**DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – CHANGES – CONSULTATION ANALYSIS**

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DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES - CONSULTATION ANALYSIS

1. We consulted upon the proposed changes to decision-making arrangements over a five week period 18th February – 25th March 2011. We consulted by two means, namely by an on-line consultation exercise and by a paper questionnaire. The on-line consultation was completed by 96 people. The paper questionnaire resulted in 100 returned forms. An analysis of the outcome of the ‘yes/no’ answers from these two methods of consultation forms Appendix A to this Annex.

2. In addition, the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee considered the democratic change proposals at its meeting on 10th February 2011. Its report, and the minutes of that meeting, form Appendix B to this Annex.

3. Each of the area committees except the Cowley Area Committee (the March meeting of which was cancelled because of lack of business) have considered and commented upon the democratic change proposals. Area committee comments are set out in Appendix C to this Annex. The appendix also includes the views expressed at a meeting with parish councils in February.

4. We distributed over 2,000 copies of the paper questionnaire. Some 1,400 questionnaires were sent to all libraries, community centres and doctors surgeries in the City. Residents’ associations and miscellaneous interest groups on Council databases were sent questionnaires as were the planning consultants that we deal with on a regular or fairly regular basis. All Councillors were sent a copy of the questionnaire and some councillors asked for additional copies for distribution in their Wards. Copies were available at the front desks in the Town Hall, in Ramsay House and at St Aldate’s Chambers. The paper questionnaire (less the front page) forms Appendix D to this Annex. The questions in the questionnaire are the same as those asked in the on-line consultation. Members will see that the questionnaire (as did the on-line consultation) refers to further information on the proposals being available. That information was the detailed report that went to the City Executive Board on 9th February 2011. The Board agreed the report for the purposes of consultation.
What are we consulting on?
We are considering changing our decision-making arrangements. In summary, the changes we are considering are these:

1) Area Forums – To set up area forums in place of area committees. The area forums would be informal meetings dealing with issues of local concern and interest. Funds are available to ensure they can meet at least once a quarter if desired, and maybe more frequently depending upon local choice.

2) Ward Member budgets – To give each member of Council £1,500 to spend in relation to their Ward.

3) Planning – To set up two area planning committees to deal with planning applications. One committee would decide upon applications for the west of the City and one committee would decide upon applications for the east of the City. The committees would meet monthly and would usually be held in the Town Hall.

4) Reaching executive decisions – To introduce single member executive decision making. The draft proposal is to split decisions presently reserved to the City Executive Board so that many of them are decided by individual Executive Board members. All decisions would continue to be made in public and could be ‘called in’ by scrutiny committees.

If you feel it would be helpful to find out more before answering this questionnaire, the Council has agreed a paper Democratic Arrangements – Proposed Changes for consultation purposes. This contains further information including Ward member spending rules and the types of decisions that single executive members will be able to reach.

This consultation paper can be viewed and downloaded from the Changes to decision-making arrangements section on the consultation page of our website www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation
A paper copy is also available to view at the same location that you collected this questionnaire, or from the reception desk at the Town Hall, St Alcates, Oxford.

Have your say
We want your views on our proposals. Please answer the questions below. Space is available at the end of each question to offer additional comments.

1) Have you ever attended an area committee? YES/NO

2) (a) The Council proposes to set up informal area forums in place of area committees. Do you think area forums and other neighbourhood meetings offer the potential to involve local people in reaching decisions about their local areas? YES/NO
(b) How would you like to see these area forums and neighbourhood meetings develop?
3) (a) The Council proposes to set up individual budgets that Ward members can spend, subject to clear rules and appropriate oversight, in their Wards. Are you in favour of this? YES/NO

(b) Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

4) (a) Are you in favour of planning applications being considered by two area planning committees covering larger geographical areas rather than the present area committees? YES/NO

(b) Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

5) (a) The Council proposes to reduce the number of meetings of its City Executive Board, and instead have some decisions taken by individual members of the Executive in public, with advice from Council officers, and subject to call-in by scrutiny. Are you in favour of this? YES/NO

(b) Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?
6) Have you any comments to make on our proposals generally?


Consultation deadline and decisions
This consultation closes on Friday 25 March 2011.

The City Executive Board on 13 April and Full Council on 18 April 2011 will consider the consultation outcomes and determine the way forward. Any new arrangements will commence from mid-May 2011.

Who to contact at the Council
For further information about this consultation please contact:

William Reed, Democratic Services Manager,
telephone: 01865 252230
email: wreed@oxford.gov.uk
or write to:
William Reed
Democratic Services Manager
The Town Hall
Blue Boar Street
Oxford
OX1 4EY

Thank you for reading this questionnaire and responding to our consultation. Please complete this form and leave it at the reception at the Town Hall, St. Aldate's, Oxford or place in an envelope and return by FREEPOST before 5pm on Friday 25 March to:

Democratic Changes
Oxford City Council
FREEPOST OF10
OXFORD
OX1 1BR

This consultation is also available online until 25 March 2011. Visit www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation and click on Changes to decision-making arrangements.
DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

Analysis of ‘Yes/No’ answers to the consultation exercise:-

1. Have you ever attended an area committee?

**On-line consultation response**

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2. The Council proposes to set up informal area forums in place of area committees. Do you think area forums and other neighbourhood meetings offer the potential to involve local people in reaching decisions about their local areas?

**On-line consultation response**

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3. The Council proposes to set up individual budgets that Ward members can spend, subject to clear rules and appropriate oversight, in their Wards. Are you in favour of this?

**On-line consultation response**

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4. Are you in favour of planning applications being considered by two area planning committees covering larger geographical areas than the present area committees?

**On-line consultation response**

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**Questionnaire response**
5. The Council proposes to reduce the number of meetings of its City Executive Board, and instead have some decisions taken by individual members of the Executive in public, with advice from Council officers, and subject to call-in by scrutiny. Are you in favour of this?

On-line consultation response

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Changes to Decision Making Arrangements
Consultation 18th February 2011 to 25th March 2011
Report by: Margaret Melling, Consultation Officer, 28th March 2011 v2

Total responses received to the ONLINE questionnaire: 96

SUMMARY
The online consultation has attracted responses from people involved with the existing Area Committees in Oxford.

- Just over two thirds (69%) of online respondents had attended an Area Committee in the past.

55% of respondents disagreed with the proposal to replace Area Committees with Area Forums. Many respondents believe that the current Area Committees work well.

- “Opposed to the concept of area forums. Present arrangements of area committees work well & provide good opportunity for genuine local democracy.”

57% of respondents disagreed with the proposal to introduce budgets for individual Ward members. Respondents were concerned about the idea of giving one councillor a budget, the low amount of the budget and a lack of information on which to judge this proposal.

- “Giving individual councillors money to spend on their pet projects rather than the area committees considering the needs and priorities of the area as a whole defies common sense and will diminish accountability.”
- “It seems inadequate compared to the existing area committee budgets.”
- “It is not clear what the precise rules would be on how the budgets can and cannot be used.”

86% of respondents disagreed with the proposal for planning applications to be considered by two area planning committees covering a larger geographical area. A key concern shared by many respondents was that this would weaken the voice/power of local people.

- “It’s important that local planning issues are made as close to the people affected by the decisions as possible.”
- “I strongly oppose this proposal. It removes scrutiny from local areas to too high a level and too large an area. It severely erodes localism.”
• "Oxford's neighbourhoods are very different from each other."
• "Local knowledge leads to better quality decisions."

82% of respondents disagreed with the proposal to reduce the number of meetings of the City Executive Board and instead have some decisions taken by individual members of the Executive. A theme of the feedback was the possible impact of the changes to decision making on local democracy. Many respondents believe the proposals to be "un-democratic".

• "This directly reduces democracy of the council. Democratic process in making decisions is far better than expensive and difficult scrutiny after bad decisions have been made."
• "It puts too much power in the hands of individuals, especially as it looks as if the scrutiny and call-in arrangements are rather arduous and that anyway the results of this could be ignored by the individual decision maker."
• "Greater centralisation should be avoided. It disenfranchises the electorate."

Several respondents were unhappy with the way in which this consultation on Decision Making Arrangements has been organised and some suggested that the consultation should have been run at a more local level.

• "You are setting up the questions to help people agree with your previously made decisions."
• "Local people need to make decisions about their own committees"
Marked up Questionnaire

Question 1: Have you ever attended an area committee?

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AREA FORUMS: The Council proposes to set up informal area forums in place of area committees.

Question 2: Do you think area forums and other neighbourhood meetings offer the potential to involve local people in reaching decisions about their local areas?

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Question 3: How would you like to see these area forums and neighbourhood meetings develop?

(open question)

Current system 'works well' was specifically mentioned by 25 respondents.

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<th>Examples of suggestions</th>
<th>Comments in support of the current system</th>
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<tr>
<td>• &quot;To get more genuinely local - away from big central things and down to local level - that means more meetings, not fewer, and handling issues as locally as possible, not a wider area.&quot;</td>
<td>• As the proposal stands I think local people will be worse off, unless the Area forums meet frequently and locally, and have Councillors who live locally involved in any decision making. It's unclear exactly how and why these should replace the existing arrangements for local decision making.</td>
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<td>• &quot;A livelier, more relaxed format, with members contributing more freely and with time for proper deliberation to take place.&quot;</td>
<td>• Informal forums are no substitute for area committees. This move to neuter the limited local power that area committees have at present is a retrograde centralisation of power and should be abandoned. The area committees need more power, not less.</td>
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<td>• &quot;They should not try to embrace too wide a geographical area eg SE Area only Ifley + Rosehill. They should be easily accessible to residents by all modes of transport (currently difficult to reach all 3 parts of SE Area Ctee without use of a car). They should meet at least 4 times p.a. to maintain continuity. Very firm Chairing essential to allow full participation.&quot;</td>
<td>• Opposed to the concept of area forums. Present arrangements of area committee meetings work well &amp; provide good opportunity for genuine local democracy. The proposed arrangements would greatly reduce local democracy &amp; the potential for local participation.</td>
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<td>• &quot;Would like to see forums held in different areas of the city, with good advance publicity, to encourage wider range of participation than at Area committees. I have found the first part of Area committee meetings in Rose Hill and Blackbird Leys useful as discussions of local issues. Recommend similar content in forums.&quot;</td>
<td>• This is called a leading question. I believe the current arrangement of area committee meetings held monthly is better.</td>
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<td>• I would like them to have both a scrutiny role and an operational role. In the former role they would receive input and provide an opportunity to comment on Police, City Council and County Council services in the area covered. In the latter role they would help to develop the Neighbourhood Plan envisaged in the Localism Bill. Residents, 'stakeholders' and Councillors should meet on an equal footing. None should be more equal than others.</td>
<td>• We would prefer to keep the existing local forums in place.</td>
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<td>• &quot;Area committees as they stand at present work well and in particular East Oxford Area Committee&quot;</td>
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BUDGETS: The Council proposes to set up individual budgets that Ward members can spend in their Wards, subject to clear rules and appropriate oversight.

Question 4: Are you in favour of this budget proposal?

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Question 5: Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

(open question)

In their free text response, 12 respondents were clearly and strongly opposed to the idea of giving one councillor a budget.

- “Budget allocations should be made by collective decision and not just the result of one person’s decision.”
- “Giving individual councillors money to spend on their pet projects rather than the area committees considering the needs and priorities of the area as a whole defies common sense and will diminish accountability.”
- “How is bias on the part of Ward members to be avoided?”
- “OUR money should never just be in the GIFT of any officers or elected councillors individually and I would campaign for this to be legally challenged.”

11 respondents were concerned that the amount of money proposed was too small.

- “a pathetically small budget and a joke that it should need ‘clear rules’ and ‘oversight’ “

Several mentioned a lack of information on which to judge the proposals.

- “No reason nor information is given for setting up these budgets, how they will be operated, on what criteria, and how the figure of £1,500 was set. No indication is given of Ward members’ views on this proposal.”
- “It is not clear what the precise rules would be on how the budgets can and cannot be used.”
PLANNING: The Council proposes to set up two new area planning committees to deal with planning applications.

Question 6: Are you in favour of planning applications being considered by two area planning committees covering larger geographical areas rather than the present area committees?

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Question 7: Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?
(open question)

A key concern for respondents was that the new committees would not be local enough and that the arrangement would weaken the voice/power of local people. 52 out of the 96 respondents to the online survey mentioned this issue.

- “It’s important that local planning issues are made as close to the people affected by the decisions as possible.”
- “I gather that councillors from any area can sit on either of the two committees, and this will weaken the power of local people.”
- “I strongly oppose this proposal. It removes scrutiny from local areas to too high a level and too large an area. It severely erodes localism.”
- “Oxford’s neighbourhoods are very different from each other.”
- “Local knowledge leads to better quality decisions.”
DECISION MAKING: The Council proposes to reduce the number of meetings of its City Executive Board and instead have some decisions taken by individual members of the Executive, with advice from Council officers, and subject to call-in by Scrutiny.

Question 8: Are you in favour of this change?

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Question 9: Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

(open question)

A key theme in the feedback was the possible impact of the changes to decision making on local democracy. 40 respondents believe the proposals to be “un-democratic”.

- “This directly reduces democracy of the council. Democratic process in making decisions is far better than expensive and difficult scrutiny after bad decisions have been made.”

- “Decision making by individual Councillors is less good than decisions by groups of councillors. It would be better to go back to the old Committee structure (to be allowed by the new Localism Bill)”

- “It puts too much power in the hands of individuals, especially as it looks as if the scrutiny and call-in arrangements are rather arduous and that anyway the results of this could be ignored by the individual decision maker.”

- “Greater centralisation should be avoided. It disenfranchises the electorate.”
OTHER: Please let us know of any other comments on these proposals

There have been criticisms of the consultation process itself.

Lack of proper consultation:

- The questions are biased. They are phrased so as to obtain the outcome that the Council has already committed to in its budget. It is clear that the current proposals to abolish area committees and centralise decision making will go ahead anyway. This is a sham consultation.
- “These proposals are being bull-dozed through without time for adequate scrutiny by the electorate. I strongly object.”

Lack of information to judge the proposals:

- “Only those involved in Council decision-making can give informed responses to the proposals as they stand. A thorough account of how the present system works, and how the proposed system would work, is necessary for any valid consultation.”

Lack of involvement of local people:

- “Local people need to make decisions about their own committees”
- “I think that these proposals should have been made known to the general public, ideally through the press - was a press release drawn up - and also through the ‘newspaper’ the City Council puts through everyone’s front door. It is not enough to rely on the few people who are aware of the on-line consultation process.”

Many respondents took the opportunity of this final “other” question to repeat their view that the proposals are undemocratic and a retrograde step. Many commented again in support of the existing Area Committees.

