

Report to Governance Committee

12 September 2022

Review of County Local Forums

Report by the Director of Law and Assurance and the Assistant Director (Communities)

Electoral divisions: All

Summary

In September 2022, the Committee endorsed a proposal to replace County Local Committees with a one-year trial of more informal engagements for county councillors to engage with their residents, to be called County Local Forums. This report sets out information on the one-year trial, for the Committee to review, including feedback gathered from county councillors.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to review County Local Forums (CLFs) and decide whether to recommend to County Council in October to approve that:

- (1) CLFs be made permanent, based on the pilot arrangements; or
 - (2) CLFs be ceased, making savings through a reduction in staff posts and members supported to use other channels to engage with their residents (as set out in paragraph 2.2)
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Proposal

1 Background and context

1.1 The aims of the one-year CLF pilot were to:

- Ensure openness and transparency through providing an opportunity for the public to ask questions of and discuss issues with county councillors, to have a two-way dialogue about issues of local concern and bring relevant matters to the attention of 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 County Local Committees (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.

- Provide an evidence base for the best mechanism for county councillors to engage with their communities.
- 1.2 CLFs were not intended to be a forum for engaging with other partner organisations or for responding to issues already being managed through a separate process.
 - 1.3 Seven CLFs were established, one per district/borough area. Each met three times in the pilot year, with the first round of meetings in winter 2022 being held virtually. All subsequent meetings were held in person, at Council buildings (mainly libraries). CLF chairmen were appointed by the Forum members in advance of meetings through a virtual ballot. Residents were invited to submit questions in advance, so that detailed answers could be provided at the session. The public attendance at meetings and the number of questions asked has increased during the pilot year, with lowest levels of public attendance and questions at the first (virtual) round of meetings. The main area of public questioning has been on highways and transport-related matters.
 - 1.4 CLFs were promoted by press releases, Facebook posts and paid adverts, Eventbrite promotion, posters displayed in libraries and e-mailed to county councillors and town/parish councils and through existing County Council newsletters (Residents' e-newsletter, Libraries newsletter and Town and Parish Council newsletter). Details of each CLF, along with a record of questions and answers were also provided on the Council's [website](#).
 - 1.5 Officer support for CLFs was provided jointly by Democratic Services and the Communities Directorate. Other service officer attendance at CLFs was minimised, although the sessions held in libraries required Library Service staff attendance (these included the provision of tours for members). Other service areas were responsible for providing responses to questions submitted by the public in advance, with estimated time spent on this for the trial year set out below.

Service Area (Number of officers)	Time in Hours
Education (1)	2
Highways (8)	25.25
Planning (1)	22
Adults Services (1)	1
Legal Services (1)	0.25
Total	50.5

- 1.6 Data on each CLF, including member, public and officer attendance and questions asked is set out at **Appendix A**.
- 1.7 All county councillors had the opportunity to give views on the CLF trial, as well as other mechanisms for engaging with residents, through an online survey and through the annual informal Locality Sessions. These sessions are held to provide information, training and updates to members on an area

basis and met in July and August 2022. Feedback from councillors is set out at **Appendix B** and summarised at paragraph 4.

- 1.8 Anecdotal feedback from those residents who attended CLFs was positive, welcoming the opportunity to raise issues with local councillors and have questions answered.

2 Proposal details

- 2.1 Although CLFs have provided a forum for residents to ask questions of their county councillors, their core aims have not been met. They have not been well attended and have not reached a diverse audience. The issues/questions raised have tended to be those which councillors are already aware of and which are being dealt with through other processes. Feedback from county councillors does not suggest that CLFs have enhanced or supported them in their local role. Whilst there was very low support from councillors for continuing with CLFs, there is support for other options for engaging with residents. The evidence from the one-year trial suggests that more flexible and responsive mechanisms work better, and that existing approaches used by councillors (such as social media and attending town/parish council or residents' association meetings are more effective).

- 2.2 It is proposed that CLFs are ceased, with members supported to use other channels to engage with their residents, recognising that the need for support will vary between members:

- a) Ensure residents know who their local county councillor is and how to contact them, including through:
- The provision of posters in libraries and to town/parish councils (for local noticeboards), showing who the local county councillors are, with contact details
 - County councillors' individual pages on the County Council website to include a link to a map of the division and more up-to-date information (to be provided by the councillor) on their activities
 - Ensure the County Council website gives clear reference to the fact that many councillors have a social media presence, so that residents can find these for their local councillor
- b) Access to Council buildings for surgeries (depending on the time/location and availability of appropriate meeting rooms).
- c) Directors to ensure councillors are kept updated on relevant service issues affecting their division so they can act as communication channel between Council and their residents, including through informal/virtual briefings on relevant issues. Directors also to continue to ensure councillors are provided with appropriate support for their local casework.
- d) The provision of training and guidance for county councillors in:
- Social media
 - Technology to support online/virtual engagement
 - Managing local casework and engaging with partner organisations (e.g. town/parish councils)

- e) Annual Locality Sessions to provide the opportunity for councillors to share best practice in terms of how they manage their local role, how they engage with residents and other councils/community groups and how they deal with local casework. As in 2021, the first of these Sessions after the quadrennial County Council elections to provide an induction to the locality and the local member role. Members elected at by-elections to be provided with this as part of their tailored induction programme.
 - f) The Member Development Group be asked to build into the member induction programme the opportunity for newly elected councillors to network with and learn from more experienced members, with particular reference to their local role.
- 2.3 As and when issues of significant local concern arise, there remains the potential to arrange one-off public meetings (which may involve other partners, such as district/borough councils). These would need to be reactive, rather than pre-planned and be in response to identified local need, with the support of the relevant councillors.
- 2.4 No change is proposed to the annual Locality Sessions, which provide the opportunity for county councillors to meet informally on a local area (district/borough) basis for information sharing, training and networking.

