

**Policy & Service
Review
Community
Forum**



Date	26 July 2005
Venue	Reception Room, Town Hall
Committee members	Simon Renwick (Chairman) Maxine Chew, Kevin Eastham, Raymond Norsworthy, Heather Speak, Martin Taylor, Fabian Wilson
Other Councillors	Tim Ashton, George Caldwell, Stephen Carpenter, John Coombes, Paul Hayhurst, Howard Henshaw (A.D.K MALAYSIA), Karen Henshaw, Elizabeth Oades, Barbara Pagett, Albert Pounder, Paul Rigby, William Thompson, Colin Walton.
Officers	Philip Woodward, Dave Joy, Ian Curtis, Lyndsey Lacey, Carolyn Whewell, Peter Welsh
Others	George Buckley (IDeA Member Peer), Keith Whaley (IDeA Member Peer), Michael Wren-Hilton (Chair of Fylde LSP), Mike Greenwood (Director of Local Government Practice, ODPM), Mrs J Hunter (Chief Executive, South Ribble BC).

At the commencement of the meeting Members agreed that standing orders in respect of substitute members be waived and that in the absence of councillor Prestwich councillor Martin Taylor be appointed vice chairman.

1. Declarations of interest

Members were reminded that any personal/prejudicial interests should be declared as required by the Council's Code of Conduct adopted in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000.

2. Confirmation of minutes

RESOLVED: To approve the minutes of the Policy & Service Review Community Forum meeting held on 7 July 2005 as correct records for signature by the chairman.

3. Substitute members

The following substitutions were reported.

Councillor Heather Speak for councillor Collins; councillor Maxine Chew for councillor Wright; councillor Fabian Wilson for councillor Prestwich; councillor Kevin Eastham for councillor Carpenter; councillor Albert Ponder for councillor Norsworthy (from 5pm).

4. The Council's Political Structure

Councillors Eastham and Longstaff submitted a notice of motion, which was put before the last council meeting. Under the council procedure rules, the motion was referred automatically to the executive committee. The executive committee considered a recommendation to refer it to this Forum for further consideration

The motion called for a significant change in the way the council administered its business. As such, the Executive committee considered that the issues that the motion raised ought to be considered in detail by a community forum before being reported back to the Executive Committee to make recommendations to the council.

Because of the fundamental importance of the council's structure in enabling it to deliver the government's modernisation objectives and the services that the people of Fylde demanded, a number of external organisations concerned with local governance had been invited to contribute to the discussions at the meeting.

1. Ian Curtis FBC Monitoring Officer- Presentation - Setting the scene & legal framework.

Mr Curtis informed members that the Local Government Act 2000 provided that all principal area local authorities in England and Wales must operate new political management arrangements, to improve the efficiency, transparency and accountability of their decision-making processes. Four models were available:

An executive consisting of a leader, elected by all Councillors and a small Cabinet consisting of Councillors. (Wyre, Chorley, Pendle)

An executive that had a Cabinet, but was headed by a directly elected mayor. (Doncaster, Hartlepool)

An executive consisting of a directly elected mayor and a council manager appointed by the full council. (Stoke on Trent)

A fourth option, available to smaller councils with a population under 85,000, which could adopt a streamlined form of the committee system. (South Shropshire, Ribble Valley).

Fylde Borough Council currently operated under the alternative arrangements or fourth option, with a politically balanced Executive Committee that was responsible for setting the Policy framework and 3 overview and scrutiny committees where decisions were analysed. This arrangement was put in place in September 2004 for a trial period of 12 months.

The main potential cost in moving towards a Cabinet system was the cost of public consultation however this cost remained if the decision was taken to continue with the Executive Committee System.

Concerns were raised over the disenfranchisement of Councillors with the current arrangement and how this might be extended with the introduction of a Cabinet system.