- “These proposals to centralise power in the Council are democratically retrograde and will result in voters feeling even more disenfranchised and divorced from the Council’s operations. If the Council takes democracy seriously, it should withdraw these proposals and reinforce the powers of the existing local area committees.”
- These proposals seem designed to remove power from councillors and local people and to enable centralised decision-making without any inconvenient challenge - despite the slippery reassurances about ‘scrutiny’. I am opposed to any of the changes in this proposal being made. Instead, the nature of decision-making within the City should be opened up for proper discussion and review. More than ever we need increased involvement and debate. The City deserves much better than this.
- This appears to be a cost-cutting exercise which will not elicit local knowledgeable reactions as well as the present system. We do not believe notifications by site notices, in libraries and online will reach all interested parties,
**VERBATIM response to Question 3: How would you like to see these area forums and neighbourhood meetings develop?**

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<th>A livelier, more relaxed format, with members contributing more freely and with time for proper deliberation to take place.</th>
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<td><strong>Area Committees are more frequent and attract neighbourhood interest</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Area committees as they stand present work well and in particular East Oxford Area Committee</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Area Committees for all the benefits of localism are unwieldy &amp; expensive. Two planning committees make sense but how is all of the other important decision-making, currently taking place at Area Committees, going to happen? Quarterly meetings will be something of nothing, particularly if no key decisions are allowed. Giving each member £1,500 to spend on local/pet projects is odd. A small amount but how will expenditure be accountable, at the time decisions are taken, to the local population?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Area committees involve local people very effectively, giving interested parties a real say in the democratic process and assuring accountability (as well as cooperation between district and county councillors). How much informal area forums will replicate these functions and benefits of area committees is unclear from the documentation. I oppose the removal of area committees and the reversion of their powers to a City Executive Board.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Area committees met monthly; were well attended by councillors; were well supported by officers; had direct links to all parts of the council. Forums: To involve local groups regularly a good idea. But to be useful forums need to meet more often than 4 times pa; have regular chair; have attendance of all councillors; have officer back-up so that issues are followed up and reported on; be well publicised. Risks talking shop only and &quot;community workers&quot; overwhelmed.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Area forums will be just a talking shop as they have no powers to make decisions. When local constituents realise this they will quickly stop going.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>As committees with the existing decision-making powers of the existing area committees</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>As far as I can see the Area Parliaments were doing a good job - apart from the usual failure of the City Council to inform anyone about what is happening anywhere, e.g. I only heard by chance, a day before its end, about this Consultation- I see no reason to change the present system. The changes proposed sound much more centralised and much less democratic.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>As the proposal stands I think local people will be worse off, unless the Area forums meet frequently and locally, and have Councillors who live locally involved in any decision making. It’s unclear exactly how and why these should replace the existing arrangements for local decision making.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Better presentation of planning proposals on bigger screens with a standard format</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>By maintaining the present satisfactory system with area committees.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First I would like to see evidence that the fora would be as democratic and effective as the current area committees and would generate substantial savings over the current system. If such evidence is not available to the public, I feel time and energy should not be spent on trying to guess at improvements to the current system.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hold them in different places as at present so there is a truly 'local' attendance. Better follow-up by officers of problems raised. A pity that the new arrangement is only quarterly.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I am concerned that this arrangement is less formal than the current area committee arrangement. You ask if they have 'potential' -- but not if they offer more potential than the current arrangement, which would be a fairer question.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I believe it would be empowering to local democracy for such neighbourhood forums to have a real say in spending decisions; perhaps to have a budget at their disposal.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I didn't say I did want the area forums. Keep the area committees, they are good because they give the opportunity to people within their own area to vote and speak directly to councillors and with a budget. The power of local voice and local action is very important</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I don’t want them to develop. I’d like area committees to continue.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29th March 2011 v2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I don’t want to see them develop - I’d like to keep my perfectly well-operating area committee that has a perfect record of making planning decisions that have never had an appeal against them allowed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel that involvement of local residents and traders is vital for any decision making process. As far as how to develop, unfortunately I don’t have the time to come up with ideas now...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have answered the previous question positively, but the question is wrong. It should say &quot;Do you think that the proposed informal arrangements will better serve the purpose of local democracy? The answer to that is an emphatic &quot;No&quot;;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the area parliaments are great and would not want to lose them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the existing Area Committee system should be retained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want POWERS to be held by area committees, not by ONE councillor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want the area committee to be kept with powers over local planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will regret the loss of the East Area Parliament which allows local representation on planning issues and these views must have overriding consideration at the new area committee when decided by a majority of councillors outside the area - meetings need to be held monthly as before and must have some planning recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would have to attend one before making suggestions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like the existing area committee arrangements to continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like them to develop back into monthly Area Committees - where real decisions are made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like them to have both a scrutiny role and a operational role. In the former role they would receive input and provide an opportunity to comment on Police, City Council and County Council services in the area covered. In the latter role they would help to develop the Neighbourhood Plan envisaged in the Localism Bill. Residents, ‘stakeholders’ and Councillors should meet on an equal footing. None should be more equal than others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to preserve the Area Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see area committees continue well advertised as they are in East Oxford and well attended by the public who know that they will be listened to and action taken where possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see better consultation to be continued in the future, in order to allow an effective, open process of democracy to be shared throughout the city, in order for the transparency and operations of the council to be clear and effective as possible and for the council management to work as effectively in conjunction with the needs of the local people as possible. That therefore works best through effective consultation processes and committees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see them not be introduced and to continue with the present system, although the amount of planning brought to the Area Committees has sadly already been reduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would not like to see them develop. It would be preferable to continue with the current arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer the Local Area Committees to be retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer the previous system of area committees, instead of these ‘forums’. The East Oxford Area Committee certainly has worked well and I cannot understand why it is being abolished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer the system to stay as it is as I want my councillors to be involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to retain the area committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to see area committees kept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to see the existing system of Area Committees remain in place. Decision-making on local issues should be devolved to local committees that involve the community and neighbourhoods. These local power should not be removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the area forums have no devolved responsibility for licensing or planning, they are merely talking shops with no purpose other than to act as a sop.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Informal forums are no substitute for area committees. This move to neuter the limited local power that area committees have at present is a retrograde centralisation of power and should be abandoned. The area committees need more power, not less.

It is not clear how these forums would be more efficient than the existing procedure which is well established and understood.

It seems to me important that they are advisory and communicative rather than fundamentally decision making, in order to ensure that decisions are joined-up across the city &amp; indeed fair across the city - it would be ridiculous to allow a postcode lottery between different areas of a city as small and tightly interconnected as ours.

Keep existing system

Keep the current Area Committee system. Do not remove planning powers or area budgets.

Locals residents must be involved in the decision making

Meetings should include public, council officers, local political representatives. Voting and decision making should be public and transparent

more of them run by local people - in more harder to reach areas or areas in which the residents are not so motivated or find it difficult to get involved

More publicity of the fora and meetings please. Could we sign up for alerts to the meetings please?

My concerns:

a) No clear indication given of specific purpose/location of Area Forums, or what Councillors/Officers will attend.

b) Planning decisions will no longer be made by LOCAL councillors with good knowledge of aspects concerned - this is contrary to any intention to involve local people in reaching decisions about their local areas' (see 2 above)

There is no point in spending time and money on 'area forums', if their outcome will have no real power to influence decisions to be made.

Neighbourhood meetings with local councillors are a good idea but should not be a replacement for the current Area Committees which should be retained

Opposed to the concept of area forums. Present arrangements of area committees work well &amp; provide good opportunity for genuine local democracy. The proposed arrangements would greatly reduce local democracy &amp; the potential for local participation

Places, times and subjects given to Party leaders and other heads of interested organisations. They in turn will inform their members through social networks or by other means.

Regular meetings to update residents on future planning. Opportunities to shape local planning through masterplanning exercises.

Retain local parliaments they work well, they have planning powers, more meetings and a budget. Any local meeting has the potential to involve local people, but the question really is will this offer a better way, or will it disempower local people. this will lessen the power of local people, provide a lip service to listening and leave one person with overriding disproportionate power over planning decisions.

Return to the present arrangements

The current area committees had some powers to act and some funds which made them much more useful for local democracy than what is being proposed now - it sounds as if the new area forums would not have much power to do anything about local concerns.

The forum needs to meet monthly - quarterly consultation is simply cosmetic. If the forums and neighbourhood meetings are to be meaningful, there needs to be a budget set aside and we should be given planning powers

The present Area Committee system should be left as it is.
The proposal says that decisions the area committee makes about local matters will be made by the exec board & individual exec members. This would mean decisions about a local area could be made by a councillor who doesn’t represent that area. The new Forum is only for discussion with nc executive powers. Just because there are problems in some area committees, it does not mean all are ineffective. If local people can’t attend meetings, then allow them to contribute online.

The proposed changes look potentially undemocratic, and an extension of more arbitrary authority powers. I would prefer a more transparently open and formalised process, however cumbersome it might need to be to remain fully consultative.

| They are a complete sham - you should be asking whether we want to keep Area committees |
| They are not local enough to address particular local issues |
| They must be held regularly, have the ability to make meaningful decisions and be focussed on a relatively small area. 3-4 areas for the whole of Oxford would be ridiculous. |
| They must be well publicised and inclusive of all communities in the area. They must be attended by councillors who are in a position to make decisions. There must be active accountability to the community from the council in their relevant decisions. |
| They must have budget and planning powers, otherwise they will wither on the vine. |
| They should be formally minuted to allow for decisions to be recorded. |
| They should have a form of planning power and budget and taken seriously by higher levels so that there’s a real point to them. Otherwise, people won’t come and won’t be listened to - it is crucial that these forums don’t degrade to nothing but a ‘look how democratic oxford is and how oxford allows participation’ while not being real at all. |
| They should not try to embrace too wide a geographical area eg SE Area only Ifley + Rosehill. They should be easily accessible to residents by all modes of transport (currently difficult to reach all 3 parts of SE Area Cttee without use of a car). They should meet at least 4 times p.a. to maintain continuity. Very firm Chairing essential to allow full participation. |
| They should revert back to Area Parliaments. The proposed forums and meetings appear to have less power and influence. If they are to be imposed on us then they should have the same local influence and not be a toothless creation. |
| Think the existing East Oxford Parliament works well |
| This is called a leading question. I believe the current arrangement of area committee meetings held monthly is better. |

This sounds far too informal. Not sure what the real problem was before, but as important that decisions are presumably being made, they should be as democratic as possible and made by a group of elected people with advice taken from the residents.

To continue to involve local people. It has been stated that notification of issues concerning residents will be by electronic means. This is clearly not good enough as many people are not contactable electronically and also because it is easy to ignore electronic communications.

To get more genuinely local - away from big central things and down to local level - that means more meetings, not fewer, and handling issues as locally as possible, not a wider area.

To have some real delegated power NOT a talking shop with nothing to spend which is what you propose. I see the changes as a reversal of the democratic process.
To the stage where a majority of local people can and do take an active part in decision-making about their neighbourhood by holding their elected representatives properly to account at all times, not just at the ballot-box.

We would prefer to keep the existing local forums in place.

Whenever sufficient demand, as judged by local members

With an agreed budget (not decided by a local councillor) - without a budget they are toothless; have authority to make decisions on local planning applications that affect the community; to be genuinely for local democracy: informal meetings will have no leverage and no decision-making powers or influence - local councillors can ignore the views of neighbourhood fora; they need to be accountable for more than how they allocate &pound;1,500 to worthy causes!

With respect to my answer to Q2 - the proposed changes are not acceptable to me because - despite the misleading way they are described - they seem designed only to increase executive power and reduce the influence of councillors and local people. I object strongly.

Would like to see forums held in different areas of the city, with good advance publicity, to encourage wider range of participation than at Area committees. I have found the first part of Area committee meetings in Rose Hill and Blackbird Leys useful as discussions of local issues. Recommend similar content in forums.

yes but in addition to area committees which should have more power developed form the executive board
VERBATIM response to Question 5: BUDGETS Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

£1,500 per councillor will achieve little - give back decision making to area committees with a proper budget

a pathetically small budget and a joke that it should need 'clear rules' and 'oversight'

Abandon this shocking idea. It is unfair to councillors and community workers. Will a refusal make councillors unpopular and affect their re-election? Also favouritism and corruption are risks. Allocating public money should be the task of properly constituted committees at properly constituted meetings, using officers' reports and Council criteria. Allocations across the city must be fair, taking into account the needs of different areas.

Area Committees already do this, in public, more accountably.

As I understand it the new Area Forums only are planned to meet quarterly with no budget powers which is counter to the intentions of the Localism Bill

as long as the budget is an extension to existing budgets

Better to have local group funds that the local councillors vote on. And anyway the individual budgets sound too small to make much difference.

Budget allocations should be made by collective decision and not just the result of one person's decision.

Budget not enough - if money needs to be saved by not hiring local halls a room in the town hall should be set aside for area forums by area in rotation

Decision making by one individual is dangerous - it can lead to corruption; it would be better to give money to a group of Councillors (ideally to the area forums, but possibly to wards)

Decisions should be reported to Area Forums and they should also have the opportunity to propose items for funding.

easy to see how this is open to individual manipulation and undemocratic process.

Executive decision-making changes are effectively concentrating power in the hands of the Leader - overtaxing scrutiny committees - political composition?. Area committees will be hamstrung by a lack of budget, and then quietly shelved? To concentrate planning into two committees is a gift to the planners. OK, you don't like appeals! How will local people resist aggressive planning applications?

Funds should be related to needs and funding decisions should follow debate and public decision making.

Giving individual councillors money to spend on their pet projects rather than the area committees considering the needs and priorities of the area as a whole defies common sense and will diminish accountability.

How is bias on the part of Ward members to be avoided?

I am concerned that this proposal, which empowers ward members without proper democratic oversight, is liable to encourage political corruption, and not to be in the best interest of the local communities.

I am not convinced by the words 'subject to clear rules and appropriate oversight' - system would be too vulnerable to wasteful expenditure, inappropriate allocation of funds and to some 'causes' being given an unfair share of the money allocated.

I am opposed to this. I think it better that budgets are spent at area level, and that spending decisions are made by area committees.

I cannot see how this can bring about a better way to take planning decisions. How are the proposed new meeting to be funded? If a councillor does not spend their budget on these meetings will they still happen?

I don't really see the point of this at all. Is it a sop to make the other proposed changes look less dire than they are? Pay somebody something and that will keep them sweet? Tho what this small sum can do I can't think. Will it be able to bring back our swimming pool at Temple Cowley?

I don't think individual members should have a budget. The current arrangements with area budgets is far better.

I fail to see its utility, as the sum involved is so small. Hardly worth giving up a say in policy making.
I oppose the proposal and would like area committees retained but would like to see more additional executive powers devolved in order to improve local democracy.

I tried to earlier but this online system limits comments and will not obtain sufficiently intelligent responses. The proposals are like a curate’s egg. Save money but don’t destroy genuine local democracy.

I want a budget to help local groups and to best solve local problems.

I would need to have more information to answer this question.

I’m anxious that the words ‘clear and appropriate’ can be interpreted in many ways - who is overseeing the oversight?

I’m dubious that the money will be spent fairly. Must be careful not to lead to accusations of favouritism or corruption. Surely better to make spending a committee decision. £1500 won’t go far. Is this capital (e.g. buying a new litterbin) or revenue (e.g. clearing up a grotspot)?

I’m not in favour because as it stands the proposal is completely vague. It’s not at all obvious what the clear rules &quot;for allocating the budget would be. Who would pay for booking rooms for relevant meetings and advertising them? To do all notification online is to disenfranchise a large chunk of the local population; will money need to come from the Ward budget to leaflet people?

It is not clear in what ways this money could be spent. Tight guidelines would be necessary. Sometimes when small amounts are being spent, nothing of any real value is gained. The total amount might be better spent than in lots of small bits.

It is not clear what the precise rules would be on how the budgets can and cannot be used.

It seems inadequate compared to the existing area committee budgets.

It will not save money as far as I can see.

It’s a recipe for undemocratic patronage and will result in more discontent than positive outcomes for the community.

It’s important that the rules and oversight, and the sums involved, be sufficiently constricting that this doesn’t lead to substantially different experience of council governance between wards. There is clearly a case for some small amount of money being used to deal with minor problems of which a local councillor paying attention to a specific ward is going to be aware. But this should be used to up systematic issues/make use of local knowledge, rather than for ward self-determination.

Mini-pork barrel funding of this kind works badly in other countries. It is usually a waste of money. Present area committee arrangements give more democratic control because awards must be publicly debated &amp; justified.

More would be better.

No.

No.

No reason nor information is given for setting up these budgets, how they will be operated, on what criteria, and how the figure of £1500 was set. No indication is given of Ward members’ views on this proposal.

not yet.

Please note: It has been stated that notification of issues concerning residents will be by electronic means. This is clearly not good enough as many people are not contactable electronically and also because it is easy to ignore electronic communications.

Prefer current arrangements to continue.

Scrutiny will be important.

Since the money comes from tax payers, as tax payers we need the evidence that the proposed innovation would generate savings. It seems cumbersome and likely not to yield the efficiencies claimed, but instead to cost more and be less democratic.

