

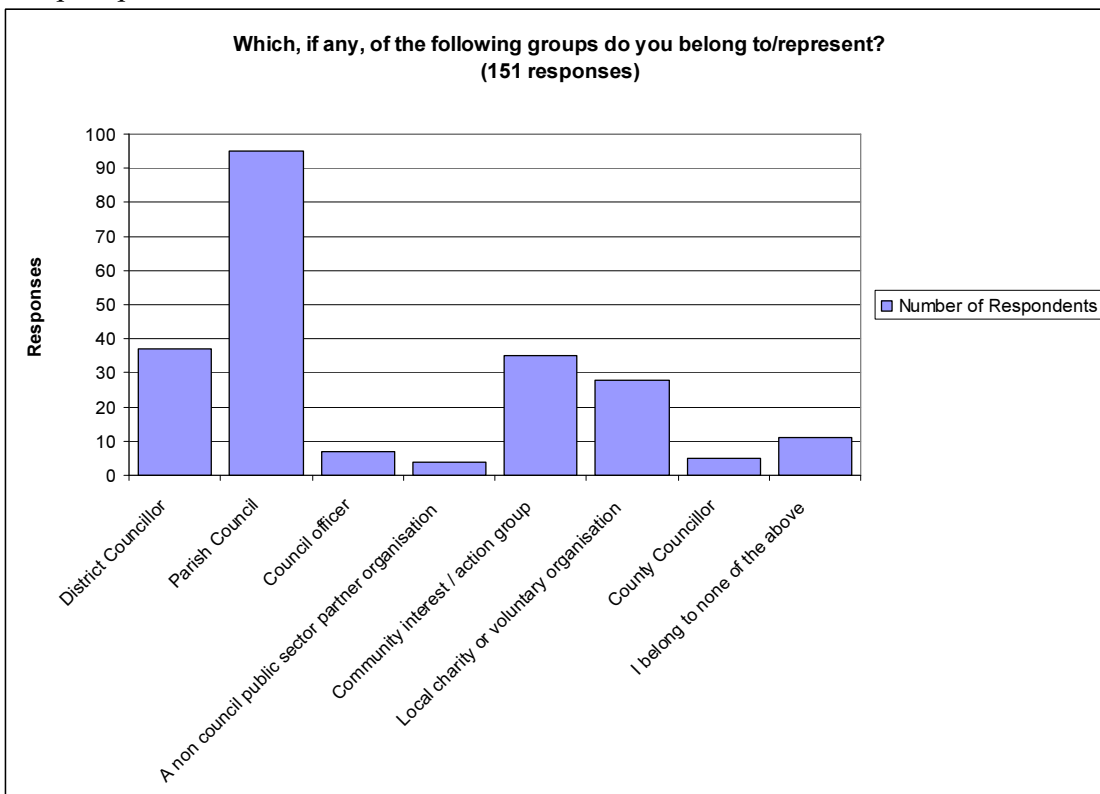
Survey of Local Area Forum Attendees: Results

Background

The online survey of LAF attendees was open for four weeks from 20th April to 18th May. A link to the survey was emailed to the LAF attendee list maintained by Democratic Services. The Buckinghamshire Association of Local Councils (BALC) also emailed the survey to their distribution list. Links to the survey were also available on the BCC Scrutiny LAF Review webpages, and this webpage was promoted by a press release and by Community Impact Bucks, using their website and blog.

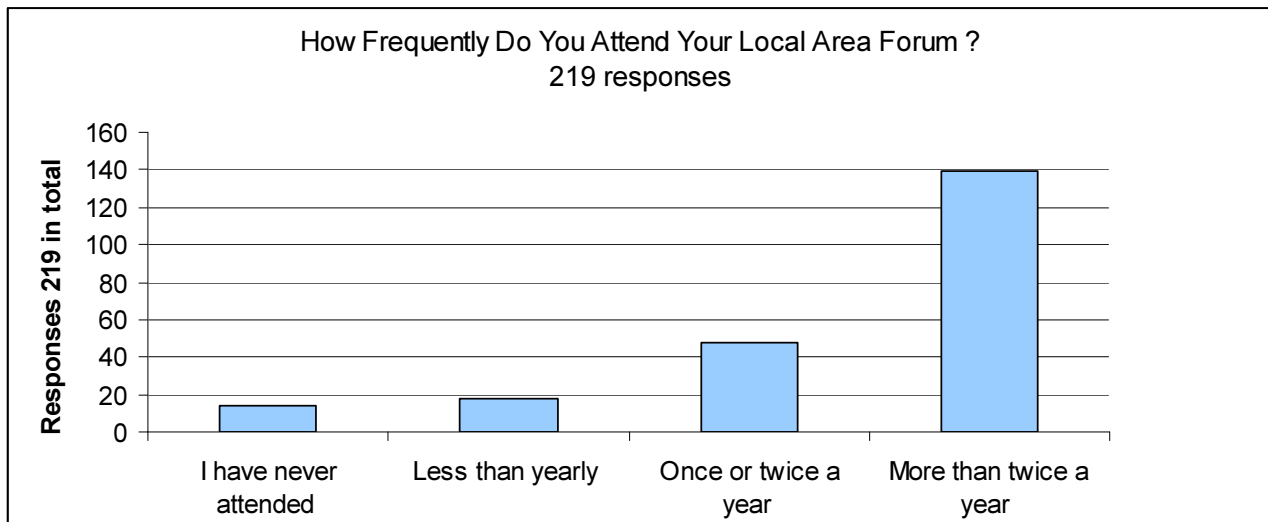
227 people answered the first question, with later questions having as few as 151 respondents. 51% (116) of the respondents completed the survey as an individual, whilst 49% (111) completed it on behalf of an organisation. In addition to this a further 10 review responses were received in writing, mostly from various Parish Councils.

