

Meeting of the Council – 11th July, 2022

Report of the Cabinet

Development of Community Forums

Purpose

1. To consider the geography of Community Forums and reduce the existing 10 Forums to 5 during the 2022/23 municipal year.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Council:
 - Approve the reduction in Community Forums moving from 10 Forums to 5, as set out in sections 4 to 7 of the report.
 - Endorse the pooling of ward funding allocations in line with the change to 5 Forums and the discussion of grant applications in advance of the meetings, as set out in sections 8 to 9 and sections 11 to 12 of the report.
 - Authorise the Lead for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer) to make any necessary or consequential changes to the Council's Constitution.

Background

3. Community Forums first started meeting in February 2013 and replaced the former Area Committees which were seen as too formal, bureaucratic and not allowing much opportunity for genuine involvement of local people. Community Forums have subsequently met at least 4 times each year until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when face to face meetings of the Forums temporarily ceased. One round of meetings was held online using MS Teams as a pilot during autumn 2021.
4. The break in the holding of Forum meetings has allowed a period of reflection into how Forum meetings are held and the development of ideas for a future approach through discussion between the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities and officers. Following reviews of the Forums in the past there have been efforts to increase participation and engagement, be less parochial and focus on wider issues across a whole town. To be successful with this aim it is felt that there needs to be a change in the geography of Forums – 5 Forums to replace the current 10 covering Dudley North, Dudley, Brierley Hill, Halesowen and Stourbridge.

5. Table 1 outlines the geography of the current 10 Forums and the wards which would make up each of the proposed 5 forums.

Table 1: Community Forum geography

Community Forum geography – 10 Forums	Community Forum geography – 5 Forums
Amblecote, Cradley and Wollescote, Lye & Stourbridge North	Stourbridge Amblecote, Lye & Stourbridge North Norton, Pedmore & Stourbridge East Wollaston & Stourbridge Town
Norton, Pedmore & Stourbridge East, Wollaston & Stourbridge Town	
Belle Vale, Hayley Green and Cradley South	Halesowen Belle Vale, Hayley Green and Cradley South Halesowen North & Halesowen South Cradley and Wollescote
Halesowen North & Halesowen South	
Brierley Hill, Brockmoor and Pensnett	Brierley Hill Brierley Hill, Brockmoor and Pensnett Kingswinford North & Wall Heath, Kingswinford South and Wordsley
Kingswinford North & Wall Heath, Kingswinford South and Wordsley	
Castle and Priory, St James's and St Thomas's	Dudley Castle and Priory, St James's and St Thomas's Netherton, Woodside & St Andrews and Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood
Netherton, Woodside & St Andrews and Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood	
Coseley East and Sedgley	Dudley North Coseley East and Sedgley Gornal, Upper Gornal and Woodsetton
Gornal, Upper Gornal and Woodsetton	

6. To reflect the new approach and make a break with the past it is suggested that a new name and branding for the Forums is developed.
7. It is proposed that the new arrangements are introduced from the autumn with, in future years, three rounds of meetings held around June, October and February.

Community Forum Funding

8. There will need to be some immediate changes made to the administration of Community Forum funding with moving from 10 to 5 Forums. Some current Forums effectively pool their ward allocations, others provide funding to community groups on a ward-by-ward basis and others taking a mixed approach. Some wards, particularly those covering the main town centres, get far more funding applications as more voluntary and community organisations are based in these centres and this means difficult decisions have to be made not to fund some groups whilst other wards have significant sums unspent. There are also issues with having only three members to consider an application for example where one or more need to declare an interest. It is proposed that in future all Forums pool their allocations rather than determine applications purely on a ward basis, and that funds will be administered at a Forum level rather than a ward level.
9. The 5 Forums are likely to have much less room on the agenda for deciding on funding applications and have double the wards to cover. It is proposed therefore that applications are discussed in advance of the Forum meeting. Voluntary and community organisations could still have the opportunity to talk about their applications at Forum meetings and to make connections with others to share resources and ideas and members would share the funding decision at the meeting.

Finance

10. There is a small allocation of £2,100 in the budget to cover the costs of venue hire and promotion for Community Forum meetings. The cost implications of moving to 5 forums needing larger venues with sound systems will need to be considered and additional budget may be required.
11. Each ward receives an annual allocation of £10,000 for awarding to voluntary and community groups for activities and events within the relevant Community Forum's area. Unspent funds are carried forward to the next year. Table 2 provides an overview of the funds available for each of the current 10 Forums and funds which would be available to allocate once pooled for each of the 5 proposed Forums.