The amount of money given to each councillor is derisory, and I fail to see how it will make any serious difference. In any case, I would rather have a council tax cut than my own money given back to me.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The amounts and regulations of any budgets shd. be clearly stated and advertised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The budgets are tiny vs area parliament budgets. Keep area parliaments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost-benefit does not appear to have been examined and is doubtful. What is wrong with the present collective decision-taking? We are a community in the City, not a business. Since when have we had a Tory Council? The whole proposal is barking mad - there is no other way to describe it. Scrap it. 500 characters not enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current Area Committee budget arrangements provide more money and provide more democratic accountability. DO not change the current arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proposal does not say how much area committees can spend at the moment. If the central executive makes the decisions instead and chooses not to invest in certain local areas, this could mean a substantial reduction in funds for that area. I think it’s better that local councillors control the local budget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proposed £1500 per ward is insignificant. Budgeting should be agreed by the whole council.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sums suggested are so tiny as to be insignificant when considering the types of community projects are likely to need funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wording of this questionnaire is set up to elicit approval by framing cuts and reductions in democratic influence in language that points to minor, seeming benefits, ignoring that which is actually being done by the people of Oxford. I feel angry that this attempt is being made so dishonestly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be a formalised system of consultation with constituents on how this should or could be spent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a pointless splitting up of a budget that would be better served by preserving the area committee structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a recipe for corruption - under the Area Committee system all grants were made openly in public - this will no longer be the case, so it will encourage cronysim - A VERY BAD IDEA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a sop - a poor exchange for the present system of democratic local involvement including the possibility to realistically influence planning and local governance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is disgraceful and patronising and leads directly to individual patronage rather than using public money democratically for the good of the community. OUR money should never just be in the GIFT of any officers or elected councillors individually and I would campaign for this to be legally challenged - its a damn cheak and I am suprised anyone may suggest such a move.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is not democratic &amp;© not the same as an Area Committee deciding on local grant applications. There’s a danger that it will be used by Councillors as a slush fund to gain support in their Ward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This proposal to remove area committees is bad idea, taking away our democracy. We need more chance to be involved in local plans of all kinds, not less. This is the beginning of the dictatorship which is being ousted form countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Do we have to go to these measures to get democracy here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This question is unfair - it fails to say that the area committee budgets will disappear. The £1500 per member is less money for the public, not more!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This whole consultation is a sham, without time for adequate consideration by the voters of Oxford.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through the existing Area committees made up of local councillors, communities are able to have a democratic voice. They work effectively, have budgets and planning powers. To replace these with a less democratic system would be a retrograde step.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without knowing what Ward members will do with the money, it is impossible to say if this is a good idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes as long as there is proper devolution of substantive budgets for local watdr committees to make their own decisions on spending. I would like to be consulted on which ones are proposed and what this actually means.</td>
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</table>

29th March 2011 v2
VERBATIM response to Question 7: PLANNING Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Obviously more efficient. present system: amazing to see how councillors are swayed by protestors at meetings and make decisions that are clearly dubiously legal. I'm not a planning expert but see the present system doesn't work.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to be sure new committees have better training in planning law etc.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Again joined-up governance across the city. (for similar reasons it seems to me important that the area planning committees be similar in terms of partisan makeup - it would be wrong to have one party majority on one area and a different majority on the other. They should both aim to represent the city itself rather than narrow area interests.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Again, this proposal could result in non-local councillors making decisions about a local area and putting greater power in the hands of fewer people.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerned that the reduction in committees will lead to delays and members will have less experience of relevant local issues.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decisions should be made as near to the relevant locality as possible. That was supposed to be the point of planning through the Area Parliaments staffed by local elected Councillors. Sometimes the Area Parliaments are overridden by the full Council who can have no idea what is really appropriate to a locality in which most of them do not live and work. Planning committees covering larger areas would also not adequately represent local interests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Having witnessed how the SDCC operate I want ALL planning decisions made by councillors who KNOW the area.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How will they be aware of the issues affecting local neighbourhoods? E.G.decisions affecting the East will be considered by a West committee. The proposed composition is highly suspect - anyone councillor can be a representative? The committee powers are non-existent. Field-day for planners! How is this promoting local democracy?</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am anxious that these could be dominated by the political party who happens to be in power - and that the concerns of other elected councillors (eg Green party) will simply be ignored.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am happy with Planning Decision being made by the present area committees. Its important that local planning issues are made as close to the people affected by the decisions as possible.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am happy with the current system.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I gather that councillors from any area can sit on either of the two committees, and this will weaken the power of local people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have taken time out from work to respond to this. I have read the document outlining the proposals. As far as I am concerned, no further action should be taken until and unless there is a PROPER consultative process that is framed and debated in plain and honest terms. Those who have framed the proposal, written the document and created this questionnaire have cause for shame at their attempt to mislead Oxford people and get these changes through without being challenged.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I strongly oppose this proposal. It removes scrutiny from local areas to too high a level and too large an area. It severely erodes localism.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think local residents should be involved in decisions about planning applications, and the bigger the geographical area covered by your proposed committees, the less input local residents will have.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think the current area committee system works well.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think we will lose the granularity which is a strength of the current system. Oxford's neighbourhoods are very different from each other.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If we knew the questions before we moved to another page we could make a far better response. This is not consultation!</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| It will be a return to when Councillors from other areas made decisions in locations they were unfamiliar with, often against local needs and wishes. |

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It's rubbish, cannot even be recycled, waste of the worst kind, a waste of good peoples time and our money to produce it

I've attended several area committee meetings. They have been very effective in engaging councillors in local planning issues. While their decisions have not always gone as I'd have liked, it's been plain that more than just one's most local councillors have mutually developed their understanding of the city's needs. The transparency of the process and accountability of councillors makes the scheme cost effective in so many ways -- a retrograde step to weaken the system.

Just two area planning committees are not sufficient for the size of Oxford City. The present area committees are just right for proper consideration of planning matters by those concerned giving the opportunity for feedback and consultation between the Ward Councillors and the local residents

**Keep it local**

Local committees are more democratic and searching

Local input is important in planning considerations. The local residents will have a different sense of what matters than someone who doesn’t live there or know the area or what matters to that area. It's important that the area MATTERS to the people consulted and making the decisions. There are already some pretty poor planning decisions and this would probably only make things worse.

Local knowledge is needed to make this decision

Local members understand the local area and local issues best. We mean about planning inspectors’ lack of local knowledge but we're now going down the same defective line! My area committee makes planning decisions perfectly effectively and that should not be changed. <br> Area Committees are not politically balanced. Planning is not party political but recently a bunch of Labour Councillors calling in a North Area Committee (exclusively LibDem) planning decision I think rather indicates otherwise!

Local people need to make decisions about their own communities.

Loss of local involvement, knowledge and site visits

not yet

People on Area C'tees are local. Local decisions are made by those who understand the impact, in front of local residents: ideal for planning issues. <br> The Town Hall venue is inconvenient: having meetings there disenfranchises locals wanting to speak. Getting into town = fewer attendees & decisions being made unseen, by people unfamiliar with local conditions. <br> It's not clear how many applications can be handled by two C'tees; fewer decisions being called in, means loss of local democracy.

Planning applications need to be considered by the local councillors, who have a good understanding of all aspects that would affect the local community and who have been voted into power by the local residents who would be affected. Putting the decision in the hands of those who cannot be called to account by those who have voted them into power would be extremely detrimental to the democratic process.

Planning decisions need to be made locally!

Planning decisions should be made by councillors who live in the area or answer directly to the people affected by them. Centralization will allow the majority party to dominate decisions previously taken more locally by other parties based on the preference of the voters concerned.

Planning decisions should be taken as locally as possible and called in to whole council meetings if they are of sufficient strategic importance. The new proposal has clearly been designed to give the party currently running the party the maximum say in planning decisions.

Planning matters should be dealt with by local representatives.

Public attendance at planning committees should be encouraged, and access made easy eg place and timing must be appropriate

see previous answer

Single member decisions, and members not being restricted to the area of the committee appear to leave this system open to manipulation and abuse. It does not offer improvements, it seems to takes away local power and offers a lip service to the powerless committees.

29th March 2011 v2
Smaller area planning committees more appropriate.

Such large committees cannot give appropriate amounts of time nor would they have, in the majority, a working understanding of the local issues being put forward.

The Council should support local democracy, local representation, and local decision-taking. This is Tory top down stuff, it is neither social nor socialist. The consultation gives no supporting information. The only stated criticism of the current arrangements is that decision-taking can be slow. The cause of that is often the SDCC, which in my experience is lazy, less well informed and more capricious and arbitrary that the area committees. So keep the area committees and reform the SDCC.

The current Area Committee system allows for more resident involvement and is a more accountable system. Local knowledge leads to better quality decisions.

The current arrangements with area committees is preferable, as members make decisions for the areas they are familiar with and accountable to.

The existing Area Committees are an effective forum for local communities, particularly concerning planning decisions. To replace them with this less democratic proposal flies in the face of the Localism Bill.

The existing planning committees are well established and have a clear understanding of the issues in their respective areas. This would not necessarily be so in a larger area.

The geographical areas are too large. Not enough local knowledge by those making decisions.

The larger area planning committees will never be able to appreciate local planning concerns and the mix of members need to reflect the areas in question

The local area committees knew their area &amp; its problems well which helps. It's more democratic and more locally accountable as it is. Strategically important decisions tend to get called in anyway.

the people who live and work in an area should be involved in the planning decisions

The present area committees have a better knowledge of the areas and the issues involved.

The present arrangements work well, with meetings held in the area so many local people come &amp; participate, which they are less likely to do for meetings at the Town Hall. The proposed set-up of two planning committees for the whole city would greatly reduce local democracy by making them representative of the political make-up of the council (which is not necessarily that of the area concerned). The councillors participating would have less local knowledge. A move towards centralisation

The present North-East Headington Area Committee is very effective in enabling local people to air their views on local matters. I am totally opposed to planning committees covering a larger geographic area.

The present system is much more democratic. People have a very strong sense of community when controversial proposals arise and with the present system they feel that their views carry weight. The forums would provide no such confidence.

The present system works well and does allow local people to be involved. Larger areas would require mean much longer meetings if the present level of involvement is to continue.

The proposal would tend to dilute or even swamp community interests

The proposed larger area planning committees will have insufficient local focus to make planning decisions that fully consider the needs of local residents.

The proposed two area planning committees will be less responsive to local opinion and priorities than area committees.

The smaller the geographical area, the better the local knowledge in the hands of the committees.

There is merit in having off planning decisions but it could still be handled by the current area committees. The more remote these meetings become from the people who are affected by them, the less they will be attended - or is that the intention?

These proposal massively reduce the opportunity for proper consideration of issues raised by residents and others. Also the number of councillors required to call in an application is far too high. Often when contentious applications have been
considered locally very important issues have been raised and changes made. The two committees will have a heavy
workload and are unlikely to have time to do justice to the issues. Far too many decisions are delegated already.

think the larger geographical regions will mean a dilution in local accountability and that these larger organizations will not
have such local knowledge to serve their areas

This is a good suggestion to remove this element from area committees but I think that area committees should stay.

This is not an enhancement of democratic representation and I strongly object to this proposal. The interests of the
committees will not be guaranteed to coincide of those they represent. This a retrograde, not an enhancing proposal and
needs to be withdrawn.

This proposal is less democratic than the current system.

This removes the decision-making from the local area where people live and where the councillors are familiar with the
very local problems & issues - Another VERY BAD IDEA

This represents centralisation, in that planning decisions will be made by people less directly affected by them than under
the current arrangements. I can't see how that is progress, especially in the current political climate of 'localism'.

This takes decision making powers away from individuals who know the area well.

This will lose the present local involvement and knowledge and replace it with larger, anonymous and detached bodies,
open to outside vested interests.

Too much risk of political interference in the planning process. Planning matters should be considered on their merits by
local people who are directly affected.

Unlike centralised personnel, councillors know their area, and are in touch with those they represent. The proposed
schedule involves delays; people would be reluctant to travel to a central location. The process would seem remote and
undemocratic. Ceasing to inform residents of applications is a retrograde step, disregards those whose taxes pay Council
staff, is arrogant and disenfranchises residents; I can think of no better example of loss of democratic process, and loss of
informed input.

Utterly undemocratic and unacceptable concentration of power. This will be a disastrous policy

We believe that as Planning decisions are not whipped there is no need for political balance in Area Committees. Members
should represent a wide spread of wards within the area covered by the Committee and have an understanding of
planning issues.<br>Comments by local Councillors should not take time away from the time made available for local
residents objections or observations.<br>Call-in to Review PC should require 4 Councillors not 12. Call-in to Full Council,
by Cllrs, should remain

what evidence is there that the current system does not work?

Why change?

Yes - please see my earlier comments on committees.

You are setting up the questions to help people agree with your previously made decisions. It is also an attack on
democracy that the area parliaments & planning delegated power may be lost. There is nothing wrong with real local
democracy so why abandon it? The idea of giving Executive members individual power to make decisions is again a
shocking anti democratic move.
VERBATIM response to Question 9: DECISION MAKING Have you any other comments to make on this proposal?

A huge weakening of local democracy, distancing our elected councillors from decision-making with a holistic view of the community’s needs, thereby further distancing us as electors and residents from decisions. Surely the complete opposite of what we and all political parties stand for.

Again, this takes it further from the people who know the areas and details

Decision making by individual Councillors is less good than decisions by groups of councillors. It would be better to go back to the old Committee structure (to be allowed by the new Localism Bill)

Decisions should be made in public, not just published in public. Councillors making important decisions about services and policies that directly affect the lives of Oxford should continue to be required to do that as part of a large group and with full opportunity for the council-tax paying public to attend. This is far too much power-concentration and removal of accountability.

Democracy is not about centralizing power in the hands of a small number of people.

Extremely undemocratic and very dangerous in terms of good decisions being made. Don’t do it. Far too much power in the hands of too few.

Feel very strongly that the number of meetings of the City Executive Board should not be reduced, and that power to make decisions should NOT devolve to individual members of the Executive.

Further reducing democracy to oligarchy is a preposterous idea.

Give us back our democracy, supreme leaders and dictators out row.

Greater centralisation should be avoided. It disenfranchises the electorate.

How can this be democratic if only one individual is taking the decision?

How democratic is a decision made by individual members of the executive? Not very.

I am all for the council becoming more businesslike but I do not think one member committees are acceptable. I am not happy with the County’s approach on this. Making representation at such meetings is absurd.

I am in favour of a transparent accountable decision making process. The proposal to reduce the number of meetings will make the decision making process less accountable and democratic.

I am very much against establishing an overmighty executive. The call-in power of Scrutiny proposed seems excessively lax.

I believe that the meetings should be as inclusive and representative of the wishes of the wider public of Oxford as possible in order to be effectively open and accountable to the best interests of the public of Oxford.

I do not trust members of the City Executive to make unbiased decisions in the interests of local residents.

I don’t know what this board does

I find this to be a thoroughly undemocratic decision, and am fearful for the precedent it sets.

I request that the existing procedure is retained. No information has been provided as to why a change is necessary and the reasons for it such that it will give better results.

I think all issues should be subject to discussion among Board members. If many decisions are made by individuals it is unlikely that call-in would happen as often as would be necessary for adequate discussion and consideration.

I think this represents an unacceptable concentration in decision making powers which will benefit too few over-powerful individuals.

I want every councillor to be able to involved in ALL aspects of council work. I do not support the proposed change.

In principle simplification of decision making sounds good. However, I don't believe Councillors are elected to be executives, nor are they necessarily qualified to act as such. Which is why councils employ professional executives. It also reduces accountability - the only councillor the electorate can hold to account is the one in their ward.
Individual members may feel under great pressure as a result of this suggestion being adopted. I don’t think that it is a good idea.

It depends on what sort of decisions we are talking about and how difficult it is to call them in if need be - not enough information here to make a sensible response.

It is not for the Executive to rule, whether they think they are acting in the best interest of Oxford or not. We elect our councillors to represent us and for their power to be usurped in this way is anti-democratic, arrogant and presumptuous. Does Bob Price think he is Lord Vetinari? (Ankh-Morpork had dallied with many forms of government and had ended up with that form of democracy known as One Man, One Vote. The Patrician was the Man, he had the Vote. - from ‘Mort’ by Terry Pratchett)

It is undemocratic and reduces opportunities for involving people in quite proper debate about local issues that impact on their lives.

It puts too much power in the hands of individuals, especially as it looks as if the scrutiny and call-in arrangements are rather arduous and that anyway the results of this could be ignored by the individual decision maker.

It seems the Strong (supreme) Leader (Bob Price also Human Resources Director for Brookes) can make overall decisions, choose who is on the Executive and fire them at will. The members on the Executive can make decisions in isolation without referring to a committee - this is most non democratic.

It will place decisions in the hands of individuals without proper consultation, disenfranchise residents, and is an anti-democratic measure.

My reservation is that controversial decisions should always be referred to the executive board.

My understanding is that the scrutiny is only advisory, so this seems to be less accountable than at present.

No! This is hugely undemocratic! I am absolutely against this proposal!

not yet

Putting decisions in the hands of various individuals is far from wise, despite assurances of 'advice from Council officers' and 'call-in by Scrutiny', PARTICULARLY WHEN THERE IS NO INDICATION OF EXACTLY WHAT DECISIONS WOULD BE MADE IN THIS WAY.

Reducing the number of meetings seems likely to lead to bottlenecks developing in the approval/rejection process.

Regular scrutiny essential

Single-member decision-making would place too much power in the hands of individual Executive members. Such decisions could be called in by Scrutiny under the proposals, but not overruled. I would accept such a proposal only if (a) the list of reserved matters were subject to full council scrutiny and decision annually, and (b) CEB or scrutiny could call in and reverse individual-member decisions.

The County Council’s committee of one approach allows for pre-publicity, an agenda, written comment, aural representations, clearly documented decisions. The reasons for not adopting this approach should be given.

The list of decisions recommended as appropriate for single members, and the oversight process, in my view does not maintain the kind of transparency and scrutiny that is appropriate for decisions at the more significant end. I would not object to single-member executive decisions taken at the more minor end.

The powers and attention given by Scrutiny, and its composition would have to be defined.

The proposal put a great deal of power into the hands of individuals with no clear powers from someone else to question those decisions effectively. All a scrutiny committee could do is make suggestions. It is wrong to put so much power into the hands of one person.

The proposals make local government less democratic

The reduction of democratic discussion and control is disquieting to say the least and leaves the scope for corruption much larger.

The single member who makes decisions alone can also choose who is on the executive, and fire them. The executive does not have to refer to a committee, what is the point of committees? The executive can ignore the scrutiny committee. This
is a ridiculous situation to deliberately create, who can hold him to account? This is open to abuse and manipulation. I strongly object.

There is a lack of voter decision making in this - decisions will be largely taken by beaurocrats, with little questioning by voters. There will be too much power grabbed by too few hands.

This again reduces democratic accountability and the weak safeguards will not necessarily prevent inappropriate, stupid or even corrupt decisions being made - at least with the Executive there is some requirement for a consensus amongst elected members - council officers frequently provide advice at odds with views of elected members.

This directly reduces democracy of the council. Democratic process in making decisions is far better than expensive and difficult scrutiny after bad decisions have been made.

This doesn't appear to be very democratic - putting decision-making into the hands of individual councillors. Effective decision-making should involve all relevant stakeholders. I am very much opposed to this proposal.

This goes right against the grain of local democracy. I want decisions to be taken by Councillors that I know, who I can talk to, and who have time to talk to me. I do not want decisions taken by way of a remote and highly unaccountable process which empowers officers and weakens local democracy. Save us from supermen and 'sacro egoismo'.

