

Report to Governance Committee

28 June 2021

Plans for future Member Community Engagement to replace County Local Committees

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral divisions: All

Summary

It is proposed that County Local Committees (CLCs) be replaced by a more informal local community engagement forum for county councillors. The objectives are to support the local role of councillors and to improve engagement with residents and communities. CLCs have not met since March 2020, but previously there were 11 CLCs across the county which met three times per year. These took decisions on grant funding and on some Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) as well as providing a forum for public question and answers. There is no legal requirement to hold CLCs or any form of local area committees. CLC decision-making powers have reduced over time and, with the removal of the Community Initiative Fund (local grant funding), it is timely to review their role and options for the future.

The CLC meetings due to be held in June/July 2021 are being used for locality sessions on a district/borough footprint. These will be a mixture of place-based induction alongside a public question and answer session. It is proposed that this approach be used as a model for local member forums to be trialled for a year, to be called 'County Local Forums'. Local councillors will continue to be consulted on Traffic Regulation Orders, although the decision would revert to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport. It will be important to ensure a consistent approach to these forums across the county, whilst enabling more informal arrangements. A review of this trial should be completed by March 2022 in order to establish a new model for 2022/23 onwards.

Recommendations

That the County Council be recommended:

- (1) To remove CLCs from the Constitution and change decision-making arrangements for Traffic Regulation Orders and outside bodies with these returning to the Cabinet or Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport in consultation with local members;
- (2) To establish district/borough-based forums for councillors to engage with residents using the locality sessions being held in June and July 2021 as a model, to include 'Talk With Us' question and answer sessions with the public; and
- (3) To review the arrangements by the end March 2022, to determine future arrangements and resource requirements.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 County Local Committees (CLCs) are a mechanism for county councillors to engage with their communities. There are 11 CLCs across the county each made up of a number of electoral divisions. They used to meet three times per year and were open for anyone to attend. The Governance Committee agreed to cancel the meetings due to be held in 2020/21 due to the impact of COVID-19. The main reasons were the availability of officer resources given pressure from other business and the fact that the main business of CLCs can be dealt with outside formal meetings. Later, as part of the Council's Budget for 2021/22, it was decided that the Community Initiative Fund (CIF) would cease. The allocation of this local grant funding had been a key role for CLCs and the removal of this element of their business is a key driver for change.
- 1.2 Through previous CLC reviews and consultation with members and town/parish councils, the core purpose of CLCs is seen as engagement with the public, particularly through the 'Talk With Us' agenda item. The CLC meetings due to be held in June/July 2021 are being used for locality sessions on a district/borough footprint. These will be a mixture of place-based induction alongside a 'Talk With Us' session, providing the opportunity for residents to meet and ask questions of their councillors. This approach could be used as a model for community engagement to be trialled for a year. These informal county locality forums could be supported by Democratic Services and the Communities Directorate, with a view to identifying some initial staff savings in Democratic Services. Depending on the outcomes of the one-year trial, there may be opportunities to make further staff savings.
- 1.3 Other decisions taken by CLCs relate to Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). For 2019/20 and 2020/21 CLCs received 11 TRO decision reports, as well as each CLC receiving a TRO prioritisation report. Decisions relating to this area and how local members can participate could be achieved through other means, as can the appointments to some outside bodies which CLCs have exercised.
- 1.4 Other drivers for change include the evolving role of the CLCs over the years, with a strong focus on the 'Talk With Us' element on the meeting, and an ability to react to local issues. Public attendance at CLCs is generally low, except when there is a special/significant issue of local interest being discussed. Officers across the Council engage with members in their locality on a variety of specific service-based issues/casework. This has been complemented prior to COVID-19 with support from the Partnerships and Communities Team. The role of this team has evolved during the pandemic and will in future be focusing on the corporate priority of supporting people to remain independent.
- 1.5 Whilst the CLCs in Arun District were intended to operate as 'joint' committees, these have not worked well as it is rare for any District business to be included and they are very large committees.
- 1.6 Virtual locality sessions are being held in June/July 2021 on a district/borough footprint, replacing the CLC meetings. These will provide county councillors with the opportunity to learn more about their communities, be provided with information on local Council services and training in their local role. They will also provide an opportunity for residents to meet and ask questions of their

councillors. This digital 'Talk With Us' approach may encourage a wider audience.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 It is proposed that CLCs be replaced by a more informal local community engagement forum. There is no legal requirement to hold CLCs or any form of local area committees. CLC decision-making powers have reduced over time, and with the removal of CIF (local grant funding) the only remaining decision for CLCs is on some Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and appointment to some outside bodies. CLCs did not meet during 2020/21, but informal meetings of members in their CLC areas were held, mostly to consider CIF applications.
- 2.2 Future meetings can utilise digital tools, building on the learning from COVID-19 (e.g. virtual meetings, social media) and locality sessions in June/July 2021. Meetings will have no need for formal agenda and minutes.
- 2.3 Following the decision taken in the 2020/21 budget, the only remaining decision left for CLCs is concerning some TROs (those with local objections and not delegated to officers), which can be dealt with by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport in consultation with relevant local members. Local members could also retain a role in the prioritising of TROs in their area. Outside body appointments previously made by CLCs, where still required, would be made by the Cabinet in consultation with local members. This would allow a more flexible model of local member meetings to be trialled in 2021/22 with a stronger focus on community engagement and local issues.
- 2.4 Any new model will be reviewed ahead of March 2022 in order to establish a new working model for 2022/23.
- 2.5 The aims of a new model are set out in the below table:

