

Report to Governance Committee

24 September 2021

Plans for County Local Forums

Report by the Director of Law and Assurance and the Director of Communities

Electoral divisions: All

Summary

At its meeting in June 2021, the Governance Committee endorsed a proposal to replace County Local Committees with a more informal local forum for county councillors to engage with their residents based on district/borough areas to be trialled for one year. The County Council agreed this Governance Committee recommendation in July. This report sets out the proposed pilot arrangements for these new County Local Forums and includes a summary of consultation feedback received from county councillors and town/parish councils.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to agree:

- (1) The arrangements for the one-year trial of County Local Forums as set out in paragraphs 2.01 to 2.10;
- (2) That separate annual Locality Sessions should be held, as set out at paragraphs 2.11 to 2.12;
- (3) That the pilot period should extend to the end of July 2022, to enable a full year's trial; and
- (4) To review these arrangements by September 2022, to determine a new working model for 2022/23 and confirm the necessary resource requirements.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 The last meeting of this Committee endorsed the replacement of County Local Committees (CLCs) with more informal County Local Forums on a district/borough footprint. A broadly consistent approach will be taken across the county, but with the ability for some flexibility of arrangements given that they are for a trial period only. County Local Forums will be trialled for a year and supported by Democratic Services and the Communities Directorate.

1.2 Aims of this one-year pilot are to:

- Ensure openness and transparency, including through an opportunity for the public to ask questions of and discuss issues with county councillors
- Maintain and enhance engagement with communities, with a mechanism for significant local issues to be discussed and aiming to reach a wider audience than was achieved by CLCs
- Use different ways of working, testing both virtual and in-person meetings, different times of the day and, where in-person, different venues
- Enhance and support the local role of county councillors

1.3 Although the Committee agreed in June that the trial period for the new approach should be until March 2022, it is proposed that this be extended to the end of July 2022 to enable a full year's trial and a thorough assessment to be carried out and reported to the Committee in September 2022.

1.4 Plans for how the County Local Forums will operate have been informed by learning from the virtual locality sessions held between June and August 2021. These provided county councillors with the opportunity to learn more about their communities, information on local Council services and training in their local role. They also included an opportunity for residents to meet and ask questions of their councillors, through a 'Talk with Us' session. Consultation feedback (as summarised at **Appendix 1**) has also informed the plans for this new approach, as well as the comments made by members of the Governance Committee at its meeting in June 2021.

1.5 Points from the locality sessions, consultation feedback and comments from this Committee that have informed the proposal include:

- Local Forums should be accessible and inclusive and enable two-way engagement with county councillors
- Councillors should be in a position to hear residents' views, act upon issues where they can, or provide feedback to explain when they can't
- Combining local place-based induction for members with a public forum is not ideal; engagement with the public needs to be separate from any member-only or training sessions
- Public engagement sessions need longer than 30 minutes
- There should be a mix of both local and more strategic subjects, with the format of meetings depending on the nature of the topics to be considered
- Informal, workshop style can be more productive for engagement with residents than the 'top table' question and answer session
- There should be a mixture of both virtual and in-person sessions, recognising that virtual meetings may reach a more diverse audience and be easier to attend for those with work or family commitments
- Consideration should be given to how best to reach a wider audience, including social media. The public forum of the locality sessions held did not have good attendance, so ways of publicising events more effectively should be considered
- The timing and venue of meetings could be more flexible than was the case with CLCs
- Whilst the Forums won't need a formal agenda and minutes, actions and outcomes of any meetings/events should be recorded

- Chairing arrangements should be clear with a preference for member chairing so that they do not appear officer-led
- Questions from the public should be focused on local issues and where possible be provided in advance; they should not be used for raising issues already being dealt with as part of a separate process. Where an answer cannot be provided on the night, this may need to be provided after the meeting.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 The main objective of the one-year pilot for County Local Forums is to provide an evidence base for the best mechanism for county councillors to engage with their communities and which is responsive to those communities. The Forums are not intended be a mechanism for partnership engagement between the County Council and other public bodies or councils. They are also not intended to provide information and updates for councillors on cross-county, strategic issues as these are dealt with through separate briefings (including at the monthly member development days). They are also not intended to replicate discussions being carried out through other elements of the democratic process. A new, separate process outside of these Forums for county councillor engagement in local highways matters, including on community-requested Traffic Regulation Orders, is being developed and county councillors will be briefed on this at a later date.

Overarching approach

- 2.2 There will be seven County Local Forums, one per district/borough area. The membership of the Forum will be the county councillors for the area. Each Forum will meet three times in the pilot year, in October/November, February/March and May/June. They are to provide an opportunity for the public to meet and ask questions of their local county councillors, to have a two-way dialogue about issues of local concern and bring relevant matters to the attention of councillors. They may also provide a mechanism for the Council to engage residents in current consultations and discuss specific local issues where relevant.
- 2.3 The chairmanship for the Forum will rotate, with each meeting having a different chairman, appointed by the Forum members in advance through a virtual ballot. The main role of the chairman will be to chair the Forum meeting, but they will also act as a point of co-ordination for officers to liaise with on the meeting arrangements.

Format of meetings sessions

- 2.4 Two Forum meetings will be held in-person, ideally at a County Council venue, such as the local library (where available). These in-person meetings will rotate around the larger district/borough areas. One of three Forum meetings will be virtual - ideally the autumn/winter meeting, when evenings are dark and people are less likely to want to attend a public meeting. Meetings will be up to a maximum of two hours long (in line with the previous CLCs) and it is proposed that they should be held at different times of the day to test accessibility for different communities. As well as early evening meetings, starting at 7pm, there should be at least one meeting held earlier in the day as agreed by the Forum members. It may be most

appropriate for the virtual meeting to be held at a different time of day, with the in-person meetings at the more usual (for CLC meetings) time of 7pm.