This is bound to lead to individual patronism and is a move well away form real democratic decision making as we all know that scrutiny is no substitute for debate prior to a decision being made. It should be challenged legally as it increases potential for individuals to be too influenced by officers and to mis-use their power and mis-use public money.

This is clearly undemocratic. To enhance decisions that can be taken by single Executive members? Shame on these proposals. This has serious ramifications for the democratic integrity of the Council. Why reduce meeting numbers? This is a poor set of proposals indeed. They must be amended. The integrity of the built city, the protection of green spaces are not safe. These proposals are a serious threat to that.

This is less democratic and accountable. This is being rushed through without proper consultation.

This is not a localist agenda. Decisions taken by individual members will not have been considered from different angles, and are likely to be perceived as potentially biased.

This is outrageously undemocratic. We live in a democracy not some local private fiefdom.

This is the most undemocratic of all the proposals in this initiative! 'Call-in by Scrutiny' is a cumbersome and unreliable means of dealing with any problematic decisions of individual members of the Executive. We elect our Councillors to represent us and they end up collectively representing a diverse body of electors. If they are politicians worthy of the name they will find a means of doing so - by discussion, compromise, etc. Don't ask the electorate to simplify their lives.

THIS IS UNACCOUNTABLE ANTI DEMOCRATIC AND CLOSED MANAGEMENT - this is not government this is dictatorship.

This proposal seems on the face of it an outrageous abrogation of the responsibility of good governance, and a complete failure of understanding about how human institutions work and can fail to act correctly. It is a retrograde step in social management of our area.

This proposal would be a totally retrograde step; narrow, less democratic than the existing Area Committees and to be avoided.

This reduces collegiate decision making and means that interested members of the public will have to attend lots of different, small meetings.

This seems to be undermining the democratic structure that is now in place.

This shocking proposal should be withdrawn. It is unthinkable for individual councillors to take decisions involving hundreds of thousands of pounds (some potentially unlimited: eg accepting tenders of £pound;250k or more). Nor should individuals appoint representatives to outside bodies. The risk of corruption within councils is high. ALL DECISIONS ABOUT EXPENDITURE OR SIGNIFICANT POLICY ISSUES should be taken by properly constituted committees of councillors with full accountability.

This sounds exactly like dictatorship to me. ONE person making a decision! Do you think we've never heard of Hitler and Stalin? not to mention Gaddafi or Mugabe! and all those other current dictators. What can you be thinking of? Decisions on everything should be as direct as possible i.e. made by those who are affected by the decision. And "with advice from Council officers"! We have elected Councillors these are elected to make decisions, not unelected Council officers.

29th March 2011 v2
This will almost certainly be abused and cannot possibly be considered democratic.

This would not lead to a democratic process. Some members of the Executive I believe are not even local to Oxford, so I feel don't necessarily have the best interests of local community at heart.

This would save cost without significantly reducing safeguards for the Council Tax payers

Too much centralization of power. Who will the individual member of the Executive be? Don't have to guess! Advice can be ignored. Call-in by a scrutiny committee, which has what kind of political composition? Dangerous precedent for local democracy.

Too much opportunity for personal bias and ignorance of micro-local issues

Transparency in decision making is vital. If decisions are not made at Executive Board in full view of the public, how can that transparency be achieved?

Undemocratic

Utterly undemocratic and concentration of power in the hands of a few. Disastrous policy

We saw what happened with an over-strong executive when Tony Blair with a few cronies forced an unpopular and catastrophic war agenda through

Whilst the possibility to call-in is good, this proposal will appear to be a move away from transparency and accountability.
VERBATIM responses to OTHER: Please let us know of any other comments on these proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A backward looking proposal. I strongly oppose any proposed measures which dilute the powers of the remaining Area Committees. They act effectively and tirelessly as the voice of local communities within the City Council and should be retained at all costs. Any proposal which would take away the remaining powers of local communities/local councillors to shape their areas together and place more power into the hands of individuals is to dilute rather than enhance the democratic process.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All these proposed changes are in precisely the wrong direction, i.e. away from democracy and towards narrow political control. I strongly oppose the proposed changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any decision can be called in to Scrutiny (needs 12 councillors to do so) but the Scrutiny Committees advice can be ignored by the Executive member - The &quot;call in&quot; of applications need to be based on the number of local public respondents - the size of project should not be a consideration - small projects often attract as much public comment as larger ones.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadly these seem like an excellent set of proposals and I do hope they are adopted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can we have a better chance to comment properly online, without being limited to a meagre 500 words on key and substantive issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy is expensive, but does give better decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>For such an important change in the local democratic process, the low profile of this consultation and the paucity of factual information provided within its documentation is a disgrace. I most certainly hope that this entire proposal will be rejected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>From the information on your site it seems that the members on the Executive can make decisions in isolation without referring to a committee. Also that any decision can be called in to Scrutiny (which needs 12 councillors to do so) but the Scrutiny Committees advice can be ignored by the Executive member. I am opposed to this, and to abolition of the Area Committees, as it appears that the new Area Forums will have no budget or planning powers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am against any changes that take away a voice from those who know an area best. It all sounds very impersonal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am uncomfortable that unnecessary centralization seems to be happening without any proper oversight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can understand that changes may be needed, but I do not think this proposal offers a good way forward. It is wrong to have single member decision making, and very wrong to have a system where local interests and representatives can be so easily overridden, with little ability to remedy a bad situation that could arise. This seems to be open to abuse and misuse. We all need something better than this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cannot think but that the City Council is determined to completely undermine the meaning of democracy. We vote for Councillors in our Wards to carry out policies in our best interests. Executive decisions by one person! I would prefer to disband the whole City Council and only have Area Parliaments taking all the decisions for their areas. We could have a federal system to deal with all-city policies. Democracy has to be bottom up not top down. This plan concentrates power at the top.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I do not agree with many of the decisions made by councillor Bob Price</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel very concerned about these changes - the experience of the Blair &amp; Brown years (inherited by the ghastly 'Coalition' - Clegg no longer even pretends to represent anything other than a Tory agenda) has taught us how bad for democracy it is to concentrate power in the hands of the few.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been stunned into disbelief by some of these proposals. We supposedly live in a democracy. In a democracy decisions are taken in an open and accountable way and should reflect the views of the citizens as represented by their elected politicians. Trying to save money by cutting accountable decision-making is wrong. It also is likely to lead to poorer decisions; problems for individual councillors who will be put in an invidious position; and possibly corruption. Most should be abandoned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hope the composition of the executive board will reflect political balance on the council. The one-party cabinet of the</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

29th March 2011 v2
I think that these proposals should have been made known to the general public, ideally through the press - was a press release drawn up - and also through the ‘newspaper’ the City Council puts through everyone’s front door. It is not enough to rely on the few people who are aware of the on-line consultation process.

I think we need to move towards more accountability and widen participation and that the money to fund this should come from decentralising the executive, removing middle management and getting more local people involved in the decision making process using incentives such as travel expenses / child care and training opportunities.

I’m not a political animal but am disillusioned by this proposal which seems born from a desire to get rid of Area Committees which take decisions with which the ruling political party in the council disagree. The point of local democracy is to reflect local wishes. The council should respect that and implement change democratically by getting a better showing at local level through the ballot box not by a demolishing structures which don’t suit, under a veneer of budget saving.

It could well be that Area Committees have not caught on in other parts of Oxford, but the East Oxford Area Committee has certainly proven of value of local residents. I would be be saddened to see it disappear. I would be even more saddened, indeed enraged, if individual members of the Executive were to be empowered to take decisions on their own.

It is an insult to our intelligence to pretend these are democratic changes - they are blatantly anti-democratic both in intent and practice - shame on the Oxford Labour Party for promoting such an Orwellian process.

Keep the area committees with substantially their present make-up & powers. Do not give pork barrel money to individual councillors - grants of this kind should be debated & justified publicly.

Local decisions need to be made by local councillors.

Local democracy should not be reduced by the promotion of forums that have fewer decision making powers. Collective decision making processes not individuals would serve local democracy better. The decision making arrangements that are being proposed may appear to save money in the short term; however, in the long term there is a threat of loss of power and ability to decide how budgets are spent for local communities that is not worth the price of the initial savings.

Local Greens are concerned that this is a power grab by Labour councillors, and will have negative impact on local decision-making, especially in East Oxford where we are fighting to protect local facilities and services (eg Temple Cowley Pools).

My strongest feeling is to the decision making arrangements. We should not reduce meetings and have individuals (even with advice) making decisions. This would be a very unfortunate and unpopular decision.

not yet

Only those involved in Council decision-making can give informed responses to the proposals as they stand. A thorough account of how the present system works, and how the proposed system would work, is necessary for any valid consultation.

Please keep existing system

Please rethink what you are doing here on Planning Committees and decision-making by individual councillors. It appears that these proposal may result in less democratic decision-making in the city.

Responding via the oxford.gov site causes a lot of consternation to many who consider themselves IT-literate; the response mechanism is not user-friendly. Besides, not everyone has internet access- just one more piece of evidence that leads to the criticism that the proposals are far from inclusive. The Council would be advised to heed the views of those they are here to serve.

Taking decision-making away from local communities when these decisions affect their immediate environment and putting the power of decision-making in the hands of an individual would be damaging for the democratic process.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment

The changes proposed send the cause of local democracy backwards, not forwards. The need to make decision-making efficient is understandable, but in the long run it is better to get the right decision first time, and keeping several people involved in decisions and as many decisions made very locally as possible helps this happen. Keep the area committees!

The closure of the Area Committees is a completely outrageous decision, and anything that is put in their place are simply
talking shops. Completely disastrous for the City

The council should overturn its decision and retain the area committees, modified as need be to improve where necessary, but not to reduce local democracy, as is proposed.

The current proposals will reduce local democracy.

The democratic nature of the council is paramount. This is very simple: It means elected councillors, deciding by majority should have the final say, not unelected executive members nor the council leader on their own.

The present area committee system should be left unchanged. Apart from the opportunity it gives to residents to contribute to formal discussion, the meetings are a valuable forum to meet and get to know officials and councillors on an informal basis. Any larger grouping would be too cumbersome in this respect.

The proposals appear to be a serious erosion of localism and of 'democracy'. I strongly oppose the proposals.

The proposals are very vague. I'd like to know if the new forums will have "teeth", who will pay for them, what savings this change will make for council tax payers. I want the Area Committees to remain as they are.

The questions are biased. They are phrased so as to obtain the outcome that the Council has already committed to in its budget. It is clear that the current proposals to abolish area committees and centralise decision making will go ahead anyway. This is a sham consultation.

the rationale for these proposals is obscure to say the least

These proposals sound extremely undemocratic. They sound as if the main motivator is not improved systems, but cost-cutting. Oxford needs good quality and well considered decisions made about council issues, not made by a couple of executive members who have taken little or no advice. Very dangerous situation - sounds paranoid - I'm not!

These are depressing, self-serving and undemocratic proposals that I hope are rejected.

These proposals are a retrograde step and are more about centralising power into the hands of a small number of Councillors, than they are about the democratic representation of residents.

These proposals are being bulldozed through without time for adequate scrutiny by the electorate. I strongly object.

These proposals seem designed to remove power from councillors and local people and to enable centralised decision-making without any inconvenient challenge - despite the slippery reassurances about 'scrutiny'. I am opposed to any of the changes in this proposal being made. Instead, the nature of decision-making within the City should be opened up for proper discussion and review. More than ever we need increased involvement and debate. The City deserves much better than this.

These proposals to centralise power in the Council are democratically retrograde and will result in voters feeling even more disenfranchised and divorced from the Council's operations. If the Council takes democracy seriously, it should withdraw these proposals and reinforce the powers of the existing local area committees.

This appears to be a cost-cutting exercise which will not elicit local knowledgeable reactions as well as the present system. We do not believe notifications by site notices, in libraries and online will reach all interested parties,

This change increases the administration's power over geographical areas, in which (as decided by the ballot box) it currently don't have much. It is a power-centralisation and renders non-administration and in many cases non-executive councillors extremely powerless and gagged. Councillors with executive powers should be expected to attend meetings to make those executive decisions as a body, not as individuals by email from their offices which in some cases will be miles from Oxford.

This consultation has been poorly advertised, and for my part I am only now aware of it one day before closure as a consequence of a Letter in the 'Oxford Times'. This is hardly the way to achieve a democracie process and decision. Indeed it is a lamentable example of how not to undertake 'open government'.

This consultation should have been carried prior to any decisions taken by the city council to implement these changes even though they had not consulted the public. This proposal is Orwellian.

This is an undemocratic proposal, sidelining local people. How can we trust this process? How can we oversee and control individual interests? We don't want governance by a clique, that is not truly accountable to full council and electorate.

29th March 2011 v2
This major change has not been widely broadcast and is being hurried through too quickly. The implications of these changes need wider debate than has been afforded so far. It is no wonder that politicians are distrusted.

This project seems to be an exercise in taking away local participation. Local forums sound inclusive but are they? As proposed they appear not to be. Planning decisions seem to be removed from local scrutiny and individual decisions are not transparent. A small pot of money given to each Councillor is not money well allocated-again no transparency-how will money be distributed-needs to be discussed and justified. Nothing wrong with present arrangements.

To enhance the power of single executive members by making them able to take more decisions alone, to allow leaders to change the make-up of committees, do decrease representation in this way is totally wrongheaded and cannot be allowed to happen.

Under the guise of savings, redressing so-called inefficiencies and promoting more local involvement, these proposals are attempting to pull power to the centre and no credit to a Labour council.

Voters have real concerns that councils dominated by one party (like the City and County) tend to streamline business management in such a way as to concentrate power in too few hands. Current legislation gives them the power to do so, but it diminishes democracy and accountability.

We are concerned by the lack of detail on Area Forums. As they are supposed to span elected politicians and community stakeholders we feel that the working party due to develop that detail should include Community representatives.<br>

Whilst having fewer Planning Committees may have merits, the 'politically balanced' Area Planning Committees seems to embody the antithesis of localism.

When are the ordinary council officers going to stand up and revict against what the big wigs are doing? It can only be a matter of time, you guys are not stupid and I hope you will be reacting in your droves against the power of the high 'earners'.

When carrying out these surveys please provide links to the relevant part of the consultation document under each question. There is a distinct lack of information in this questionnaire.

Why consult AFTER you have made these decisions; you have already reduced budgets so local parliaments can not go ahead. You have taken planning power away from those committees too, this is a sham consultation. Democracy is about real decision making being as near to the local people as possible for them to scrutinise, question and their representatives to take real action, not individual Councillor patronage & centralisation of decision making. Please do not implement any of these changes.
1. Respondents to the consultation were invited not only to answer the 'yes/no' questions but also to comment upon the proposals. The comments on each question can be summarised thus:-

   a) **Have you ever attended an area committee?**

      - Not well advertised
      - Their value is seeing local members “at work” and getting direct answers from them
      - Meet locally in their related communities
      - Provide increased trust in local government
      - Able to represent own views and views of others, get involved and report back
      - Devolved power and decision-making.

   b) **Operation and development of area committees**

      Comments fell into two types, namely those concerned at the replacement of area committees with area forums, and those commenting on the question directly.

      On the replacement of committees with forums, this was said in summary:-

      - Not proposed to meet frequently enough
      - Keep things as they are and devolve more powers
      - Area forums would be undemocratic talking shops and a waste of time
      - Area committees provide democratic safeguards
      - Area forums should be in addition to and not instead of area committees
      - Local groups already meet
• Area forums could give too much weight to neighbourhood views without the balancing Council influence

• Likely to represent only a well informed and organised sector of the population

• A sop to the chattering classes

• Area committees should be reconstituted on County Division boundaries

• Lack of accountability will result in low attendance

On the operation and development of area forums, this was said in summary:-

• Must develop in and around local communities

• Regular cycle of planned meetings

• Locally initiated meetings for specific/local issues

• Advertising and promotion of meetings is important – local web sites

• Local people from all walks of life should be involved and allowed to speak

• Needs to be representative of the whole area and residents should have a real sense of contributing

• Should have executive powers and decisions should be followed up

• Should feature an open session

• Should be accountable to the electorate

• Have meetings in association with residents’ association meetings.

c) **Ward member budgets**

• Leave things as they are – i.e. area committees. Area committee spending is democratic

• Only if area committees still exist
• Undemocratic

• What would the money be used for? What restrictions would there be? Must be transparency

• Acceptable if it increased member accountability

• Bureaucratic and not open to public scrutiny

• Could be used to supplement County cuts

• Controls needed over lobbying and pressure group activity

• Will lead to corruption, abuse and cronyism

• Amount represents a reduction in local spend

• Allocation too small and not sufficient to meet local needs

• Pool the money per Ward

• Concern that spending would be in the hands of individual members. Members not trained in managing finances

• Money should be spent for the benefit of the Council overall, not per Ward

• Everyone should be able to have an input into the allocation

• Should not be used to hire meeting places for meetings

• Sounds good in principle

• Concern that allocation would be used for councillors’ own agenda and not in the public interest

• Should be subject to review after twelve months

• Grants spend should be through the grants budget

• Should have ability to spend Section 106 money.

d) **Area planning committees**

• Some area committees lack expertise
• Area committees have made a farce of the planning system

• Current area committees are vulnerable to cronyism

• Keep local planning applications local, determined by local councillors who understand local conditions

• Meeting in the Town Hall loses the local element and fewer people will be able to attend and raise local concerns

• Takes decision-making away from local communities

• Creates distrust in the process

• Councillors will be reaching decisions on sites they do not know well or at all

• To ensure open and honest debate on planning issues these should remain under scrutiny by the public (as they are with area committees)

• Dilutes public participation and increases the power of officers

• A political move

• The one planning committee model from several years ago was a good one. One is now sufficient

• Proposed areas too large

• North Oxford needs its own planning committee because local people are vociferous. Headington also needs its own planning committee as does central Oxford

• North and South Area Committees would represent a better split

• Will save time if call in continues

• More planning expertise will be available. Concentrates knowledge and expertise

• Long meetings are likely
• Local Councillors should still be involved if area planning committees are established

• Supported as long as less expensive to the tax payer

• Because planning must be considered according to a specific protocol, it is best debated away from other aspects of a Councillors work, which abide by more relaxed rules

• Majors must go to full Council

• Whole Council should deal with applications

• Reduce length of planning reports

• Planning applications need to be much more widely advertised.

e) Reducing City Executive Board meetings and introducing single member decision making

• All Councillors should be able to give their views

• Don’t trust the proposal

• Anti-democratic

• If the arrangements result in savings, and then a good idea

• Accountability and opportunity for debate essential

• Too much power. Too many matters are to be subject to single member decision making

• Big financial decisions should stay with the City Executive Board

• Diminishes accountabilities. Single members become too close to officers. The Executive should keep a distance from Council officers and challenge officer advice. Could result in the rubber stamping of officer decisions.

