

**NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUMS – CONSULTATION RESPONSES**  
**(Report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 At its meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2011, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) commenced a review of the Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire. At the time, it was agreed that the views of District Councillors, relevant County Councillors and Town and Parish Councils should be sought and reported back to the Panel in November. The purpose of this report therefore is to acquaint the Panel with the responses received.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 In order to initiate the Panel's investigations, Councillors S J Criswell, J J Dutton and R J West were asked to draft a letter to all parties seeking their views on the Forums. When discussing the letter, it was agreed that it should also be sent to Partners. The letter was sent out on 21<sup>st</sup> September, requesting responses to be returned by the 28<sup>th</sup> October 2011.
- 2.2 Any subsequent responses, which have been received since the publication of the Panel's Agenda, will be reported at the meeting.

**3. CONSULTATION RESPONSES**

- 3.1 To date, a total of **30** responses have been received as follows:-

Town and Parish Councils – **15**  
District and County Council Members – **6**  
Partners - **9**

- 3.2 Of the **30** responses received, **25** had attended a Huntingdonshire Neighbourhood Forum meeting, **2** had not attended a Forum meeting, with **1** respondent suggesting the Council should explore the community engagement model adopted by East Cambridgeshire District Council and **2** not indicating their attendance either way.

**(a) Town and Parish Council Responses**

- 3.3 The following Town and Parish Councils have responded:-

Alconbury Weston	Old Hurst	Bury
Great Gransden	Spaldwick	Pidley-cum-Fenton
Great Staughton	St Neots Town	Earith
Huntingdon Town	Stow Longa	Buckden
Waresley-cum-Tetworth	Little Paxton	Chesterton

- 3.4 Of the **15** Town and Parish Council responses, **8** have indicated that they find the Neighbourhood Forums useful, with **3** respondents expressing contrary views. **3** Town and Parish Councils have not indicated a response either way and **1**

respondent stated that they were not aware of the Huntingdonshire Neighbourhood Forums.

3.5 A series of general comments on the Neighbourhood Forums have been received as follows:-

- The Forums are useful to raise local issues such as the presentation of Parish Plans and gaining Partner support on local community initiatives such as local Youth Groups.
- The Forums provide an opportunity to raise matters for discussion at future meetings whilst at the same time enable members of the public to air their views and concerns and meet their local Partner representatives.
- The Police attendance at these meetings are very useful and are the only means of communicating with the Police - in the absence of their presence at Parish Council meetings.
- The Forums have been successful in resolving a number of local issues raised by residents, which are very useful and informative.
- Focus needs to be placed upon smaller, more local areas within the District as it is felt that this would enable Forum meetings to be held more locally, thereby encouraging greater public attendance at the meetings.
- The public are generally not willing to travel great distances to attend a Forum meeting.
- Public attendance would largely depend upon the subject matter in question.
- Too much focus is placed upon issues affecting the Towns and the larger settlements. There is a view that smaller Parish views are often disregarded at the meetings as it is felt that they are not affecting enough people within the community.
- The meetings only attract attendance from local Councillors and Officer representatives from Partner organisations. It has therefore lost its public focus.
- The Neighbourhood Panels do not work effectively.
- Town and Parish Councils need to engage more effectively in the process.
- Some Parishes believe themselves to be different from their neighbouring communities and wish to retain their independence.
- More effective publicity needs to be undertaken in advance of the meeting and communications need to be strengthened.
- The Forum should be brought to the Town and Parish Council meetings.

3.6 In response to a question posed about whether or not local Forums should have decision making powers, **8** Town and Parish Councils agreed with this view and **1** did not comment either way. The **6** that disagreed with this statement commented that the proposals would, in effect, add a fourth tier to Local Government and that elected Members only should be responsible for making decisions on funding. In addition, comments have been received that if there is a large contingent from one area, then their views would carry more weight. This is regarded as being unfair, particularly when attendance at meetings is perceived as being inconsistent and not fully representative of the community. Furthermore, comment has been made that decisions should not be made without consultation with local Town and Parish Councils. Those in support of devolving decision making powers have commented that this would prompt constructive action being taken at Forum meetings and would deter the meetings from being a "talking shop". The view has been expressed that these proposals would add value to the Forums' role by making local issues more important. A comment has been received that this would only be successful if local Members had sufficient knowledge and contact with the local community to reflect

their needs and to vote accordingly. The same respondent also believed that the devolution of these powers would enhance public attendance levels at meetings.

