
Review of County Local Forums

Background and context

- 1** In July 2021 the County Council agreed to a proposal to replace County Local Committees with a one-year trial of more informal arrangements for county councillors to engage with residents, to be called County Local Forums (CLFs). This report sets out information on the one-year trial, for the Council to review, including feedback gathered from county councillors.
- 2** The aims of the one-year CLF pilot were to:
 - Ensure openness and transparency through 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
- 3** CLFs were not intended to be a forum for engaging with partner organisations or for responding to issues already managed through a separate process.
- 4** Seven CLFs were established, one per district/borough area. Each met three times with the first round in winter 2021 held virtually. All later meetings were in person, at council buildings (mainly libraries). Chairmen were appointed by members by virtual ballot. Residents were invited to submit questions in advance, to ensure detailed answers could be provided at the session. Public attendance and the number of questions increased during the year, lowest at the first (virtual) round. The main area of questioning was highways and transport.
- 5** CLFs were promoted by press releases, Facebook posts and paid adverts, Eventbrite promotion, posters 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 provided on the Council's [website](#). A total of 298 members of the public attended the 21 CLF meetings held during the trial year, with 216 questions raised.
- 6** All county councillors had the opportunity to give views on the CLF trial, as well as other mechanisms for engaging residents, through an online survey and through the annual informal Locality Sessions. These are held to provide information, training to members on an area basis and met in July and August 2022. Feedback from councillors is summarised at paragraph 14.
- 7** Anecdotal feedback from residents who attended CLFs was positive, welcoming the opportunity to raise issues with local councillors and have questions answered.

Proposal details

- 8** The conclusion is that the core aims of the pilot have not been met. They have not been well attended and have not reached a diverse audience. The issues raised have been 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 supported them in their local role. There was very low support from councillors for continuing with CLFs but there is some support for other options for engaging residents. The evidence suggests that more flexible and responsive mechanisms work better, and that existing approaches used by councillors (social media and attending town/parish council or residents' association meetings) are more effective.
- 9** The Governance Committee therefore proposes that CLFs should cease, with members instead being supported to use other channels to engage residents, recognising that the need for support will vary:
- (a) Ensure residents know who their local county councillor is and how to contact them, including through:
 - 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 meeting rooms).
 - (c) Directors to ensure councillors are kept updated on relevant service issues affecting their division so they can help communication with 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 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.

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- (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.

10 As and when issues of significant local concern arise, there remains the option 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.

11 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.

Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

12 The option to make the CLFs a permanent arrangement is not proposed. This was not supported by consultation with county councillors and data from the trial.

13 Whilst some councillors wanted to see the CLF model enhanced and developed, this would require additional resources to support and was not widely supported.

Consultation, engagement and advice

14 All county councillors were consulted 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. The full results of the survey and feedback from the Locality Sessions were considered by the Governance Committee. An overview of the responses is set out below.

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

15 There was little support for CLFs to be made permanent, although some of the 28 who suggested other options for engaging with residents wanted to see the CLF model adapted to be less focused on question-and-answer sessions, to involve district/borough councils, have 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 and a removal of the requirement to provide written questions in advance.

16 Those preferring other options suggested a range of more flexible approaches, generally requiring less administration, including more collaborative working with district/borough councils on local issues and (where relevant) with town/parish councils; councillors organising engagement within their own divisions; use of surgeries; more engagement with young people.

17 In general feedback indicates councillors feel they are already accessible to residents, through e-mail and telephone, social media, surgeries and attending local events, town/parish council, community group meetings and newsletters, leafletting/door-knocking, drop-ins and by 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.

Finance

18 The cost of CLFs has been kept to a minimum, including through working virtually, using Council venues for in-person meetings. Officer support for CLFs was provided jointly by the Communities Directorate and Democratic Services. Other officer attendance at CLFs was minimised although other service areas provided input in terms of helping to answer residents' questions provided in advance, with some service lead officers attending meetings where required.

19 Ending CLCs in 2021 generated savings of £68,200 by the removal of two posts. If CLFs cease, an estimated saving of £76,000 can be delivered through the removal of two further posts in Democratic Services. This could limit support for new mechanisms for member support, although resources are available for the proposals at paragraph 9. Updates to councillor pages on the website can be carried out by Democratic Services staff, but capacity is limited. Arranging one-off public meetings (paragraph 10) can be met from within existing resources, but resourcing would need to be considered in liaison with the relevant Director(s).

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

Policy alignment and compliance

20 There are no social value, crime and disorder, equality, human rights, public health or legal implications. There may be limited impact for climate change implications with less travel required to attend in person meetings. The proposal supports the Council Plan objective 'making the best use of resources'.

Recommended

That County Local Forums be ceased.

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Background papers:

None