Groups represented



Respondents came from a broad range of groups. A number of respondents belong to more than one group and were able to indicate all the groups they were affiliated with. 63% of respondents were a Parish Councillor or represented a Parish Council, and this was the largest group represented. District Councillors, Community interest/action groups, and local charity/voluntary groups were also well represented (each group having between 18-25% of survey respondents). Council officers and non-council public sector partner organisations are a relatively small proportion of LAF attendees and so the low number of respondents from these was unsurprising. The number of responses from County Councillors was disappointingly low.

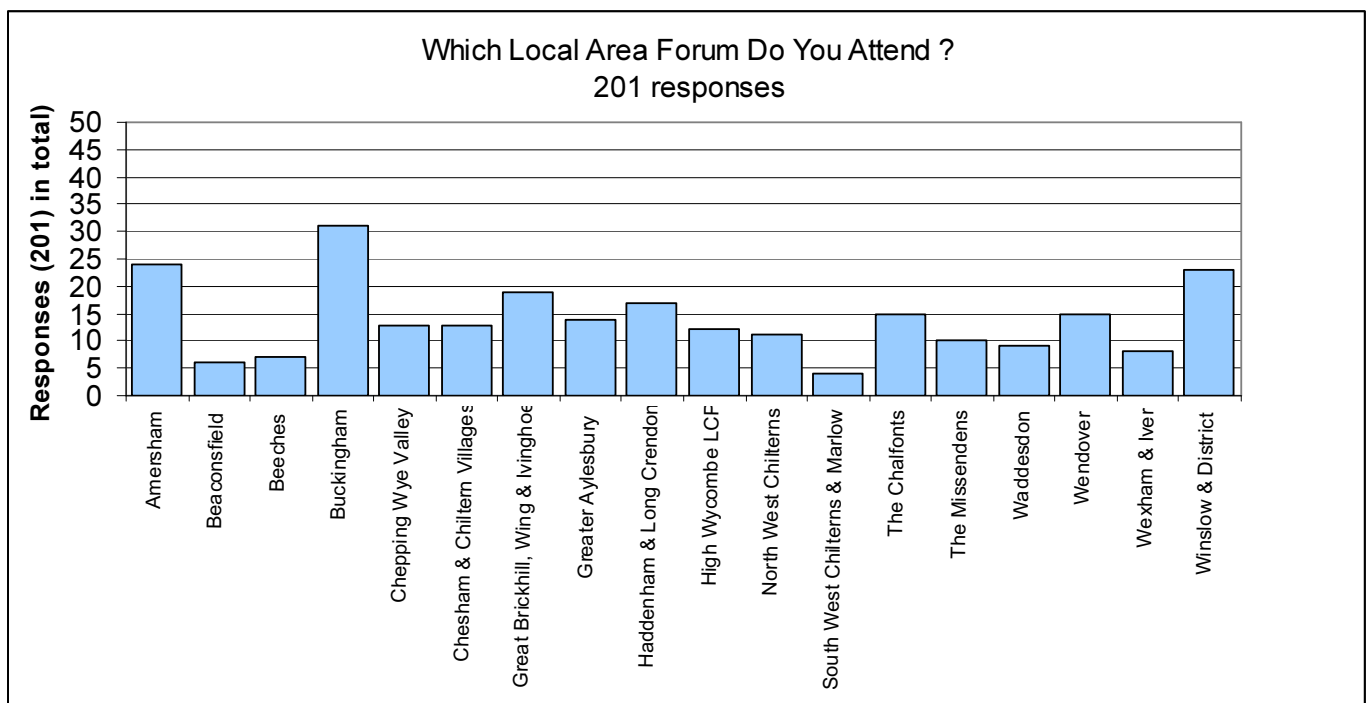
Frequency of LAF attendance



As can be seen from the graph the majority of respondents were regular LAF attendees with over 85% attending at least annually, and 63% attending more than twice a year.

