
FORA

**Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor John Williams, Leader
Responsible Director - Richard Alty, Assistant Chief Executive (Regeneration)**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report reviews the purpose of the Council's consultative fora and considers alternative ways of carrying out the functions of some of the fora.

Summary

2. The Council's consultation fora were an innovative means of engagement when they were first established, but their roles can now more effectively and efficiently be carried out by the Local Strategic Partnership, Scrutiny Committees, specific consultation strategies on issues and Talking Together events.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that the Environment Forum, Town Centre Forum and Transport Forum be disbanded.

Reasons

4. The recommendation is supported by the following reasons :-
 - (a) To focus engagement in ways that it can be most effective.
 - (b) For efficiency

**Richard Alty,
Assistant Chief Executive (Regeneration)**

Background Papers

None

Richard Alty : Extension 2946

S17 Crime and Disorder	No implications
Health and Well Being	No implications
Sustainability	No implications
Diversity	No implications
Wards Affected	Residents and businesses from all wards will be able to access the proposed methods of engagement.
Groups Affected	All will be able to access the proposed methods of engagement.
Budget and Policy Framework	Does not affect the Budget or Policy Framework
Key Decision	Not a key decision
Urgent Decision	Not an Urgent Decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	No implications
Efficiency	Will reduce the number of regular meetings, with more relevant meetings organised as appropriate.

MAIN REPORT

Background

5. The Council's consultative fora were set up before Local Strategic Partnerships and more structured partnership working existed. They were also set up before Scrutiny Committees existed. They were an innovative way of engaging with partner and stakeholder organisations, mainly intended as a way of consulting those organisations on Council services, strategies and projects.
6. The Public Protection Forum has recently been disbanded, and the following fora now exist:
 - (a) Environment Forum
 - (b) Transport Forum
 - (c) Town Centre Forum
 - (d) Planning Forum
7. They now serve different purposes and have evolved in different ways.

Environment Forum

8. Established to provide a forum for environmental groups and the Council to consider, promote and initiate proposals on environmental issues and consider the Council's environmental policies. Since its formation, the Forum has met to debate and discuss a wide range of environmental issues and made important contributions to Council policy development. In general, the issues discussed by the Forum have tended to arise out of the work of the Council, for example emerging policy documents and proposed environmental projects.
9. Environment Forum has been relatively well attended by voluntary sector environmental groups, although various groups sitting on the Environment Forum (and Transport Forum) are now also represented on the Greener Darlington Theme Group of the LSP. Although a number of the organisations on the Environment and Transport Fora are not on the Greener Theme Group, many of these groups have not attended the Forum meetings.
10. It has been the case that the same reports are taken to the Environment Forum, the Greener Darlington Theme Group of the LSP, and been considered by the Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee. For example, the Forum has met twice since July 2008. Only three agenda items were involved in each meeting, which reflects the general difficulty coming up with items on a regular basis for Quarterly meetings. 4 of the 6 items also went to Economy and Environment Scrutiny and three to the Greener Theme Group.
11. Although, two meetings have been cancelled within the last year, and the last meeting was on 9 March 2009, this has not generated much reaction. One representative of an organisation was concerned about the lack of activity and felt the Forum had a useful role for local groups to share information and influence/contribute to, policy development and projects. However, when the role of the Greener Theme Group was explained, and she was invited to attend that Group, this appeared to satisfy her concerns. Other Forum Members

have not been pressing for a meeting.

12. At the meeting of 28 July 2008, officers presented a report for discussion which considered the role and remit of the Forum particularly in light of the establishment of the Greener Theme Group. Although the report proposed a continued role for the forum, in association with the Greener Theme Group, a view supported by some members, there were also strong views that the work of the forum could and should be dealt with by the Theme Group, to avoid duplication.

Transport Forum

13. The quarterly meetings of the Transport Forum are regularly attended by around 20 to 25 individuals, either on their own account or representing local interest groups, transport operators and other voluntary organisations. Many of the groups or organisations concerned are also represented at the LSP, especially on the Greener Theme Group.
14. Transport Forum considers many items that are, or could in future be, considered by the Greener Theme Group thus benefitting from the wider perspective that this Group can apply. Increasingly, Transport Forum examines detailed issues raised by some members in a depth more appropriate to a scheme consultation process. These issues are sometimes raised repeatedly at successive meetings despite previous debate. Currently, the Forum is strongest in dealing with specific scheme proposals, rather than the strategic objectives for transport within the Borough.

