

## **Consultation feedback on plans for future member community engagement to replace County Local Committees**

This paper sets out feedback received on plans for future member community engagement to replace County Local Committees (CLCs). All county councillors and town/parish councils were invited to provide feedback on the proposals. Councillors were informed of the proposals via The Bulletin (members' weekly newsletter) on 2 June and town/parish councils were informed via the Council's town and parish newsletter on 9 June. As CLCs in the Arun area are joint committees with the District Council, Arun District Council was also invited to comment. Responses have been received from two county councillors, eight parish councils and from Arun District Council.

### **1. Summary of feedback from county councillors**

All county councillors were advised of the proposals and invited to consider the report and offer feedback. Only two councillors have done so. It is not possible to draw conclusions from the low level of response although it could suggest neutrality or support for the proposal – hence no desire for comment.

#### **Councillor Beccy Cooper:**

- It is disappointing that the option to delegate more decision-making to CLCs was not considered. The assumption seems to be that as CLCs were not optimal a reduction to a 'local talking forum' is the solution. If it is important for local communities to have a voice this should welcome the opportunity to make some decisions about the local community with the local County Councillors who will know their area far better than Cabinet Members and other decision-making committees. TROs for example are an important part of local ownership of the road system – sending decisions back to the Cabinet Member loses that local decision-making connection that communities have with their own County Councillors. This model could have been expanded to other County projects that directly affect a particular area of West Sussex.
- The fact that there is low public engagement with CLC meetings is not a reason to stop them. It is a reason to work with local communities to find out how we can make them more accessible and engaging. Enabling and empowering communities is a key part of engaging with communities, and removing decision making responsibilities is a backwards step in our partnership approach to the people we serve.
- The justification that reducing CLCs to informal local talking forums will produce savings in the form of one post in democratic services is verging on ludicrous. In a budget of £625 million, £35k savings is no justification whatsoever for taking away the last remaining vestiges of local community decision making in areas that are key to the healthy development and sustainable wellbeing of communities.
- A standing agenda item for future CLC meetings should be joint County and District/Borough updates. This is an opportunity for Councillors from both Councils to work more effectively together, either on joint projects or being aware of work where there is natural synergy and opportunities for lessons learned (for example, the Sustainable Transport Strategy and Local Walking and Cycling Plans). It is also an opportunity for local community members to

understand how their Councils work (or are supposed to work) together and to give feedback for improvements and development.

### **Councillor Lord**

- I don't have a problem with the proposal to stop CLCs in their current form and welcome the focus on the Talk With Us section. They would need to be at least as frequent as existing CLCs.
- Suggest that a local forum covering the whole of Mid Sussex district will not work well with 12 councillors. The High Weald provides a geographical divide, with residents in East Grinstead having little in common with those in the South and Centre of the district. Attendance rates at the two Mid Sussex CLCs are higher than other district/boroughs, suggesting residents in this district are very supportive of the local forum; it would be difficult to manage questions from that many residents. If the meetings are to be held in person residents will feel disenfranchised if they have to travel from the southern villages to East Grinstead or vice versa. Therefore consideration should be given to retaining this split.
- With regards to TROs, I think councillors have always found the opportunity to hear from residents before making the decision very valuable and I know residents have appreciated that. I'm therefore a bit nervous of TROs not having that final public element, although I do understand the reasons why they may be managed differently. Has consideration been given to how the final input from the public can be managed?

## **2. Summary of feedback from town and parish councils**

Responses were received from councillors, chairmen and clerks of the following town/parish councils: Angmering, Barnham & Eastergate, East Preston, Kingston, Plaistow & Ifold, Rogate, Turners Hill and Yapton. Key points raised are set out below:

- CLC meetings have often been useful but have not achieved their full potential.
- TROs were about the only area left where town/parish councils had a say – and it would be helpful to have clarity on future process for this and the mechanism for towns/parishes to make bids.
- Holding meetings virtually would help participation numbers and regular scheduling.
- Getting local parishes together in whatever format has to be considered a good thing.
- It is a good idea to test the proposal for a one-year trial.
- One respondent (a parish clerk) was concerned that insufficient time had been given to enable town/parish councils to consider the proposal and suggested that a direct message should have been sent out rather than including details of the proposal in the town and parishes newsletter.
- One respondent (parish councillor) looked forward to seeing how the new local forums will work and felt there should be more engagement at parish level (via online meetings) by county and district councillors and the MP.

- Another parish clerk responded that the proposal will be discussed with the Chairman, but that the likely response is to support the proposal as the Council hasn't gained anything from these arrangements except the occasional grant funding opportunity.
- One respondent (a parish councillor) was completely against the change as it further erodes the grass-roots basis of local government. Their parish council is extremely concerned that the change represents an increase in the power of bureaucracy and a reduction in local accountability.
- Informal meetings on various WSCC proposals in our local areas before the whole County implement will be a good thing.
- The information given by the County Council, Councillors and Officers at CLCs has been useful to report back to my Parish Council, but many items we have been dictated to as this has been decided without apparently any contact with the local Parish Council or even the District Council.
- The county councillor for our area is good at keeping parishes informed.
- The new format will hopefully give local areas more of a voice.
- I am happy that CLCs may disappear. The replacement forum could be a better option.

### **3. Feedback from Arun District Council**

Shaun Gunner, Leader of the Council:

As Leader of Arun District Council I have consulted with other Group Leaders and the response of the Council is as follows:

There is a recognition that only some of the original purposes of the JAACs are still relevant, particularly now that the Community Initiative Fund has been removed and that the meetings have limited 'added value' at this time. However, the opportunity for local people to have direct contact with Councillors in all three tiers of local government via the 'talk with us' sessions is seen to be particularly important. We are also aware that in the past the forum has also been used by members of the public and Parish councils to ask questions of WSCC and ADC when they have been uncertain where to go on community issues. These questions may well have been answered outside the regular meetings, but it has been an important 'other route' for a number of people. We are keen therefore to understand exactly how you see an informal forum working and how you would include District Councillors if necessary.

Traffic management is a subject of great interest to local people and they, along with District Councillors are keen to maintain an input to these sometimes complicated decisions. District Councillors are also often the first 'port of call' for local residents concerned about such matters. Your e-mail makes it clear that traffic management plans will not be part of the new informal local area forums, in which case we feel strongly that there must be an alternative way for local residents and Arun Councillors to be consulted and have their say about local proposals. JAACs have been used in the past to deliver presentations, prior to decisions, on particular schemes for members of the public and councillors and we are unclear as to the mechanism for doing this in the future.

It is unfortunate that we have been given very little information about future

arrangements and how you see them working in practice, alongside very little time to have a proper discussion at District level. I trust that WSCC will take on board the views expressed here and we look forward to hearing more about how the new arrangements will work and how they (or other arrangements) will take account of our concerns.