Table 2: Community forum grant funding by geography

Community Forum geography – 10 Forums	Remaining funds by ward as of 18.05.2022	Community Forum geography – 5 Forums	Funds available to allocate for 2022/23 as of 18.05.2022
Belle Vale, Hayley Green & Cradley South	£24,638.00 £22,637.95	Halesowen Belle Vale, Hayley Green and Cradley South	£88,924.34
Halesowen North Halesowen South	£14,043.44 £13,577.68	Halesowen North & Halesowen South Cradley and Wollescote	

Amblecote, Cradley & Wollescote, Lye & Stourbridge North	£38,654.40 £14,027.28 £28,160.00	Stourbridge Amblecote, Lye & Stourbridge North Norton, Pedmore & Stourbridge East Wollaston & Stourbridge Town	£100,076.16
Norton, Pedmore & Stourbridge East, Wollaston & Stourbridge Town	£12,245.90 £18,931.30 £2,084.56		
Brierley Hill, Brockmoor & Pensnett	23,195.53 21,898.33		
Kingswinford North & Wall Heath, Kingswinford South Wordsley	£16,747.56 £18,982.78 £20,437.35	Brierley Hill Brierley Hill, Brockmoor and Pensnett Kingswinford North & Wall Heath, Kingswinford South and Wordsley	£101,261.54
Castle and Priory, St James's St Thomas's	£25,858.22 £16,058.16 £22,917.66		
Netherton, Woodside & St Andrews Quarry Bank & Dudley Wood	£44,121.45 £28,862.50	Dudley Castle and Priory, St James's and St Thomas's Netherton, Woodside & St Andrews and Quarry Bank and Dudley Wood	£137,817.99
Coseley East Sedgley	£39,060.39 £20,489.81		
Gornal, Upper Gornal & Woodsetton	£35,260.41 £14,797.05	Dudley North Coseley East and Sedgley Gornal, Upper Gornal and Woodsetton	£109,607.66

12. At the point of transferring unspent/ uncommitted funds it is proposed that the funding for Amblecote, Cradley and Wollescote, Lye and Stourbridge North is split on a ratio of 2/3rds to the Stourbridge Forum and 1/3rd to the Halesowen Forum in line with the proposed geography.

Law

13. Community Forums are not Committees of the Council so the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972 and subsequent legislation relating to appointing Committees, delegating functions and proportionality do not apply. Community Forums comprise all the ward councillors for the areas concerned.
14. The Localism Act 2011 gives the Council a power of general competence to act in the interests of the Community. Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 enables the Council to do anything that is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive to or incidental to, the discharge of its statutory functions.

Risk Management

15. There are minimal risks associated with the proposals in the report.

Equality Impact

16. Community Forums are one way in which the Council seeks to engage with local residents and communities. Attendees at Forum meetings are not always very representative of local communities so it remains important that the Council continues to provide a range of opportunities for people with different protected characteristics to get involved.
17. If the recommendations in this report are approved a new equality impact assessment will be completed.
18. The impact of Covid-19 on health inequalities should inform our approach to developing Community Forums. There is clear evidence that Covid-19 has a disproportionate impact on different groups within the population. Older age, ethnicity, male sex, and geographical areas, are more greatly associated with the risk of getting the infection, experiencing more severe symptoms and higher rates of death.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

19. Meetings of Community Forums have been supported by Community Forum liaison officers who have been identified by Directors, and community development workers from Public Health. Liaison officers provide support to the forums on top of their usual work responsibilities. Moving to 5 forums rather than ten will require reconsideration of the staffing support needed.
20. Without changes to the approach to Forum meetings and to the grants process, additional staff capacity will need to be identified within Public Health to help to coordinate and manage Community Forum meetings and grants, with 40 meetings to support in a normal year on the current geographical footprint and a £240k funding budget to manage.

Commercial/Procurement

21. There are no commercial implications associated with this report.



Council Priorities and Projects

22. This work will contribute to objectives within the Borough Vision, the Council Plan and the Future Council Programme which focus on healthy, resilient, safe communities by:
- providing an opportunity for local people, elected members and partners to work together to identify and progress priorities for their local area
 - supporting people to be actively involved in their community by identifying community assets, connecting people and resources, and enabling people to share ideas and make positive things happen in their communities
 - providing opportunities for local people to influence plans and services which will impact on the local area
 - providing a forum to deal with wider community issues rather than individual complaints or case work issues
 - providing funding to groups who demonstrate that they are working alongside local people and utilising existing community assets wherever possible
 - focusing on approaches which support people to be more self-reliant, independent and co-ordinated in order to increase community resilience
23. People attending Community Forum meetings may identify issues and priorities in relation to a range of public services, including, for example, health services, housing, community safety and green spaces, as well as highlighting inequalities. Insight from Community Forum meetings will be shared accordingly to ensure that, wherever possible, this informs public sector priorities and ways of working through our strategic partnership groups such as Forging a Future and the Health and Wellbeing Board.
24. Community Forums are one of the many ways in which local people can be kept informed about plans for the local area and engaged in or provided with the opportunity to influence plans and services which will impact on the local area.
25. Community Forums give local people and groups the opportunity to bring forward ideas about tackling climate change, share what they are doing and to apply for funding to support groups' environmental projects and activities.



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Leader of the Council