

<b>General Purposes Committee</b>	
<b>Meeting Date</b>	2 March 2016
<b>Report Title</b>	Review of Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Cllr Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Localism, Sport, Culture and Heritage
<b>SMT Lead</b>	Kathryn Carr, Director of Regeneration
<b>Head of Service</b>	Emma Wiggins, Head of Economy and Community Services
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Sara Toal, Communications Manager
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To recommend to Council that the Local Engagement Forums and the Swale Rural Forum cease in their current form.</li> <li>2. To note proposals for better ways to engage with our community.</li> </ol>

## **1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report sets out details of the proposal made by Policy Development and Review Committee (PDRC) following a review carried out on the effectiveness of Swale Borough Council's Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum.
- 1.2 The report also outlines the proposals for better ways to engage with our community.

## **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.

### **Swale Rural Forum**

- 2.2 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.

- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 A review took place in 2014/15 to establish the effectiveness of Swale Borough Council's Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum. The PDRC was invited to provide feedback and input into the review in order to inform any changes or improvements for future years, or indeed determine whether the forums are the best means for the Council to engage with the public.
- 2.5 Following PDRC on 18 November 2015, the proposal made to Cabinet was that both the Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum cease in their current form, and that a consultation undertaken on better ways to engage.
- 2.6 A consultation took place from 21 December 2015, asking residents what methods of engagement they would value in terms of the Councils' engagement with them. Discussions also took place at the LEFs and the Rural Forum. Appendix I sets out the feedback.
- 2.7 Taking into consideration the feedback, proposals have been developed for better ways to engage with our community. These are shown in Appendix II. These new ways to engage will be promoted and publicised so people are aware of the change in approach. In summary these include:
- whilst LEFs and the Rural Forum will cease, public meetings will be organised on an ad hoc basis when there is a significant or contentious local issue that requires discussion so face-to-face communication is still available;
  - attendance by the Leader or nominated deputy at meetings of the Swale Area Committee of Kent Association of Local Councils to engage with Parish Councils;
  - introduce a 'Your Swale' section on the website and Inside Swale magazine, so it is easier for residents to find out about services and what's on;
  - introduce direct email to residents informing of news, information; and
  - continue to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter;

### **3 Proposals**

- 3.1 To recommend to Council that both the Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum cease in their current forms.
- 3.2 To note the proposals for better ways to engage with our community.

## 4 Alternative Options

- 4.1 To continue all three Local Engagement Forums and Swale Rural Forum. This is not recommended as it is clear that these are not effective in engaging with the residents and community, and more efficient and effective engagement methods are required.
- 4.2 Assist community groups or other organisations to run and organise LEFs. This is not recommended as even though such groups may be happy to take the lead, it will still require the Council to provide resource, and this is not an effective method of engaging with the community.

## 5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 Following consultation with members through the PDRC, consultation took place from 21 December 2015, including discussions at the LEFs and Rural forum.

## 6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	Community Engagement contributes towards 'a Borough to be proud of' as it ensures that the Council listens and empowers local residents.
Financial, Resource and Property	<p>The cost of the introduction of a new direct email channel and a new website will be requested through a Performance Fund bid as part of a wider digital channel development project. Should this bid be successful, these new online channels will be the main drivers of community engagement activity. If not, our existing website will be used at no cost to achieve the engagement proposals outlined, but in a more limited capacity due to existing technical capability.</p> <p>A roadshow and public events are the only other elements of the proposals that require budget for delivery. £420 per annum will be contributed by ECS utilising the budget previously allocated for the LEFs. Any additional budget required to develop materials and organise roadshow and public events will be allocated from the existing Communications Service campaigns budget, which is £13,500 per annum.</p>
Legal and Statutory	None.
Crime and Disorder	By utilising new channels of engagement we will be able to promote the work of the Community Safety Partnership.
Sustainability	Introducing primarily online channels of engagement and resourcing through the existing communications service ensures the campaign activity is sustainable.

	We will also, through the new engagement channels, be able to promote and encourage community participation in recycling services.
Health and Wellbeing	By utilising new channels of engagement we will be able to promote and encourage community participation in Active Swale activities and events, and promote health and wellbeing messages from CCGs and the Chief Medical Officer to a wider audience and more frequently.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None.
Equality and Diversity	Providing new channels for community engagement increases accessibility to groups who may not have engaged with the Council previously.