2. Councillor J Coombes Questions and comments from the Council Leader.

Councillor Coombes emphasised the importance of a "One Team" approach should the Council decide to move to a Cabinet structure. He noted that Councillors had raised concerns over disenfranchisement under the old structure and the current structure but this only demonstrated a lack of understanding of the Committee system. The potential for all Councillors to be a Member of an O&S committee was an option but only a proportion of Members would attend on a regular basis. All Councillors were able to attend and speak at Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committees. The Leader was finding it difficult to obtain Members willing to serve on two of the O&S committees

Councillor Hayhurst questioned the leader on the implications of a Cabinet structure on the Rural/urban divide. Councillor Hayhurst was concerned that the rural/urban split was parallel to the Political party split within the borough therefore members from Lytham and St Annes would dominate a single party Cabinet structure. The Leader advised that a politically balanced Cabinet structure was preferred as this provided an inclusive structure with clear lines of responsibility and accountability

3. George Buckley IDeA Member Peer - Views and comments from a Conservative representative from IDeA.

George Buckley is the Conservative Leader of Rushcliffe Borough Council. Rushcliffe had a population of 106,000 citizens represented by 50 Councillors. The Council operated a single party Cabinet consisting of 6 Members. The Conservative Party held a total of 34 seats. According to councillor Buckley, a strong ruling party Cabinet was the only way to effectively operate in Rushcliffe. The Cabinet made decisions collectively then the decision were passed down to Officers. Policy was developed at O&S prior to Cabinet decision.

There were 5 politically balanced O&S panels covering Housing, Community and Leisure, Community Protection, Environment and Finance and Audit. The Cabinet and O&S structure were changed on an annual basis reflecting that years priorities. Every Councillor was a Member of an O&S panel. Those who did not attend were monitored and "Named and shamed" within their party groups. The Cabinet did not have the power to enforce attendance.

The opposition had a role on Committees (or Task and Finish groups). Membership was allocated on the basis of interest and expertise.

Mr Buckley argued that the Council had not scarified democracy for efficiency as they were a performance driven council and all Members were involved in the evidence process.

4. Keith Whaley IDeA Member Peer - Views and comments from an Independent representative from IDeA.

Keith Whaley is an Independent Member from West Lindsey District Council. West Lindsey had a population of 78,000 citizens represented by 37 Councillors. There were 19 Conservative, 16 Liberal Democrat and 2 Independent Members. The area comprised of one industrial town and a large rural area.

The Council had four policy committees, which were responsible for most day to day decisions. These committees met on a 6 weekly basis. There was one Overview and Scrutiny Committee chaired by the Conservative party that supported the work of the policy committees and the Council as a whole. It could "call-in" a decision that had been made by a policy committee but not yet implemented.

The Chairman of the four policy committees met regularly with the Leader on a Leaders panel.

5. Deputy Chief Executive - Views and comments relating to officer support.

Phil Woodward, Deputy Chief Executive responded to questions from Members.

Staffing resources was a neutral issue; the administration structure would shape itself to assist the serving political structure. It was possible more democratic support may be needed to serve Members efficiently.

The restructure was CPA driven for improvement following the Councils weak rating therefore it would be difficult to go back to the old structure. Concerns were raised that the current system had not had enough time to settle.

Checks and Balances were provided by the O&S function. Members were able to participate in O&S Forums even though they did not sit on the Forum.

Mr Woodward had previous experience of a Cabinet system from Derbyshire Council and advised that this was an efficient model once stabilised.

6. Open session for Members of Council

Councillor Hayhurst was concerned that a single party Cabinet system would expand the gap between Urban and Rural, as Conservative Party members were concentrated in the Lytham St Annes area. If a politically balanced Cabinet were in place, members could still be marginalised as the Ruling Party still had the power to change to single party.

Councillor Oades agreed with this view and stated that if a Cabinet structure were to be approved then all parties would need to work together to ensure the needs of the rural population were met. The Executive Committee needed more time to establish itself to run efficiently.

7. Chair of Fylde Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) (Michael Wren-Hilton) - Stakeholder views.

Mr Wren-Hilton had been Chair of the Fylde Local Strategic Partnership since November 2004. The position was non-political. Fylde LSP was funded partly by Fylde Borough Council and partly by Lancashire County council. There was one policy committee supported by several themed groups drawn from statutory authorities (e.g. employment, road safety). Councillor John Coombes was the Council's representative on the Policy committee and member champions often attend the themed groups.

