

North Yorkshire County Council

Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee

13 June 2011

Area Committees

1.0 Purpose of report

- 1.1 To invite the Committee to contribute to discussions concerning Area Committees.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of all seven Area Committees meet regularly on an informal basis, together with Area Committee appointees to Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships. At their meeting on 7 February 2011, Councillor Carl Les raised the future of Area Committees. He noted that whilst there had been numerous minor changes over their life, it was perhaps timely to review their role more formally. A survey was circulated to all Area Committee Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen to gauge views and the results considered at their meeting on 4 April 2011.
- 2.2 Subject to any comments by the Committee, a report of the discussions will be submitted to the Constitution Working Group (date to be agreed). If any changes are required to the Council's constitution, these will need to be developed and considered in the normal way prior to submission to full Council for approval.
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3.0 Area Committees

- 3.1 Area Committees have existed for over ten years. Each of the seven Area Committees is made up of all the County Councillors representing electoral divisions in that area.
- 3.2 Area Committees have power to co-opt additional members, but no co-opted members has the right to vote. Typically, co-opted members are representatives of district councils, parish councils and voluntary organisations, but the number and range varies.
- 3.3 Area Committees normally meet five times a year. All Area Committees have the same terms of references in relation to their respective areas. Overall these have not changed significantly since Area Committees were established, although in the past year the responsibility for certain decisions with regard to rights of way and common land has been transferred to the Planning and Regulatory Functions Committee; and Area Committees no longer have a small grants budget.

4.0 Discussions at the meeting of Area Committee Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen, LSP and CSP Representatives on 4 April 2011

4.1 This meeting received feedback on the survey of Area Committee Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen. A summary of area committee arrangements in other county councils (see appendix one) was also provided.

4.2 The consensus of the meeting was:

- The way forward is not to abolish Area Committees but to seek to improve how they work, as well as exploring any further opportunities for decision making;
- Area Committees are Council committees, not community engagement structures, although it is valuable to have the contribution of co-opted members and those members of the public who attend for specific agenda items; and
- There is a need to explore further the opportunities for joint working with other partners including district councils.

4.3 The main points made during the discussion were:

- Area Committees provide a valued opportunity to question officers, similarly Fire and Police representatives;
- There needs to be closer working links with Parish Councils – perhaps asking them what items they would like on the agenda – in line with the NYCC Parish Charter;
- Area Committees provide the only local face of the Council – particularly beneficial when taking big and difficult decisions eg around schools, libraries, day care etc. It was noted that there was keen interest amongst residents to see how local members responded/voted on such issues. Those living in the areas remote from County Hall, feel involved when they attend their Area Committee – hence taking the meetings out to different localities was very important;
- Area Committees provide an opportunity for strategic decisions to be interpreted at local level – would like to see more focussed local discussion in future eg: forthcoming schools reviews;
- The approach of Area Committees should become more standardised and less individualised in future;
- There was consensus around the appointment of District and Parish Councillors, but questions over the co-option of others;
- The membership of Area Committees and voting rights needs to be considered, but the general consensus was that only County Councillors should be able to vote on County Council business;
- Area Committees are generally unhappy with ‘Round Robin’-style reports, which go to all Area Committees without being area specific. This was felt to be a waste of officer resources – better ways of circulating such information were required;
- Area Committees could meet less frequently, particularly where local community engagement structures existed such as in Selby.
- Interest was expressed in Area Committees having a greater ability to influence the prioritisation of highway maintenance work.
- The local media do not always attend and therefore do not often report on meetings – greater engagement/coverage would be beneficial;

- With the forthcoming changes around Health, members would like to see appropriate Health representatives involved in future meetings; and
- Democratic Services costs for five meetings of the seven Area Committees a year is just under £34,000;
- Members hoped that Area Committee grants would be reinstated one day;
- When big decisions are to be made by the Executive, Area Committees would like the relevant Portfolio Holder to attend to a preceding Area Committee to discuss proposals in person;
- Area Committees can make a difference eg Ryedale Area Committee lobbying and eventually reversing a decision re Malton Hospital;
- When a contentious area specific decision is to be taken by the Executive, the Executive meeting should be held in that area as is the case with Planning Sub Committee;
- The Localism Bill should provide a proactive driver – an opportunity to review working practices such as meeting times and venues used, better advertising of arrangements etc; and
- The option for a travelling road show could be considered helping to raise the profile of the council.

5.0 Next steps

5.1 Subject to any comments by the Committee, a report of the discussions will be submitted to the Constitution Working Group recommending that Area Committees should be retained and in particular:

- Democratic Services officers should continue to work with the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of Area Committees to improve the format and agendas of meetings, including:
 - Enabling and encouraging members of Area Committees, including co-opted members, to contribute to development of agendas; and
 - Minimising 'Round Robin'-style reports that go to all Area Committees without being area specific.
- The Constitution Working Group be invited:
 - To review the provisions for co-opting additional members to Area Committees;
 - To identify and consider any further opportunities for delegation of decision making to Area Committees; and
 - To identify and consider the principles that should underpin any possible joint area committee arrangements with district councils in North Yorkshire.

6.0 Recommendation

6.1 That the Committee contribute to discussions concerning Area Committees, in particular to the next steps outlined in paragraph 5.1.

Neil Irving
Head of Policy and Partnerships

31 May 2011

Appendix one – County Councils and area committees

<i>county council</i>	<i>number of district councils</i>	<i>area committees</i>
Buckinghamshire County Council	4	no, 18 area forums but considering reducing number
Cambridgeshire County Council	5	no
Cumbria County Council	6	yes
Derbyshire County Council	8	no, previously had area committees, changed to area forums a few years ago
Devon County Council	7	yes
Dorset County Council	6	no
East Sussex County Council	5	no
Essex County Council	12	4 area boards, plan to replace with 12 locality boards
Gloucestershire County Council	6	no
Hampshire County Council	11	no
Hertfordshire County Council	10	no
Kent County Council	12	no, 32 area boards but not all functioning
Lancashire County Council	12	no, Lancashire Locals ended March 2010
Leicestershire County Council	7	no, 27 area engagement forums, considering joint commissioning locality boards
Lincolnshire County Council	7	no
Norfolk County Council	7	no
North Yorkshire County Council	7	yes
Northamptonshire County Council	7	no, previously had area committees
Nottinghamshire County Council	7	no
Oxfordshire County Council	5	no
Somerset County Council	5	no, previously had area committees
Staffordshire County Council	8	no
Suffolk County Council	7	no
Surrey County Council	11	yes
Warwickshire County Council	5	yes
West Sussex County Council	7	yes, arrangements vary with 1, 2 or 3 districts per area
Worcestershire County Council	6	no