• Collective decisions preferable. A team works better than an individual

• Subject to arbitrary decision-making, abuse and bias
• Single members should be of adequate calibre

• Single members will always have a personal view which may not be fair and balanced

• Needs safeguards but the proposals might result in quicker decision making

• Less meetings are the way forward – streamline

• Public should be able to attend (single member meetings) and be given time to address

• Number of meetings should not be reduced

• Proper records of decisions must be kept

• Abolish the Executive Board and keep area committees

• Too much centralisation

• Whatever arrangements are introduced, they should be reviewed after twelve months

• Likely to result in more scrutiny meetings

• Delegation (to single members) will allow for decisions to be made closer to the ground and reflect local need

• Executive Board sub-committees will be better than single member decision-making.

f) **Have you any other comments to make?**

• Area committees are vital to local communities and to democracy

• Proposals are anti-democratic, resulting in a loss of local democracy

• Shifting of decision-making to those who may not understand local conditions

• Limit democratic checks and balances

• Centralised decision-making will result and is unhealthy
- Not in the spirit of localism
- Is it right to be introducing changes at a time of economic recession, cost cutting and change generally?
- Seems to be politically motivated
- A good move - the quicker the proposals are implemented the better
- Is this real consultation?
- This is purely a cost cutting exercise
- Don't add to bureaucracy
- Content with the present situation
- Keep planning decisions local
- Improve present area committee arrangements – they represent democracy at its best
- Will make the Council seem remote
- Local people need to feel involved and listened to. Will they be with the new arrangements?
- Reduce the number of councillors
- More clarity needed on the role and purpose of area forums
- Area committees are not that well attended
- More and more extensive public participation is needed.
DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

Summary of miscellaneous comments received:-

- Letter expressing passionate support for the retention of the East Area Parliament.

- Web access to consultation page difficult

- Overmuch authority being vested in one councillor, namely Bob Power (sic)
  Local councillor influence lessened.

- Proposals presented in a misleading/inadequate way

- The questionnaire provided no hard information and “consultation” was a misnomer

- Comment fields in online consultation limited to 500 characters

- Consultation not sufficiently advertised

- Single member decision making is a move to unrepresentative autocracy

- Short sighted and ill thought out

- Orwellian

- Strategic Development Control Committee is lazy, arbitrary and political and that, not area committees, is the problem with the planning process

- The council should support local democracy, local representation and local decision making

- The council should be owned and regulated by the community as a whole

- No cost/benefit examination

- High hurdle for call in (from area planning committees to planning review committee)

- Great deal of financial power for single members
• Not enough detail on area forums

• Area planning committees might not possess members representing any of the Wards for which the committees are responsible
To: City Executive Board - 13th April
Council - 18th April

Report of: Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON PROPOSALS TO CHANGE THE DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS OF THE COUNCIL

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To present the comments and recommendations of the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee on democratic arrangement proposals

Key decision: No

Scrutiny Chair: Councillor Campbell

Executive lead member: Cllr. Price

Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s): See the body of the report

Introduction

1. The Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee considered the City Executive Board’s proposals to change democratic structures within the Council. The consultation document highlights that these changes are considered necessary to deliver proposals within the consultative budget for 2011/15. It was made clear by Cllr. Price that the changes proposed for Area Committees would have been considered regardless of budgetary constraints with the aim of providing a structure that allows for better and broader community engagement and influence.

2. The committee decided to focus its debate around the change from Area Committees to Area Forums and with this in mind consulted City Councillors asking their opinions on:

   • What is good about the current system of Area Committees
- What is not so good about the current system of Area Committees
- How Area Forums should operate and develop, in particular as community engagement mechanisms

A report outlining all responses is attached at Appendix 1 this includes an introduction that draws out the "key themes" from all responses. The committee would like all these comments to be considered within the consultation process

Conclusions and Recommendations

3. The debate of the committee focused on:
   - What are the essential elements for a system of Forums aimed towards improving community engagement
   - Practical administrative processes and resources
   - Consultation

Many of the points raised are bought out in the document at appendix 1 but the committee wished to highlight some particular issues and make recommendations

4. Essential Elements

The current system of Area Committees has strengths and weaknesses. Highlighted particularly amongst the weakness is the lack of engagement with a broad cross section of the public within an area. It is accepted that this is variable from committee to committee but none could demonstrate that engagement with all key groups is good. For Area Forums to be an improvement this must be addressed by officers and councillors to produce a process that includes good outreach and flexible ways of working to encourage broad engagement from communities on the key issues for an area

Areas of the City are different and many of these differences are seen through the current system of Area Committees. What works for some communities may not for others. It is important that any standard or regular processes are complemented by structures that address these differences focusing on “what will work” for the area

Any structure set to engage communities has to be linked in with people and organisations of influence. Area Forums will be linked to their local ward members but they also need a right to be heard by those both within and outside of the Council making decisions or delivering strategies and projects in their areas. These links should be clearly articulated to avoid Forums becoming platforms for debate and complaint only
Recommendation 1
Any new system must be set as an improvement to current processes and in particular for better community engagement. The development of new systems and structures must have as key considerations issues of flexibility, broad engagement, and robustness of outcome for communities.

Recommendation 2
To lay out clearly within a protocol the processes within which Area Forums operate detailing in particular any arrangements for them to be heard, responded to and rights of access.

Recommendation 3
To review in December the operation of all new process and structures within the changed democratic arrangement against criteria to be decided now.

5. Practicalities

It is understood by the committee that 4 meetings will be provided each year, in each area and ward members will have £1,500 each to spend within their areas. What is less clear is the overall resource (human and otherwise) available in the Community Development and Local Regeneration Team to support the inputs and outputs from these 24 meetings and any additional activities local members feel necessary to improve on current arrangements. Clarity in this area will help in developing structures locally that are realistic.

The practicalities of organising meetings of any sort (booking rooms, producing any necessary paperwork, inviting interested parties, paying bills etc.) are small issues but important in making for a smoothly running process. It was not clear from the consultation documents or the discussion where this resource would come from. Once again reassurance around these administrative issues is called for.

Recommendation 4
To detail the amount of staff time and budget available within the Community Development and Local Regeneration Team to support the inputs and outputs from Area Forums and the administrative processes necessary when running “meetings”.

The last Area Committees are in May and it is hoped that there will be a seamless run into Area Forums in June. This was not clear from the proposal but reassurances were given by the Leader of the Council that this would be the case. To produce a workable solution requires a good degree of debate, problem solving and option consideration. It is hoped that work with officers and members on the details of working can begin in earnest.
It would seem that any Area Forum structure is likely to have ward councillors at its heart. The committee would like to see briefings for councillors aimed at familiarising them with the new Area Forum system alongside other changed democratic arrangements.

Recommendation 5
Implementation must happen in June. The committee want planning discussions to begin now, running alongside consultation, to ensure administrative process are sound and can be built upon as decisions are made.

Recommendation 6
To provide in May a range of member briefings aimed at familiarising them with the new Area Forum system alongside other changed democratic arrangements.

6. Consultation

The change from Area Committees to Area Forums is set at improving community engagement it is therefore important that we obtain as robust and broad a view as possible from individuals and organisations about what they think of proposals. The consultation documents only contain an outline of structures so “in principle” opinions accompanied by ideas and suggestions for working should be sought.

It was noted by the committee that a member working group is to be set to work on the details of these proposals. The committee requested that 2 of their members are part of this group. Cllr. Price agreed to this at the meeting.

Recommendation 7
To provide a broad consultation process using all opportunities to reach a wide group of people. To included within the consultation opportunities for residents to not only comment on the principle but make suggestions on ways of working.

Recommendation 8
To formally nominate Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson as members of the working group proposed and urge that this group meets as soon as possible.

Name and contact details of author:-

Pat Jones on behalf of the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee
Principal Scrutiny Officer
Law and Governance
Tel: 01865 252191 e-mail: phjones@oxford.gov.uk
Appendix 1

Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 19th February 2011

Briefing note for Item 8: Democratic Changes, including proposals for Area Committees

Introduction

As Members will be aware, there is a budget proposal to abolish Area Committees and replace them with Area Forums that would meet quarterly.

As part of the wider consultation process, the Chair and Vice Chair felt it would be a useful exercise for the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee to consider this and make some proposals. Every Member of Council was contacted and asked to give their thoughts on the following three questions:-

(1) In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?
(2) In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?
(3) Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?

In total 20 Councillors responded, as follows:

- Labour – 11
- Liberal Democrat – 7
- Green – 1
- Independent Working Class Association – 1

Below is a summary of the key themes emerging from the responses to each question.

Attached at Appendix A is the full list of responses received to each question.

Key Themes

Question 1: In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

Councillors identified the following key themes as positive aspects of the current Area Committees:-

1. Cross party working – Councillors from all parties are able to come together and work on issues of local concern;
2. Accountability – Councillors are accountable all year round, not just at
election time. Allows Councillors and the public to meet regularly;

3. Regular contact with service providers such as the Police, the County
Council and the Council's street scene and parks teams. A good way to
ask questions and receive information from them;

4. Accessibility – venues are in the local areas, not in the Town Hall.;

5. Openness – the Open Forum in particular provides somewhere for
people to raise issues of local concern and obtain answers. Decisions
are made openly in a public meeting;

6. Targeted funding meant that grant aid is given in an open and
transparent manner to help very local causes. Area Budgets have
been especially useful in this respect;

7. Public engagement – direct contact between Councillors and the public
on a regular, pre-programmed basis;

8. Community involvement - allows the public to comment on major
issues that are of concern across the City, for example the proposed
closure of libraries;

9. Local knowledge – especially in the case of planning decisions which
are made in the local area by people who know the it intimately;

Question 2: In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?

Councillors identified the following key themes as negative aspects of the
current Area Committees:-

10. Over dominance by planning items. These frequently take up too much
time to the detriment of other items on the agenda. The public often
attends only for these items and then leaves, showing that they are not
truly engaged with other issues being discussed;

11. Public awareness – this still is not high and there is often insufficient
attendance by the public generally. However there may be insufficient
publicity for the meetings;

12. Insufficient engagement with all communities - there is a lack of
diversity in the public attending the meetings;

13. Over dominance by some individuals. There are regular attendees at
some Committees who raise the same issues repetitively, use
meetings as a platform, and can be intimidating towards Councillors
and other members of the public;
14. Too bureaucratic and rigid in approach - meetings can be too long and too formal and appear uninteresting and unfriendly in their layout. In particular it is hard for the public to understand the change in formality needed when planning items are considered;

15. Area Committees are too large – they cover too wide and area and find it hard to engage with issues on a ward basis;

16. Unsuitable items on the agenda – too often they are used as a consultation method on policy items that affect the whole City, and this can be complex and intimidating for the public (and on occasion, for Members), and produce no useful feedback.

**Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?**

**Structure of Working for Area Forums**

17. The Structure should fit local ward(s) circumstance so not formulaic. Local members will know what works in their communities so need to guide the overall structure;

18. Use a variety of structures depending on the issues and the target groups...workshops, on line debates etc.

19. Either run on a local ward basis or allow for real ward focus within the make-up and business;

20. Residents and communities should take the lead on agendas/topics for discussion;

21. Issues should be kept local and relevant but where strategic or city wide issues are discussed these should be presented or portrayed in a way that is meaningful to that community...."this is what it means for you". In any circumstance local issues should dominate

22. No set dates – local issues do not present themselves to a timetable. Residents and local councillors should call for a meeting. A general perception that quarterly will not be enough;

23. At all times informal but with the possibility of the local member running the business and discussions;

24. Remove all bureaucracy and apply the greatest degree of flexibility. Maybe apply time limits to encourage focus, resolution and cooperation;
25. Have the ability to call City and County Officers and Councillors and representatives from other Partners to account and scrutinise what they deliver in their area. Suggestion of using well being powers to achieve this;

26. Try to combine or co-ordinate with other local groups e.g. TRAs and NAGs if possible to get better outcomes for local areas;

27. Ensure that debates/discussions are linked into other pathways e.g. scrutiny, senior officer, CEB. Local people want to feel they are democratically involved;

28. Have individual City Officers attached to them;

29. Proposal of a very specific structure:
   a. Ward meetings/discussions/debates – Lead by local councillors and residents
   b. Consideration of issues arising from ward meetings at a quarterly meeting of a forum consisted community representatives and those with power from councils and partners

30. Make the forum a mini LSP for that area

Influence and Engagement

31. Consider carefully how they can really engage and influence what happens and is delivered in their area and at the Council and by partners. Without any real influence they will become platforms for complainants and frustration;

32. Must have a local revenue budget to respond to demand;

33. Local people must be able to see they are making “decisions” that influence:

34. Consider local involvement in the delivery and spending on projects

35. Hold local partner provider to account through Forums. Provide better training to achieve this

36. Consider consultation and influence on contentious planning applications in the area

37. Consider giving more if the process proves successful;

38. Better publicity of the structure, concept and process (suggestion of news letters);

39. Better engagement with the local media;
40. Local strategies to engage a wide section of local people and to encourage the less confident (enable people to feel included and take part);

41. Conducive and welcoming meeting places;

42. Meeting times and places that are convenient guided by the discussion points.

APPENDIX A: All responses received.

Question 1: In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

- I had the opportunity to engage directly with residents (on the rare occasion that residents turned up!). I also had the chance to engage in constructive, face to face debate with opposition councillors. Unlike Full Council, where councillors are overseen by their Group Leadership, Area Committees afforded councillors the opportunity to forget the party line and give honest, common sense, personal responses to local issues.

- I think the good thing about Area Committees was that they provide a place for people to question their local Councillors and have an input into decisions. The problem is that they don’t do this well enough.

- It was useful to have a forum in which to ask questions of service providers working in our areas. The police reports are useful as are those of wardens along with the opportunity to make enquiries of street scene or parks officers. Such opportunities to meet people involved in day to day stuff in your ward are important particularly for new councillors. Revenue budgets have also been very useful in giving the committee an opportunity to make some decisions and support local groups.

- Some agenda items relating specifically to the area such as Local Transport Plan 3, car parking charges were helpful to allow collective discussion of an area matter. On the other hand these could have been covered in a less formalised way in a regular community forum without the costly overburden of formal papers, committee service coverage etc.

- A good opportunity to meet fellow councillors and hear about some local issues

- Making decisions in public
• Regular and formalised meetings, well publicised, and with support by Democratic Services.

• Whatever the arguments about Planning at ACs, there is no doubt that it attracts the public;

• Monthly opportunity for residents to meet and challenge local councillors.

• Opportunity to deal with local issues like libraries, playing fields, post offices, etc.

• Even though they are small, the AC budgets have allowed some local independence.

• There are some residents who believe they are very successful, these are I would consider in the minority. I would consider this to be related more to planning issues.

• Nothing!

• Area committees provide regular engagement with a range of valued community representatives and individuals. In doing so, they act to support councillors in maintaining strong relationships with key actors in local neighbourhoods.

• Community involvement, particularly on planning issues, but also community centre, leisure and parks matters. Attendance has reached 100 on occasions. The area committees also provide an efficient means for volunteers to follow what is happening in their neck of the woods.

