

CABINET

7th December 2011

FUTURE OF THE PARISH FORUM

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor Mark Bullivant
Portfolio Holder Consulted	√
Relevant Head of Service	Claire Felton, Head of Legal, Equalities and Democratic Services
Wards Affected	All Wards
Ward Councillor Consulted	N/A
Non-Key Decision	

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

- 1.1 The Parish Forum was established several years ago by the Council to provide a vehicle for liaison between Bromsgrove District Council and Parish Councils. Meetings are normally held on a quarterly basis to share information and consider matters of common interest. These meetings are chaired by the Leader (or another Portfolio Holder) and serviced by an officer from Committee Services. Various senior and other levels of Council officers attend, as required, according to the subject matters under consideration.
- 2.2 The Council currently provides facilities at the Council House for meetings of the Bromsgrove Area Committee of the Worcestershire County Association of Local Councils (CALC). CALC is the representative body for Parish and Town Councils.
- 2.3 It is proposed that the Parish Forum be discontinued and that, as an alternative arrangement, a slot be included at the start of the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC meetings where Council officers could attend, as required, to give presentations and interact with parish council representatives.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **That the Cabinet consider the response submitted on behalf the Parish Councils and agree:**
- (a) that the Parish Forum be discontinued with immediate effect;**
 - (b) that, as an alternative arrangement, meetings of the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC be used a vehicle for presentations and interaction between the Council and Parish Councils by way of a slot at the start of such meetings;**
 - (c) whether to approve the suggestion for a specific Cabinet Member to be given responsibility for managing the relationship with the Parish Councils, and if so:**

- (i) nominate that person; and
 - (ii) agree that this Cabinet Member addresses the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC at its first meeting in 2012 on the way forward in the absence of the Parish Forum;
- (d) whether to approve the suggestion for “the District Council to hold meetings between Parish Councils and District Council Members twice a year (or more often if the need arises) to discuss items of Council Policy that impact on the Parish Councils”;
- (e) whether to approve the suggestion for any changed arrangements to be “reviewed jointly before the end of the first twelve months to ensure that the District Council’s commitment to continue to maintain strong links with its parishes is met and the recognition of the need to work together for our communities is satisfied”.

3. KEY ISSUES

Financial Implications

- 3.1 There are no significant financial implications associated with the proposal. If the Parish Forum is discontinued, modest printing/postage cost savings will be achieved by not having to service such meetings.
- 3.2 In the current financial climate the Council needs to look very closely at how it uses its resources including ways in which officers’ time can be utilised in a more efficient and effective way. The proposal to discontinue the Parish Forum and include a slot at the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC meetings will rationalise the use of officer time.

Legal Implications

- 3.3 There is no legal requirement for the Council to have a Parish Forum. The Forum was established as a local mechanism to interact with Parish Councils.

Service / Operational Implications

- 3.4 In December 2001 the Cabinet considered a report on partnership arrangements with Parish Councils and agreed that “quarterly meetings be set up” to liaise with parish councils. This was effectively the establishment of what is known as the Parish Forum. The first meeting

was held on 9th January 2003 and meetings have been held at the Council House on a regular basis since then.

- 3.5 The Parish Forum meetings have been serviced from the outset by an officer from Committee Services who liaises with the Leader, members of the Corporate Management Team and other Council officers with regard to matters which the Council wish to raise at such meetings and ensuring relevant Member/officer attendance. The Committee Services officer also acts as the link person between the Council and Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC and ensures that items raised by CALC are included on the agenda.
- 3.6 In the current climate the Council has to look very closely at how it uses its resources including the best use of officer time. It is considered that the proposal to discontinue the Parish Forum and instead include a slot on the existing Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC meetings at the Council House will enable officers' time to be utilised in a more efficient and effective way. This will impact on a range of officers from the person who services the Parish Forum through to members of the Senior Management Team.
- 3.7 It is acknowledged that the Council has developed strong links with Parish Councils and the local CALC and there is a desire to maintain these links and to work together for the benefit of the district of Bromsgrove and its communities. If the proposal set out in the report is approved, in order to maintain continuity it is intended that the same person within Committee Services would still act as the link person between the Council and CALC.
- 3.8 It should also be highlighted that the Council's established engagement with Parish Councils includes the provision of training opportunities and this will continue regardless of the future of the Parish Forum. In addition, there are regular Monitoring Officer Liaison Meetings with Parish Clerks. These meetings have been a success and will continue.
- 3.9 The Council has consulted with the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC on the proposed changes which in turn sought feedback from Parish Councils.
- 3.10 A collective response on behalf of the Parish Councils has been submitted by the Chairman of the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC (Councillor Mrs. S. Baxter). This response is attached as an appendix to the report.
- 3.11 The response points out that due to the limited timescale for the consultation (4 weeks), CALC has not been able to submit a formal response due its next meeting not taking place until December and that some Parish Councils have not met during this period. However, 12 of

the 20 Parish Councils did respond to CALC's request for feedback on the proposals. Of these 6 were broadly in favour of the proposed changes although they all had some concerns or misgivings. The remaining 6 were against any change as they consider that the purpose of the CALC and Parish Forum meetings is different and that the Forum provides a useful function in its own right.

- 3.12 The response sets out a clear summary of the views of Parish Councils and a number of suggestions for the way forward for the Council to consider. These suggestions have been reflected in the recommendations on the way forward as set out in section 2 of the Cabinet report. The response also highlights a number of issues raised by individual Parish Councils.
- 3.13 Tutnall & Copley Parish Council also responded directly to the Council that *"Members were unanimous in stating that they wished to the Forum to continue. The Forum is the only open meeting between the District and Parishes, providing an excellent medium for interaction and continued dialogue."*

Customer / Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 3.14 There are no significant implications to highlight in addition to the above-mentioned consultation.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 4.1 There are not considered to be any significant risks associated with the report proposals.

5. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Parish Councils' response from Chairman of the Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Email to Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC dated 3 October 2011.
Email from Bromsgrove Area Committee of CALC dated 31 October 2011
Letter from Tutnall & Copley Parish Council dated 24 October 2011.

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