



Report title Review of Rochdale North and Rochdale South Townships Area Forums

Report to: Rochdale North Township Committee
 Rochdale South Township Committee

Date of meeting: Wednesday 7 February 2024
 Monday 12 February 2024

Cabinet Portfolio Holder: Cabinet Member for Communities and Co-operation

Report of: Director of Public Health and Communities

Public or private: Public

Key Decision: No

Published on the Forward Plan: No

1. Report summary

1.1 Area Forums were developed around 2002 in a number of wards in what was then Rochdale Township. Initially not all wards had individual meetings, however, more were developed in later years. There are now a total of ten active meetings, the majority meeting on a quarterly basis. It should be noted that Members in one ward have reduced their forum to 6-monthly due to poor attendance.

1.2 The full list of active forums for 2023-24 is as follows:

Balderstone & Kirkholt, Bamford, Brimrod/Marland/Sudden, Castleton, Central Rochdale, Healey, Kingsway, Milkstone & Deeplish, Norden and Spotland & Falinge.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to consider the work of the area forums and whether they continue to be 'fit for purpose'.

2.2 If Members consider forums no longer fit for purpose, approval is sought to discontinue the meetings from April 2024.

3. Reason for recommendation

3.1 There have been a number of challenging and difficult meetings in recent months, significantly due to the increase in the use of social media. This has resulted in area forums being used as a vehicle to challenge the authority, our

partners and individual officers. There has been an increase in instances of residents making political points and 'targeting' Elected Members for political reasons or gain.

- 3.2 Methods of engagement today are very different to the methods that were generally preferred in the early 2000's. Members may feel that it is time to look at new ways of working going forward.
- 3.3 In most cases, the issues discussed at area forums are repetitive and tend to focus on specific concerns of residents on the same matters each time. These matters are often outside the control of the Council which results in dissatisfaction, mistrust and occasionally unrest.
- 3.4 Most forums are attended by the same small number of residents, Members may feel that the meetings are undemocratic as a result.
- 3.5 There has been an increase in aggressive behaviour by individual members of the public, which brings into question the matter of the safety of those officers in attendance.
- 3.6 The cost of room hire for area forums in 2023-24 is £2,355. Venues are often community based and run by voluntary groups who, due to the current financial crisis, are regularly increasing the costs of room hire. The overall cost is therefore likely to increase.
- 3.7 Each of the Township Committees includes an 'Open Forum' on the main agenda. Residents could be encouraged to attend these meetings to raise matters of concern.
- 3.8 Area Forums do not take place in Heywood, Middleton or Pennines Townships where residents attend Township Committees to address all Township Members rather than only those within their own wards.

4. Alternatives considered

- 4.1 In considering the report, Members will decide whether or not to continue operating the area forums, and whether to consider alternative methods of engagement.

5. Key information

- 5.1 The rise of social media has changed the face of public engagement. Area forums are no longer just two-hour meetings attended by interested residents wishing to raise local issues with Elected Members. The period during the run up to meetings is often spent by residents 'lobbying' other residents to attend the area forums. This can result in the mood of the meetings feeling hostile from the start.
- 5.2 Issues raised where responses don't meet the approval of residents often results in much negative social media in the days/weeks following meetings.

- 5.3 Township staffing is at such a level that there is no capacity to 'double-up' at meetings, although this has been necessary at two recent area forums due to the behaviour of some residents.
- 5.4 There has been one incident recently when a Council officer attended a forum to respond to residents' questions in relation to a highway scheme. On leaving the venue, and whilst the meeting was still in progress, a number of residents left the meeting and followed the officer to his car, resulting in intimidation and calling into question the safety of officers attending public evening meetings.
- 5.5 The final two meetings of 2023-24 for one of the forums have been cancelled due to the lack of responsible behaviour by residents, the repeated verbal attacks on Elected Members, the political nature of some of the comments made at two consecutive meetings, and concerns for the safety of officers.
- 6. Finance**
- 6.1 Should area forums cease to take place, there would be a budget saving in relation to the cost of room hire.
- 7. Legal**
- 7.1 No legal issues to consider arising from this report.
- 8. Human resource**
- 8.1 No human resource issues to consider arising from this report.
- 9. Sustainability impact**
- 9.1 No sustainability impact issues to consider arising from this report.
- 10. Other considerations (corporate priorities, risks)**
- Members of the public could be actively encouraged to attend Township Committees to engage with Elected Members around matters of concern.

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