

FUTURE OF COMMUNITY FORUMS

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE AND CUSTOMER SERVICES AND HUMAN RESOURCES

CABINET

13 DECEMBER 2007

Wards Affected

County-wide.

Purpose

To report to Cabinet decisions by the Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executives' Group and Group leaders about the future of Community Forums.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision

Recommendation(s)

- THAT (a) the decisions by Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executives' Group and Group Leaders referred to in this report be noted; and**
- (b) Community Forums be managed and badged by Herefordshire Partnership in the future.**

Reasons

Community Forums are included within Herefordshire Council's Constitution, but a new style has been run as a pilot with West Mercia Constabulary, Herefordshire Division and HALC as a joint process since November 2006. Feedback from the forums suggest that issues residents bring up are much wider than just Herefordshire Council issues, and it is therefore essential to bring other public sector providers in to provide solutions at local level.

Considerations

1. In November 2006 Herefordshire Council, West Mercia Constabulary, Herefordshire Division and HALC began running joint Community Forums/PACTs (Partners and Communities Together) in nine locations in the County. This joint operation replaced the Council's existing Community Forums, as a pilot.
2. The pilot version of the Community Forums/PACTs differs from the traditional Community Forums in the sense that there are no presentations and agenda; they are also not chaired by elected members. Instead the approach is to ask local people to bring to our attention issues that affect their quality of life with a promise of detailed feedback and action, where possible back to local people within a specified period of time. The pilot Community Forums/PACTs are chaired by 'independent' chairs, to ensure that discussions are not biased towards the Chairs organisation

(i.e. a local Councillor or Police Officer).

3. The current pilot approach has been steered by a working group made up by officers of Herefordshire Council, Herefordshire Partnership and West Mercia Constabulary, West Mercia Division or HALC. A number of changes were made throughout the process to ensure that the process fits the needs of local people and the service providers.
4. Detailed feedback from local people (including Parish and Town Councillors) suggest that 86% of citizens attending the Forums intend to attend future forums. Further evaluation, based on the evaluation sheets completed by citizens attending the meetings shows that 87% of citizens attending found the Forums 'very useful', 'useful' or 'ok'. Half of the forums saw their attendance increased to between 30 and 60, with low attendances in Hereford Rural (which has always had low attendances) and South Wye. Publicity for the Forums is an issue that still needs addressing through the working group, as only 46% of attendees found out about the Forums through the local papers and 49% through 'other' means, which includes leafleting and word of mouth.
5. Community Forums are also one of the tools for partner organisations to inform their service planning by reflecting on issues, which are being brought to our attention. In addition, Herefordshire Council's Environment Directorate now has dedicated officer time to respond to and clarify issues, which are being raised at the Forums.
6. Cabinet decided on 12th July 2007 to refer the Community Forums to both the Herefordshire Partnership's Chief Executive's Group and Group leaders for further work to be undertaken and a report be sent to Cabinet.
7. Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executives' Group received a report by the Senior Community Involvement Officer about the progress of the Forums and the request to consider taking ownership of the Community Forums.
8. This request was supported at its meeting on 28th September. The Chief Executives Group also requested that the format of the Forums be kept under review to ensure that their appeal can be broadened. They also requested a proposal for new branding and a distinctive name for the Community Forums.
9. Group Leaders agreed at their meeting on 10th September 2007 to ask Herefordshire Partnership to run future Community Forums as a Partnership 'branded' activity, but also want to see more opportunities for promotion of Council issues through alternative methods. For example, the Council has needed to consult the public on their views and aspirations for a replacement Ledbury library during autumn and consideration is currently being given to budget preparation and events which need to support this. Some members have also requested that more serious consideration be given as to how such activities can be based on access for more rural communities. Advice and support for presentations and consultations was provided through the Herefordshire Partnership's Community Involvement team and the Council's research team.
10. This support and resource will remain in place and whilst the proposed new style of Community Forums does not lend itself to consultations or presentations, a variety of appropriate mechanisms are available and it is the Community Involvement teams role to advise and assist with this.

11. Cabinet may also wish to consider whether the Community Forums should be seen as an addition to rather than a complete replacement of existing or future consultation arrangements, which Herefordshire Council or partner organisations have or may have individually. The Partnership Community Involvement Team is available to assist members and officers to run effective consultation processes, which does include public meetings and presentations.

Financial and Legal Implications

Herefordshire Council already has an existing budget for the Community Forum Coordinator and running costs, which will be transferred to the Herefordshire Partnership Support Team. West Mercia Constabulary, Herefordshire Division is prepared to contribute a substantial proportion to the running costs, as this approach is part of their implementation of the National Neighbourhood Policing Strategy. This will ensure that sufficient financial resources will be available for both the new style Community Forums and ongoing Council-only consultations.

Separate arrangements will have to be made to ensure that the proposed changes will fit into the Council's constitution. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services will advise members in due course of the actions necessary.

Risk Management

Herefordshire Council sets to gain advantages through this partnership approach and being seen to be additionally responsive to local issues. Not agreeing to this approach may result in West Mercia Constabulary, Herefordshire running their public meetings independent of Herefordshire Council, with duplication and potential loss of public confidence in the Council's responsiveness to local people's issues.

Alternative Options

The alternative is to revert to the previous style of Community Forums without the Police's involvement. This however carries considerable reputational risks for Herefordshire Council, as the evaluation shows that an increasing number of citizens appreciate the opportunity to air their views through the chosen format and receive feedback.

Consultees

Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executives' Group

Group Leaders Herefordshire Council

Appendices

None

Background Papers

None identified