

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MEETING HELD ON 8 FEBRUARY 2006

Scrutiny Inquiry into Public Participation in the Council's Decision Making Process - Progress Report

1. The Inquiry Project Outline (Scoping Document) was agreed by the Panel at its meeting on 8 July 2005, which determined the following terms of reference for the inquiry:
 - (a) to conduct an investigation into the means by which the Council may more effectively engage with the local community on the provision of services provided by the Council and other key partner organisations in the Borough of Chorley.
 - (b) To investigate the provision of (1) Area Forums or Committees and (2) the introduction of public speaking at meetings of the Council on a trial basis and the administrative arrangements involved.
 - (c) To report on the investigation's findings and make recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The terms of reference were expanded by the addition of the following element on 8 November 2005 at the request of the Executive Cabinet following its consideration of the Audit Commission's report of its Best Value Inspection on the Council's approach to Customer Access and Focus:

- (d) To analyse what approach to Area Forums would be best for the Borough, based on a clear assessment of the effectiveness of current local groups and the best way to integrate them.
2. A questionnaire was sent to each Lancashire District Council, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Blackpool Borough Council to ascertain their policies and practices in relation to Area Forums/Committees and public participation in their Council and/or Committee meetings. The responses to the survey will form part of the Panel's inquiry report.
3. At its meeting on 13 September 2005, the Panel received a presentation from Mr R Matthews (Head of Area Committees Development at South Ribble Borough Council) on the operation of 8 Area Committees and the facilities for public participation in South Ribble Borough Council and Committee meetings.
4. The Panel has subsequently formed two Sub-Groups (Area Forums/Committees Sub-Group and Public Speaking/Questions Sub-Group) to examine the two district elements of the inquiry.
5. The Area Forums/Committee Sub-Group has visited the following Area Councils/Committees that operate in a number of surrounding Lancashire Districts:
 - Hyndburn Borough Council's Great Harwood Area Council;
 - Pendle Borough Council's West Craven Area Committee;
 - South Ribble Borough Council's Western Parishes Area Committee;
 - Pendle Borough Council's Colne and District Area Committee.
6. The Public Speaking/Questions Sub-Group has attended and observed the following meetings of neighbouring Councils which allow the public to speak at the meetings:
 - South Ribble Borough Council's Cabinet meeting;
 - Ribble Valley Borough Council's Planning Committee;
 - Hyndburn Borough Council's Planning Committee.
 - West Lancashire District Council's Planning Committee.

7. In addition, the Panel Members have attended a meeting of Rossendale Borough Council and have been invited to attend the South Ribble Borough Council meeting on 15 February to observe the manner in which the public is allowed to participate in the proceedings.
8. A number Panel members also attended the meeting of West Lancashire District Council as an Assembly on 25 January. This model represents an alternative concept to an Area Forum/Committee.
9. The Panel has also agreed to attend forthcoming meetings of both the PAiCE and SWITCH organisations and interview representatives from the two bodies to ascertain the specific roles and functions of the organisations and their views on the prospect of Area Forums in Chorley.
10. The reports of the various visits and perceptions of the Members attending will need to be summarised and taken into account by the Panel in its deliberations and formulation of conclusions. While the Panel may feel that it is now in a position to form its initial views on the public speaking at Council/Committees element of the inquiry following the recent visits, the Panel's final conclusions, report and recommendations will have to await the completion of the Panel's review of the Area Forum's aspect of the inquiry.

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