• Allow both Councillors (especially those in Opposition and/or on the backbenches) and their constituents to raise local issues, get problems fixed, and campaign for better services; and to do so locally, at easy-to-get-to venues, in an atmosphere that encourages people to take part;

• Ensure that planning applications which directly affect people living nearby to be decided or commented on by Councillors who know the area and understand their constituents’ needs;

• Are a proven pillar of effective local democracy, making Councillors locally accountable all year round, not just once in four years at election time;

• Give members of the public access to their local Councillors in open forums at an early stage of decision making, with officers present for advice and action – including police, and also county officers by invitation;
• Promote effective cross-party working in the common interest, and transparent decision making;

• Bring an area's City and County Councillors together to cooperate in a local, accessible forum – hugely beneficial while Oxford is a second-tier authority;

• Allow targeted funding of local resources, and value-for-money delivery of real change to local communities through the locally elected Councillors.

• Area Committees provided a local forum for raising local issues and for local people to raise any issues that concern them – including in fact citywide issues which have local effects, such as plans for the city centre. They are a much more accessible 'forum' than the Town Hall. Officer support is vital if the emotions are to be useful and not just talking shops. Local planning applications are a big draw whose importance should not be underestimated. And regular once-a-month meetings mean that people know when the next meeting will be and can prepare accordingly. Monthly is the right frequency so issues are topical, not already decided. Local budgets to address local problems hugely useful and appreciated. Police presence and reporting much valued – by members as well as the public.

• ACs can be occasionally engage local people on big planning issues and particular matters of concern such as the recent item at NEAC about libraries (even though NEAC has no responsibility for this issue). Mostly though, ACs are only good for the small group of people who attend each meeting.

• Area Committees are good because they serve as democratic forums for the presentation of very local concerns with the possibility of the issue being resolved quickly by the body people are attending. The present Area Committees have officer time and money that they may wish to deploy to address the issues raised. A forum which has neither resource will not be in a position to do this offering only a platform of complaints that may be passed on to a more central distant authority for possible action at some time in the future.

  Example: Small grant to the Friends of Aston Eyot to eliminate Chinese Knotweed in Aston Eyot Nature Reserve.

• Knowing they have powers to act generates credibility and willingness to attend and strengthens people belief in local government and the benefits for community engagement. People feel they are more in control of their lives and that grass roots involvement is worthwhile. Powers to act rather than a talking shop strengthens local democracy.

• Area Committees help identify more precisely local issues which are crucial to the quality of life, healthy living, address poverty, improve a sense of community and can help to address wider environmental concerns.
Examples: East Oxford Car Club started with EAP seed funding providing access to modern low emission vehicles and making a major contribution to alleviating local parking problems.

Example: East Oxford Farmers Market initially organised by the EAP who provided start up funding. The Farmers market now runs as a successful community and environmental initiative providing access to low cost locally produced quality food.

Example: The EAP funded additional trees and bike racks across East Oxford along main streets and side roads. The EAP knew where best to place these improvements.

Example: The EAP provided funding for local youths who were unable to take part in sports activities. Their very local and specific needs where met in a locally focused forum.

Example: The EAP funded playground improvements encouraging healthy exercise amongst local children and knew what improvements were really needed.

Example: St. Mary and St. John Churchyard turned from a crime blackspot into a community green space when the EAP funded lighting and lowering of high walls to open out the space.

Example: The EAP funded innovative solar lighting at Manzil Way playground reducing crime and helping make more community use of facilities.

Example: The EAP secured funding from local businesses and the County to create the first new Public Square' by closing a road in East Oxford.

- Having the power to grant or refuse planning permission via Area Committees not only ensures that the councillors who make the decision are the people who know the area intimately and can assess the impact of the proposal better than any centralised forum but also means that local people feel the process is transparent and they have easy access to the planning process.

Example: 190 Iffley Road and the Planning application to turn this Arts and Craft house into a student accommodation block.

It is untrue to suggest that locally determined planning applications give greater opportunities to local people against any form of development (NIMBYs) and as a consequent halt much needed development. By enlarge planning applications are approved and often where they have been refused this has been endorsed by the independent planning inspectorate. Centralised planning consent will be viewed as alien by local people.

- Area Committees with their resources of officer time and devolved budgets can serve as ideal structures to address what local people see as THE most important
issue in their area. This may be to focus on alleviating poverty, improving care for the elderly, protecting green spaces etc etc.

- In the East Area Parliament area, a major theme has been developing a wide range of crime prevention measures.

  Example: Cycle Bobbies introduced for the first time in East Oxford.

- The localism aspect of the Area Committees gives people a sense that the immediate major local problem or development that they encounter every day is being addressed by the Neighbour Committee and the issue is not lost in a sea of other priorities in the centre. With officer time and monies available Communities feel confident that their priority will be addressed by elected councillors that reflect their major priority.

- Area committees with their devolved budget and officer time as presently constructed are administrative structures with the capacity to launch and sustain initiatives that will benefit their area and are unique to their locality. Consultative forums will not have an organisational administrative base to take on project work or to supervise any initiatives. Practical creative and community support will be lost.

  Example: Community grant every year to support the Cowley Road Carnival

- Giving local councillors a tiny allowance to spend on community initiatives (£1,500 suggested) will have virtually no impact and will not sustain major local programmes. The idea will without doubt lead to money being given to political cronies and could even end in fraud cases something that will only serve to undermine people's trust in local democracy.

- All council monies given to community groups campaign organisations should be made in an open collective forum where it is clear why the money is being given, to whom it being given and the community advantage that will result.

- The Area Committees can also serve as a debating forum to define the local neighbourhood stance during consultations launched the City, the County Council, the Police Authority or any public body presenting a development or reform of their services. The pro and cons of the suggestion can be debated by those present and view established as to what this particular neighbourhood thinks of the proposals.

  Example: County Council, consultation on a proposed controlled Parking Zone (2009)

- It could be argued that a powerless neighbourhood forum could undertake this task however without the rich array of other reasons for being at the Local Committee (i.e. items 1-4) the turnout to such activities would be very poor. The wide variety of practical reasons for being there generates an audience who would not otherwise turn out for such general consultations.
The three positive aspects of the AC system have been:

**The Open Forum, which has allowed local residents and others to raise issues that they felt needed attention - e.g. in CSWAC, flooding and the management of the allotments; this has also been mis-used by people raising trivia and/or matters which would better have been raised directly via email or phone with a Ward member because they were highly individual in nature.**

**The reporting by the police and street scene staff on local issues allowing questioning and debate that is closely related to the area and to specific local concerns e.g. busking/peddlers in Cornmarket, graffiti in Jericho, trade waste in the city centre etc**

**The occasional discussions on local topics linked to applications for funding or to wider policy issues e.g. the response to flooding post- 2007, the development of Frideswide square**

Good points:-

**Local democracy in action – place where local people can get involved and see decisions being made;**

**Public having a voice and feeling included – being able to speak in open session, see the point properly minuted, making it more likely that action would be taken;**

**Enables residents to contribute information and make informed decisions;**

**Accountability of Councillors – finding out what they are really like, seeing them in action;**

**Helps people understand why decisions are made – gives some understanding of the rationale behind decisions;**

**Regularity and frequency of meetings – less that monthly would be too infrequent;**

**Involvement of Parish and County Councillors;**

**Local venues – rotation of venues shows attempt to be inclusive;**

**Popularity – lots of people give up their time to attend;**

**Involvement of other agencies, e.g., Police, Thames Water, City Cleansing department;**

**Planning – local knowledge of Councillors responsible for planning decisions, decisions made openly, high visibility of planning matters;**

**Identification and funding of local projects;**

The greatest single benefit has been the consideration of planning applications by councillors who know the area. There is seldom need for a site visit, and objectors are assured that their views were heard, even if the decision went against them. In addition, the monthly opportunity to raise concerns and receive reports is seen as valuable.

On the plus side, I have appreciated area committee revenue budgets, and especially, to be honest, think we have got good value out of some of the small items of expenditure - small things which can make a difference but which would be hard to cover from elsewhere.
• The relationship with the neighbourhood street scene manager has been excellent, though this has usually been pursued outside the formal committee setting.

• Police reports have been helpful, and I hope there is a way we can incorporate hearing from the police at the new forums.

Question 2: In your experience, what was not-so-good about them?

• Planning - which often concerned only a small minority and took up too much time.

• Area Committees function according to rules that give members of the public only a limited opportunity to put across their points of view, with long periods spent listening to Councillors talking. If anything it should be the other way round, and it is not surprising that people are put off by the procedures and there is a very low turnout, unless there is a particular planning application of concern (and in those cases members of the public could have exactly the same input at a dedicated planning committee).

• Another problem with Area Committees is that they are at set, infrequent times and cover a set area so it is not possible to respond in a timely way to a big local issue that arises and which local people rightly expect their representatives to take action on. These issues are sometimes left up to the initiative of individual Councillors in conversation with individual residents - which can work very well, but Ward Councillors being able to organise meetings individually or in cooperation could significantly increase accountability here. Residents could air their views and Councillors would have to say in public what they were going to do.

• Very little public participation/audience confined to the monthly one or people who probably take numerous opportunities to voice their concerns in any case. The public participating are usually outside of my or the adjacent ward and as such this never feels like a useful opportunity to address public concerns in my ward. Likewise meetings can be heavily dominated by planning decisions these can be very procedural and applications rarely fall in my ward this is not to negate my responsibilities but I rarely have much to contribute.

• Low attendance on many occasions. Often Open Forum was used for people with the same parochial concerns month after month where they get the same answers month after month and do not listen or simply come along to say something against the administration or against Council processes because implementation of spending decisions do take time and this is often not understood by members of the public. These people often left soon after making a grandstanding contribution in Open Forum and seemed to have no interest in the
generality of matters before the area committee. Sometimes attendance was greater for a tricky planning application than for the main agenda items. I think across the city that Area Committees have made some pretty disastrous planning decisions where local interest outweighs the general interest of the city. I think this is particularly shown by many East Are Parliament decisions where the openly party political nature of decisions seems to have taken precedence over all the probity advice for more than a decade which says that planning decisions should not be so decided and that they should be treated as quasi-judicial with strategic planning policy to the fore. Efforts to get a more strategic focus on development control decisions by a enlarged focus into, say, two development control committees in the city now proposed, would take the heart out of the monthly area committee agenda and leave a rump of disparate business. And, of course, it is sometimes used by committee members for grandstanding both on general items and planning application debates (no names no pack drill - but the AC also includes County Councillors and Parish Council reps as non-voting members).

- The meetings are often very long. They are sparsely attended by the public. They are expensive to run

- Most residents are still unaware of their existence or having attended found them boring, too formal and get very cross that the one thing they have turned up for (usually a planning application) has to wait so that the regular attendees have their say.

- Some of the few that turn up regularly use the area committee as a political platform and repeat the same thing each month, sometimes they are abusive towards members of the committee.

- Some venues are not suitable and difficult to get to. For example, Risinghurst has never been able to host a meeting of NEAC because of the limited size of venue and availability.

- Timing so that most councillors and residents can get there (i.e. evenings Monday to Friday) makes travelling difficult at rush hour.

- There is no flexibility in arranging meetings; they are fixed and therefore unable to respond to issues that crop up.

- They are not the best use of time for officers and councillors alike to address local concerns

- Too bureaucratic and, perhaps, formal. Possibly intimidating for an "average" resident wishing to raise an issue. Some boring reports on items that are not of general interest.

- Small turnout for most non planning items. Despite efforts of councillors and officers we have failed to attract and engage public on a regular basis
- I regularly check other area committee meeting minutes and note the attendance...some meeting only achieve attendance in single figures and regularly attendance levels are poor for the high cost of providing a venue, officers, equipment etc.

- The attendance is very poor at ours, except when we manage to arrange a topic that is of interest in the area of the meeting (our venues rotate) e.g. flooding in the Botley Rd area or the canalside site in Jericho, and when we manage to advertise it well. It's not a good idea to hold a councillor meeting in a public place -- we should be listening to the public, not to one another.

- Whilst I found that the Area Committees did attract the public in some small number, they did not bring in many people from my ward. The demographics of those attending was mainly middle class, white and middle aged/elderly. I almost never saw lower income groups, BME groups, young people, working people, families or high users of public services attend. This was a major flaw and I think needs to be addressed in the future structures.

- I also feel that the issues discussed were often geographically or socially removed from residents in my ward. Broader strategic issues affected residents in my ward but these issues are issues that people find difficult to identify with. Issues that are more relevant to 'neighbourhoods' tended to be parochial and less relevant for residents that did attend. I think this may be partially a reflection of the large area covered.

- Planning issues and cases dominated both attendance and agenda, to the extent that other issues were squeezed out.

- I often felt the layout and 'feel' of the meetings were over formal and encouraged a 'them and us' feel. I also think the method of public engagement puts off all but the more confident members of the public.

- But, with such a large area, I found that too few people from Barton or Sandhills attended when the committee met away from my ward. Further to this, the inclusion of planning often meant that all those with direct interest in the applications waited for quite some time while the community business and reports were debated. Those with no interest in planning packed up and left well before the end of the meeting, leaving only members of the public with a direct interest in an application. Then there is the matter of the change of protocol required for planning. Some are confused having listened to an earlier debate within a flexible protocol and wish to speak even though all of the allotted time for a proposer or objector has expired. I do feel planning should be somewhere else and that business could be more efficiently processed if it was at a meeting solely for planning and a meeting run under the one protocol.
• Lack of engagement by county council representatives, even when major transport and strategic planning issues are being discussed. Also, on occasions, difficulty in getting senior city council officers to engage with area committees, for example in regard to development of outdoor leisure facilities. A lot of time has been wasted over the years in "consulting" with Area Committees about complex major policies affecting the whole city equally. This has bulked up the agenda and intimidated members of the public (and some councillors) without producing any worthwhile feedback.

• In my experience, what is not-so-good about Area Committees is that they need a stronger constitution. Under the present rules

a) Over-indulgent Chairs can and do allow members of the public to
   (i) Register to speak at any time during the proceedings – instead of allowing only those requests to speak which are
   submitted before the start of the meeting;
   (ii) Over-run their allotted five minutes – which itself is too generous in many cases and would be better reduced to three;
   (iii) Raise several issues in the course of a single address, which both negates the purpose of addresses to tackle specific issues, and
   confuses discussion;
   (iv) Raise 'non-issues' or resurrect/restate issues already dealt
   with at previous meetings;
   (iv) Intervene in councillors' deliberations from the floor;
   (v) Get into conversations with officers;

b) Members' seats can and are arranged in a very shallow curve facing
   the public and not each other. This
   (i) Makes it difficult for councillors to discuss issues with each
   other in the proper way – they are effectively addressing the
   public, not the chair;
   (ii) Makes it difficult to catch the Chair's eye – especially if the
   Chair is inclined to be overly-politically in the order in which they
   allow members to speak;
   (iii) Turns a legally constituted and in some issues quasi-judicial
   meeting of a committee of the council into a 'town meeting'.

c) The Order of Business is not rigorous enough.
   (i) Dealing with the minutes first allows meetings which should
   take an hour to run for two or three hours – sometimes longer –
   because of umpteen matters arising;
   (ii) Having the Open Session (addresses by the public) early in
   the meeting has the same effect. If it was last, there would be
   greater pressure for more discipline and despatch.
   (iii) Planning applications and other important issues are
   consequently pushed back, often to a time when everyone is
   starting to get tired, and when members of the public have
   begun to go home.
- Less good is the bureaucratic inclusion of indigestible reports - which Area Committees do not need to consider but have been forced upon them. Local budgets very good but inadequate. Publicity needs to be improved to ensure residents know they can come along - the city council should be funding this and developing ways to inform people better.

- Firstly, there are only a limited amount of people from my ward who ever attend.
- The agendas are often dominated by planning or issues not relating to my ward.
- There is a very select number of people who attend AC meetings who are generally unrepresentative of our communities as a whole.
- There is a lack of strategic planning or co-ordination to AC meetings.

- The major problem with Area Committees in Oxford is that there is little attempt to promote them and advertise their meetings or the issues under debate. The consequence of this is that attendance is much lower than it should be.

- The system relies on passive involvement i.e. those who have an interest in a specific planning application or direct involvement in a particular issue. Real community engagement needs to be worked on with leaflets, posters, promotions on the council Website and involvement of community groups.

- With declining amounts of many to support community initiatives and ever declining officer time being made available the capacity to help launch or help local initiatives and community groups has steadily declined and as a consequence the credibility and authority of the Area Committees has been eroded as they no longer able to provide the support and development they once did. Communities will only engage with local Government if they feel it is worthwhile and they see results. Talking shops will fail.

- Minimal community engagement and attendance except for planning issues - and the people turning up for planning items didn't stay for the rest of the agenda; those who attend ACs for planning applications will I suspect also attend the new Area Planning committees as they feel strongly about the applications concerned.

- Agendas dominated by consultation documents from the City and the County which don't excite any interest - e.g. LTP3, Highways maintenance under s.42, etc

- No sense of pro-activity in shaping the Areas

- Covering too large an area for there to be a genuine sense of community between the various components e.g. Jericho, West Oxford, St Ebbes/Thomas', City centre/University, Grandpont
Many items seem to be on the AC agenda for reasons of completeness and hardly we ever got discussion (such as planning performance reports etc.) or were discussed almost exclusively by members (such as NAG reports which members had already seen at their NAGs anyway).

