

10 November 2020		ITEM: 5
Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Community Forums		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: NA	
Report of: Natalie Smith, Strategic Lead: Community Development and Equalities		
Accountable Assistant Director: Les Billingham: Assistant Director, Adult Social Care and Community Development		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris: Corporate Director, Adults, Housing and Health		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny have requested a report on Community Forums as part of their work plan. An invitation to Community Forum Chairs to attend the Scrutiny Committee meeting has been made to the Chair, Vice Chair and Secretary of Thurrock Association of Forums as the umbrella body for Forums. This report provides a summary background to Community Forums.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 This report is provided as background information to Community Forums.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Community Forums were encouraged by the council in the late 1990s as part of a neighbourhood management approach. They were encouraged to increase community engagement to shape council policy, as well as to encourage stronger partnerships at a local level. In essence Community Forums were encouraged to help stimulate a community response to local issues.

2.2 Initially, Community Forums were considered part of the council structure with a dotted line into the council via Area Assemblies. Individual Forums were clustered into four Area Assemblies, chaired by Councillors, with four Area Assemblies across the Borough – North, South, East and West. Area Assemblies ceased in 2004. At that time, Forums continued to receive an

annual budget of £200,000 across the borough to support community improvements identified through Forum meetings.

- 2.3 A set of best practice guidelines and templates was developed with forums in 2007 to help increase the diversity and representation of residents participating at meetings, as well as the general visibility of Forums across the borough. This provided an opportunity to ensure Forums had their own constitutions and were established as independent community associations. At the same time, a website was developed to support Forums, encouraging them to publish minutes and to use this medium to support a wider engagement base.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 Current Community Forums: Currently, 15 Community Forums are active in Thurrock in the following areas: Aveley & Kenningtons; Bulphan; Chadwell-St-Mary; Corringham, Fobbing & Homesteads; East and West Tilbury & Linford (Welcom); Horndon-on-the-Hill; Little Thurrock; Orsett; Purfleet-on-Thames; Stanford-le-Hope; South Ockendon & Belhus; Thameside; Tilbury; West Thurrock & South Stifford, and Orchards (south Grays around the Broadway).
- 3.2 Community Forums have previously operated in Chafford Hundred, Stifford Clays and Grays Town however, these have folded in recent years. There is some interest amongst residents to restart forums in Chafford Hundred and Grays Town, and work is ongoing to explore these opportunities.
- 3.2 Meetings: Ordinarily, Community Forums generally hold between 4 and 6 public meetings per year, including an Annual General Meeting to elect a steering committee and key roles such as Chair, Vice Chair and Treasurer. Physical public meetings have not been possible recently due to Covid but many Forums have explored new ways of engaging locally including e-newsletters and keeping in touch with member lists. There is increasing interest in hosting video meetings as it is clear the restriction of physical meetings may continue for some time.
- 3.3 Attendance and engagement: The numbers attending meetings can vary from area to area and depending on the agenda items. Most Forums have a regular set of people attending, but all aim to communicate with the wider community. Forums often succeed due to the dedication and commitment of a small number of volunteers. Many Forums struggle to encourage new committee members. There is an individual and collective commitment to increasing the diversity of those engaging with Community Forums and often local events prove to be more popular at attracting a broader profile of local areas than public meetings.
- 3.4 Communication and engagement: Community Forums have a dedicated website to share agendas and minutes as well as local news <http://www.thurrockcommunityforums.org.uk> Some Forums use social media.

All use local notice boards and are a valued resource for helping promote information across the borough about events, road closures, opportunities, consultations, workshops etc.

- 3.5 Partnership Working This varies across Forums. Police engagement is still strong in some areas but links with schools and GP practices is not fully embedded. Forums meet collectively through the Thurrock Association of Forums (TAF - an umbrella group for Forums). There is regular engagement through the council via the Community Development and Equalities team with TAF about ways in which the profile of Forums can be improved to attract an increase in the number and diversity of residents who engage with their local Forum. The council team supports individual Forums liaise with relevant departments as required to help resolve local issues.
- 3.6 Ward Councillors: Ward councillors are encouraged to attend and work alongside Community Forums. Ward members do not have voting rights on Forums, but Forums tend to work towards a local consensus rather than hold formal votes apart at AGMs.
- 3.7 Funding to Community Forums: Individual budgets for local improvements ceased in 2009. Thurrock Association of Forums negotiated to keep small administration budgets to cover costs such as room hire, promotion and volunteer expenses – this is currently £600 per active Forum per year. In addition it was agreed that council would continue to fund a blanket community insurance programme for Forums that can be used by local organisations for small events. It was also agreed to continue to fund the license for the website. Currently, the annual budget to support Community Forums is £15,810. As independent community associations, many seek external funding to help improve local conditions or to make things happen that benefit neighbourhoods.
- 3.8 Local outcomes: Often, the strength of the Community Forum is best demonstrated in the difference they can make locally by bringing people together around issues of local concern. Some examples of the outcomes Forums have contributed to include:
- Building local pride by celebrating local heritage through events and installations
 - Building community cohesion through hosting events from summer fetes to sports days and Christmas celebrations.
 - Environmental improvements, for example, regular litter picks and taking action against fly tipping
 - Raising awareness of local issues and helping to find the best solutions for all
 - Helping people to feel a sense of belonging and connected to where they live.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 This report is provided for information only.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 NA.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 Community Forums contribute to the priority: **people** – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Rosie Hurst**
Interim Senior Management Accountant

The annual financial contribution made by council to the cost of supporting community forums is covered at 3.7

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Tim Hallam**
Deputy Head of Law and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Since the purpose of this report is to provide background information to this Committee, there are no direct legal implications as such. As paragraph 3.6 of this report explains, Ward councillors are encouraged to attend Community Forum meetings and work alongside Community Forums. As such, if they attend Community Forum meetings, they have a role to play at them, but they would attend in a non-voting capacity only.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities Team

Community Forums support a sense of belonging within neighbourhoods. Forums have adopted equal opportunity policies and aim to attract a diverse range of residents at public meetings, events and onto committees.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

NA.

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- NA

9. Appendices to the report

- NA

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