## 7 Appendices

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

- Appendix I: Consultation Results
- Appendix II: Community Engagement Proposals

## 8 Background Papers

8.1 LEF and Swale Rural Forum paper PDRC November 2015  
<http://services.swale.gov.uk/meetings/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=127&MId=1585&Ver>

## Consultation Results – Local Engagement Forums

Local Engagement Forum	You Said	We Did
Faversham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Forums are valued as they currently are and are a great form of engagement.”</li> <li>▪ “Swale Borough Council website is poor and doesn’t make it easy for the public to reach information about the forums due to the layout – suggested putting LEFs under ‘Committee Meetings’ on website.”</li> <li>▪ “Agenda is advertised too late – two weeks’ notice isn’t enough.”</li> <li>▪ “Suggest the use of an email group.”</li> <li>▪ “The name of the forums shouldn’t change, as recorded in the minutes from PDRC on 18 November.”</li> <li>▪ “Overall publicity/communication isn’t as effective as it could potentially be.”</li> <li>▪ “Despite the same attendees at each forum, the information is being fed back by the representative to groups/organisations.”</li> <li>▪ “Suggested promotion in Inside Swale.”</li> <li>▪ “Send to other social media pages to advertise, for instance Faversham TC, groups/organisations in the area.”</li> <li>▪ “More should be published in the papers, including a follow up from the meeting.”</li> <li>▪ “Residents highlighted the importance of face to face engagement with the Council and the benefit of a general forum to discuss issues of the day.”</li> <li>▪ “It is the only forum for parish council’s engagement.”</li> <li>▪ “Critical of the extent of consultation with some advocating that it be 'run again with publicity' and that the website is 'impenetrable'.”</li> </ul>	<p>Improvements are planned to the Council’s website in 2016 which will address the points raised.</p> <p>Promotion of the ways the Council will engage will take place, including in Inside Swale</p> <p>Public meetings will still take place but on an ad hoc basis when there is a significant/ contentious issue</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Don’t want the entire process to be put online/social media as not everyone has easy access.”</li> <li>▪ “Residents can’t speak or raise a question at Faversham TC meetings due to being in the surrounding parishes and so value LEF meeting.”</li> </ul>	
Sheppey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “When LEF’s were first set up to replace the old Sheppey Area Committees, they were fully engaged and the meetings had a purpose.”</li> <li>▪ “Public attendance at the LEFs is poor. Before, when there was an issue it was standing room only. Public would speak first before items, as well as ‘chip-in’.”</li> <li>▪ “The Area Committees made expenditure decisions and LEFs are not fulfilling this and are not effectively engaging.”</li> <li>▪ “No problem with LEFs being removed, issues will be raised and will be consulted with the public when needed.”</li> <li>▪ “Supported Area Committees when a Parish Councillor. Major issues aren’t being put on the agendas, for instance consultation on Sheppey Hospital. There needs to be a better mechanism to trigger a positive/good discussion.”</li> <li>▪ “Supported Area Committees – good officer/member support and budget. Should have meetings when necessary and based around specific items, not scheduled in ‘religiously’.”</li> <li>▪ “Agenda is advertised too late – two weeks’ notice isn’t enough.”</li> <li>▪ “Public office workers and members of the public do attend at Parish Level. LEF should not use non-attendance of public as it not being relevant.”</li> <li>▪ “Support single issue meetings and suggests a coordinator rings PCs to see what issues are and coordinate a meeting.”</li> <li>▪ “LEF’s get Police and KFRS attendance whereas Parish meetings do not and so commends LEFs.”</li> <li>▪ “LEFs are a good mechanism for community networking with partners.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted and supports the recommendation in the report.</p> <p>Improvements are planned to the Council’s website in 2016 which will address the points raised.</p> <p>Promotion of the ways the Council will engage will take place, including in Inside Swale</p> <p>Public meetings will still take place but on an ad hoc basis when there is a significant/ contentious issue</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Aren’t fulfilling purpose unless a major issue of concern/ interest is present.”</li> </ul>	
Sittingbourne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Swale Borough Council website is poor and doesn’t make it easy for the public to reach information about the forums due to the layout and accessibility issues.”</li> <li>▪ “The name of the forums doesn’t attract people to attend.”</li> <li>▪ “Press coverage needs to improve.”</li> <li>▪ “Promotion in Inside Swale.”</li> <li>▪ “More promotion on Social Media.”</li> <li>▪ “Supportive of engagement with the Council but require better ways to do so.”</li> </ul>	<p>Improvements are planned to the Council’s website in 2016 which will address the points raised.</p> <p>Promotion of the ways the Council will engage will take place, including in Inside Swale and on social media.</p> <p>Public meetings will still take place but on an ad hoc basis when there is a significant/ contentious issue.</p>

