

Policy Development and Review Committee		Agenda Item: X
Meeting Date	18 November 2015	
Report Title	Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum Reviews	
Cabinet Member	Cllr Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Localism, Sport, Culture and Heritage	
SMT Lead	Kathryn Carr, Director of Regeneration	
Head of Service	Emma Wiggins, Head of Economy and Community Services	
Lead Officer	Brooke Buttfield, Economy and Community Services Coordinator	
Recommendations	To review Swale Borough Council's Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum in order to make changes or improvements for future years or indeed that the forums are no longer required as a means for the Council to engage with the public.	

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out details of work that has been undertaken to assist the Policy Development Review Committee to undertake a review of the effectiveness of Swale Borough Council's Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum.

2 Background

Local Engagement Forums

- 2.1 Kent County Council and Swale Borough Council established three local engagement forums (LEFs) across the borough in January 2009, to engage, inform and consult residents across Swale in order to achieve their ambition to create better services, build positive relationships with communities, and to create confident and skilled community members. The LEF Terms of Reference is attached Appendix I.
- 2.2 The LEFs are consultative forums and have no decision making powers. However, the outcomes of the LEFs are discussed at Cabinet every quarter.
- 2.3 As consultative forums, LEFs provide an opportunity for the public to meet with County, District and Parish Councillors, the Police and Fire Brigade, and other public bodies such as AmicusHorizon.

- 2.4 As such they provide an opportunity for residents of Faversham, Sheppey and Sittingbourne and their surrounding areas to ensure that their elected representatives and key public sector agencies who deliver services locally can hear their views on issues affecting their community.
- 2.5 The LEFs are held quarterly in each of the high population areas of Swale; Faversham, Sittingbourne and the Isle of Sheppey. The meetings are kept as informal as possible and all residents are encouraged to come along and take part in the discussions. Residents can ask for relevant topics to be added as discussion points at the meeting. The topics are agreed before the meeting takes place. An agenda is published on the Council's website, and publicity is sent out and put on the Council's Facebook page to advertise the meetings to encourage people to attend.
- 2.6 A review of the LEFs took place in 2011, with a report discussed at Cabinet in March 2011. A further evaluation took place in March 2012 to assess the performance of the LEFs in 2011/12. This review builds on these previous reviews. The review report is attached in Appendix II.
- 2.7 KCC withdrew its acknowledgment of the LEFs after the KCC elections in 2013. SBC agreed to continue with the forums, but taking both the chair and vice-chair positions due to SBC becoming the sole sponsors of the LEFs. KCC does offer support by way of officer time and funding for hire of halls etc., but SBC no longer report back to the KCC Cabinet.

Swale Rural Forum

- 2.8 Swale Borough Council established the Swale Rural Forum in December 2005 to discuss issues and make recommendations regarding rural problems, given the ambition to create better rural services and build positive relationships within the rural community. The Forum was established to 'rural proof' relevant policy and strategy documents and, where appropriate, respond to consultations from local, County, regional and national level organisations.
- 2.9 Like the LEFs, the Rural Forum is a space for debate and discussion, and has no decision making powers – it can only make recommendations to SBC's Cabinet. Its Terms of Reference is attached Appendix III.
- 2.10 The Swale Rural Forum is held quarterly in various rural areas of Swale. Membership comprises of Councillors in the Leader Programme Area, the Ward Member for Borden Ward, the Cabinet Member for Environment, three representatives from the Kent Association of Parish Councils, three representatives from the Swale National Farmers Union, and a representative from each the following: Diocese of Canterbury, SEESwale, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, Greening the Gateway Kent and Medway (now dissolved), Council for the Protection of Rural England, and Kent Rural Police Force.

- 2.11 A review of voting rights in relation to the Swale Rural Forum was last reviewed by General Purposes Committee on 3 February 2014. A review of the Rural Forum year is attached in Appendix IV.
- 2.12 The Leader programme has been reviewed in 2015 to widen its definition and incorporate a greater numbers of wards. This has resulted in an increased amount of Councillors eligible to attend the Rural Forum in a voting capacity.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 To review Swale Borough Council’s Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum in order to make changes or improvements for future years or indeed that the forums are no longer required as a means for the Council to engage with the public.
- 3.2 To help with the review, in addition to the work set out in this report, a pros and cons assessment for the LEFs and Swale Rural Forum is attached in Appendix V.