The 14 people who indicated they had never attended a LAF were directed away from the rest of the survey and asked to submit comments on LAFs by email.

LAF Representation

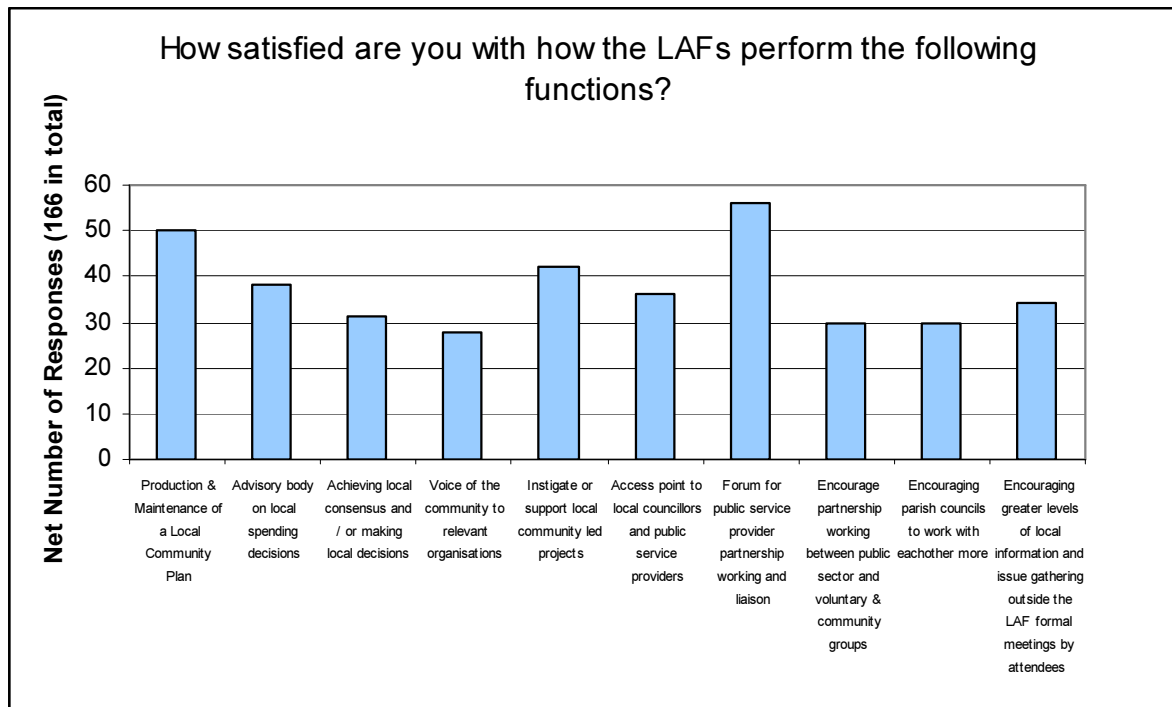


All 18 of Local Community Areas with a LAF were represented among the respondents.

Buckingham (31), Amersham (24) and Winslow & District (23) were the most represented, with each representing between 11 and 15% of the sample. South West Chilterns & Marlow (4), Beaconsfield (6) and Beeches (7) were the least represented, with each representing between 2 and 3.5% of the sample.

LAF effectiveness and functions

Graph below shows the net satisfaction with various functions performed by LAFs (calculated by subtracting the total satisfied and very satisfied responses from the total dissatisfied and very dissatisfied responses).



Overall there were high levels of satisfaction expressed with all the functions LAFs are considered to perform. The highest levels of satisfaction were recorded for a ‘forum for public service provider partnership and liaison’ (+56), the production and maintenance of a Local Community Plan’ (+50) and ‘instigate and support community led projects’ (+42). Lower levels of net satisfaction were expressed for ‘voice of the community to relevant organisations’ (+28), Encouraging partnership working between public sector and voluntary & community groups (+30), and Encouraging Parish councils to work with each other more (+30).

Reasons for dissatisfaction

Reasons given for dissatisfaction with the functions LAFs are performing were varied and wide ranging. This is to be expected given the variability across LAFs in terms of the functions they have taken on, and the diversity of those who attend, the areas represented and local issues present. There were however some common themes evident.

The size of the budget delegated to LAFs was a common issue, with a number of people feeling this was too small, and dissatisfaction with how it was reduced in 2011/12. Lack of budget and powers was seen as a reason for a lack of buy in and greater attendance.