- 3.7 When asking Town and Parish Councils whether or not they would be willing to nominate a representative onto a local Forum that would facilitate closer working between the three tiers of Local Government, **8** respondents indicated they would nominate a representative and **4** indicated that they would not as they were of the view that the issues discussed would not affect their local areas. **3** respondents did not indicate their support either way. Those in support of devolving decision making powers have commented that this would enable individuals at the heart of the community to make local decisions. It was also felt that Town and Parish Councillors are often closer to the public than their District or County Council representatives. It has however been commented that the smaller Parishes may find difficulties in sending a representative to attend these meetings.

**(b) District and County Council Member Responses**

- 3.8 The responses received from District and County Council Members were all received from District Councillors – **6** in total. **4** Members found the Forums useful, indicating that they provide an opportunity for local matters to be discussed by the community whilst at the same time enabling the public to talk to stakeholders directly. Views however were also expressed that policing issues often dominated the meetings and that the meetings are generally not well supported by the public.
- 3.9 **3** of the **6** District Members have expressed the view that local Forums should have decision making powers. It is felt that the Forums would enable local views to be sought and taken into account when making decisions of a local nature. Members who believe that such responsibilities should not be devolved, have made comments that it would raise the public's expectations about what could/could not be determined at Forum meetings, too many decision making bodies would cause confusion, they are not well enough attended to be decision making bodies, they are currently dominated by pressure groups and are therefore not truly reflective of the community. One Member comment has been received that the former Neighbourhood Policing Panels operated more effectively than the present arrangements.
- 3.10 Having been asked whether or not closer working between the three tiers of Local Government was desirable, **4** of the **6** Member respondents expressed support for it, with **1** respondent not commenting either way. The respondent who disagreed with this statement expressed the view that it would make it harder for the public to determine which authority was responsible for particular outcomes. **1** Member respondent who expressed support for this view commented that the existing format of the Forums would not be the best way to achieve this as their primary role is to give residents an opportunity to highlight issues. This Member has also made comment at the possible introduction of "Locality Panels" to comprise the Mayor/Chairman of Town/Parish Councils together with the relevant District and County Councillors, with the "Locality Panel" leading on the Neighbourhood Forums and having decision making responsibilities.
- 3.11 Members were provided with an opportunity to make further comments and/or observations on the Forums as necessary. A comment has been received that the Forums are unnecessary and should be reviewed. On the contrary however, a Member has commented that the Forums should not be abandoned as it would send out negative messages to communities that the Council and Partners does not want to listen to and/or engage with them. It has been suggested that special invitations

should be issued to the Town and Parish Councils with a view to engaging them more effectively in the process. A comment has also been received that decision making at Town and Parish Council level should be introduced on significant planning matters, such as large scale housing developments. Other comments which have been received relate to the inefficient use of Police time, the venues utilised for Forum meetings and the impact in terms of travel, the dates set for the Forum meetings and the low level of public attendees at such meetings.

**(c) Partner Responses**

3.12 **9** responses have been received from Partners as follows:-

Sector Inspector – **2**  
Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service – **4**  
Parish Councillor (Panel Member) – **1**  
County Councillor (Chairman/Panel Member) – **1**  
Police Authority - **1**

3.13 **6** Partner respondents have indicated that they do find the Forums useful, with **1** respondent indicating that they are interesting but not very useful and **2** respondents not commenting either way. A series of comments on the Neighbourhood Forums have been received as follows:-

- The meetings provide an indication of local issues and problems that require attention by Partner organisations, thereby promoting local accountability.
- Face to face engagement with Partners is valued by the public. It also enables Partners to pick up on local community issues and respond to them, either on an individual organisation approach or by way of partnership working.
- Some frustration arises due to limited and true community representation at the meetings.
- The issues raised at some of the meetings by the public are generally of a minor nature that could be dealt with by other means.
- The community would not wait three months to raise a significant issue at the Forum meetings and would contact the relevant authority at the time. Whilst the intention to engage with the community is clear, the reality is often different.
- The Forums portray a perception that Partner organisations view this as a “tick box” exercise to demonstrate that they are communicating with the local community rather than being a real Forum where individual issues can be discussed.
- There is a perception that the priorities adopted at Forum meetings all need to be Police related. This is not the case as the priorities should be far ranging and should include other agencies taking the lead.
- The view has been expressed that the meetings are dominated by the Police.
- A comment has been received from one of the Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue respondents that they often have very little input at these meetings.

3.14 **5** of the **9** Partner respondents have indicated that they have utilised the Forums for their own organisation’s consultation purposes.