4 Alternative Options

- 4.1 Not to carry out a review of the LEFs and Swale Rural Forum. However, the Cabinet Member for Localism, Culture, Heritage and Sport requested in a letter to the PDRC Chairman dated 31 July 2015 that PDRC conduct such a review during the 2015/16 municipal year.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 The Chairpersons and Lead Officers for each Forum have been consulted on the reviews. It is also proposed that an eight week consultation with the public takes place (December – February 2016), including a consultation at the LEFs and Rural Forum which will take place in December 2015, before any final decision on the future of the Forums is taken by Cabinet/ General Purposed Committee in April/ May 2016.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	<p>The LEFs and Swale Rural Forum contribute towards all three SBC corporate priorities as they are key projects for empowering local residents.</p> <p>In particular, they contribute to the aims of enabling members to champion communities and improving local consultation and engagement.</p>

Financial, Resource and Property	LEFs and Swale Rural Forum are administered through officer resource from Kent CC and SBC's Economy and Community Services Team.
Legal and Statutory	<i>None.</i>
Crime and Disorder	Residents can engage directly with senior police officers at the LEFs and Swale Rural Forums.
Sustainability	<i>None.</i>
Health and Wellbeing	<i>None.</i>
Risk Management and Health and Safety	<i>None.</i>
Equality and Diversity	The aim of the Forums is to engage with all Swale residents by providing Forum meetings across the Borough and also in rural areas. These are publicised through a variety of channels to encourage public engagement. Members of the public are also able to have their say at meetings.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: LEF Terms of Reference
- Appendix II: LEF Review Report 2014/15
- Appendix III: Swale Rural Forum Constitution
- Appendix IV: Swale Rural Forum Review Report 2014/15
- Appendix V: Pros & Cons Assessment

8 Background Papers

8.1 LEF paper Cabinet March 2011
<http://services.swale.gov.uk/meetings/CeListDocuments.aspx?MID=292&RD=Minutes&DF=16%2f03%2f2011&A=1&R=0>

**Swale Local Engagement Forums (LEFS)
Terms of Reference
July 2011**

Introduction

This document sets out the terms of reference and governance arrangements for Swale's Local Engagement Forums. This document will be reviewed on an annual basis.

Terms of Reference

Purpose

To provide an opportunity for local residents and communities in Swale to come together in Faversham, Sheppey and Sittingbourne and meet local councillors and public service officers. This is to discuss local issues and have a say on service delivery, so people feel they are involved in civic society and enabled to take part and have a say in how council and other public services are run.

Aims

- To create local forums for the Borough where everyone feels able to participate and engage, knows how and where to make their voice heard and make a difference.
- To help create cohesive, active and sustainable communities.
- To enable locally elected representatives, as leaders of their communities to engage with and respond to local communities needs.
- To put citizens at the heart of public services with dialogue and consultation with community leaders so they are more able to take responsibility for their own communities and service needs.
- To create opportunities for residents to have greater interaction with public service providers and partners.

Objectives

- Develop a shared understanding of local issues and priorities for improving the quality of life of local people, their neighbourhoods and the Borough.
- Drive improvement in public services by advising the public sector bodies on service improvement.
- Refer issues of local concern to the relevant organisation / partnership, to monitor action and negotiate the resolution of issues, including submission of regular update reports to the Cabinets of Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council.

- Maintain and enhance strong and robust links with local communities.
- Communicate issues of local partnership arrangements across the Borough supporting information dissemination.
- Develop a mechanisms/framework to support community engagement in the design and evaluation of services.
- Enhance local democracy and community cohesion by identifying and providing opportunities for meaningful community consultation and participation in a constructive and inclusive manner.
- Advise and consider potential development of joint service provision, facilities and resource allocation.
- Support the implementation of local plans and strategies.
- Represent a cross section of interests.

Principles

LEFs will:

- provide an opportunity for genuine dialogue and open discussion, enabling and encourage an informal and participatory approach to community engagement;
- encourage discussion and debate on 'hot topics' of local interest;
- be open, transparent and inclusive;
- will encourage bottom-up involvement from the community in decision making through an accessible format and style of meetings;
- ensure wherever possible, practical and lawful, that each Council represented will not withhold from discussion, matters of service delivery or local concern that are of genuine public interest;
- ensure that as elected representatives of the community, members of County, Borough and Parish/Town will have the primary role of engaging with the LEF and taking delegated decisions/recommendations to their appropriate Cabinet on behalf of the community; and
- provide a 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy makers and decision makers through developing a constructive working relationship with both Executive bodies (KCC & SBC) colleagues and external partner agencies.

Membership

The forums are open to all members of the community to attend. The standing membership is limited to the following:

	Name	Organisation
Faversham LEF		
Chairperson	Cllr Anita Walker	SBC
Vice Chairperson	Cllr Bryan Mulhern	SBC
Lead Officer	Mark Radford	SBC
Sheppey LEF		
Chairperson	Cllr Ken Pugh	SBC
Vice Chairperson	Cllr Ken Ingleton	SBC
Lead Officer	Abdool Kara	SBC
Sittingbourne LEF		
Chairperson	Cllr Sue Gent	SBC
Vice Chairperson	Cllr James Hunt	SBC
Lead Officer	Pete Raine	SBC
Support Officers:		
	Bill Ronan	KCC
	Brooke Buttfeld	SBC

PLUS

- Representatives of elected members of all tiers of Local Government (Parish Council; Kent Association of Local Councils; Swale Borough Council; and Kent County Council) elected in the three forum area's (Faversham; Sittingbourne; and Sheppey);
- Representatives from Public Sector Partners;
- Private Sector Partners;
- Voluntary and Community Sector Partners;
- Swale Community Empowerment Network (SCEN) representatives;
- Youth Forum and Youth Action Group; and
- Local Community Groups.