The Executive Committee structure was an ideal arrangement for the LSP. One representative from FBC sat on the Policy Committee and every member had an equal say in decisions. In a revised committee structure, FBC would potentially have 4/5 members on the committee marginalising other members including the police and Health authorities who only had one representative each.

The Themed Groups carried out the bulk of work and the themes were always changing. FBC representation was more effective if the relevant member Champion attended the corresponding themed group by bringing specialist knowledge.

Most notably, the LSP was not a political organisation and the success so far was contributed to political neutrality.

8. Mike Greenwood Director of Local Government Practice, ODPM - Views and comments of ODPM / GONW.

Mike Greenwood is Director of Local Government Practice at Government Office Northwest. The position arose to work with Councils with a 'poor' or 'weak' CPA rating developing to assisting all councils with their overall improvement. Mr Greenwood is a member of Fylde's Voluntary Improvement Board.

While the ODPM did not favour any specific option the cabinet model provided focus, clarity and accountability in decision-making. Councils that operated under the Fourth option structure had the lowest proportion of 'good' and 'excellent' CPA ratings. It was felt that those authorities that opted for the fourth option did not want to change following the Local Government Act 2000. ODPM could not put any legal pressures on authorities that decided to remain 'fourth option' as long as the decision was made through debate and consultation.

The O&S function was potentially very powerful and would allow all members to contribute to the decision making process.

9. Mrs J Hunter Chief Executive South Ribble BC - Experiences from a council rated as 'good' under the CPA process.

South Ribble has a population of 107,00 represented by 55 councillors (18 Conservative, 17 Labour, 15 Liberal, 4 Idle Toads and 1 independent). The Cabinet consists of 4 Labour and 4 Liberal Democrat members. Every member is a member of the Cabinet or an O&S or regulatory committee.

The cabinet had collective responsibility, met monthly and upto 75% of agenda items had previously been considered by Scrutiny. The council allowed members of the public and other councillors to speak at Cabinet meetings but not vote. Cabinet members were also questioned systematically at Full Council meetings. Questions were not known prior to being asked.

Informally, several other mechanisms were in place. Monthly Cabinet/Management Team meetings were held to plan ahead, particularly on sensitive issues. Workshops for all members were also held on sensitive issues. Cabinet members were provided with a monthly update in the member's bulletin to communicate issues.

There were 3 O&S committees covering. The 2 internal committees were chaired by Conservatives. The O&S committees could make recommendations to the Cabinet. The Cabinet adopted 92% of decisions. Scrutiny also had the power to call in but this was rarely, if ever used.

The Forward Plan was crucial to South Ribble and all future policies were included in the forward plan.

There were 8 Area Committees with a membership of district, county and parish councillors together with representatives from other organisations. These committees had a small budget of approx. £1000 and could make decisions on localised issues.

Parish councillors had the right to put anything on the agenda at these area committees. Upto 5000 members of the public had attended these area meetings in the space of a year.

The culture of co-operation and openness had been developed over the past 6 years with a lot of hard work between all members and officers. Members of the Forum indicated that they would like to visit South Ribble.

10. Open session for Members

Councillor Paul Rigby advised that he would prefer the Executive committee to continue in its present form for 2-3 years then move over to a Cabinet system.

Councillor Oades reiterated her preference for the Executive Committee to be allowed time to settle to run efficiently.

Councillor Carpenter advised that changing the structure of the council would not solve the issues heard today. It was important to change the culture of the council and work together as one team.

11. 'Stocktake'

All members agreed that the meeting had been extremely useful, however the speakers had tended to favour the Cabinet structure and there was a need to arrange another meeting in order to consider contrary evidence.

RESOLVED-

- 1 Members of the Forum attend a cabinet meeting at South Ribble Borough Council.
- 2 The Leader/Chief Executive of Ribble Valley Borough Council be requested to make a presentation at the next meeting of the Forum on their council's 'alternative arrangements'.
- 3 A Leader from an opposition party of a local authority operating a cabinet system be asked to make a presentation at the next meeting of the Forum.
- 4 Details of the structures and call-in procedures operated by authorities in Fylde's family group be presented to the next meeting.
- 5 That the representatives who provided presentations to the Forum be thanked for their assistance and attendance at the meeting