3.15 A number of comments have been made by Partners for developing the Forums further:-

- Clearer roles and expectations for Officers and respondents would be advantageous at the meetings.
- More effective publicity of the meetings, including the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter and existing local newsletters/publications, should be undertaken to increase public attendance levels which are perceived to be low.
- The Town and Parish Councils should make more effort to publicise the meetings.
- The formal format of the meetings may put people off from attending.
- Youth Groups and Town and Parish Councils should be more effectively engaged.
- The Forums should be adapted to enable a greater variety and a number of community members to contribute in the priority setting process. It is suggested that key links between Partner organisations should be established and fed into the Neighbourhood Panels. This would remove the burden of people attending, which there evidently appears a little appetite for across the District.
- Could the Forums go out to different venues at a different time of the day (eg schools and businesses)?

3.16 The Chairman of the Huntingdon Neighbourhood Panel is amongst those Partners that have submitted responses. He wishes to draw the Overview and Scrutiny Panel's attention to the work undertaken by the Huntingdon Neighbourhood Panel in improving the effectiveness of Forum meetings. The Huntingdon Panel is currently investigating the idea of a "clearing house" where the Panel would meet separately and look at and respond to issues submitted by the community. It is felt that this would improve the current process as it enables the Neighbourhood Panel to identify issues being raised by groups and for them to either invite the groups to discuss the issues highlighted or to call a public meeting to discuss them openly. Another project being explored is working with and listening to the views of young people.

3.17 The idea of all three tiers of local government working together is supported by the Chairman of the Huntingdon Neighbourhood Panel so long as they engage and respond to the views of the community and are not led by their own agenda. He went on to comment that it would be detrimental for residents if the Neighbourhood Forums were to come to an end. This view is also supported by 2 of the other Partner respondents.

3.18 In addition, the Police Authority response indicates that the future structure of the Neighbourhood Forums should take into account the election of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) in November 2012. The PPC would replace the existing 17 Police Authority representatives and have a wider responsibility for community safety as a whole. The Police Authority have indicated that a Police and Crime Panel will be established to assist with these new changes. Additionally, they have commented that the existing structure and format needs to be simplified to avoid confusing members of the public, rather than adding additional layers which could be portrayed as additional bureaucracy.

3.19 In commenting specifically on the Council's proposals for local decision making, the Police Authority wishes for clarification to be received on how and when various Partners would work together and what is required of each to fulfil obligations to local priorities. It has also been commented that the future arrangements for Neighbourhood Forums should also be considered alongside the review of the County Council's area Joint Committees, which are currently not attended by the

Constabulary or the Police Authority, but overlap in terms of considering road safety issues.

#### **4. OTHER MATTERS**

4.1 Town and Parish Councils and District and County Council Members were requested to identify which neighbouring settlements they defined as being part of their local communities. Responses were received as follows:-

- Alconbury, Alconbury Weston, Upton, Huntingdon and The Stukeleys.
- Huntingdon, Hartford, Stukeley Meadows and Hinchingsbrooke.
- Elton, Water Newton, Alwalton, Haddon, Folksworth, Stibbington, Yaxley, Stilton and Farcet.
- Great Gransden and Little Gransden.
- Abbotsley, Gamlingay and Great and Little Gransden.
- Little Gransden and Eltisley.
- St Ives and Old Hurst.
- Spaldwick, Stow Longa, Easton, Ellington, Barham & Wooley, Catworth, Bythorn & Keyston, Brington & Molesworth, Old Weston, Grafham and Buckworth.
- Bluntisham, Earith and Colne.
- St Neots
- St Neots and Little Paxton.
- Godmanchester.
- Warboys and Ramsey.
- Ramsey, Ramsey St Mary's, Ramsey Heights and Ramsey Forty Foot.
- Bury, Ramsey, Ramsey Forty Foot, Ramsey Mereside, Ramsey St Mary, Wistow, Warboys, Upwood, Great Raveley and Somersham.

4.2 At its meeting in September, the Panel requested updates on the discussions on the future of the Huntingdonshire Neighbourhood Forums being held between the District and County Councils and on Cambridgeshire Constabulary's Operation Redesign Community Engagement project. Officers will deliver these updates at the Panel's meeting.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

5.1 Views have been requested from District Councillors, relevant County Councillors, Town and Parish Councils and Partners on the Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire. This report sets out the responses received to date. Any responses received after the publication of this report will be presented to the Panel at its meeting.

5.2 The Panel is requested to consider the information presented as part of its review of Neighbourhood Forums in Huntingdonshire and to identify how it wishes to pursue the study further.


## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Report and Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) held on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

Neighbourhood Forums Working File held by Democratic Services Section – includes Consultation Responses.

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