Role and Responsibilities of Members

- To be champions in their organisations for the LEFs and the localism agenda.
- To support and resource the LEF, encouraging and supporting multi-agency working within their organisation.

- To ensure that relevant information is fed back through their organisation and that where required information is shared at a suitable level between partners that will improve the workings of the LEF.
- Commitment and attendance at meetings by officer representation at a senior level. If a designated member is unavailable, a briefed deputy should be sent in their place.

Accountability

LEFs are part of the Locality Board structure and a summary of the 'You said we did' reports will be presented to the Locality Board for feedback and two way dialogue. They are also accountable in an advisory capacity to the Cabinets of Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council reporting annually.

Monitoring

Monitoring of the 'You said we did' reports will undertaken by the LEF support officers.

Standing Agenda Items

- Welcome and introductions
- Apologies for absence
- Feedback on Notes of Last Meeting (You said we did)
- LEF Grant Scheme
- Question Time
- Hot Topics

Governance

- Local Engagement Forums will report and feed back via the 'You Said, We Did' format to both Cabinet structures and the Swale Locality Board.
- LEFs represent both Kent County Council and Swale Borough Council's commitment to co-operate and work together on local public service issues within their remits.

Meetings

Meetings will be held quarterly in Faversham, Sheppey and Sittingbourne in venues that are accessible and central, in agreement with the Chair and Vice Chair.

Before the meeting:

- Requests for agenda items will be advertised six weeks before the LEFs.
- Four weeks before the LEFs, The Chairman, Vice Chairman and Officers will liaise to prepare the agenda for the next meeting and a work programme for future

meetings. The LEF may also hold private meetings to consider business related to the LEF (e.g. planning agendas, venues, actions) where the public/press are not invited.

- The agenda will be publicised two weeks prior to the LEF meeting, via SBC website, email and in hard copy.
- Invites and posters to publicise the meetings will be promoted two weeks before the meeting.

At the meetings:

The Chairperson will be responsible for the order and timekeeping of the meeting and encouraging open and accessible dialogue, with support from the support and lead officers.

After the meeting:

- Notes of the meeting will be publicised two weeks after the meeting.
- The You said we did report will be issued two weeks after the meeting.

Procedures

- All meetings are expected to last no more than two hours.
- People attending LEF meetings must sign the attendance list or ensure the Community Engagement Manager (or representative) records their presence.
- The Chairs and Vice Chairs are to be elected every year.
- Terms of reference reviewed annually.

Appropriate Behaviour

Local Engagement Forums are public meetings, and will be conducted in a good manner. Any improper or offensive behaviour will not be tolerated. The Chairperson will ensure meetings are conducted accordingly. This may include suspension of the meeting.

Conflict of Interest

All participants are expected to consider whether they have a personal and/or prejudicial interest in any matter under discussion on the agenda, and declare it accordingly at the relevant part of the meeting.

Rights to Attend and Speak

Local Engagement Forums are open public meetings, and all citizens and community groups are warmly invited to attend and speak.

Attendance of officers at meetings

Council officers are expected to attend any LEF meeting when asked to do so by the Chairman or on their behalf by the Community Engagement Manager. Such requests must be reasonable in terms of notice, demand and expectation.

Actions

These will be recorded on the You Said, We Did performer, and copies will be held on the web site of the Borough Council. It is expected that LEF Chairman will take the lead in pursuing actions resulting from meetings in consultation with the Community Engagement Manager and nominated officers.

Resourcing

- Each council shall bear its own costs incurred in the operation of the LEF.
- Swale Borough Council will provide support services for the LEF and work in partnership with KCC via the Community Engagement Manager.
- Assistance from statutory and other agencies may be required in preparation of papers and reports as required.
- The Council will also be responsible for the administration of the meetings; timely preparation and distribution of agendas, notes and papers; and booking of meeting venues and refreshments.

Publicity

LEFs will be publicised in an accessible way to encourage attendance.

Measuring Success

This will be measured through numbers participating and outcomes arising for the You said we did reports. LEFs will be evaluated annually through annual report to Cabinets.

Risk Management

A risk assessment for each LEF will be undertaken by the support officer to ensure any risks identified at LEF meetings are mitigated.