The control and content of the LAF agendas was another common issue. Various comments were received of agendas not being of local interest and imposed on the LAF rather than decided by it. This included uninvited presentations being made to the LAF from service providers. Some felt agendas were dominated by certain topics such as transport and funding issues, other felt some issues were discussed that were not appropriate for the LAF level, some that LAFs should focus on areas they can achieve in, and that content should be tailored to maximise and interest and thus attendance from parish councils.

The way LAF budgets were allocated seems to have bred negative feeling with people feeling these process needed to be more transparent and fairer. Some were unhappy that not all group representatives could vote and others pointed to overly complex and onerous systems and processes. Linked to this could be the perception by some that parish councils are not working together at some LAFs and are competing with each other for funding rather than working together and reaching consensus on area wide issues.

A common criticism was that LAFs were all talk and no action. This applied to the LAF meetings themselves but also issues passed from the LAF to the County Council. Some also pointed to the slow process of the LAF arriving at an outcome or identifying local priorities.

Some issues seemed to stem from BCC being too top down and going against the grain of localism. In addition to the already mentioned issues of imposed agenda items and budget decisions, the unilateral decision to reduced meeting frequencies from 4 to 3 times as year was a source of dissatisfaction.

Uncertainty of LAF role among attendees is an issue, but again this could be affected by the fact that some LAFs are performing different roles than others. Generally it would seem there needs to be greater clarity of LAF purpose, which could help overcome feelings that the LAF role could be better performed by other methods or is duplicating existing methods/meetings.

The general representativeness of meetings was a common concern. Some felt LAFs were dominated by a vocal minority (pressure group, a larger or more organised parish/town) or the 'same old faces' which had implication for the matters discussed, priorities identified and budget decisions. Others felt the meetings were undermined by a lack of attendance from various groups including the general public, Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and parish councils. A lack of district council buy in was also highlighted. Greater attendance and buy in would not only improve the repetitiveness of meetings but also help reduce the perception that LAFs are a 'BCC thing'

Linked to the limited public/wider attendance of LAFs was the lack of awareness or low profile of LAFs, with people thinking information on and from them should be more available and/or communicated better.

Some LAFs have suffered from Councillors bringing politics into the meetings, both party politics and District/County Councils politics.

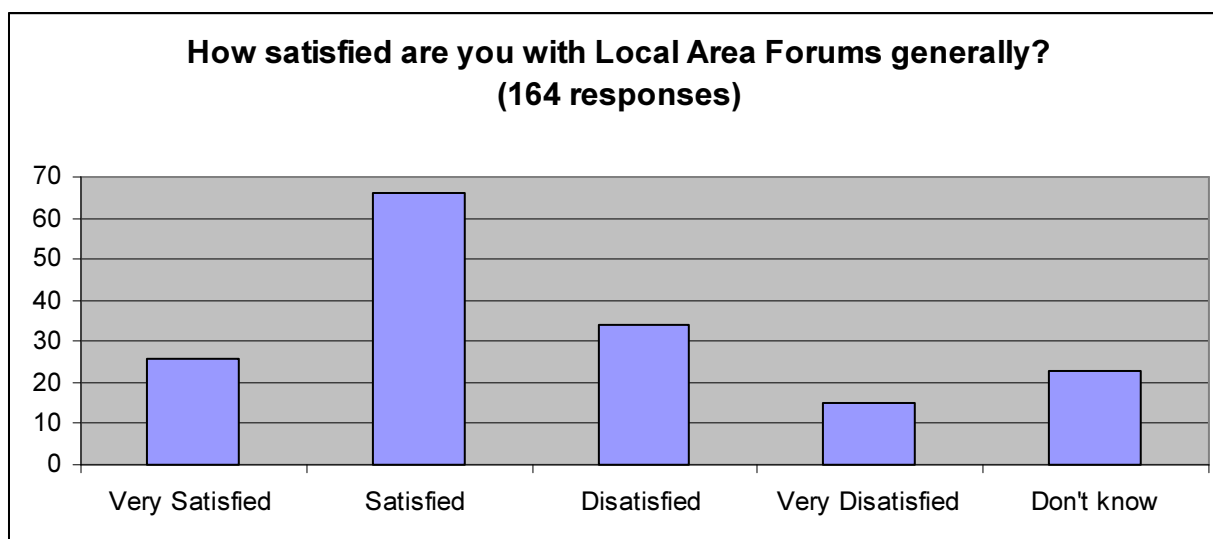
A source of dissatisfaction in its own right but also probably a factor in other issues such as management of what is discussed and LAFs being more than just talk, is the role of chairman. Some pointed to a lack of rotation, poor management of meetings, and ignorance of wider local issues. It is recognised that some chairmen have been more effective than others, and some may benefit from training, however it is undeniable that it is an important factor in LAF performance. Particularly the chair, but also other county and district members have a role in making all attendees feel welcome and encouraging partnership and strategic working.

