town, the Town Committee will form the core non-County Council membership of the Wycombe Local Community Partnership (LCP) but other members may also be nominated as appropriate by the forum.

21 **Public engagement**

The LAFs will be open to the press and public. All LAFs will allow a 20 minute period for public questions before the start of each meeting. Members of the public should be encouraged to submit their questions in advance of the meeting to facilitate a full answer. In addition the Forums are encouraged to promote public attendance and engagement eg: allowing members of the public to speak on particular items, present petitions.

22 **Support for the LAFs**

As these will be joint forums it is proposed to ask partners to share the costs of the Forums (eg: officer support, provision of meeting rooms). Lead Support for the meetings will be provided by the County Council's Lead Area Officer and Area Co-ordinator, supported by a representative of Democratic Services, who will provide secretarial support to the Forum and constitutional advice. The funding of corporate costs (e.g. the cost of advertising meetings, logistic and support consequences for small service areas in the event of having to attend 19 forums) has been included in the approved budget.

23 **Frequency of meetings**

As a starting point, a 3 monthly cycle of meetings is proposed. Meetings of the LAF would normally be held at a location in the community area. Special or

joint meetings can be called to consider issues of concern outside the normal cycle of meetings

24 **Sub groups**

LAFs are free to establish time limited working groups, but Officer support for these will be limited.

25 **Agenda Management**

This will develop over time. Agendas will need to be set by Co-ordinator in conjunction with the Chairman, Vice Chairman and Lead Officer. The basic principle is that the LAF should set an agenda that reflects local priorities and issues of concern. There will be topics that are common to all LAFs, such as devolved budgets. Each LAF may hold an annual “community conference” to help to set the priorities for the local community plan with increased participation by local groups and residents.

Chairs of LAFs may wish to meet from time to time to share experiences and good practice

26 **Reporting of Issues**

Various mechanisms will be required to ensure that the LAFs are connected into the countywide community planning process and that issues discussed by LAFs are reported to the appropriate place. This could include:

- Circulation of Minutes to partners
- Local Community Plan issues being included in the area performance management system
- Attendance of LAF Chairmen at County and District LSP annual conferences
- Annual reports from LAFs

These will be addressed with partners and agreed on a subject by subject basis

F DEVOLVED FUNCTIONS AND BUDGETS

- 27 It is proposed to adopt the existing arrangements that are in place for the County Council’s Transportation services for LAFs. Under this arrangement the Local Committee advises the Head of Service who then implements the decision. This is the simplest and most effective model which from past experience works effectively. The arrangement will be that the LAF advises the relevant Head of Service, who then implements the decision.

Further detailed guidance will be produced on matters relating to budgets covering, for example:

- Relationship with Financial Regulations
- Policy constraints on decision making
- Arrangements for considering and influencing the annual spend and budget of partners in the area

G LOCAL COMMUNITY PLANNING

- 28 One of the roles of LAFs will be “Setting Priorities for the Area”. Central to this is the lead role of LAFs in overseeing the development and delivery of area based Local Community Plans. These will set out the local priorities for the community based on parish plans (where they exist), other local community planning information (eg: revitalisation groups in Chiltern), needs assessment and other quantitative and qualitative information from local residents. These will feed into (and reflect) the objectives of the county and district councils and other partners.
- 29 It must be ensured that the local plans fit together with the **county and district sustainable community strategies** and the Local Area Agreement (see the diagram at Annex B). The County and District Councils Policy Officers Group are developing a planning framework for community planning which will form the basis of these arrangements. They will evolve over time across the 19 local community areas.

H LINKS WITH OTHER LOCAL WORKING

- 30 The Pathfinder Joint Improvement Board has agreed to pilot joint community engagement arrangements in the Wycombe Area. In Wycombe District LAFs will be known as a Local Community Partnership for the purposes of the pilot. LAFs in other parts of the County would/will? be running alongside the arrangements in place in Wycombe and there will be the need for agreement about differences of approach to specific items e.g. the composition of the forums to meet different needs and existing local arrangements. The LAFs will also need to take account of the Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAG's) and other community engagement mechanisms. Currently there are many more NAGs than LAFs and this is likely to continue. Thames Valley Police have agreed to work in partnership towards these aims.
- 31 The development of LAFs with broader functions than previous local committees and based on smaller geographic areas will help focus debate on local issues and provide opportunities for there to be ‘something for everyone’ at each meeting. They will also enhance the local Member’s local community leadership role. The change to LAFs does not preclude cross LAF working or specific service areas holding events on a wider geographic basis if that is more relevant. At district level the local strategic partnership will also play a lead role, particularly in bringing together local priorities into a district wide picture. For example:
- Issues which would go to the LAF:
 - Rural Grass Cutting
 - Switching off street lights
 - BCC Green infrastructure plan
 - Travel planning in the community
 - Transportation Delegated budget
 - Issues where a cross LAF meeting might be needed:
 - Chesham and Amersham Transportation Study
 - Bus Strategy

- Issues which would go to the LSP:
 - South East Plan
 - Waste Development Plan
 - Extended Services Programme
 - BCC Green infrastructure plan

I PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

- 32 A key objective is to provide consistent and prompt follow up or feedback when issues are reported to Services and/or at local area forums. To help address this, a local issue performance management system is being put in place. This will enable us to capture the issues raised in each of the 19 areas (from a variety of sources – LAFs, NAGs, Parishes etc), refer them for action and follow up progress. The Area Coordinators will manage the system for their local area(s).
- 33 The key officers in supporting the Local Area Forums will be the Lead Area Officers and the Area Coordinators. However, it is crucial that all Officers involved with frontline services support local Members and attend meetings. Locality working is a key corporate priority for the Council and all Officers must play their part in delivering our objectives. This will be reinforced via the performance management framework.