Finance Management

There are grant schemes that SBC and KCC administer that are available to local community group to apply for in 2011/12. A standing item on LEF agendas is details of spend and promotion of the grants and how to access them.

Local Engagement Forum's Review Report 2014/15

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the LEFs, which will enable the successes and areas for improvement from 2014/15 to be identified, and any changes or improvements to the LEFs to be made for 2015/16 onwards.

The effectiveness of the Local Engagement Forums (LEFs) can be measured by participation rates, outcomes delivered as a result of discussion, and service improvements based on comments received.

Background

As consultative forums, LEFs provide an opportunity for the public to meet with County, District and Parish Councillors, the Police and Fire Brigade, and other public bodies such as AmicusHorizon.

They provide an opportunity for residents of Faversham, Sheppey and Sittingbourne and their surrounding areas to ensure that their elected representatives and key public sector agencies who deliver services locally can hear their views on issues affecting their community.

The LEFs are held quarterly in each of the high population areas of Swale; Faversham, Sittingbourne and the Isle of Sheppey. The meetings are kept as informal as possible, and all residents are encouraged to come along and take part in the discussions. Residents can ask in advance for relevant topics to be added as discussion points at the meeting. The agenda topics are agreed before the meeting takes place. The agenda is published on the Council's website, and publicity is sent out and put on the Council's Facebook page to advertise the meetings to encourage people to attend.

Evaluation

(A) Attendance

Over the course of the year, there were approximately 90 attendees across all three LEFs in each round, giving an average of 30 attendees at each individual LEF, though in practice this varies from LEF to LEF and from round to round..

Graph 1 shows how the attendance figures over the past year have fluctuated greatly across each LEF meeting.

Graph 1: LEF attendance level 2014/15

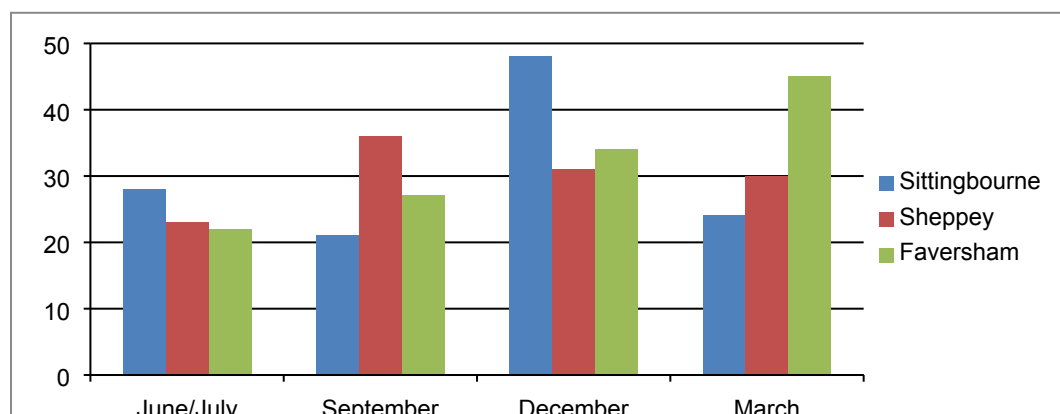


Table 1: Breakdown of LEF meetings 2014/15

Date and Venue	Public Attendance	SBC Councillor Attendance	Parish Councillor Attendance	Agenda Items
Faversham				
1 July 2014, The Alexander Centre	9	8	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parking Enforcement ▪ Faversham Foodbank
9 September 2014, Creek Creative	11	10	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Swale Borough Council – Local Plan ▪ Sport and Physical Activity Grants
2 December 2014, West Faversham Community Centre	21	6	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heavy Goods Vehicles ▪ South Eastern Railways and Transport Issue ▪ School Parking and Traffic Management
4 March 2015, The Alexander Centre	24	8	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capital Investment – Faversham Pools ▪ Capital Investment – Faversham Creek Swing Bridge ▪ Transfer of Allotments to Faversham Town Council ▪ WW1 Centenary Grant Scheme
Sheppey				
10 June 2014, Blue Town Heritage Centre	10	7	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Breastfeeding ▪ Green Doctor and Sustainable Sheppey Project