Other issues raised but to a lesser frequency included dissatisfaction with the local community boundaries, a concern that BCC relied too much on LAFs rather than consulting directly with parish/town councils, a lack of a published updated local community plan and a timetable for refreshing local priorities.

Additional objectives or purposes that could be performed

Various roles suggested but none in any great number. Some that LAFs were already encouraged to do such as bringing together public sector with VCS, debate and discuss local issues with possible submission of LAF wide response, and an access point to local public service providers. Others included to facilitate collective negotiation by local groups for services supplied, being more than just an 'advisory' body so having greater powers delegated, and to coordinate service delegation by BCC to individual or clusters of parish councils.

Overall Satisfaction with LAFs



Over 55% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied generally with the LAFs they attended, although some 30% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

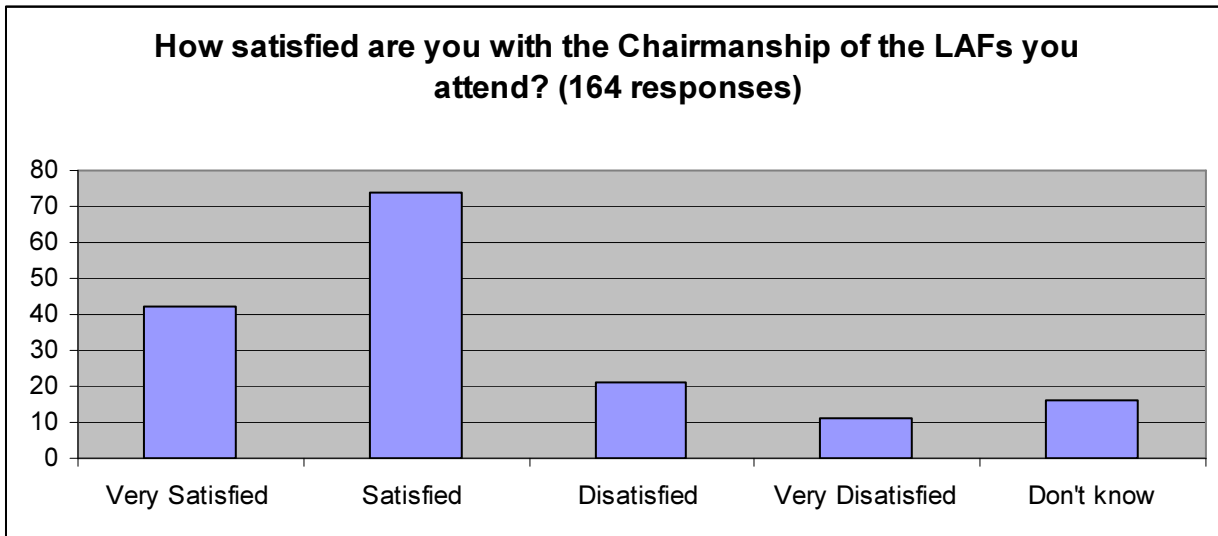
Reasons for dissatisfaction

The most prominent reasons given for the overall dissatisfaction with the LAFs were them being poorly chaired, the agenda not being decided locally with content of local interest, uncertainty over the role/remit of LAFs, and the lack of promotion/low profile of them.

A number of reasons given for dissatisfaction in how the LAFs perform their function were also given as reasons for overall dissatisfaction such as boundary issues, lack of funding, incomplete parish council attendance, the need for more public attendance, more district council input and ownership, and meetings seen as too BCC.

Other reasons given included minutes not being produced timely enough and agenda papers not provided sufficiently in advance for wider discussion, meetings being too formal, use of council jargon, transport issues dominated, and decisions taken outside of meetings. Some felt LAFs should be more inclusive with membership open to non-councillors.