Aim	County Local Forum
Enhancing and supporting the local role of members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice and information for members on their local role (managing casework and using social media – at induction and ongoing member development programmes) • Members signposted to key contacts • Providing members with local insight and data on their communities, introduction to County Council services delivered locally and an opportunity to showcase local community organisations (and meet with local partners and community organisations) • Opportunity to learn and exchange ideas, exploring local issues/priorities, responding to questions, visiting (where possible) new ventures/services • Ensure local members' knowledge is used by the Council through their role as community champions
Ensuring openness and transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The potential to arrange ad hoc local meetings for timely consultation/engagement on topical issues locally or to raise the profile of local services. Options to hold jointly with partners and hold virtually to enable wider participation. • Continue to provide the only forum for public Q&A session with county councillors

Aim	County Local Forum
Maintaining and enhancing engagement with communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess any gaps in current engagement mechanisms • Supporting members to be connected into activity in their community through various networks (e.g. voluntary and community sector organisations) • Use of digital technology to enable members to interact more flexibly with their communities (e.g. through social media and virtual meetings) • Utilising existing spaces and places for face-to-face contact to enable engagement with people who aren't digitally connected • Explore opportunities to involve members of the Youth Cabinet at a more local level

2.6 It will be important for a consistent approach to be taken to any new mechanism that is agreed for implementation. It is proposed that there should be seven new County Local Forums meeting on a district/borough footprint. However, the locality session being held in June 2021 in Adur and Worthing is a joint session. It is proposed that the relevant county councillors be consulted on their preferences as to whether they continue to meet jointly or as separate forums.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

(a) Continue with County Local Committees as decision making bodies

3.1 One option is to continue with CLCs as they are. However, there is no real need for formal meetings as few decisions now fall to CLCs. Also, findings in the consultation above strongly suggest that the community engagement is the key part of the meeting and that there has not been a strong appetite to continue CLCs in their previous form.

3.2 Details of public attendance at CLCS during 2019/20 are set out below. Public attending CLCs usually includes organisations bidding for CIF, town/parish council representatives, district/borough council representatives and people with an interest in traffic schemes under discussion. N.B. The higher number of public attending Adur, South Chichester and Central & South Mid Sussex CLC meetings was due to high profile local issues being on the agenda, therefore a new model would support this way of working.

Name of CLC	Summer 19	Autumn 19	Early 20
Adur	35	40	6
Horsham	14	14	5
North Chichester	6	18	Cancelled
South Chichester	34	46	46
Worthing	Not collected	20	25
Central and South Mid Sussex	22	55	45
North Mid Sussex	26	22	20
Chanctonbury	13	15	5
Joint Eastern Arun Area Committee	9	8	Cancelled

Name of CLC	Summer 19	Autumn 19	Early 20
Joint Western Arun Area Committee	30	20	15
Crawley	30	30	18

(b) Cease CLCs and any level of community engagement

- 3.3 Good practice demonstrates that it is an essential part of a local member's role to engage with residents and this provides a mechanism for this supported by officers. Also, consultation through the recent review and with councillors and town and parish councils clearly shows support for a continuation of a model that has a focus on local community engagement.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 Arun District Council, all county councillors and town and parish councils have been invited to provide comment on the proposal set out in this report. Details of responses received are at Appendix 1.
- 4.2 In summer 2020, consultation on whether to resume CLCs was undertaken with all county councillors, town and parish councils, Arun District Council (for the Joint Area Committees) and Council officers who support CLCs (Highways and Communities) during 2020. This consultation feedback was reported to the Governance Committee in September 2020. It was difficult to draw firm conclusions from this as there were very low response rates. Only 12 responses were received from county councillors (17%) and 22 from town/parish councils (14%). Eleven of the county councillors wanted CLCs to resume, citing CLCs as an important mechanism for local engagement. All the town/parish councils responding supported a resumption of CLCs as virtual meetings. Arun District Council supported the resumption of Joint Arun Area Committees.
- 4.3 County councillors were also consulted as part of the informal CLC meetings in October/November 2020. All CLCs met informally apart from North Mid Sussex (which did not have any decisions to take). Issues raised in these informal discussions were the importance of public engagement and concern at the loss of 'Talk with Us' as a mechanism for hearing residents' questions/issues.
- 4.4 Since the suspension of CLCs in March 2020 there has been no correspondence from the public on this matter.

5 Finance

- 5.1 There is a potential for initial saving of one post in Democratic Services: £34,100 (by September 2021). Future savings opportunities could be explored and assessed through the one-year trial.
- 5.2 Support for CLCs is currently provided by Democratic Services (to facilitate formal decision-making). The resource implications of alternative mechanisms for community engagement will need to be assessed as part of the review. The Partnerships and Communities Directorate also supports CLCs, but is still busy with response to the pandemic, therefore all Democratic Services support cannot be removed immediately (and most of the CLC team in Democratic Services are providing support to new ways of working such as virtual meetings and increased levels of webcasting). Therefore, although limited savings could

be achieved initially, further savings may be identified once a model is established.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
Loss of local democratic debate on issues	Any new model will ensure a strong level of community engagement and democratic input.
Decisions on Traffic Regulation Orders not taken locally	Decision by Cabinet Member will be in consultation with local members.

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 A continuation of community engagement through more flexible working arrangements will have a positive effect on communities as it will allow for a greater level of community engagement, and an opportunity to reach a wider and more diverse audience.
- 7.2 There are no social value, crime and disorder, human rights or legal implications. Climate Change implications are positive, with virtual meetings leading to a reduction in travel and therefore in carbon emissions.
- 7.3 The proposal in this report support two of the objectives in the Council Plan:
- Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential.
 - Making the best use of resources.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Consultation feedback on plans for future member community engagement to replace County Local Committees

Background papers:

None