

AREA WORKING POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

MEETING, 16 JANUARY, 2008

Present – Councillors Ibrahim (Chairman), Lord (Vice-Chairman), Critchley, Hayes, A.S. Walsh, J. Walsh and D. Wilkinson.

Also in Attendance

Ms. C. James	-	Head of Strategic Projects
Mr. J. Shannon	-	Area Working Manager
Mr. A. Jennings	-	Democratic Services Manager

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Connell

Councillor Ibrahim in the Chair.

11. MINUTES

The minutes of the proceedings of the meeting of the Policy Development Group held on 6TH November, 2007 were submitted and signed as a correct record.

Members raised a number of issues as follows;

- (a) that the engagement of members of the public and forums being more community lead needed to be examined in light of the Government's proposals re community engagement as contained in the Government White Paper "Stronger Prosperous Communities;
- (b) that clear working relationships and improved communication needed to be established with partners , particularly Bolton at Home; the Police and the PCT;
- (c) that links needed to be established between partners action plans and those proposed for forums.

It was explained that two further meetings of the PDG would deal with the above issues.

12. REVIEW OF AREA WORKING IN BOLTON

Ms. C. James, Head of Strategic Projects submitted a report that updated members on the current area working review and considered the options for development based on the previous discussions at the PDG.

Members were reminded that the options emerging from the last Area Working PDG were as follows;

Move to Ward based Area Forums which would meet less frequently but more locally;

Increase the number of themed meetings;

Consider with partners the possibility of several Ward based Forum Areas coming together to form mini local strategic partnerships in due course;

Develop a local action plan for each area;

Increase the level of resources;

Culture change for officers and partner agencies to become more public focused, eg, content of presentations;

Recognition that Area Working was not just about the Forum meetings.

Consequently, it was considered that there were 3 options for consideration ;

Option 1- create 20 Area Forums based on ward boundaries.

Advantages: In terms of administration this was the simplest option with an even split of three elected Members per Forum.

Disadvantages: Electoral ward boundaries did not always recognise community/neighbourhood areas; this option also ignored the fact that Westhoughton would be split in two and that Horwich and Blackrod would also have a mismatch of boundaries.

Option 2 - create 19 Area Forums and retain one two ward Forum at Westhoughton North and Chew Moor and Westhoughton South. Arrangements would also be varied for the Horwich and Blackrod and Horwich North East wards to recognise the distinct townships of Horwich and Blackrod. The Horwich and Blackrod Members would have representation in both Forum areas. All other boundaries based on electoral ward boundaries.

Advantages: This option recognised the distinct geographical areas covered by Westhoughton, Horwich and Blackrod.

Disadvantages: Some boundaries did not recognise community/neighbourhood areas; this could be overcome by adopting

an area action planning approach.

Option 3 - create 18 Area Forums and retain two ward Forum areas at (i) Westhoughton North and Chew Moor and Westhoughton South, and (ii) at Horwich and Blackrod and Horwich Northeast. This would ensure that all Forum boundaries were ward based.

Advantages: The use of electoral wards as the basis for boundaries was used consistently across the Borough.

Disadvantages: This arrangement combined the Horwich and Blackrod townships in one Forum area, the townships could, however, be recognised through the action planning process.

Members, having considered the views of local members, particularly in the west of the Borough, were of the opinion that, overall, option three was the best option and that option two could lead to practical difficulties and tensions with regards to Horwich and Blackrod members sitting on two forums. It was also felt that the present Two Towns Forum that covered Horwich and Blackrod worked well. All agreed the 2 ward forum would be the most effective in the Westhoughton area.

It was stressed that the proposed action plans would be the key to making the proposal work.

Each Forum would meet four times per year, giving up to 80 meetings per year. Meetings would take place in May/June, August/September, November/December and February/March. The May/June meeting would function as an engagement event with the public. The August/September, November/December and February/March meetings would be more formal decision making meetings dealing with items such as the action planning process. Members felt that it would be advantageous to have the May/June meetings as early as possible in this period or the meetings would spill over into July and that such meetings could take place soon after the local elections if they were to be community engagement meetings. It was also considered that the February/March meetings should be over by mid March to avoid the run up to the local elections.

The format of meetings would be flexible, address local issues, and include activities such as workshop sessions and it was suggested that the decision making part of the meeting (eg community grants) could be split off and either take part at the beginning of the meeting or on another day with members of the Forum to ratify decisions following discussion with members of the public at the forum meeting. This would then provide an audit trail for decisions made with regard to spend etc.

It was explained that when a specific issue had been identified, and a request for a themed meeting had been made, the relevant service delivery department would be asked to sponsor a themed meeting to help address the specific issue. Themed meetings would focus on a range of geographical areas from the sub ward level to a cluster of wards.

The need for an action planning process linked to Area Working had been highlighted as a useful tool to help identify local priorities and influence service delivery. They would also include details of other specific local plans in the ward such as Neighbourhood Action Plans and Estate Plans

The action plan would focus primarily on universal services provided by the Council but would also incorporate partner agency services where this was possible.

Action plans would be similar to the latest summary Neighbourhood Action Plans and contain;

- Some background information on the area (an area profile);
- Key issues;
- Priorities;
- A list of actions by Council and partner agencies;
- Information on service standards for universal Council services and partners; and
- agencies with available performance figure.

It was felt that the action planning process would provide the following

- (a) give elected Members and local people easy access to clearly presented information on the local area, on current performance, and on what was planned in terms of service delivery;
- (b) the process would also give elected members and local people the opportunity to prioritise actions and trigger urgent responses to “hot” issues;
- (c) the action planning process would also help shape service delivery at a local level and provide a platform for continuous improvement; and
- (d) provide detail on key issues to inform decisions on the use of resources.

The action plan areas would also accommodate the various boundaries used by partners and help resolve the issues of competing service planning and

delivery areas.

The development of support to Area Working at a wider level would be driven by the Council's Culture Change programme which aimed to establish a more customer focused approach to service delivery.

It was considered that meetings would be more relevant to local people's needs and address issues identified in the action plans. Members would also have the opportunity to raise more immediate issues with appropriate service providers which would lead to more interactive formats at meetings including workshops and discussion groups. Presentations would be tailored to the ward area and be relevant to local issues.

Members felt that clarity was required as to what was funded via mainstream budgets and those devolved to the forums.

It was explained that as the above proposals were a change to the Council's structure then full Council approval would be required ,following a recommendation from the Executive/Executive Member.

It was proposed to hold two further meetings of the PDG with a view to submitting a recommendation to Council on 23rd April, 2008.

Further discussions would be held between officers to examine meeting cycles;decision making;terms of reference;chairing ;SRAs and reporting mechanisms.

It was also proposed that the next meeting of the PDG would include discussion with representatives from Bolton at Home;B Safe partnership and include details as to how the proposals fitted in with the Government's thinking regarding community leadership and what an action plan may look like.

The Policy Development Group agreed Option three as the preferred option and that further details be submitted to the next meeting as to the issues now raised and that representatives of Bolton at Home and the B Safe Partnership be invited to attend to discuss the practicalities of the proposals and the way forward .