Satisfaction with Chairmanship



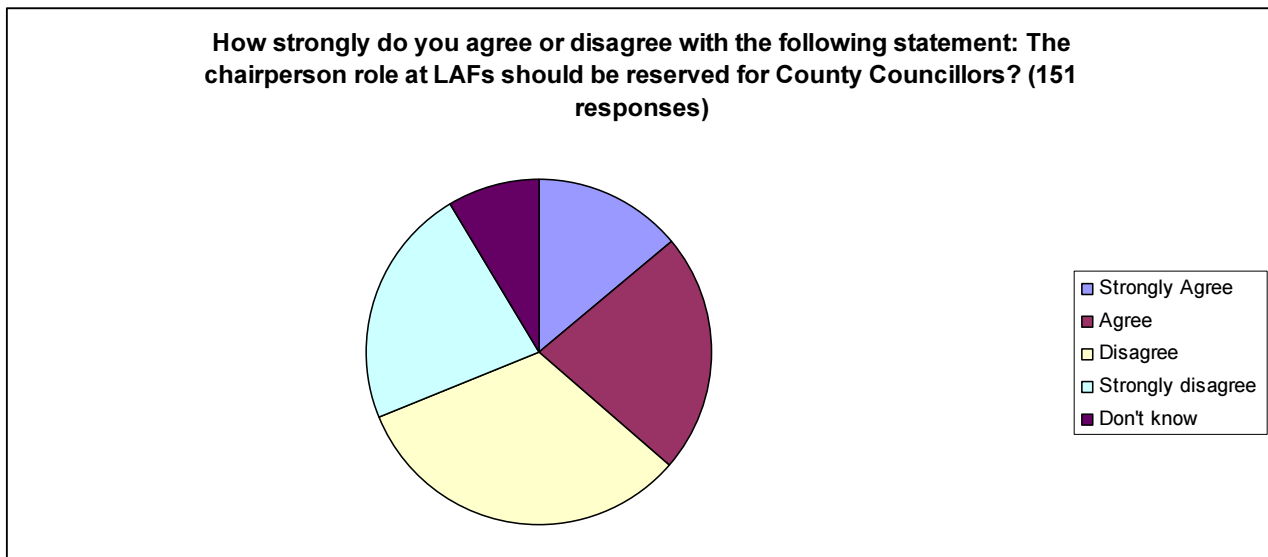
There was generally a high degree of satisfaction with the chairmanship of the LAF meetings attended, with over 70% being satisfied or very satisfied.

Reasons for dissatisfaction

There was no consensus on why people were dissatisfied with the chairperson. Some reasons were evident in why people were dissatisfied with the LAF function. Additional ones given included concerns the chair wasn't committed to the LAF concept, lack of meeting preparation, and the chair making unilateral decisions for the group.

Some felt the chairs hands were tied by the LAF processes and limited membership, and that they were not supported adequately by officers which delayed outcomes.

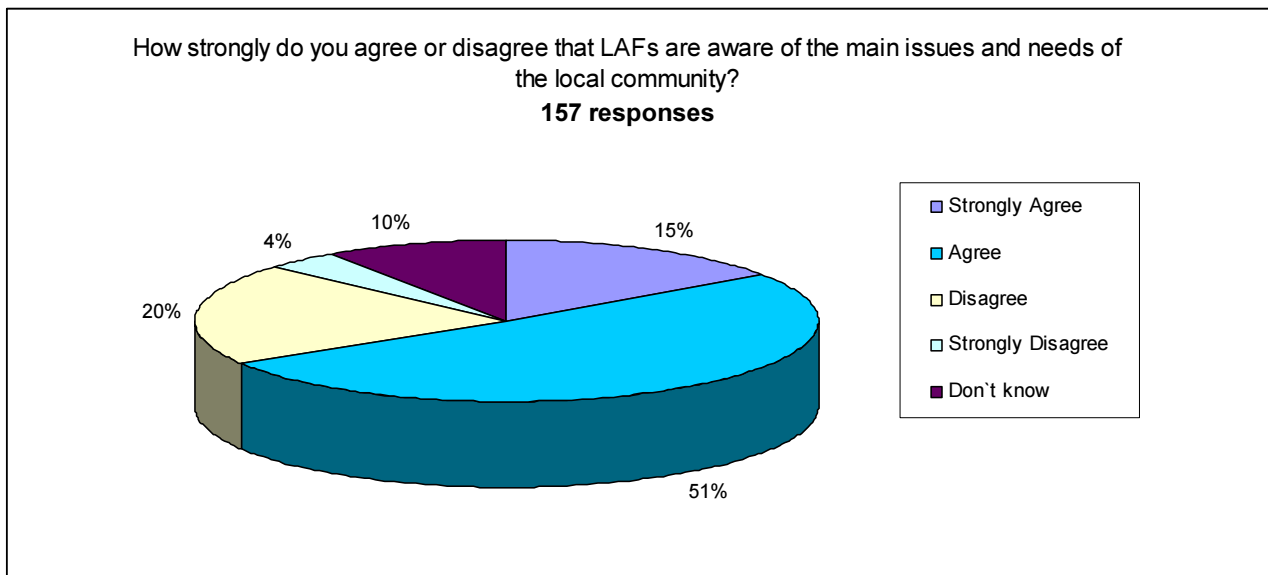
Some suggested the LAF should elect their own chair from any of the LAF members and that this should not be restricted to a BCC member, or even a politician at all.



The majority (55%) disagreed with this statement and did not think the LAF chairperson role should be reserved for County Councillors. A significant proportion (36%) agreed however.