23 September 2014, Oasis Academy Isle of Sheppey	23	7	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Swale Borough Council – Local Plan ▪ Safety Measures on Sheppey Crossing ▪ Sport and Physical Activity Grants
9 December 2014, Leysdown Village Hall	21	6	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peel Ports Masterplan ▪ 50mph Speed Limit – Sheppey Crossing
10 March 2015, Seashells Sheerness Children & Families Centre	18	7	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ WW1 Centenary Grant Scheme ▪ Queenborough Creek Development Plan ▪ Sheppey Cliffs ▪ Sheppey Crossing ▪ Transfer of Allotments to Queenborough Town Council
Sittingbourne				
17 June 2014, Fulston Manor School	12	10	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spirit of Sittingbourne ▪ Parking Enforcement
16 September 2014, Phoenix House	11	6	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Swale Borough Council - Local Plan ▪ Sport and Physical Activity Grants
16 December 2014, Coniston Hotel	26	15	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Police and Crime Commissioner – Ann Barnes ▪ ‘Lights Out’ KCC
17 March 2015, Phoenix House	10	10	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spirit of Sittingbourne ▪ Sittingbourne Skate Park ▪ Parking Issues – Kemsley Clock Tower Hall ▪ WW1 Grant Scheme

The clear message that can be derived from Table 1 is that attendance figures are impacted dramatically by the agendas set and topics of discussion. As an example, Anne Barnes, Kent's Police and Crime Commissioner, attended the Sittingbourne LEF in December 2014 to discuss crime figures in Swale, and there were 48 attendees at that meeting alone. Another example is the Faversham LEF which took place in March 2015 - the agenda had two very current items for discussion that residents were interested in, Faversham Creek Swing Bridge and Capital Investment for Faversham

Pools. In short, Table 1 indicates that when topics are contentious or of significant local interest, then more people are likely to attend the LEFs.

With regards to stakeholder participation and attendance at the LEFs, representatives from Kent County Council, Kent Police and Kent Fire and Rescue, as well as many other public sector organisations including AmicusHorizon, attend each meeting to provide updates on the services over the last three months and to answer questions raised by the public. These organisations have reported using the LEFs as a key method of engaging with the public, leading to improved services based on comments received.

(B) Issues raised and resolved

When looking at the number of issues raised in total across the LEFs, the majority of issues have been solved at the meeting or post the meeting through the 'You Said We Did' (YSWD) approach. Table 2 illustrates the current progress of the issues made at the LEFs during 2014/15.

Table 2: Progress of issues raised at LEFs




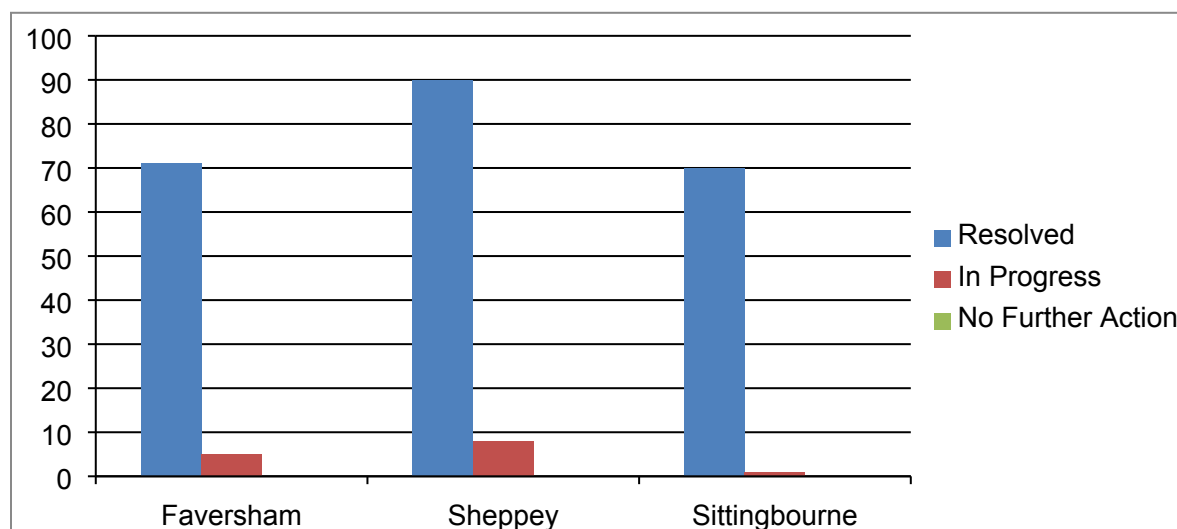
LEF	Issues Raised 2014/15	Actions Status		
		 Resolved	 In Progress	 No Further Action
Faversham	76	71	5	0
Sheppey	98	90	8	0
Sittingbourne	71	70	1	0
Progress		95%	5%	0%

Table 2 indicates that during 2014/15, 95% of the issues reported at the LEF as a result of discussion were resolved either at the meetings or recorded through the YSWD Reports. The 5% of outstanding issues raised were largely raised at the final LEFs of the year, and would be resolved by the June 2015 cycle of meetings.

LEFs encourage a listening culture within public services in Swale, and the YSWD approach ensures that responses are provided to all issues raised. Table 2 shows that this method of engagement is extremely successful as 100% of issues raised at the meetings were either resolved, or have been agreed to be resolved by the next round of LEF meetings.

Graph 2: Issued raised at LEFs



Graph 2 highlights a large disparity between each locality in the numbers of issues raised. Although more issues were raised at the Sheppey LEF, this does not correlate to the amount of time or resource spent in that locality as 'issues' vary in their scale and complexity – a 'single' issue raised from the Sittingbourne LEF may warrant as much officer time as three or four issues raised at the Sheppey LEF.

(C) Impact

The most common form of impact resulting from the LEFs is the raising of awareness surrounding a public sector service or policy or intention. By helping to raise the local community's awareness of public sector practices, the LEFs enable residents to scrutinise local services and contribute towards their improvement, with comments and actions being recorded in the YSWD report.

Actions established through the LEFs also enable the community to engage in local decision-making. The statements made by the public are conveyed to the appropriate service and taken into account during any upcoming service reviews by being recorded in a YSWD report.

Specifically, the action responses during 2014/15 have taken the form of:

- responding to a statement directly either at the meeting, or through the YSWD; and
- an action identified from the statement, which is set and reported through the YSWD.

Each of these types of responses has led to a range of measurable types of impact. The key impacts of each LEF meeting during 2014/15 are summarised by locality in the following quarterly Cabinet reports which are available online – <http://services.swale.gov.uk/meetings/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=129&Year=0>

In summary key impacts are:

- increased awareness or knowledge about the public services in Swale. Although this impact is relatively immediate, it is valuable for improving local knowledge of and dispelling myths about services in the Borough. The information can also enable the community to bring about a change to a service as they will be aware of which policy and procedure to challenge. The response can also contribute to improving the perceived transparency of an organisation; and
- feedback at the LEFs have influenced organisational policies or intentions. A key example of this type was the addition of double yellow lines in Shortlands Road, Sittingbourne, to reduce irresponsible parking, which will allow Emergency Service vehicles to attend incidences in the area, after the issue was raised at a Sittingbourne LEF on 17 June 2014. This is a key example of where the LEFs are facilitating the ability of the local community to target and resolve local issues.

Despite the evidence of resolving the actions and issues raised statements at LEF meetings, there is a lack of feedback from residents about how they see the LEFs and whether they meets their requirements and expectations. Additional effort could be made to increase promotion and deepen the impact of the LEFs. Identifying ways of growing the dedicated LEF mailing list (by email and post), and greater promotion through social media, could contribute to a widening of the audience and an improvement in residents' engagement with the process.

Proposals

Based on the evaluation of the 2014/15 LEFs, it is proposed to:

- promote the purpose of the LEFs as a means of enabling the community to influence local decision-making;
- continue to develop the range of items covered in LEF agendas, to ensure that relevant issues are raised as a means of driving engagement and participation;
- increase distribution of the agendas and promotional material to ensure that the widest possible audience is being reached and made aware of the LEFs, including growing the dedicated LEF mailing list and greater promotion through social media;
- continue to explore alternative methods of engaging with the community through the LEFs; and
- gather further evidence to understand the impact of LEFs by consulting their audience.

During 2015/16, the Council will continue to use the LEFs as an opportunity for the public to raise local issues with County, District and Parish Councillors, the Police, Fire Brigade, and other public bodies. Using the proposals of this evaluation, Swale BC will continue to strive to improve the LEFs and ensure that a larger audience benefit from the opportunity of engaging with local decision making in Swale.

Swale Rural Forum Constitution

Membership

Voting membership of the Swale Rural Forum is 15 Members from the Wards in the Leader Programme Area, the Borden Ward Member, the Cabinet Member for Environment (including rural issues), one County Councillor and three KALC representatives, together with voting representatives from the following organisations:

- Kent County Council
- Swale National Farmers Union (NFU) - three representatives
- Diocese of Canterbury
- SEESwale
- Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)
- Kent Rural Police Force.

There are no delegations – it is a consultative forum.

Purpose

1. To provide an appropriate forum for public participation and consultation on matters relating to their area.
2. To consider and champion the needs of rural communities and businesses within the context of:
 - (i) The policies and services of statutory and non-statutory agencies operating within or on behalf of Swale.
 - (ii) Community and economic regeneration activity impacting upon Swale.
3. To consider "Rural proof" relevant policy documents and statements made at a local, County, regional and national level and, where appropriate, respond to them.
4. To identify issues impacting upon relevant communities and organisations and seek their views about those issues.
5. To draw together, through partnership working, existing available resources to pursue projects to the benefit of rural communities, businesses and other organisations.
6. To identify, promote and obtain external funding (including LEADER) and forms of support available to rural communities, businesses and organisations and to support projects to the benefit of rural communities and businesses.

Review of the Swale Rural Forum 2014/15

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the impact of the Swale Rural Forum, which will enable the successes and areas for improvement from 2014/15 to be identified, and any changes or improvements to the Rural Forum to be made for 2015/16 onwards.

The effectiveness of the Swale Rural Forum can be measured by participation rates, recommendations made to Cabinet and other Committees as a result of discussion, and service improvements in relation to rural areas of the Borough, based on comments received.

Background

Swale Borough Council established the Swale Rural Forum in December 2005 to discuss issues and make recommendations regarding rural problems, given the ambition to create better rural services and build positive relationships within the rural community. The Forum was established to "rural proof" relevant policy documents and statements made at a local, County, regional, and national level and, where appropriate, respond to them.

Like the LEFs, the Rural Forum is a space for debate and discussion, and has no decision making powers - it can only make recommendations to SBC's Cabinet. Its Terms of Reference is attached Appendix III.

The Swale Rural Forum is held quarterly in various rural areas of Swale. Membership comprises of Councillors in the Leader Programme Area, the Ward Member for Borden Ward, the Cabinet Member for Environment, three representatives from the Kent Association of Parish Councils, three representatives from the Swale National Farmers Union, and a representative from each the following: Diocese of Canterbury, SEESwale, Action with Communities in Rural Kent, Greening the Gateway Kent and Medway (now dissolved), Council for the Protection of Rural England, and Kent Rural Police Force.

Evaluation

(A) Attendance

Over the course of the year, there were approximately 22 attendees at each individual meeting. Graph 1 shows the level of attendees per Swale Rural Forum. It is clear that the attendance figures over the past year have fluctuated greatly across each Rural Forum.

Graph 1: Swale Rural Forum attendance level 2014/15

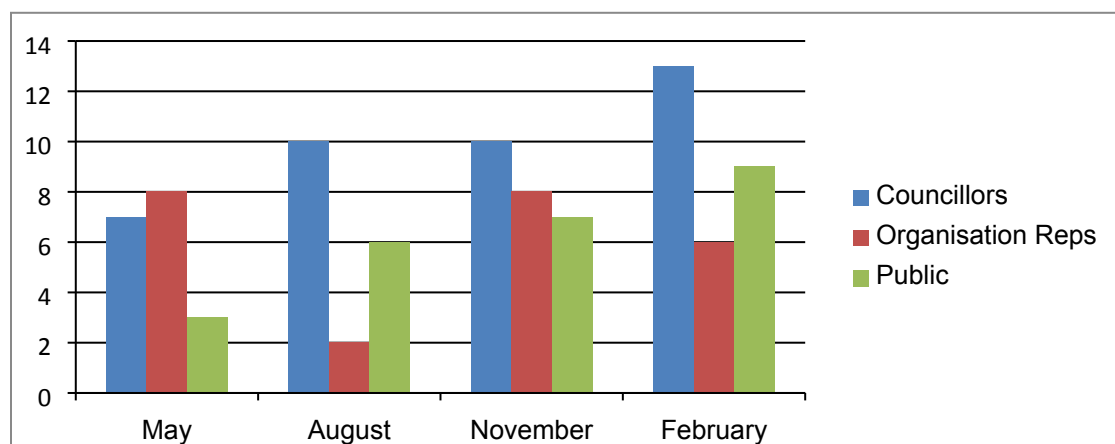


Table 1: Breakdown of Swale Rural Forum meetings 2014/15

Date and Venue	Public Attendance	Committee Member Attendance	Agenda Items
27 May 2014 Rodmersham Village Hall	3	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parking Problems outside village schools and speeding in rural areas ▪ Diocese of Canterbury work with Parishes ▪ Rural Business Opportunities
19 August 2014 Leysdown Village Hall	6	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information Item - Ann Barnes (Kent Crime Commissioner) ▪ Rural Apprenticeships ▪ The Leader Programme ▪ World War I Commemorative Events and Activities ▪ Rural Business Opportunities ▪ Parking Problems outside village schools and speeding in rural areas ▪ Information Item - Market Survey and Analysis of the Irrigation Services Sector in Kent
18 November 2014 Selling Village Hall	7	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Market Survey and Analysis of the Irrigation Services Sector in Kent ▪ Update on the fibre high speed broadband for Wormshill and Throwley exchanges ▪ Revision of the Community Warden Service' ▪ Rural Business Opportunities

10 February 2015 Lower Halstow Memorial Hall	9	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leader Programme Update ▪ Loss of hedgerow along the Lower Road (A2500) ▪ Facilities for Young People in 2015/16 ▪ Lack of Bridleways ▪ Rural Business Opportunities
---	---	----	--

It is clear from Table 1 that public attendance is impacted by the agendas and topics of discussion. As an example, the agenda on 10 February 2015 had a contentious item for discussion, the loss of hedgerow along the Lower Road, that residents were very interested in, and as a result there was a total of 28 attendees. When topics are contentious or of significant local interest, then more people are likely to attend the Swale Rural Forum.

In terms of Councillor attendance, this has increased over the year. In 2015 the Leader area has been expanded to incorporate most wards in Swale. As such more councillors are eligible to attend the Rural Forum, based on the definition in the Forum's Constitution. Indeed, it could now be argued that the Rural Forum is no longer specific to 'rural' areas (depending on the definition of 'rural'), but covers such a wide area that it replicates the LEFs.

With regards to stakeholder participation and attendance at the Swale Rural Forums, all participating organisations have reported using the Swale Rural Forums as a key method of engaging with residents of rural areas in Swale, leading to improved services based on their comments received.

(B) Issues raised and resolved

When looking at the number of actions raised and recommendations made to Cabinet across the Swale Rural Forums in 2014/15, the number is extremely low. Across all four forums that took place during 2014/15 there were only 11 actions produced as a result of discussion, and no recommendations were made to Cabinet.

Given that the purpose of each Swale Rural Forum is to discuss issues and make recommendations to SBC's Cabinet regarding rural problems, as a means of creating better rural services and building positive relationships within the rural community, then this purpose has largely not been fulfilled in 2014/15.

(C) Impact

The most common form of impact resulting from the Rural Forum is the raising of awareness of public sector rural services or policies or intentions. By making the rural community more informed of public sector practices, the Swale Rural Forum enables residents to scrutinise local services and contribute towards their improvement, with actions being recorded in the minutes, and recommendations being made to Cabinet.

Actions established through the Swale Rural Forum have also enabled the community to influence local decision-making. The statements made by the public are conveyed to the appropriate service and taken into account during any upcoming service reviews.

Specifically, the action responses during 2014/15 have taken the form of:

- responding to a statement made at the meeting, either at the meeting, or through the minutes; and
- an action identified from the statement, which is followed up and then reported through the minutes.

In summary, the key impacts of the Rural Forum are increased awareness or knowledge about public services in rural areas of Swale. Although this impact is relatively immediate, it is valuable for improving local knowledge of and dispelling myths about services in the rural parts of the Borough. The information can also enable the rural community to bring about a change to a service, as they will be aware of which policy and procedure to challenge. The response can also contribute to improving the perceived transparency of an organisation.

The Swale Rural Forum can therefore be seen to be achieving the aim of discussing issues with the rural areas of the Borough. However, there is a clear lack of actions and recommendations being made to Cabinet as a result of the discussions, which highlights concern as to whether the Forum is meeting this expectation.

Proposals

Based on the evaluation of the 2014/15 Swale Rural Forum, it is proposed:

- to consider whether there is still a need to continue with the Rural Forum given the broadened scope from revised Leader boundaries, and therefore whether the Forum continues to add value to the LEFs as a means of public engagement;
- should the Forum continue, to ensure that it focuses on strategic issues and those where recommendations can be made to Cabinet to improve rural areas; and
- should the Forum continue, to use it to champion rural issues and ensure the Borough benefits from Leader funding.
- should the Forum continue, consider changing eligibility criteria to narrow its focus and not be the same as Leader.

Pros and Cons Assessment

Pros	Cons
Local Engagement Forums	
The LEFs provide an opportunity for the public to meet with County, District and Parish Councillors, the Police, Fire Brigade and other public bodies, including Amicus Horizon, Swale Community and Voluntary Services and Swale CCG.	Lack of residents attending and taking part in the meeting to share their concerns publically. There is limited attendance and normally the same people which doesn't indicate a true representative of residents of the areas.
The LEFs enable residents to have an opportunity to discuss issues affecting their community with their elected representatives and key public sector agencies who deliver services locally.	Not all public sector agencies are attending each meeting on a regular basis, despite the forum requesting their attendance and invitations being extended to these agencies.
Residents are able to shape each LEF by asking for relevant topics to be added as discussion points at the meeting, or if not, raise them under the public questions section of the forum.	Advertisement of the LEFs doesn't seem to be drawing in new attendees to the meetings and therefore, it is questionable whether advertisement is being effective to its full advantage.
	The last item on the agenda is 'Public Questions' which in fact limits residents' ability to raise their own issues that aren't on the agenda. This also reduces the amount of engagement SBC, KCC and other public bodies are having with the residents due to the meeting coming to an end by the time agenda items have been presented and discussed.
	Possible duplication in Faversham and Sheppey where Town Council and Parish Council meetings are held.
Swale Rural Forum	
Provides an opportunity for the residents of rural areas to discuss issues and make recommendations.	Membership comprises of Councillors in the Leader programme and due to the boundaries being extended, almost every Councillor is able to become a member of the forum
Provides opportunity for stakeholders involved in rural issues to come together to discuss relevant topics	Strategic discussion limited and has being a 'talking shop', with no recent recommendations to Cabinet