## Consultation Results – Online Questionnaire

You Said	We Did
Q1 - Are you aware of the ways you can engage with the Council at the moment? If no, why?	
<p>73% - Yes</p> <p>27% - No, comments below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “You don’t listen or act anyway.”</li> <li>▪ “Not needed to so never looked.”</li> <li>▪ “How do you find out about times, venue etc.”</li> <li>▪ “Never been informed.”</li> </ul>	Noted
Q2 - How have you/do you currently engage with the Council? Please specify if you have ever:	
<p>Attended a LEF or other public meeting?</p> <p>60% - Yes</p> <p>40% - No</p> <p>Followed us/made a comment on social media?</p> <p>69% - Yes</p> <p>31% - No</p> <p>Responded to a survey/consultation? (other than this one)</p> <p>66% - Yes</p> <p>34% - No</p> <p>Written a letter/email to your Councillor/ the Leader?</p> <p>60% - Yes</p> <p>40% - No</p> <p>Attended a Council or Committee meeting?</p> <p>53% - Yes</p> <p>47% - No</p>	Noted

<p>If no to any of the above, why not?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “You don’t listen or act on what we ask you to do.”</li> <li>▪ “More people would probably attend an LEF if they knew what LEF meant. Perhaps it should just be called a Have Your Say meeting? And the people on the panel should be advertised at least three weeks in advance. With their names and what they do on posters. Shops should be asked to posters in their windows.”</li> <li>▪ “Didn’t think I could make a difference.”</li> <li>▪ “Work commitments, lack of knowledge of events.”</li> <li>▪ “Didn’t know I could.”</li> <li>▪ “Don’t use social media. No need to write a letter/email to Councillor.”</li> </ul>	
<p>Q3 - Do you think the Council provides the best opportunities to enable you to engage at the moment? Are they accessible to you?</p>	
<p>36% - Yes</p> <p>64% - No, comments below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No – “Email address for every department should be on a list on contact page of the website instead of being blocked by customer service staff that lack customer service. List more numbers than just the customer service number.”</li> <li>▪ No – “No information.”</li> <li>▪ No – “Not well publicised and discussions are not flowing rather than councillors won’t move from the agenda or give open answers.”</li> <li>▪ No – “The LEFs are not sufficiently engagement in that run by the council who set the agenda. Should have variety of different chairmen; rotate between councillors and (capable!) members of the public. Too much a forum for offloading Council issues rather than driven by the public.”</li> <li>▪ Yes – “I am informed because I proactively dig for info. Those who are not informed probably are not yet aware of this survey. The PROBLEM is for SBC to get the message out to those who do not read Inside Swale, do not attend meetings, maybe do use FACEBOOK, and are generally ignorant until they have a specific problem that they wish to be addressed.”</li> <li>▪ No – “Limited information, do they hold the meetings in various venues or it is always Sittingbourne. What about people living in high deprivation areas?”</li> <li>▪ No – “Forums are always held on a Tuesday.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted. Comment regarding customer services passed to head of service.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No – “Didn’t know anything about it.”</li> <li>▪ No – “These surveys should have a middle button for people who think engagement is sort of OK but could be better.”</li> <li>▪ No – “You are slow, unresponsive and find excuses not to act.”</li> </ul>	
<p>Q4 - Are you interested in engaging with the Council more and/or in different ways?</p>	
<p>67% - Yes 33% - No</p> <p>Comments below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “I just would like to know what is going on without relying on the local paper which isn't the best.”</li> <li>▪ “There needs to be more public involvement in local decision making.”</li> <li>▪ “Progress.”</li> <li>▪ “More frequent opportunities to meet such as LEFs but run on different basis. Need to think out detail re how run, who sets agenda (if one needed), venues etc. Need to change the format on regular basis so keeps fresh.”</li> <li>▪ “Online surveys would be a good addition as I cannot to evening meetings.”</li> <li>▪ “I like to know what’s going on.”</li> <li>▪ “Would be helpful to know how to.”</li> <li>▪ “For the good of the wider community.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Q5 - What would encourage you to engage more with the Council in future? Are there specific subjects that are of particular interest to you, that you would like to be involved with, give ideas and feedback, or be kept informed and up to date about?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “My time is too valuable to discuss with you, when you always have only good reasons not to do things. More accountability is needed - I want to see people held accountable to do their work, not making excuses all the time.”</li> <li>▪ “LEF meetings that are only held when there are important issues, not just at set times in the year when nothing is happening.”</li> <li>▪ “Sheppey tourism.”</li> <li>▪ “Planning and Regeneration.”</li> <li>▪ “Not currently, I would only engage on subjects that interest me at the time.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Different venues and times, local meetings in accessible places. Greater promotion of meetings and remember not everyone is unemployed in Swale. There are people who actually work!”</li> <li>▪ Not really sure if you mean engage with Council or Councillors. The two are different! I'd like to enquire for example into how the council operates as have seen and heard of many instances where it appears council unaware of its responsibilities and obligations.”</li> <li>▪ Anything affecting Faversham, especially the Creek and heritage.”</li> <li>▪ More publicity quicker meetings more to the point, quick action on points raised.”</li> </ul>	
<p>Q6 - Are there specific decision-makers/people in the council or other public bodies (e.g. Police, Kent County Council, Fire &amp; Rescue Service, NHS) you would like to engage with and why?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “We haven’t seen a policeman here in ages - people break the law here all the time: speeding, theft, burglary. Yet police are not controlling it.”</li> <li>▪ “Kent Police, KFRS, KCC, NHS, all should be available to be questioned and have suggestions given by the public.”</li> <li>▪ Police, KCC Highways, Local health organisations such as Swale CCG and KMPT.”</li> <li>▪ “I feel Swale needs the opportunity to engage with health representatives in particular, the CCGs. I would also like the opportunity to discuss local issues with KCC.”</li> <li>▪ “I found that the LEF's provided a FORUM, as opposed to Committee Members' Debate and DECISIONS.”</li> <li>▪ “I think other bodies could be dealt with separately. There is enough to be getting on with looking more deeply into the council operations. Also if e.g. Police come to a meeting it becomes a talk by the police (taking up much time) not a forum for discussion.”</li> <li>▪ “Councillors.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted</p>
<p>Q7 - Are there any different methods of engagement that you would prefer to use and be more likely to participate in?</p>	
<p>Join live online discussions/Q&amp;As?</p> <p>38% - Yes</p> <p>53% - No</p> <p>9% - N/A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “These services are often unregulated and you have to wait long periods until you get a response.”</li> <li>▪ “Can get a bit long winded unless chaired effectively.”</li> <li>▪ Nice and modern.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted</p>

View online meetings/presentations?

69% - Yes

31% - No

- “Easy for more people to get involved who cannot get to meetings.”
- “Anyone can watch when they have some spare time, not just on a specific date or time.”

Attend public meetings in your area?

86% - Yes

7% - No

7% - N/A

- “Less interest in talking about how the Council is taking action.”
- “Yes but need advance warning.”
- “Keep LEFs but radically alter structure, who runs etc.”
- Meetings are not easy to attend.”
- If they were more localised to the area not Sheppey-wide but about Minster.”

Receive email newsletter/updates?

92% - Yes

8% - No

- “Yes, straight to computer.”
- “Work commitments mean not always able to attend.”
- Yes – can read as and when I want.”

Follow/comment through social media?

79% - Yes

21% - No

- “Facebook is good.”
- “Would expect prompt responses.”

- “I do this now; you can comment but get little reply.”

Read and comment on online blogs?

54% - Yes

46% - No

- “Most blogs are boring.”

Attend public information events/exhibitions/displays?

80% - Yes

6% - No

14% - N/A

- “Preferably at weekends and evenings.”
- “Need to be promoted and available outside normal working hours.”

Send letters/emails to Councillors/Leader?

72% - Yes

21% - No

7% - N/A

- “Always a means of communication.”

Respond to surveys/consultations – by post/door to door/online?

76% - Yes

24% - No

- “Surveys are a pain. If have to do them, online is easiest.”
- “Online is convenient.”

Attend Committee/Council meetings?

76% - Yes

15% - No

9% - N/A

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Need to be arranged at different times.”</li> </ul>	
<p>Q8 - What would you like to get out of the engagement you have with the Council in future? For example, you may want to get answers to questions, have opportunities to have a say, to feel listened to, raise an issue, get more/better information about what’s happening locally and council decisions and services, or something else. What would matter most to you?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “I want to be able to ask them to so sometime - for example stop the speeding through my village - and then I want them to demonstrate progress by the next meeting rather than shuffle papers, accountabilities and excuses.”</li> <li>▪ “Keep the LEF but make it less of a forced act, don’t set it every few months but hold them when they are required.”</li> <li>▪ “Subscribe to free email results service of all decisions made in meetings.”</li> <li>▪ “Proper information not sensationalised.”</li> <li>▪ “Depends on the subject.”</li> <li>▪ “The opportunity to raise concerns and have a voice. Also, to get answers.”</li> <li>▪ “Bins and planning that's all. Don't want to pay for or need any other services. All this cultural stuff you do is an utter waste of time and money. And for God sake will you take down the 'it's here' bill boards around the town, they are (a) a false claim as none of it is 'here yet' and (b) are an utter eyesore.”</li> <li>▪ “Need to look at when and where meetings held all means of communication. Online surveys are now becoming very significant.”</li> <li>▪ “All methods of modern communication would be encouraging engagement with all residents especially the younger generation, busy people and those less mobile.”</li> <li>▪ “Everything matters but at the moment it is getting the Council to put in two parks on Thistle Hill which they have the money and land for but have done little to move forwards to installing and the Green Spaces Manager has ignored my emails for a month.”</li> </ul>	<p>Noted</p>

### Community engagement proposals – ‘Your Swale’

Feedback from the consultation process reveals that in order to successfully engage with the wider community the Council will need to look at more accessible ways of enabling public involvement beyond the traditional LEF public meetings and Rural Forum, and to embrace more modern channels for engagement.

It is evident from the feedback that the ways the community can engage with the Council needs to be accessible, at a place and time convenient for the resident, clearly signposted, simplified and humanised to encourage greater awareness of the opportunities available, and to improve community participation. It is therefore proposed that all community engagement activity be consolidated under a campaign identity of ‘Your Swale’.

Online channels potentially provide a wide reach across the community, are much more accessible for residents to engage with in the comfort of their own home or when out and about on a mobile device/ tablet at a time convenient for them, and offer us a cost-effective means of engagement. As such, it is proposed that these channels are used as the main driver for community engagement, supplemented by face-to-face activity when required.

It is proposed that community engagement activity is focussed on Council activity and that of its Members rather than that of wider partner organisations such as the Police, KFRS, CCG and KCC. That instead the Council, through ‘Your Swale’ activities, provides clear information and links to how residents can directly engage with those partner organisations on the services and issues for which those bodies are responsible.

It is proposed that community engagement focus on the following areas.

- **What the Council is responsible for** – what the Council does for you and your community and how to access its services, providing clear information and links to how residents can engage with other public bodies on the issues for which they are responsible.
- **What’s happening in the Borough** – keeping citizens up to date about the latest issues the Council is addressing for them (both Council-wide initiatives and local concerns), activities and events taking place (in partnership with Visit Swale), how the Council has listened to feedback, the decisions it makes, and why it comes to the decisions it does.
- **Delivery, success and change** - what the Council is doing to make Swale a better place, the progress being made, and how it is spending council taxpayers’ money.
- **How to get involved** - how the community can find and receive regular information, be involved in Council activities and their community (e.g. volunteering, community litterpicks, events), participate in consultations, and provide feedback.



	next'.	
<b>Inside Swale magazine</b>	<p>Introduce a 'Your Swale' section to the magazine where members of the community and councillors debate an issue. This could be a complex issue that requires explanation, a rumour that needs quashing, a hot-topic people are keen to know more about, or a forthcoming decision that may be contentious.</p> <p>This topic could also be developed as a short and informal video for use on website and social media as described above.</p>	Delivered quarterly - to be introduced from June 2016 edition.
<b>'Your Swale' roadshow</b>	<p>A mobile exhibit that travels to key locations (e.g. high streets, supermarkets, libraries, village halls, post-offices). Managed by the Communications Service and relevant service teams, and attended by Members.</p> <p>The exhibit could be topic-specific - for example, relating to the regeneration of the Borough - or undertaken to annually showcase progress against the corporate plan, what is making Swale a better place, inform residents about forthcoming Council activity and plans, and to promote current consultations and other methods of engagement.</p> <p>This roadshow would bring the Council to places of high footfall and provide an informal opportunity for residents to learn more, raise questions, and provide comments directly to officers and Members in a familiar setting without significant time commitment on their part.</p> <p>Roadshow schedule, locations and outcomes (what was raised and what we do with the feedback) would be publicised via all online 'Your Swale' channels to reach beyond those people who directly interact with us on the day.</p>	Visit key locations during the Summer
<b>'Your Swale' public meetings</b>	<p>Formal public meetings on contentious/important topics held in the locality involved.</p> <p>Attendance by the Leader or nominated deputy at meetings of the Swale Area Committee of Kent Association of Local Councils to engage with Parish Councils</p>	<p>Organisation of public meetings as and when required.</p> <p>Attendance of the Leader or nominated deputy at meetings</p>

It is proposed that the community engagement channels as described are developed, scheduled and delivered by the Communications Team, with the support of all service areas and Members to provide direction, regular content, and to actively participate in direct engagement with the public in the areas described.