

Governance Committee

2 December 2019

Review of County Local Committees

Report by the Working Group Chairman

Electoral Division: All

Summary

This report sets out the conclusions and recommendations of the working group set up by this Committee to carry out a full review of all County Local Committees (CLCs).

The working group held four meetings and has reviewed a range of information relating to the purpose, structure and value of CLCs. It consulted with a number of key interested parties, including county councillors and local councils across West Sussex, on different options for the future of CLCs. The working group has concluded that CLCs play an important role in terms of how the Council engages with local communities and does not propose any changes to their configuration, the areas they cover or the number of meetings per year. Whilst it was mindful of the fact that changes introduced in 2017 have impacted on how well some CLCs reflect their communities, the working group does not support reinstating any CLCs given the current financial constraints facing the Council. The working group recommends some changes to how CLCs work in order to strengthen their community focus, including through 'Talk with Us' sessions being given a priority on the agenda and the development of best practice guidance for CLCs.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to endorse the recommendations set out in Appendix B.

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 A review of CLCs in Mid Sussex was carried out by a working group which reported to this Committee in November 2018, when it was agreed that there should be a full review of all CLCs. This would enable consideration of the impact of changes to CLCs introduced in May 2017 as well as ensuring an assessment of different options for all CLCs across the county.
- 1.2 A new cross-party working group was appointed to carry out the review, with one member from each district/borough area, as follows:
 - Adur: Mr Kevin Boram
 - Arun: Ms Hilary Flynn
 - Chichester: Mrs Carol Purnell
 - Crawley: Mrs Brenda Smith
 - Horsham: Mrs Morwen Millson
 - Mid Sussex: Mr Andrew Barrett-Miles

- Worthing: Mr Paul High (Chairman)

1.3 The working group met four times between May and October 2019 and reviewed a wide range of information, including:

- CLC terms of reference
- Comparative data on each CLC (number of members, population covered, attendance at meetings, number of agenda items, length of meetings)
- The Mid Sussex CLC review report and consultation feedback gathered during this review
- Comparative data from other councils (arrangements for area working and for administering traffic regulation orders)
- Community Initiative Funding (CIF) and the crowdfunding approach, including a decision to reduce CIF by 50% in-year
- The Council's approach to community engagement
- The resource implications of supporting CLCs
- Consultation feedback from key interested parties, including CLC chairmen, county councillors district/borough councils and parish/town councils.

2. Findings and Conclusions

2.1 The Working Group concludes that CLCs are fit for purpose and should remain in their current format. They are a vital tool for the public to be heard and also to hear from county councillors about what is going on in their local areas. CLCs provide a line of communication with local government and an open democratic interchange where the public can hold local councillors to account. It is also important for some Council decisions to be taken at the local level. Some of those giving feedback to the Working Group had mixed views on CLCs – that they do not reflect local communities, do not meet often enough and do not discuss the issues that really matter to local residents. However, most feedback received supported a continuation of the current arrangements. In the ideal world there may be more CLCs meeting more often, but the Working Group agreed that it could not support any changes that would lead to increased costs.

2.2 The Working Group considered the potential to make savings through removing CLCs altogether, reducing their number or by replacing them with an informal community forum. However, members concluded that they play a valuable role and that it is important for the County Council to have a local presence and formal mechanism for engagement in the community. Whilst CLCs are not statutory, and many councils do not have such area-forums, they provide the opportunity to showcase what the Council does, to raise the profile of the Council's services and to provide a forum for dealing with issues of community concern. The allocation of grant funding through the Community Initiative Fund (CIF) is seen as particularly important in terms of helping to support local action to address the Council's priorities.

2.3 The Working Group acknowledges that the arrangements in Arun, where there are Joint Area Committees, may need further review jointly with Arun District Council. Some consultation feedback highlighted the large size of these Committees and some elements of confusion amongst their members of the different decision-making carried out by county and district councillors. The reduction in the number of Joint Area Committees in Arun from three to

two in 2017 has had a negative impact in terms of how well these reflect the community. However, given the need to avoid any increase in the cost of supporting these, the Working Group recommends that the Cabinet Member for Fire & Rescue and Communities liaises with the County Councillors for the Arun area as well as with Arun District Council, to identify any specific areas for improvement relating to the Joint Area Committees.

- 2.4 It is important to consider ways of increasing public interest in, and attendance at, CLC meetings. The Working Group feels that public engagement typically arises from issues relating to infrastructure or key one-off topics of local concern and that there is generally very little public interest in the nomination of school governors (as confirmed by the consultation feedback). Decisions relating to Highways, including the allocation of Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) receive high levels of public interest and help display openness and transparency. As the core purpose of CLCs is to engage with the community, the Working Group considers that 'Talk with Us' sessions are particularly valued and should be given priority and as long as possible on the agenda.
- 2.5 The Working Group welcomes the involvement of Service officers in CLC meetings, particularly the Area Highways Managers who attend all meetings. However, this can be a drain on officer time and it proposes that there should be one Highways-themed CLC meeting per year at which TROs are allocated. For the remaining two meetings per year, Area Highways Managers should only be required to attend for the 'Talk with Us' session, which should be first on the agenda. Members are keen to have a better understanding of the work of the Partnerships and Communities Team and to identify opportunities for member input into relevant community initiatives. The Working Group therefore proposes that Partnership and Communities officers should provide an update report at each CLC meeting, outlining their activities in the communities (what has been happening and what is planned).
- 2.6 CIF is an important mechanism for the Council to support community-based projects and programmes and its allocation is a key function of CLCs. The Working Group considered the potential for members to have individual budgets for CIF allocation within their own divisions. However, it does not support this approach as it would be difficult to administer and prefers a collective approach, with the pooling of funding across an area. A decision by the then Cabinet Member for Safer, Stronger Communities to reduce CIF in-year from £280,000 to £140,000 was supported, given the financial challenges facing the Council and the fact that many front-line services are making savings. However, the Working Group does not support any further reductions to CIF at this stage, given the important community projects its supports.
- 2.7 Although it is recognised that three meetings per year may not be frequent enough to consistently address local issues, the Working Group feels that there are other mechanisms for county councillors to engage with the community in-between CLC meetings (such as through holding surgeries and attending town/parish council meetings). It is possible to hold extraordinary meetings to address significant local issues (and which may be supported by the relevant Service area, rather than requiring Democratic Services' support).