J CONSTRAINTS

- 34 LAFs will take time to become established and will require the commitment of all partners to participate, learn and evolve to meet the different needs of the 19 local community areas. Whilst there are clear benefits of working together at a more local level, there are a range of constraints that will need to be borne in mind. These include the following:
- *The additional costs involved in working with 19 LAFs:* the County Council has made additional budget provision in recognition of the wider benefits of locality working
 - *There are some things that it is not appropriate or practical to do 19 times:* this will need to be addressed on a case by case basis
 - *There are some issues where a District wide view is needed:* arrangements for LAFs do not preclude district wide meetings
 - *There is a balance between getting full local representation at LAFs and having so many people around the table that business cannot be conducted effectively:* this will need local discussion, but the LAF is not the only mechanism for bringing together partners to take action on local issues
 - *There are many questions and uncertainties about how LAFs will work:* this is a new way of working, this document provides a framework but not a blueprint; it will be for each area to evolve through experience

K ADDITIONAL RESOURCE/INFORMATION?

- 35 Further guidance will be issued from time to time as our learning grows. There will also be a “*Guide to Local Area Forums*” with more detailed information, which is aimed at Officers supporting LAFs.

ANNEX A: Local Decision Making

SERVICE	LOCAL DECISION MAKING
Arts/Culture	Consider specific local grants/projects.
Bus Stops/Shelters	Local Area Forums could decide on location of bus stop.
Children's Play Areas	Local decision making with regard to opening hours.
Community Safety (e.g. Domestic Violence, CCTV, anti-social behaviour)	Local decision making with regard to addressing local priorities e.g. CCTV.
Community Planning and Regeneration	Local regeneration schemes, parish planning etc. Develop local community Plans and provide input into the community planning processes
Communications and Council Newspapers	Local Input and focus for publication
Dial a Ride	Consider input from local area forum re local services
Drugs and Substance Misuse	Monitoring/scrutiny could be local consideration.
Early Years and Childcare	Decision making with regard to opening hours, location and development of services.
Environmental Improvements	Input via local forums. Potential for small scale issues to be agreed at local area forum level
Gritting and Snow Clearance	Opportunity here for monitoring and some areas may wish to go above countywide standards of gritting.
Grounds Maintenance	Local decisions with regard to improving beyond minimum standards. Schools have the opportunity to decide on level of service.
Highways	Potential for local decision by local forums and local influence via monitoring and scrutiny and prioritisation of local maintenance schemes.
Household Waste and Recycling Centres	Potential for decision making around opening hours, sites for provision. Also opportunity for local monitoring.
Local History and Archives	Some potential for decision making re local exhibitions and opening times.
Museums	Some potential for decision making re local exhibitions and opening times
Parks, Country	Opportunity for local decision making with regard to improvements above agreed standards. Local scrutiny of services and local inspection via Parishes is a possibility. Consultation re charges
Property	Consultation on local issues
Public Service Points	Decisions locally with regard to opening hours.
Public Transport	Local forums could consider local transport issues and monitoring of transport initiatives.
Residential Homes for Older People	Influence major decisions via forums e.g. closure
Rights of Way and Countryside	Could be considered at local forums

SERVICE	LOCAL DECISION MAKING
Road Safety	Local Community Forums potential for local road safety issues.
Sewers and drains	Could be considered at local community forums
Street Lighting	Local community forums could decide on additional lighting e.g. as part of prioritising local accessibility planning and community safety work. Scrutiny of local service delivery.
Tourist Information	Local decisions with regard to opening hours and location of access points.
Trading Standards and Registration	Some issues may be relevant to input/consultation from local forums e.g. viable location for Registration Outstations, Trading Standards No Door Step Selling Zones and activities to combat the sale of age restricted products. However enforcement decision making could not be devolved.
Traffic Management	Local scrutiny of hotspots with opportunity for local community forum to consider improving and influencing strategic delivery. Local consultation on scheme engineering would be appropriate. Local decision making on prioritising minor local traffic management improvements (funded from the delegated budget).
Transport Planning	Input via local forum and local transport plans
Tree Enquiries, Management & Safety	Input from local forums
Tree Protection (Planning) Hedgerows	Input from local forum
Voluntary Sector Development	Input from local forum
Waste and recycling	Input from local forum
Youth Offending Service	Input into general issues

LOCAL COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS



