

TO FORUM OR NOT TO FORUM? FORUM OR AGAINST THEM?

We have all been to Area Forums and come away thinking something along the lines of ...“well that was a waste of time and effort to talk to only a handful of people” or “we outnumbered the public pretty much 2:1” and as a result the view seemed to be generally accepted that Area Forums were ineffective and that the resources we, UDC, put into them could perhaps be better allocated.

Having read the background papers to the principle of public engagement I have reached the conclusion that Area Forums do have a place and a part to play in the Council year. They should continue but they need to be co-ordinated with other activities and the forecasted major issues of the times, so yes continue them but in a new format.

I am therefore putting forward the following suggestion for discussion by the Constitution Working Group.

It may well be that as a result of discussion among us we can evolve a proposition for submission to Full Council with a recommendation for acceptance as a structure for ensuring that no part of the District will feel left out of any process which leads to a Council Policy decision.

There are various changes that have been made to the Health and Wellbeing programme by Central government, by County Council and ultimately by UDC that have led me to arriving at the point where I feel it necessary to try to join up the dots as it were. There are also changes to the Local Plan making policy decreed by Central Government to be taken into account.

SUGGESTED PROGRAMME OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INFORMATION.

TAKING THE MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE:

1. Ensure that Members are engaging with Parish Councils by attending meetings as often as possible. It is accepted that meetings clash but the dates of all meetings, Parish and District, are known for the year in advance so calendars can be adjusted. A written update to the Parish Clerk prior to the meeting can be of great assistance for those times when absence is unavoidable. Members should be aware of all the mainstream activities of UDC so a report to their PCs is not difficult. A Member of a single Member ward will face more challenges than their colleagues so written reports to Clerks/ local newsletters will probably feature more when several parishes are involved

Local Member surgeries can sometimes bring a matter of concern to the fore but by reaching out and encouraging contact by email or telephone, Members can be more effective. Certainly there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes that never makes the “front page” or Facebook.

*Relevant matter for consideration and discussion: Should double hatting stop?
Should District Councillors also sit as Parish Councillors?*

As there are only 3 County Councillors in Uttlesford then is there so much of a conflict possibility in that area? But again we can discuss.

2. UDC has commenced a mobile service which will enable rural residents to access information on many subjects. This is a multi-agency initiative mainly due to the merging of Health and Wellbeing into the Housing Department. With the correct information available within the vehicle and the appropriate staff presence the aim is to make it pertinent to all parts of our society not just Council tenants.

Please refer to the Council's Press release of 8th February.

GETTING THE PEOPLE TO HEAR THE MESSENGERS:

2016 is going to be an unusually busy year for the year after an election.

We have a PCC election in May and an EU referendum in June for the whole District and Great Dunmow will have a Neighbourhood Plan referendum.

Essentially that will take us through until July/August.

We should be pressing the new PCC (together with the Chief Constable) to meet and address our residents and I believe that this will at best/earliest be July or August.

There will be public exhibitions regarding the Local Plan proposals in the Autumn.

Basically I feel that any Area Forums this year will be difficult to programme.

My proposal therefore relates to 2017 onwards.

3. Two Forums per area (North and South/Spring and Autumn) can be programmed as was the practise. In each area one would be a single topic agenda, the other a Q & A Open House. This latter event would have to be attended by enough Officers to enable positive reaction to questions. No Officer should have to attend both North and South events. By careful selection a single item agenda should elicit more attendance. We will have had Policing and Local Plan so other topics have to be tabled for 2017. Future events will direct the focus on topics over time. No Forum should run longer than 2 hours. I believe this format will reduce the time that Officers have to dedicate to the Forums which inevitably have to be held in the evenings. Light refreshments, paid for by Members, should be provided, i.e squash, water, cake & biscuits. No hot drinks.

So with a concerted effort by Members to engage with parishes; with a mobile information service that reaches out to those who for whatever reason cannot attend other events; a structured approach to airing the subjects of interest and concern to the electorate, I believe we can fulfil our obligation to inform and engage with our constituents.

Paper prepared by Councillor Vic Ranger – April 2016