- 2.8 Whilst survey feedback shows that most respondents feel CLCs cover the right size of area, the Working Group accepts that changes introduced in May 2017, with a reduction in the number of CLCs from 14 to 11 had a negative impact, particularly in Mid Sussex and Arun. However, it cannot support a return to previous arrangements, given the cost implications. A reduction in the number of CLCs is not supported, as this would not reflect communities and would discourage attendance and engagement. It therefore proposes that the current configuration of CLCs should be retained.
- 2.9 There should not be any change to the areas covered by CLCs, although this means that two Council divisions will continue to be split between two CLCs. These are Bourne (split between North and South Chichester CLCs) and Lindfield and High Weald (split between North Mid Sussex and Central and South Mid Sussex CLCs). The current arrangements provide the best fit with the interests of local communities and moving the whole divisions into one CLC area would lead to difficulties for some communities and parishes. Whilst this means that the relevant members are each required to attend two CLC meetings, this is not seen as an insurmountable problem.
- 2.10 There should not be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to CLCs and they should be able to take a flexible approach to best reflect their communities' interests. However, it is important to explore how CLCs can develop and improve. The Working Group concluded that different ways of working should be encouraged, to include holding more themed meetings on topics of local interest, alongside the proposed annual Highways meeting. Agendas should be more dynamic and be influenced by key issues of local concern as raised by residents and parish/town councils and community groups (as appropriate). Best practice should be shared, particularly in terms of how best to encourage public involvement, so it is proposed that best practice guidelines and suggestions for different ways of working should be developed in the form of a checklist or toolkit for members' use. Area profiling data should be made available to CLCs to help members identify local priorities and to inform the allocation of CIF. Pre-events are considered a useful way of highlighting key Council services or significant issues of public interest.
- 2.11 All members should be involved in reviewing CLC activity and planning for the year ahead. As such the Working Group recommends that CLC Chairmen's meetings should become an annual event to which all members are invited.

3. Resources

- 3.1 The Working Group agreed that any changes recommended should be cost neutral, given the financial challenges facing the County Council. Whilst it recognised that in an ideal world there might be more CLCs meeting more often, members felt that the current arrangements were appropriate. The changes recommended can be met from within existing resources.
- 3.2 The current staff costs within Democratic Services of supporting CLCs, based on 4.5 full-time equivalent staff, are £200,600. This does not include administrative and incidental costs such as venue hire, staff and member travel, agenda printing/postage.

- 3.3 There are some resource implications for staff from other Service areas who support CLCs, with a slight reduction in the level of Highways Officer support as they will be present for less time at CLC meetings. There may be a slight impact on the Education Service in terms of the process for nominating School Governors.

Factors taken into account

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Consultation on the impact and usefulness of CLCs was carried out with CLC Chairmen, the Council officers most closely involved with CLCs (Highways and Transport, Partnerships and Communities, Education) and with the relevant Cabinet Members. Each CLC meeting in the summer was invited to give feedback and surveys were carried out with all county councillors, district/borough councils, town/parish councils and the residents and organisations that have signed up to receive electronic alerts on CLCs. A summary of feedback from these surveys is set out at Appendix A.

5. Risk Implications and Mitigations

- 5.1 There are very limited risks associated with the recommendations in this report, as there are no significant proposals to change. The recommended changes seek to address adopting a more proactive best-practice approach for all CLCs.

6. Other Options Considered

- 6.1 Options considered by the working group were to:
- (a) Maintaining the current structure of CLCs (11 CLCs meeting three times per year)
 - (b) Reduce the number of CLCs to seven (coterminous with district/borough councils)
 - (c) Remove decision-making from CLCs and replace with 11 informal community forums
 - (d) Remove decision-making from CLCs and replace with seven informal community forums
 - (e) Remove CLCs completely and use one-off meetings in the community for important local issues
- 6.2 The consultation undertaken by the working group showed some degree support for all options, but the majority of all respondent types supported maintaining the current structure. The working group recognised the value CLCs have for their local communities so did not support removing CLCs completely, and the importance of reflecting local communities as far as possible meant that reducing the number of CLCs any further was not supported. Members felt that too large a geographical spread would reduce CLCs' ability to address the needs of the communities they serve. In addition, the working group agreed that it should only put forward options that would be cost-neutral, given the financial pressures facing the Council.

7. Equality Duty

7.1 This is a report dealing with procedural matters only and does not have any implications under the Equalities Act 2010.

8. Social Value

8.1 Not applicable

9. Crime and Disorder Act Implications

9.1 None

10. Human Rights Implications

10.1 None

Paul High

Working Group Chairman

Contact: Helen Kenny, Head of Democratic Services,
helen.kenny@westsussex.gov.uk, Tel: 033022-22532

Appendices

- Appendix A – summary of survey feedback
- Appendix B - recommendations

Background Papers

None