3 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 3.1 The option to make the CLFs as currently constituted a permanent arrangement is not proposed. This was not supported by consultation with county councillors and data from the trial shows that CLFs did not draw large or diverse audiences and the questions/issues raised by residents were often already being dealt with through other processes (e.g. councillors' local casework, scrutiny, the Council's complaints system). The format was not considered to work well, with many of the questions raised relating either to very specific issues only affecting one division (and so not benefitting from a collective response) or to other councils' areas of responsibility and which could not be easily answered (except where the county councillors happened to also be district/borough councillors for the same area).
- 3.2 Whilst some councillors wanted to see the CLF model enhanced and developed (including through setting up more CLFs to better reflect the geography of larger district/borough areas), this is not proposed as it would require additional resources to support.

4 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 4.1 All county councillors were consulted as part of the review of the CLF trial through an online survey and through the informal Locality Sessions held in July and August 2022. 45 councillors (65%) took part in the Locality Sessions and 18 (26%) completed the survey. Feedback from this consultation is set out at **Appendix B** with an overview of responses below.

	Locality Sessions	Member Survey	Total
Make CLFs permanent, based on the pilot arrangements (7 CLFs meeting 3 times per year)	3	6	9
Cease CLFs, make savings and support members to use other mechanisms for engaging with residents	16	6	22
Other (a range of different options were suggested)	22	6	28

- 4.2 There was little support for CLFs to be made permanent, although some of the 28 who suggested other options for engaging with residents (including all of the six the councillors who attended the Chichester Locality Session) wanted to see the CLF model improved and adapted to be less focused on question-and-answer sessions, to involve district/borough councils, have themed sessions with topics of specific local interest and more service officer attendance to provide presentations/answer questions. Some wanted the areas covered to be smaller, as district/borough areas are too large and diverse and a removal of the requirement to provide written questions in advance.
- 4.3 Those preferring other options suggested a range of more flexible approaches, generally requiring less administration, including more collaborative working with district/borough councils on key local issues and (where relevant) with town/parish councils; councillors organising engagement within their own divisions; surgeries; more engagement with young people. The requirement to provide written questions in advance was not supported.
- 4.4 In general, feedback was that councillors feel they are already very accessible to residents, through e-mail and telephone, social media, surgeries and attending local events, town/parish council meetings, residents' association/community group meetings. Other mechanisms councillors use include newsletters, leafletting/door-knocking, pop-up drop-ins and by having a presence through living or working in the division. Whilst the usefulness of social media and other online platforms was highlighted, there was clear recognition of the need for more traditional, face-to-face engagement mechanisms. One councillor commented that 'there is no method that is the most effective as you need to use all media/means to contact residents'.

5 Finance

- 5.1 Officer support for County Local Forums is provided jointly by the Communities Directorate and Democratic Services. Other service areas have provided input in terms of helping to answer residents' questions provided in advance, with some service lead officers attending meetings where required to deal with a high-profile local issue. The cost of CLFs has been kept to a minimum, including through working virtually, using Council venues for in-person meetings and by reduced organisational and administrative processes (in comparison to CLCs).

- 5.2 The cessation of CLCs in 2021 generated savings of £68,200 through the removal of two posts in Democratic Services. If CLFs cease, an estimated saving of £76,000 can be delivered through the removal of two further posts in Democratic Services. Removal of these posts would preclude the provision of support for any new/additional mechanisms for engaging with residents, although resources are available to support the proposals set out at paragraph 2.2. Updates to the county councillor pages on the Council website can be carried out by Democratic Services staff who manage these pages, but activity may need to be monitored as capacity is limited. Arranging one-off public meetings (as at paragraph 2.3) can be met from within existing resources, but capacity and resourcing would need to be considered as part of the planning for any such meetings, in liaison with the relevant Director(s).
- 5.3 The current format of CLFs (size and number of meetings) could be supported from within existing budgets.

6 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
Loss of local democratic debate on issues	Councillors to be supported to engage with a wide range of residents, including through training and access to some Council venues for surgeries

7 Policy alignment and compliance

- 7.1 There are no social value, crime and disorder, equality duty, human rights, public health or legal implications. There may be some limited impact in terms of Climate Change implications if CLFs cease, with less travel required to attend in person meetings (so potentially some decrease in carbon emissions). The proposal in this report supports the Council Plan objective 'making the best use of resources'.

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Appendices

Appendix A – County Local Forum trial year data

Appendix B – Consultation feedback from county councillors

Background papers:

None