- 2.5 As County Local Forums are not formal meetings, there will not be a formal agenda or minutes. They will have a more flexible programme encouraging resident participation and two-way dialogue. The programme may include:
- Welcome by the Chairman and councillor introductions
 - WSCC consultations or focused subject discussion (where appropriate)
 - Timed one-hour open Question and Answer session (chaired by the Chairman)
- 2.6 Residents will be asked to submit questions in advance, so that detailed answers can be provided at the session. Some questions may be dealt with in advance, particularly where there is a simple answer or a need for more swift action. Issues already being dealt with through a separate process will not be forwarded to the County Local Forum for response and it is not a forum for raising issues that have already been resolved or requesting updates on ongoing local casework. Issues relating to other councils' services will be followed up, with answers provided where possible. A note will be taken of Forum meetings, providing an anonymised summary of questions/issues raised, along with any answers provided and actions to be taken. These will be published on the Council's website and will also be shared with all county councillors, as there may be issues of common interest and which cut across district/borough areas.
- 2.7 Feedback will be sought following each County Local Forum meeting (from county councillors and public attendees) to help plan future sessions.

Communications/promotion

- 2.8 The former CLC Facebook pages will be rebadged as County Local Forum Facebook pages, enabling questions and issues/topics to be shared on a locality basis. Residents will be notified of Forum meetings via the Council's social media and e-alert systems as well as via press releases. They will also be promoted via existing newsletters. County councillors will play a key role in promoting the Forums within their own local networks.
- 2.9 County Local Forums will be promoted internally within the Council, so that relevant services are able to identify opportunities to use these for consultation on key topics or for the promotion of key messages/information to the public.
- 2.10 The potential for people to join virtual sessions through the use of IT infrastructure at libraries will be explored. For those who are unable to attend, the use of streaming or social media to provide live updates will be tested.

Inward-facing locality sessions

- 2.11 The member information and training that was provided through the Locality Sessions in the summer of 2021 can be met through different mechanisms (e.g. member-briefings and the ongoing member development programme). However, it is recognised that the opportunity for members to meet informally on a local area basis for information sharing, training and

networking can be beneficial. So it is proposed that there should be seven annual Locality Sessions on a district/borough area basis, but that these should be seen as quite distinct from the County Local Forum. The focus for these will be on advice, information and training for members. Information on local insight and data may be provided as well as updates on key Council services and priorities, with briefings from relevant officers.

- 2.12 It is proposed that the first Locality Sessions should be in July/early August 2022 and that these should include the opportunity for members to assess the pilot County Local Forum for their area, providing feedback for consideration by the Governance Committee later in the year.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 The proposal includes a range of options for members to consider for the trial period, within the constraints of the agreed County Local Forum approach and the need for some degree of consistency across the county.
- 3.2 Some feedback indicated a desire for more than seven Forums, providing the flexibility for question and answer sessions to be held on a smaller geographical footprint. Some felt that this would better reflect local communities of interest, particularly in the more rural areas. Holding more Forums would require additional resources and the level of public attendance at CLCs and at the recent Locality Sessions does not necessarily indicate public demand for this. The County Local Forums do not preclude county councillors from holding their own more local surgeries (either individually or in conjunction with councillors from neighbouring divisions). Following the pilot, if the decision is to continue with the Forums, the most appropriate geography can be assessed. However, if the Governance Committee wishes to pursue the option of smaller geographical areas, it could be possible for virtual Forum meetings to break into geographical groups for the public Question and Answer session.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 Arun District Council, all county councillors and town and parish councils have been invited to comment on how the County Local Forums should operate. A summary of responses received is at **Appendix 1**. Only Arun District Council, seven (of 70) county councillors and two (of 158) town/parish councils provided comments. Most key themes/points raised through this consultation have been included in paragraph 1.5. Other issues raised include:
- How highways matters will be dealt with (this will be part of a separate process, as referenced at paragraph 2.1); although residents will be able to ask questions relating to local highways issues through the public question and answer sessions at County Local Forum meetings
 - The benefits of a forum involving all three tiers of local government (all County Local Forums will include members who sit on district/borough councils; county councillors for parished areas carry out regular liaison with their town/parish councils)
 - How town/parish councils will be engaged with going forward (options are being considered for this, as referenced at paragraph 2.10).

- 4.2 The Member Development Group will be invited to advise on the form and content of the Locality Sessions.

5 Finance

- 5.1 Officer support for County Local Forums will be provided jointly by the Communities Directorate and Democratic Services and officer attendance at meetings will be minimised as far as possible. As they will not be formal, decision-making committees it is anticipated that they will require less support than CLCs. Organisational and administrative processes that lie behind County Local Forums will be minimised, to include through aiming for a digital by default approach. Pre-agenda meetings will not be required, with liaison carried out virtually through the identified chairman for each County Local Forum meeting.
- 5.2 Initial savings of £68,200 will be delivered by the end of September 2021, through the removal of two posts in Democratic Services. Further savings opportunities will be explored and assessed through the one-year trial. The resource implications of the County Local Forums will be part of the assessment at the end of the one-year trial.

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 from county councillors.
Low public participation	Use of virtual sessions to engage on a more local basis and at times more accessible to a wider range of people Promotion of meetings, including through social media and more traditional communications, to maximise publicity for the Forums

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. There may be some negative impact in terms of Climate Change implications if County Local Forums are held in person rather than virtually, given the potential increase 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 – Summary of consultation feedback

Background papers:

None