LAF representation of the community

83% of respondents had read their Local Area Plan and the Local Priorities contained within it. Hence they were familiar with the identified problem and issues of the community documented in it.



The majority of respondents agreed that the LAF was aware of the main issues and needs of the local community (66%) with only 24% disagreeing.

Reasons why thought LAFs not aware of main issues and needs

The main reasons given concerned the level of representativeness at the meetings (general LAF meetings and priority setting workshops) with it being considered that not all communities are represented at the LAF meetings, poor levels of attendance generally but by elected councillors specifically, and limited community input into the meetings. The issue of dominance by certain parish or town councils over others was also raised.

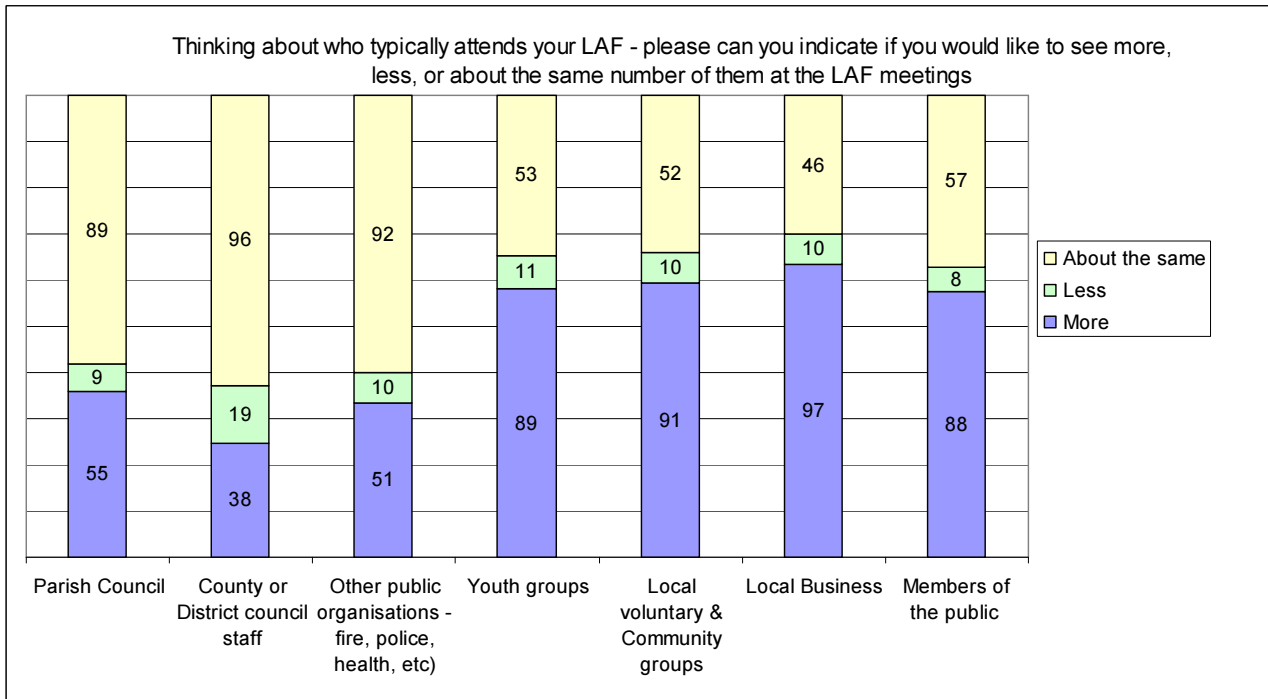
Other reasons given included slow responsiveness to issues raised, a BCC issue focus, and officers being seen as too remote from local knowledge and feelings. A further reason given was that LAFs focus on obvious issues such as potholes but miss the less obvious issues such as homelessness, illiteracy, domestic abuse and community cohesion.

Suggestions for how could better represent

By far the most common suggestion was to raise the profile of LAFs and increase community awareness and involvement in LAFs. This was followed by the need to increase attendance by parish councils and other elected LAF members. Other popular suggestions was for the LAFs to focus on more local issues of more interest to all attendees, include more resident association, community organisation, youth and VCS representation at the LAFs or input into them from these groups, and for there to be more action on issues.

Other suggestions included more effective feedback on issues/actions raised, chairperson improvements, increase devolved budgets, reduce bias to some groups at LAFs, increase LAF influence on public service delivery, better communication to attendees and early agendas. It was also suggested that there be some form of LAF annual conference or at least production of an annual review to showcase LAFs and their achievements.

LAF Attendees



The graph features a number of groups, and respondents were asked to indicate whether they would like to see them better or less represented at LAF meetings or not.

There was strong support for the LAFs to have greater levels of attendance from local business representatives (63% wanted more), local voluntary and community sector groups (59%), youth groups (58%), and members of the public (57%). There was also support, but to a lesser degree, to see more attendance from parish councils, council staff and other public organisations.

