Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Area Working Groups – review and future work
Date:	19 April 2013
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1.0	**Relevant Background Information**
1.1	The Council at its meeting on 2 April 2012 adopted five Area Working Groups consisting of- - North Belfast comprising the Castle and Oldpark District Electoral Areas (DEAs) - South Belfast comprising the Balmoral and Laganbank DEAs - East Belfast comprising the Pottinger and Victoria DEAs - West Belfast comprising the Lower Falls and Upper Falls DEAs; and - Shankill comprising the Court DEA.
1.2	The interim terms of reference for the AWGs were agreed as to: - act as community advocates to identify local priorities and support effective 'place-shaping'; - make recommendations to SP&R Committee on investment decisions for the local area; - offer advice and guidance to SP&R Committee and officers in the development and implementation of local projects; - participate in and facilitate community engagement and communications activities with a wide range of groups on investment in local areas; - consider other area-based issues as referred by SP&R Committee; - monitor progress and produce an annual report on performance. In governance terms, the Groups were established to have an advisory role, informing the implementation of the Belfast Investment Programme. It was agreed that the AWGs would have no delegated authority and no budget.
2.0	**Review of first year**
2.1	The Area Working Groups have met consistently since their establishment, largely on a

	monthly basis. Work to date of the AWGs has included: - Considering and making recommendations to the SP&R Committee of project proposals under the Local Investment Fund. To date approx 60 projects have been agreed in principle for funding; - Using local intelligence to explore key issues at a local level; - Holding a series of workshops looking at examining the role of Members in place-shaping and community engagement, in the context of the LIF, as well as the wider context of community planning. - Receiving a range of presentations from a variety of stakeholders presenting issues/projects of specific interest to each AWGs - Considering integrated multi-organisational interventions at a local level. Since their establishment, the Area Working Groups have had a positive impact in the development of area based interventions and Members have begun to explore the potential presented by local area working.
2.2	In discussions at the Area Working Groups, members have highlighted a number of positive aspects of the approach to date including that the process has: • helped move forward a significant stream of funding to local areas through LIF which has developed Members and officers shared understanding of project implementation; • through LIF, Feasibility Fund and recently BIF , helped focus purpose around delivery and city and local issues; • provided useful sharing of emerging thinking/priorities in SIF area plans; • acted as a channel for the emergence of local ideas and issues; • provided a more informal and creative environment for the generation of ideas about improving local areas; • acted as a forum within which local area issues and initiatives can be presented without the need for formal committee deputations; • provided Members and officers with practical learning opportunities in relation to resolving "live" community issues; • External workshops with community planning experts were well-received and generated new ideas • Helped understanding of the value of data and evidence e.g. citystats information as evidence for interventions • Begun to shape shared ambition re: local outcomes

2.3	On the whole, the AWGs **have worked productively within their interim terms of reference** as agreed by SP&R and have stimulated discussion on wider governance issues. Moving forward, it is important to build on the groundwork of the Area Working Groups to date and to take forward their future development in the context of local government reform and the overall review of governance underway within the Council. Members have highlighted a number of areas that require consideration, including: • **Governance** of the Area Working Groups; • **Chairmanship** of the Groups; • Agreed **agendas** and **forward workplans;** • **Preparing for community planning.** These issues are explored further in the remainder of the report.

3.0	**Issues and proposed way forward**
3.1	**Governance** As outlined previously, to date the AWGs have had no decision making powers, with recommendations going to the SP&R Committee for decision. In progressing the work and role of the Area Working Groups, it is now necessary to consider their governance in the context of the overall review of governance currently underway. Key issues will include: • Confirming the role of Area Working Groups in terms of their relationship to other committees/decision making structures; • The optimum number of area working groups to ensure good governance and delivery; • The degree of delegation, if any, to Area Working groups; • The role of Area Working Groups and of other committees/decision making structures in taking forward community planning. A separate report on the Committee's agenda provides further information on the timescales and approach to the review of governance.
3.2	**Nomination of chairs for the Area Working Groups** Two AWGs (South and North) have appointed political representatives to chair meetings in recent months but this has not been replicated across all AWGs. It is recommended that a Member is nominated to chair each of the remaining working groups within the May cycle of meetings to facilitate the effective planning and management of meetings.
3.3	

Agreed agendas and forward work plans

The terms of reference for the Area Working Groups remain relevant. Based on discussion at the Area Working Groups and at Committee about future agendas, it is recommended that the following issues provide a focus for the work of the AWGs in the year ahead:

- a continued role in implementing LIF and working through BIF projects and other related capital projects including those emerging under the Social Investment Fund (SIF);
- development of integrated, area-based interventions;
- consideration of the local dimension of key strategic Council projects such as leisure transformation; renewing the routes; tourism etc.;
- using set-piece workshop sessions as 'creative spaces' and opportunities for capacity building, designing interventions and problem solving;
- Member and Officer Development and
- Exploring the organisational consequences of area working and building capacity.

3.4

Community Planning

In addition to the above, at the Voluntary Transition Committee meeting on 5 April, Members considered the potential role of the Area Working Groups in helping to develop our approach to community planning at a local level.

Members agreed that the Area Working Groups could help the Council prepare by:
- Developing an effective, inclusive, approach to area-based planning, connected to emerging approaches to local regeneration;
- Exploring issues of engagement and partnership and delivery at a local level;
- Using local intelligence and information to build a stronger understanding of local needs, priorities and outcomes, connected to the development of a city outcomes framework.

3.5

It is recommended that preparation for community planning forms a central focus for the working groups in the months ahead and that their next task should be to begin the creation of local area plans, involving partners and engaging local communities as part of this process. A further report to set the context for this work will be brought to Committee shortly.

3.6

Schedule of meetings

Consideration needs also now to be given as to how to best integrate the meetings of working group into the overall meeting schedule in order to better align the decision making process. In scheduling meetings it is also important to be cognisant of the number of meetings which Members are now attending both within and external to Council.

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4.0	Recommendations
4.1	Members are asked to agree the proposals set out at paragraphs 3.2-3.6 in relation to: • The nomination of political chairs for all the Area Working Groups; • The proposed future focus of future working groups agendas; • The role of the groups in community planning; • Review of the scheduling of Area Working Group meetings to create better alignment with decision making cycles.