Town Centre Forum

15. Since the establishment of the Town Centre Board, the Town Centre Forum has a specific role of considering the Town Centre Management Business Plan twice a year. At the beginning of each year its function is to review progress against the previous year's Plan and provide input to the coming year's Plan. Mid-year it is simply updated on progress. However, it met only once a year from 2006 to 2008 and has not met since April 2008, and businesses have been happy to have the good level of frequent engagement with the Town Centre Management Team that exists through frequent personal business visits, newsletters and the new Town Centre Traders Association.
16. The Town Centre Forum has, since the establishment of the Town Centre Board, been open to all town centre businesses and stakeholder groups.

Planning Forum

17. Planning Forum has a specific role in consultations on the Local Development Framework. Its meetings happen as and when required. Its role is specified in the LDF Statement of Community Involvement, a document which full Council is statutorily obliged to agree. Any review of its role should therefore be through a review of the Statement of Community Involvement.

Common Issues

18. Since the Fora were first established, much has changed, including:

- (a) Working with partners and stakeholder organisations has now been brought together in a more comprehensive and structured way into the Local Strategic Partnership. The LSP should be the centre of normal partner and stakeholder engagement.
- (b) It is now acknowledged that a key Council role is as community leader, enabling, facilitating and encouraging other organisations to play their part in achieving the overall objectives for Darlington. By contrast, the fora were more about (though not exclusively about) consulting others on things that the Council is doing.
- (c) The Sustainable Community Strategy, the Local Area Agreement and the Comprehensive Area assessment are out-workings of the idea that the Council is there to facilitate partnership working around agreed objectives.
- (d) Talking Together has created new ways of having dialogue with community organisations and members of the public that generates better dialogue and feedback than is sometimes possible in a forum meeting.
- (e) Many ways of engaging with partner organisations have evolved in the preparation of policies, strategies, projects and service changes; large meetings of all partners and stakeholders together (as in the fora) are but one way and not always the most productive for partners. Modern consultation strategies recognise different stages of engagement – giving out information, receiving views, dialogue to test and reconcile different views – and in such strategies a meeting of all partners may feature as a defined part of the process (not necessarily at a time when the regular forum meeting happens to be diaried).
- (f) By being open to the public, some fora have attracted increasing numbers of members of the public regularly attending the meetings mainly to pursue their own personal issues, thus detracting from the original purpose of dialogue with partner and stakeholder organisations.
- (g) Scrutiny Committees now have the key role in scrutinising Council decisions and actions, and in assisting with policy development. They can take evidence from organisations and members of the public. In the last year Economy and Environment Scrutiny has effected good engagement by holding a meeting on a topic the day after a Talking Together meeting on the same topic, with Members of the Committee attending the Talking Together event to hear views, receiving a summary of the Talking Together event and inviting direct representations at the Committee meeting. This places such engagement on Council decision-making within the democratic processes set up for it in the constitution.
- (h) Efficiency has become a more significant consideration, and the duplication of consideration of issues between some fora, themed groups and Scrutiny Committees is no longer efficient. Staff-time and printing savings in Democratic Services and departments can facilitate the increasing support required of LSP groups and Scrutiny.

Proposed Engagement in Future

19. Looking at functions which the fora have been carrying out in turn:
- (a) ***Regular dialogue with partners and stakeholder organisations*** is best carried out through the LSP for the reasons set out above. This may be through regular involvement in the relevant LSP theme groups, or through fixed-term enquiry groups or task-and-finish groups set up by the theme groups.
 - (b) ***Dialogue and consultation with the public and community groups*** can more effectively be carried out through Talking Together events. There will be better understanding of the Council's engagement processes if the 'Talking Together brand' is used for all such engagement in future.
 - (c) ***Consultation on a specific policy, strategy or initiative*** should have its own bespoke consultation or engagement strategy, which may, in the dialogue phase of engagement, involve meetings of partners or stakeholders, but would be better planned in a bespoke way as part of the engagement strategy. Such consultation may sometimes also involve dialogue through Scrutiny Committees.
20. Developing a strategic capacity in the Connecting with Communities Section to advise on more creative approaches to engagement will help to improve practice on the last two above beyond what is currently possible in fora.
21. In consequence, it is suggested that:
- (a) Transport Forum, Environment Forum and Town Centre Forum are disbanded and their roles are replaced with the three forms of engagement set out above.
 - (b) The memberships of the Greener and Prosperous Darlington Theme Groups are reviewed against the memberships of the Transport Forum and the Environment Forum to check whether any current Forum invitees should be invited to a Theme Group instead. Darlington Partnership has agreed to look at this.
 - (c) The Town Centre Forum is replaced with a Talking Together event on the Town Centre Business Plan as required.
 - (d) Planning Forum needs to continue as an 'as and when required' meeting under the LDF Statement of Community Involvement, and will be re-considered, if necessary, at such time as that document is received.
22. Current Forum attendees are being consulted on and informed of opportunities to discuss issues with the Council and partners in future.