There was not much indication that LAF attendees wanted to particularly see less attendance by some groups, with the most notable being council staff but this was only felt by 12% of respondents. So the overall message being that apart from the four group's people would like to see more off, levels of attendance by the others are satisfactory currently. Some additional attendee's people would like to see more off included Age Concern and Cabinet Members.

Additional written responses received

In addition to the online survey submissions, the review also received a number of email and letter submissions from LAF attendees and Parish Councils. Comments received via these means have been used to supplement the following conclusions that can be drawn from the survey results.

Conclusions

At its lowest (151) the size of sample is sufficient to draw some conclusions from the survey, and this compares healthily to a summation of the average attendance figures at the LAFs over the past couple of years which totals 357. That half of responses were on behalf of groups, also adds to the legitimacy of any findings. Care has to be taken however in the interpretation of any findings given the 18 LAFs are not uniform and there is variation in how they are managed, the functions they are performing and their effectiveness. Hence dissatisfaction in some areas, does not necessarily apply to all, but should be noted as this may warrant further investigation.

All LAFs were represented by the survey, the respondents were largely regular LAF attendees, and with the exception of County Councillors there was a good spread of responses from various groups who attend LAFs.

Some comments were made that the survey invited negative comment, given the open questions were primarily for explaining reasons for dissatisfaction or improvements. However, a number of respondents took the opportunity to speak positively about LAFs and the Localities Team in these fields. In addition high levels of satisfaction shown in some areas by the survey, as well as evidence that will be collected elsewhere as part of the review will help offset some of the negative comments invited and provide an overall balanced assessment of LAFs.

Satisfaction with how the LAFs are performing certain functions showed that their role in bringing local public service providers together, production of a Local Community Plan and the local issues contained in it, and their role in supporting community led projects is widely acknowledged and performing well overall. Some functions are perhaps less obvious or being performed as effectively, namely the LAFs being seen to represent the community, encouraging partnership working between the Public and Voluntary and Community Sectors, and encouraging Parish Councils to work together more.

Some of the factors affecting LAF performance include the size of delegated budget and lack of powers, agenda content (interesting content, appropriate for LAF level), attendees, the perceived fairness and transparency of LAF processes, and the lack of and/or slow pace of action by LAFs. Two further factors are perceived top down pressures on meeting content and LAF arrangements, and uncertainty by some of the role and purpose of LAFs. Some queried if LAFs were succeeding in influencing BCC service delivery, and that feedback is needed on issues raised, and that achievements and outcomes need to be better publicised. Linked to this is a possible need for better sharing of experience and good practice across LAFs.

The degree to which LAFs are seen as representative of the community is clearly an issue. Some would argue the presence of elected representatives is sufficient representation, but many feel a broader audience or input into the LAF meetings is required. This along with a capable chair could help overcome concerns of dominance by certain groups and individuals, allowing all voices to be heard with equal treatment.

It is felt that more people should attend LAFs, particularly the elected councillors in the area (both County and District) and representatives from all Parish Councils in the area. More work perhaps needs to be done on why certain councillors and parish councils don't attend LAFs more frequently, and to what extent it is due to personality clashes, being seen as a BCC thing, uncertainty/scepticism of LAF purpose, agenda content, or any other sources of dissatisfaction given by the survey respondents.

There was strong support for more non councillor attendance/input too at LAFs particularly from local businesses, young people, VCS and the general public. There is no clear method to achieving this with it likely to involve a mix of various meeting improvements, a clearer purpose and more powers alongside the raising of the LAF profile. Things that might help include having less formal/ 'council like' meetings, less officer speak/jargon at meetings, a broader range of topics discussed, more transparency on LAF decisions, a wider LAF membership, better use of a forward plan to generate interest in future meetings/topics, and more effort to publicise LAF outcomes/successes. Some caution should be noted over some Parish Council resistance to extend LAF membership beyond elected representatives.

Overall satisfaction with the chair people should not mask the fact there is room for improvement and obvious variability in the quality of chair across the LAFs. Chairs have a key role to play in making LAFs a success and can help tackle some of the current deficiencies in agendas, meeting management, attracting more and varied attendees, getting action done, clarity of role/purpose and managing top down pressures. In addition to training and support, another option to improve the chairpersonship at meetings is to widen the selection pool, and there is support for a relaxation of the rule that the chair must be a BCC member. Opponents of this however point to the fact that BCC provides the entire delegated budget and most of the operational support for the meetings.

Beyond the chair attending members from any of the three tiers of council have a role to play in making the LAFs a success, keeping politics out of the meetings, engaging with the community beyond the LAF meetings, and making attendees feel welcome and involved.