Not so good aspects:-
**Poor chairing;
**Sometimes too much input from Councillors and not enough from the public;
**Poor knowledge of Councillors (especially in planning law);
**Not local enough – some areas too vast, not everything is one part of the area is relevant for residents of another;
**Length and timing of items on the agenda – can be overly long, people might have to wait some considerable time for their item to be reached;
**No right of reply for residents;
** Lack of power of Area Committees;
** Some venues inadequate – can be cold, or suffer from inadequate technology;

I have not seen many problems, and those I have seen have been due to human error rather than the structure.

On the minus side, I really don’t think area committees worked as a form of community engagement. The south east area is not, in fact, an area at all, and consists of a variety of different communities, some of which have little in common, and there’s even some mutual antagonism. I think much is said by the fact that we get more interested members of the general public at meetings of Villiers Neighbourhood Watch (covering perhaps 300 people), Rose Hill TRA (covering around 2000) and Friends of Iffley (about 800) than we do at SEAC (covering 16,000 plus). The profile, necessarily, has also not been representative of the wider population in terms of gender, ethnicity, age etc.

Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?

Maybe we could have themed meetings around topic local issues (on top of the usual agenda) and make it clear in the advertising literature that residents will have the opportunity to influence council policy by airing their views at the meeting.

I hope there will be some flexibility in the calling of Area Forums, perhaps with one of the four annual Area Forums being on a “floating” date so it can be arranged out of turn if it is felt there is a local demand for a large-scale public meeting. The high level of public concern about
library closures could be an example of an issue that would cause such a forum to be called; alternatively Councillors in the wards affected could use their personal budgets to organise meetings and help set up local action groups, preferably resident-led with Councillor support.

- Forums would be better on a more ad-hoc basis organised when particular issues arise such meetings need to be better advertised and with the high profile issues should be better attended right now they do not provide much opportunity to address or hear from the public. Perhaps a less frequent meeting of service providers, councillors and the public should be provided though planning should be removed so this does not impact. Some sort of revenue budget needs to be retained so councillors can spend some money locally on projects that might be ignored by the larger council.

- There are very good examples of ways to have something of the same intended effect without the current overburden of bureaucracy and procedure. I set up the Headington Forward group under the auspices of NEAC. HF has now been meeting for more than a year and brings together community leaders with representatives of major employers and institutions in Headington (universities hospitals etc.) under my chairmanship. It is a great success by bringing important local players (who would not come to area committee because they would have to sit through hours of stuff in which they had no interest) face to face with the community via its reps round a table in a good atmosphere of collaboration not confrontation to discuss issues which are of direct relevance in a short, usually constrained time period (of a couple of hours every two months or so). I understand a similar type of arrangement exists in the city centre. This type of forum seems much more effective at getting to the heart of local issue and concerns. Of course, it is not possible to be formulaic about this. The option for local members to take the initiative and suggest forms and procedures relevant to their locality and the flexibility this gives is a real benefit if members are willing to get out of the habit of the formal committee.

- They should be flexible, involve more members of the public and take up local issues as they arise

- I would like to be able to arrange meetings to respond to local issues as and when necessary even on Saturday mornings!! The best meetings I have organised myself have been just that.

- I would like to be able to represent constituents at planning meetings.

- Through regular contact with constituents an effective councillor will know what the local issues are, they have their own methods in keeping in touch with them. Street or static surgeries for example. Most times a formal meeting is not the best way to achieve resolution. Our Community development team will be there to help councillors.
• We used to have a Jericho area forum, which worked well. Can you find the old minutes? The forums should perhaps be held when needed, rather than regularly, unless the public say they want a follow-up meeting. The 2 ward councillors can decide where and when and what the topics should be, probably only one or two in the first meeting, with plenty of time for general questions and survey forms for people who prefer to write.

• Ideally there should be a long lead-in time, so that we have time to advertise the meeting in local newsletters, as well as on posters.

• There should be refreshments and a friendly, more informal atmosphere, so that people feel welcome.

• My 'vision' for an area forum would be for a 'neighbourhood' forum or board, call it what you like, that meets regularly with key members of the ward with a specific remit to carry on projects locally and provide a sounding board for local issues. Perhaps chaired by a local member. Ideally this would combine with the NAG, TRA, community association meetings etc. I would imagine that this neighbourhood forum would then report to a quarterly area forum that may have some power to involve people in authority (city council, county council, PCT, police etc). This could be done through wellbeing powers or some aspect of the localism agenda?

• I would see area forums as a focus for items of importance to the neighbourhoods and feel that as little other business should be conducted. It should be an opportunity to be called to account, an opportunity to listen and an opportunity to question officers about projects with impact locally.

• In North Oxford, I think the only natural "Area" is the whole of north Oxford. I can see no obvious role for an Area Forum different from the Area Committees.

• I can not answer these questions without knowing the proposed composition, competence and governance arrangements of Area Forums.

• However, I should be alarmed if Area Forums were not composed only of elected members. The inclusion of interest groups in decision-making is insidious – it was, after all, the way the fascist state in Italy was constituted. Self-selecting groups with powers are open to undemocratic manipulation; without powers they can only be talking shops or consultative at best.

• I am very concerned about the proposal to transfer planning powers from Area Committees to two Planning Committees, one for North and West Oxford, and another for East. In addition to my points about the
positive nature of Area Committees in relation to planning, I would add that:

(i) The proposal to include East Area with the North and West of the City disregards the area’s natural affinities – which are with the rest of the east and south of the city, primarily with Cowley and also with Headington;
(ii) The proposed political composition of the two committees, both reflecting the overall composition of the council across the city, is contrary to the requirement that planning decisions be made by councillors as individuals and not following a group line;
(iii) It also disenfranchises the area’s electors to the extent that this political composition may well have the effect of removing most if not all of their local elected members from the planning process. East Area has five Green Party councillors and one Liberal Democrat. With five members out of 48, one Green Party councillor from East Area may be given a seat on each of the proposed eight-seat committees, but it is not certain, since Labour will want four, if not five, and the Liberal Democrats are only just short of the number of councillors to assure them three.

- They should be Area Committees, meeting monthly, funded and supported by council officers. Members should discuss with officers how to improve residents’ involvement - may be different in different areas. They need to have Area budgets which are decided LOCALLY, not by reference to a central committee or officers.

- I’d like to see far more community-based neighbourhood meetings so local councillors can engage more closely with their wards rather than other wards

- The Area Committees should not be abolished and replaced with talking shops.

- To strengthen local democracy Area Committees should retain their planning powers and be given an enlarged budget. Each Area Committee should have specific officers attached to their own Committees.

- The Committees should be given extra powers over green space management, nature reserves, children’s playground equipment, certain leisure activities, community centres capital funding, historic memorials, waste collection systems and licensing in their area. (My experience of Middleton Township which had these extra devolved powers was that it create an effective local ‘team’ of officers who really cared for their area with the capacity to act.)

- Far from backing away from, devolved government and moving decision making into the hands of small, centralised elites the Council, should move to more democratic systems

- Invite all the representative community stakeholders (mini LSPs)
• Set up agendas that are relevant to community concerns and allow enough time for presentation and real discussion/debate/decision

• Break down into smaller community areas and engage directly in place shaping, feeding proposals back into Scrutiny, CEB, officers

• If the individual budget allocations work well and aren’t abused, increase the amounts available as resources permit

• Newsletters to the community
  
  • Quarterly will not be responsive enough
  
  • Must include more community bodies (they need to be actively invited) like schools community groups, religious groups, residents groups, other user groups
  
  • No dreary reports and death by bvi (the reports should however be available on request and pref. at no/low cost) for those with an appetite for such things.
  
  • Need to be much less formal - no top table etc., ideally blocks of theatre style seating and a chair in the shape of an MC maybe moving about among people
  
  • Decent sound system that works - really important and cut out all the messing about moving people/mics etc
  
  • Proper engagement with local media (this needs to be a project for someone!)
  
  • Greater engagement with public consultations, but quarterly would not be responsive enough or have enough time to do justice to this role;
  
  • Identify and investigate local needs – think Big Society agenda, Area Committees should have a leading role in the development of local leads into local needs. Better use of non Government and non-politically motivated funding for projects and provisions, which would be beneficial to local communities;
  
  • Hold themed meetings around a key local issue;
  
  • Avoid duplicating the content of other meetings – a forum could duplicate and destabilise the work of Residents’ Associations;
  
  • Wider local engagement – local workshops on local issues working with Residents’ Associations and other local groups;
• Empowerment – greater emphasis on making Parish Councils accountable to better run local government matters;

• Meetings more frequent than quarterly – would be loss of local focus, issues would have lost topicality by the time they reached the forum, and could be longer, despite not having a planning section.

• Bring back planning – or Area Forums could become toothless talking shops.

• Better engagement with public.

• Deal with issues chosen by public and not by Council.

• Quarterly meetings are too infrequent (if there is a major issue, we need to be able to have a meeting).

• How can we engage with a variety of individuals and groups and not just the regular attendees?

• Who will chair/lead the forums?

• Area Forums need to meet monthly at a specified time and place. Since the Area Committees provide excellent contact with the community I do not see the need for change. The crucial issue is the local consideration of planning applications. I do not believe there will be any real savings in the proposed new arrangements, since there will be a considerable increase in the need for site visits. In human terms, the Councillor's time needed to consider applications will increase, since the number of applications to be considered will not change, while the size of the committees will increase.

• I think we need to have a sharp focus on working with existing community groups, and supporting new ones to develop where there is local interest; ensure that some funds are available to support community projects (the ward Councillors' budget should help in this regard), and retain the important links with the area street scene manager and the police (the NAG might be sufficient for the latter).

31/1/2011
Appendix 1 continued (late responses)

Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee – 10th February 2011

Item 8: Democratic Changes

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS RECEIVED SINCE THE AGENDA WAS PRINTED.

Question 1: In your experience, what was good about Area Committees?

- I have rarely thought that area committees are a useful way to expend council resources or councillor and officer time. Having said that, there are a number of frustrating ways of working associated with being a councillor; having to attend an area committee is by no means the worst. The committees have always been excellently clerked, and, in recent years, our committee has had excellent support first from an acting area co-ordinator and then from the communities and neighbourhoods team leader for our area. I also appreciated the ability to make unwilling or recalcitrant county council officers appear in the evening on an estate on the outskirts of Oxford to explain the ways in which their proposal, whatever it was, would disadvantage residents of our wards and our city. However, I tended not to find that this process resulted in positive change to the proposals in question, although there was a certain grim self-satisfaction inherent in it.

- The 6 Area Committees -- and I have been to several different ones -- allow local communities to contribute to the debate as local councillors discuss and decide issues, both parochial and citywide. They allow lobbying before meetings and contributions during, and that point applies not only to planning issues that draw the largest audience, but to the whole range of issues that arise. One comment that I heard was "I had no idea that councillors discussed and decided so many different issues." At the January North Area Committee meeting, the hall was packed, with standing room only, for the debate/discussion on the future of Summertown Library -- and most contributions came from the audience.

Question 2: In your experience, what was no-so-good about them?

- I have a number of concerns about the way that area committees functioned and the role that they play.

  Firstly, the meetings as currently set up are a nonsense: nearly all of the matters could be more usefully dealt with elsewhere. For example:

  **All parts of the city are covered by a neighbourhood action group, which receives the quarterly police report. Reports are produced on a NAG-basis (usually the size of two wards) in order to inform a high-quality discussion between engaged residents and professionals in a**
dedicated meeting. It appears unnecessary to duplicate that meeting with a broader less-focussed repetition of the same report for two or more NAGs at area committee.

**Councillors regularly use the area committees as a forum for raising their casework issues. Casework should properly be dealt with via email take-up with the appropriate officer, rather after a delay of some weeks aired publicly, often in a forum where the detail cannot be discussed and appropriate action cannot be decided.

**Consultation on administration proposals should be carried out with scrutiny committees and in party groups. Consultation on behalf of other organisations (for example, the county council) should be held centrally for the city, to enable all members to attend and to increase the quality of information on offer.

**Planning matters – usually centred on un-strategic issues affecting only a couple of streets – regularly take up disproportionate amounts of time. In my area, large side extensions to houses in Littlemore form the bulk of planning applications before our committee; there have been, I would venture, fewer than ten key planning applications affecting Rose Hill and Iffley ward which genuinely required local input from the ward councillors, as opposed to being generic applications for generic decision; I am satisfied that the new structures would allow me to either advocate for residents or substitute myself in for a decision affecting my ward if necessary.

- It’s also worth noting the attendance at area committees: at our area, the attendees who are not city or county councillors tend to be:

  **Parish councillors – and I gather that meetings of the parish councils in our area are always attended by a city councillor, so there is a more appropriate route to resolve city issues
  **Chairs or officers of residents’ and tenants’ associations – I certainly attend all meetings of the TRAs in my ward, and would expect other councillors do likewise, so there is a less formal route to seek changes in the local area
  **People with a particular concern, repeated on a number of occasions – for example, our area committee has for the past several meetings been addressed by those wishing to keep Temple Cowley Pool open, despite the pool not being in our area and those speaking not being from our area, and despite the area committee having no powers in respect of the decision about the pool

- As an example, I point interested parties towards this blog post, talking about a meeting of the North-East area committee when it discussed library closures in Headington: [http://oxfordsos.org.uk/?p=370](http://oxfordsos.org.uk/?p=370). The writer is, unfortunately disillusioned by the experience:

  "I attended the North East Area Committee meeting on the 18th Jan as a private individual, in the same way as I attended the meeting the week before in Summertown, looking for answers about the proposed
Library closures. I did not hear them. I heard a lot of comments in support of libraries and a lot of talk about consultation. But this was the consultation that is going to take place after the budget is set. This is the consultation about communities putting in bids to run local libraries not consultation about the closures. County Councillors are keen for communities to work with them to submit bids to ensure that they will get a share of the monies that the Council has set aside to support these bids. Although volunteers were asked for, none came forward. This was from a community where 200 people braved the snow to protest and 300 turned out for a public meeting. But maybe the community did not know that question would be posed to them at this meeting."

Understandably there were few answers for this concerned resident at a meeting of city and county councillors, all of whom are opposed to closing public libraries, and none of whom have any power to change or vary that decision. A formal area meeting of the city council, to which county councillors are invited but which holds no status in formal county council structures is never going to be an appropriate forum for consultation about an issue for which it has no responsibility, or for resident participation in a decision in which no participation is sought by the deciding authority.

- If resident consultation, engagement and participation are to be genuine, rather than tokenistic, then, they need to be systematic and focused on things that are able to be changed. A good example of consultation is the police area priority-setting, which involves street surgeries and door-knocking to determine local priorities, which are then reported back on to communities in newsletters and notice-board announcements. At the city council, we have an excellent consultation team who help us meet our legal obligations with regards to consultation, and we also have centres of expertise in other teams who deal with specialist consultation. We do not have the resources to undertake ongoing meaningful dialogue with every community – but in those of particular importance, such as regeneration areas or areas close to major developments, we need to develop the flexible staff resource through our communities and neighbourhoods team to seek a higher and more systematic level of participation. This will include setting up TRAs where we have none, as the key local building block for participation.

- Moving on, one might sensibly reply that the solution to the problem of a lack of power of area committees to change things in the areas they cover is for them to have increased power and resource; perhaps. But under the council’s constitution area committees have enormous powers, none of which to my knowledge have been used. For example, despite formally being expected to do so they do not manage community centres, parks or street-scene on behalf of the council. If we wished to move to neighbourhood management, with groups of ward councillors controlling these services, we could do so under the current
delegated powers; the fact that we have never done this seems to me to make it clear that members of this council prefer these functions to be exercised centrally and do not wish to increase the powers of area committees.

- As councillors, we seek to place-shape, to improve our communities: my argument is that this is better done at the neighbourhood level, utilising existing groups working to recognisable communities that people live in – in my ward, then, this would be Rose Hill estate, Iffley Village, and the area of Iffley borders and Rose Hill main road. Each of these areas has its own representative groups, and my work as a ward councillor is far better performed working with and through these groups. Ihave always thought of the role of city councillors as being that of ringmasters – particularly when they represent a regeneration area. For me and Ed, getting the housing development off the ground, managing the spending of major (£450k) Section 106 funding, working to ensure the survival of existing organisations like the advice centre or helping set up new ones like the junior youth club, dealing with major ASB problems alongside the police – all of this has been outside the area committee rather than through it.

- The concern for area committees seems to me to reflect a misunderstanding of the role of being a ward councillor: no longer is real, meaningful business conducted in formal meetings. Instead, the work that matters is brought about through relationships, through community leadership, through playing that ringmaster role, holding local public services accountable, leveraging money into your ward. Formal decisions may be taken in public at CEB, but the preparatory work and negotiation happens informally. No longer do we operate a committee system in local government where the only contact with officers is in the meeting, and nor would we wish to return to that; ward councillors must take responsibility for using their influence with key staff and in partnerships to seek change for the area they represent.

**Question 3: Thinking about the above, how would you like to see the new Area Forums develop? What suggestions would you make to improve Area Forums in terms of content, and, particularly, engagement with the community?**

- I see no need for area forums per se. A quarterly meeting between senior managers, CEB and councillors for an area to discuss area issues might well be useful – particularly if key partners are involved. Will it enhance the ability of ward councillors to be effective if the meetings are in public? I think not, to be honest; rather, a NAG-like attendance would be most appropriate. Small focussed groups able to take action rather than further opportunities to grandstand would be most welcome. We should, though, be clear that whatever process results will be asymmetric: regeneration areas and areas where major development is going on will for obvious reasons receive greater attention than other areas, and some areas may choose not to have
Forums at all. I can't see many common issues across the area known as south-east, for example, and would not be surprised if there was no south-east area forum.

- Engagement with the community should be primarily through existing neighbourhood groups – parish councils, TRAs, neighbourhood watches etc. We have a vastly-expanded communities and neighbourhoods team who will be able to support councillors in their activities, where they coincide with wider council priorities, but primarily this is the role of councillors.

- The one real concern I have about the abolition of the area committees does not concern them in particular, but instead the funding that they hold. It is deeply regrettable that a very useful source of flexible local funding is to be reduced; however, with (disgracefully) the national funding settlement the way it is, funding which is “nice-to-have” rather than essential must necessarily be considered for reduction. I am glad that funding is to be delegated to individual councillors, with as few strings as possible; I hope in future that this will be able to be increased, so it can play, with fewer bureaucratic constraints, a similar role to that for which area committee funding was used in the past. The concern in recent years to make applicants complete application forms for this money has been a real brake on the responsiveness of the funding for councillors, and occasionally misunderstands the relationship between the council and the applicant: many applicants are not supplicants, but partners, and funding them will meet the council's priorities.

- Moving planning applications to 2 committees at the Town Hall will reduce the public's ability to attend and contribute to the debate, by reducing audience size and reduce the valuable feeling of local issues being debated and decided locally, by local councillors. Some applications will be decided by councillors with no local connections or knowledge.

- Area Forums -- ill thought that they are, with little published ideas of organisation or management, will be much less well attended, and become just talking shops -- particularly in city areas where Area Committees are poorly attended anyway.

- Grants to outside organisations will become non-existent since the allowance for each councillor will be swallowed up by the expense of hiring a venue, paperwork and officers' time

- Centralising planning applications will not necessarily save any costs since planning committees will wish to travel to unfamiliar sites and / or there will be more formal site visits - with more travel expenses and officer time etc.
This is an ill-considered measure that sits badly with the expressed wish --of all parties nationally-- to see government devolved as far down to local areas as possible.
DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

Extracts from the minutes of area committees containing comments on the proposed changes to democratic arrangements:-

North Area Committee – 3 March 2011

142. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

The Committee received a report (previously circulated, now appended) which was previously considered by the City Executive Board at its meeting on 9th February 2011. The report provided the detail to support the Administration’s proposals for changes in the Council’s democratic arrangements as set out in the Council’s consultation budget.

Tony Joyce queried how the proposed Area Forums would work since they would be on a quarterly basis and he felt that the aspirations detailed in the report were challenging. With regard to the proposed planning Committees, he felt that these should meet in the evenings and that the membership should include members from the areas that the two Planning Committees covered. He further had concerns on the proposed single member decisions, especially on the possibility of one Member being able to sign off large contracts.

Councillor Armitage questioned the report and said that while it was true that not all of the Area Committees had worked well, which was not the case for the North Area Committee, it was not a reason to condemn them all. There should be an option for the Area Committees to continue and to continue taking planning decisions in the areas where they worked well and for the other areas that did not work well to work with the Community on a format that did. He added that it was hard to see how the Area Forums were a strategic improvement nor that by abolishing the Area Committees and creating 3 new Planning Committees and 6 Area Forums, would save the Council money. He further questioned the membership of the Planning Committee and feared that one or both would have no Councillors form the area that the Committees covered. He concluded by stating that these proposals were moving away from local decision making, would not save money, indeed costs would go up and the quality of the decision making would decline.

Councillor Fooks questioned the list of decisions that must be agreed by the current Area Committees, as she did not recall the North Area Committee for example ever being asked to take decisions concerning abandoned vehicles, nor to agree the yearly programme of works to be done on behalf of the County Council under Section 42 of the Highways Act 1980. She added with regard to single member decision making, this was part of the democratic structure at the County Council and seemed to work well, however Members were not given authority to approve the expenditure of large sums of money as was proposed here.
Councillor Campbell said that three things should be done, the first being that the North Area Committee should comment on the proposals, second, Members should also comment as individuals and third, the consultation questionnaires should be circulated as widely as possible. He added that should the changes be agreed it was important that the new structure should be made to work well. He added that the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee had looked at the proposals and as part of its recommendations, had the consultation changed so that it was not just conducted on line, and that the new structure was reviewed in December 2011.

The Committee agreed to forward its comments to the Head of Law and Governance as the consultation response from the North Area Committee and to encourage all Members and members of the public to also respond as part of the consultation.

South East Area Committee – 7 March 2011

112 DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES.

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended).

Mr Rodrigo addressed the Committee on this matter. He spoke in favour of retaining the Area Committee system and against the proposed quarterly Area Forums. He felt that the current Area Committees were not sufficiently advertised and that this could be improved and increased for very little cost.

Councillor Gill Sanders observed that there were very few members of the public present at the meeting tonight. Area Committees had been running for 9 or 10 years, and she thought that people should be aware of them by now. Ward Councillors were accessible by a variety of other means and did not have to be contacted solely through Area Committees. She felt that a Forum, dealing with a specific issue that was of real interest to people, would attract more people.

The Committee resolved to:-

(1) Note the report;

(2) Note all comments made
Central South and West Area Committee – 8 March 2011

110. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) outlining proposed changes to the democratic arrangements of the City Council including the replacement of Area Committees with Area Forums.

The Committee held a brief discussion on the report, making the following observations:-

- The Central South and West Area had a number of smaller distinctive areas within it and it was important that this was recognised in the new system.

- There would be capacity and funding for four area forums per year with additional meetings to be arranged as necessary.

- It was important that as many key stakeholders as possible (including the police) were involved in the new forums particular in the City Centre where attendees were not necessarily residents of the area.

- Geographic/ward boundaries were not necessarily the most effective way to divide the new areas.

The Committee agreed to continue the discussion amongst members outside of the meeting.

North East Area Committee – 15 March 2011

95. DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

At the request of the Committee a copy of a report (previously circulated, now appended) was submitted, which the City Executive Board considered at its meeting on 9th February 2011. The report provided details to support the Administration’s proposals for changes in the Council’s democratic arrangements as set out in the Council’s consultation budget.

Jill Cummings felt that the decision on the proposed democratic changes had already been taken, however, despite this she felt that the Area Committees worked well as residents were able to see all of the Councillors together and not just the ones representing their wards. She said that the Area Committees gave her a forum to raise issues, whereas the proposed Area Forums would become cosy and a clique. She further added that having a wider audience for planning issues was also very good. She acknowledged that there were some negatives, such as the Chair not always being in control. However she saw no reason to change the current system. She concluded by responding to comments in the
media that the same people always came to meetings, that one person could and did represent more than themselves.

John Green felt that the proposals were a coup-de-tat, leaving no opposition against them. Area Committees were being abolished to be replaced by vague Forums and he felt that Councillors preferred smaller meetings. Oxford was rather parochial and the Area Committees allowed for wider issues to be raised and discussed. He questioned how you could improve involvement by restricting it, and he felt that this was an attack on democracy. With regard to the proposed Planning Committees he felt that it was inept the way they had been put together and should be split North/South and not the proposed East/West. He concluded that the proposals were not about democracy rather the negation of it.

Peter Wilkinson said that he had attended the South East Area Committee for many years and had spoken in his capacity as the Chair of the Rose Hill Tenants' and Residents Association, one person representing many which was vital to the democratic process. He said that the Area Committees won’t be replaced by Forums, this was only likely to happen in the East Area Parliaments area, and that Members of the South East Area Committee had already said that they would not hold Forums. He acknowledged that not all of the Area Committees were perfect, but they could work better and should not be abolished. He said that any savings associated with the proposals were unlikely and that accountability and democracy would not be served. He felt that planning decisions should also stay in the current area format. He concluded by saying that Labour Councillors wanted to engage the public at a local level, but did not feel that this had been evidenced.

Councillor Darke said that they worked within a representative democracy and Councillors were elected to represent the residents of their wards etc. These proposals were not about abolition and the evidence across the City was that Area Committees were patchy in their effectiveness. He acknowledged that there was a financial constraint on the Council, but this was not the driving force behind the proposals.

Councillor Darke with regard to planning said that people had commented that it was good to have decisions at a local level, however the Council worked at a strategic level and it was important to have consistency across the City. Decisions were taken on “local feeling” rather than within the strategic framework. He concluded that this was an opportunity to have a more varied approach to engagement.

Members of the public at the meeting asked further questions such as how would the practicalities of the Forums work as it was important that important strategic issues were dealt with and the examples of the proposed County library closures and highways works were given. In response Councillor Darke said that issues were aired in a variety of places at the City and County Councils.

Councillor Clarkson said that the North East Area Committee boundaries had been arbitrary and agreed that the proposals for the Area Forums were ill defined. With regard to planning, she said that the Committees would be
politically balanced and would contain Councillors with an interest and knowledge of planning and how it worked.

County Councillor Roz Smith said that she was concerned at the loss of Area Committees and felt that the North East Area Committee was the right balance for major issues to be discussed. She highlighted that the report detailed the responsibilities of the current Area Committees, but gave no detail on what the new Forums would deal with. She said that it was good that Area Committees brought together City, County and Parish Councillors, as it was the one forum where all could hear of the issues affecting the area. With regard to the Planning Committees it was important that they continued to be held in the evenings and in the area. She did feel that the proposals were a loss to democracy.

County Councillor Brighouse said that most case work came from individuals and not the Committees. She said that the Area Committees had worked well in Oxford and hoped that Councillors and local residents could continue to meet and hold specific issue meetings.

Roger Jenkins said that there were strong views on Area Committee, but asked what in the new proposals constituted an area, was it a ward, a street, or a larger area. In response Councillor Darke said that he felt that an area was how it was now. Councillor Wilkinson said that she had also asked this question and was told that an area was what they wanted it to be. She felt that the proposals had not been thought through.

Councillor Wilkinson said that she was not sure if the proposals would save money and this had been asked at the Scrutiny Committee. She felt that there would be more call-ins and she did have concerns over the resources available and on ward budgets which would mostly be spent on paying for venues. She wondered whether the proposals would be more effective and questioned where the power was in the Forums and what the reporting lines were. She also had concerns on the boundaries and that planning should be dealt with at a local level as residents liked to see their Councillors making difficult decisions as this gave accountability. How would the Planning Committees deal with Section 106 developer contributions? She concluded by saying that while there were good and bad Area Committees, there should be a proper review and that the proposed Forums were ill defined and not thought through and that while the responsibilities of the Planning Committees and Single Member Decision Making was outlined, the Forums were not.

Councillor Altaf-Khan felt that the proposals were about one party trying to take planning away from Area Committees which had been tried before and failed and so now resulting in the abolishment of the Area Committees. He did not mind making difficult decisions at a local level and Officers would not attend the Forums. Power was being taken away and there was no reason or logic to this approach. Forums would not achieve the same as an Area Committee.

Patrick Coulter said that Councillors should take encouragement that the North East Area Committee was wanted by local people, and that the Council
would be throwing away something that was good. The best from the Area Committees should be taken and used in any new scheme.

Councillor Darke said that he saw the proposals as dealing with local issues by giving Ward Councillors the choice on how best to deal with the issue in their area. He acknowledged that the proposals need to be more precise, but said that one size did not fit all.

Councillor Hazell said that under the proposals the new Planning Committees would allow for Councillors to appoint substitutes, as she felt that under the current system she was frustrated that Councillors were not able to be advocates for their communities in case they were seen to be fettering themselves. With regard to open forums, she said that in many cases issues raised in the Open Session part of Area Committees, could have been raised and dealt with earlier and not left till the Area Committee meeting. She felt that there was a role for bigger and wider issues to be dealt with at a meeting, but on that particular issue, as she felt there would be more engagement.

Councillor McManners said that there was nothing perfect about Area Committees and gave an example that in Wood Farm there could be a body that met and dealt with the minutia of area issues, but he felt that the North East Area Committee was better to deal with strategic issues.

Councillor Baxter said that his views on Area Committees were mixed. He saw the benefit of wider strategic issues at the Area Committee level, but felt that planning was not best served by Area Committees as not being able to act as advocates for the local community was difficult. There was little diversity in attendance at Area Committee meetings and he pointed out that no one had approached him with views on the proposals.

Councillor Wilkinson felt that the Committee should make a recommendation on the remit of the Area Forums. Councillor McManners said that whatever the outcome a structure had to be in place before the Area Committees were abolished if that was the final decision. Councillor Rowley suggested that if the changes go ahead that the Members of the North East Area Committee agree to hold quarterly Forums.

Councillor Darke also felt that there needed to be a place to discuss strategic issues and that this should be quarterly, and said that there were many ways in which local issues could be dealt with.

The Committee agreed:

(a) To forward all of the comments made by the public and Members of the North East Area Committee to the City Executive Board and Full Council as the response to the consultation from the North East Area Committee;

(b) To note that some Members felt that there needed to be at least quarterly meetings to discuss and consider strategic matters;
To request the Head of Law and Governance to submit to the North East Area Committee a report detailing the outcome of the consultation exercise currently underway on the proposed democratic changes to allow the Area Committee to consider further the proposals prior to the Full Council meeting on 18th April 2011 where the final decision would be taken.

East Area Parliament – 16 March 2011

110 DEMOCRATIC ARRANGEMENTS – PROPOSED CHANGES

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning proposed changes to the current democratic arrangements.

Public speaking: Vivienne Alexander urged everyone to respond to the consultation. She felt that consultation leaflet was flawed and badly designed, and that the impression was given that the decision to abolish Area Committees had already been made. She also expressed concern at the prospect of single member decision making.

Comments from members of the Area Parliament:

- The decision had been made via the Budget, but consultation should have been carried out first;
- It was felt that the decision had been made to abolish the Area Committees, and that the consultation was to establish what came next;
- The consultation leaflet/form didn’t have a place for the name of the sender, so anyone could make multiple returns and attempt to skew the result;
- Consultation was needed at the right time in order to make a major change such as this one – it was felt there was case law on this;
- This change, especially the suggestion of single member decision making and the strong leader model, was the start of the drift into the placing of power in the hands of one person;
- There was concern at the loss of area planning and the ability of areas to give community grants;
- Democracy was about more than casting a vote once every few years. It was about the engagement of people at all levels. These suggestions seem to be giving democracy away;
- Little things that the Area Committees do can mean a great deal to small community groups;
- Area Forums will not have the same power as Area Committees. Power will go elsewhere. Even if there was lots of participation in Area Forums, they would still have no power to act;
- However, the process was not exhausted yet. The shape of the budget was decided but the changes were not defined as yet. There was very little space on the consultation form for comments and suggestions on new arrangements;
- There was disquiet about the proposed new planning committees, in that there would be only 2 and at least 2/3rd of all ward members would be removed from the decision making process. They would not be able to represent their constituents’ views. It was likely to be costly, there would be more site visits, and the proposed division of the city into two put East Oxford in the wrong group (with north and central parts of the city);
- Forums would be unelected and unaccountable;
- If there were issues with the structure of Area Committees, wouldn’t it make more sense to reform or restructure them to address the issues, rather than abolishing them altogether?
- There were fears that Ward member budgets would be “slush funds”. But they would also be ineffective, because £1,500 would not give members much spending power, and a lot of this money was likely to go on the costs or arranging meetings;
- Single member decision making was a move towards centralisation, and would not be democratic;
- The Executive Board would not have in-depth knowledge of what local people really wanted;
- The proposals were of concern because they were less democratic and had no room for ordinary members of the public to be involved and have their say;
- Planning was a worry, because it was proposed that 12 signatures would be needed to call anything in. This would make it impossible for the smaller parties, such as the Green Party, to call in a planning decision without cross party co-operation.

Resolved to note all comments made and pass them on as part of the consultation process.

Meeting with Parishes – 28 February 2011

1. Democratic arrangements / Area Forums

Councillor Price explained that the City Council was seeking to move to a quarterly Area Forum system, rather than the current Area Committees, as it was believed that this would improve and increase community engagement. The system would be flexible enough to allow each area to adapt it to serve its needs. The changes were out for consultation and the form could be completed online or by filling in a hard copy of the form. Thoughts from the Parish Councils would be helpful. Jeremy Thomas added that there would also be single member budgets, 2 area planning committees and single member decision making.

Gordon Roper (Blackbird Leys PC) stated that he found South East Area Committee to be an excellent meeting, which residents did attend; and he feared
that its abolition would be a retrograde step. He thought that a quarterly meeting would be much too infrequent, that it was important for the public to be able to meet Councillors, and that any discussion and decisions were properly minuted.

Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager) advised that she was trying to establish much more neighbourhood management, which would seek to resolve problems in the present but also make plans for the future. She was happy to discuss this further. It was intended that officers from the Communities and Neighbourhoods team would be available to take up issues, and there should be more dedicated resources to assist Parish Councils. However, there might not always be officers at every meeting, as there were other ways in which to communicate. Councillor Price echoed this, adding that the intention was to review the system during its first year of operation.