



**A report on the Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council
(Review)**

by the Scrutiny and Audit Committee

February, 2011

SAC Report No. 20

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SUMMARY

This report sets out the process, conclusions and recommendations of the 20th investigation undertaken by Aberdeenshire Council's Scrutiny and Audit Committee. The investigation was a review of a previous report of September 2005, into the Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council (Investigation No.10).

The work was agreed at a meeting of Aberdeenshire Council in Spring 2009 and was incorporated into an existing schedule of work. The investigation began in June, 2009, was continued from September 2009 to March 2010, and was revisited by the Committee prior to publishing its revised conclusions. Some of the initial considerations required to be reassessed in the light of the financial pressures which the Council, along with other public sector bodies, faces.

The Committee heard evidence from both Aberdeenshire Council staff and external witnesses during 21 sessions. Visits were made to meetings of each of the six area committees and an analysis made of their workload, order of business, range of matters under consideration, time allowed for each item, and public participation and attendance. The Committee considered all the evidence gathered and drew up its conclusions and recommendations at meetings on 12 and 25 November, and 3 and 17 December, 2009, 11 and 20 January, 18 November, 1, 8 and 15 December, 2010 and 12, 19 and 27 January, 2011. The meeting on 17 December, 2009 was attended by a majority of the Area Chairs and their input into considering the evidence submitted was of great benefit.

In considering the improvements or developments which had been established since the recommendations of the 2006 investigation had been implemented, the Committee reviewed the September 2010 report to formal committee. This "Review of the Work of the Committee" notes progress as "amber" – i.e. not fully completed but with no significant delays or barriers to completion. The report noted clear signs of greater use of area committees inputting into strategy policies; area committees exploring additional areas of council operation, including those services which did not usually report their standard business to the area committees, with the use of informal briefing sessions and presentations; area committees devoting considerable attention to the quarterly Performance Indicators (PIs) and providing challenge at a local level for service performance; that the budget allocated for area committee top-up grants has been substantially increased; and in several areas, the area committees have met with the area management team.

The original recommendation to have the area management team role contained in job descriptions has not been pursued – it having been deemed to compromise the principles of Single Status.¹

Despite these undoubted advances, the Committee feel that there are several areas where further work needs to be done.

¹ Single Status is the agreement by which councils undertook to end the historic pay discrimination in local government by reviewing pay and grading structures to make them equal payproofed.

The process of reporting area committee comments to the policy committees, although established and reviewed by officers in 2009, still operates unevenly. Not all reports contain a service response to area committee comments, and there are differences in how each area records discussion. Also, there is a concern that sometimes the process timescale can be upset by either lack of appropriate representation at the area committee to facilitate discussions, or other factors which lead to a deferral.

Directors have expressed concern about the staffing implications of servicing the area committees, but this may be a necessary part of democracy. The Committee believes that providing more effective officer support is necessary to counteract the reduction in numbers on central policy committees. It is also felt that methods are already in place to minimise the time impact of area committee attendance, including Worksmart² and flexible working, together with the application of technology such as video-conferencing, and this should allow officer time to be allocated as effectively as possible.

The Committee acknowledges that additional resources have been made available to the area committees through the “top-up” scheme. Although some services already report regularly on planned work programmes, others are very much centrally determined and seem very remote from local input as voiced by the area committees. Public perception about the local application of democracy, to which Aberdeenshire Council has made an open commitment, would be bolstered if the areas can be seen to have real responsibility over a wider range of fiscal and resource matters.

The profile of the area committee may also be challenged by the growing public awareness of Community Planning’s role in delivering the Single Outcome Agreement.³ This was a source of concern from several witnesses, citing confusion in understanding the role of local councillors, as democratically elected representatives, in the coordination of public resources across several agencies working in partnership. The interface between the local area committee and local community planning group needs to be strengthened, and more publicity generated to heighten awareness of the respective role and remit of each. Partnership working is very much the way ahead, but it should not be pursued in isolation from the local councillors. Shared meetings with local community planning partnerships may be a good way forward in increasing mutual understanding and closer engagement.

The Committee feel that the role of the area management team is crucial in considering how best to support and strengthen area committees. Regular commitment by designated officers in contributing to the cross-service work of the area management team is felt to be essential if the system is to work to its best. Some areas seem to have succeeded in engaging with all services, regardless of delivery focus, in projects of mutual interest. Full participation is critical. More should be done to encourage officers to share the area focus. It is also felt that joint

² Worksmart is the council’s system of working differently, in new ways and more efficiently, to provide better services to its customers.

³ The Single Outcome Agreement is the agreement between the Scottish Government and community planning partnerships (initially the local authorities) which set out how each will work in the future towards improving outcomes for the local people in a way that reflects local circumstances and priorities, within the context of the government’s national outcomes and purpose.

meetings with the area committee and area management team would help support the dialogue of communication on the area dimension.

The role of the area managers and the area management team is very much core to supporting the area structure at the heart of Aberdeenshire Council's decentralisation scheme. It would appear that Aberdeenshire's decentralisation structure is in the forefront of all Scottish local authority schemes. The Committee feels that more should be done to make the area focus more resilient and effective, although there has been clearly discernable progress since 2007.

Community council representatives and area staff generally provided very positive feedback on public awareness of, and interest in, the work of area committees. Public participation and press coverage tended to concentrate on the planning applications where local determination was the norm, but interest in policy matter consideration was difficult to achieve, despite the level of debate by elected members. There may be a lack of public awareness of the integral role which area committees play in terms of the formulation of policy, and in particular their role to consider local implementation aspects.

Mention was made by several witnesses of decentralisation applying not only to the operation of the area committees but to other devolved structures such as head teachers and community groups. The Committee acknowledges the role and remit of such functions but feels they do not negate the need to strengthen the role of areas and area committees.

Overall, while the Committee thinks much has been done, it feels there is more still to be done to take the 2006 recommendations and make them fit to fully support the new, post-2007 committee system in Aberdeenshire.

Since the investigation commenced, several actions have been pursued, potentially in response to issues raised with witnesses in evidence gathering, which would have otherwise been included as recommendations. For example, the area chairs meet regularly. Data projectors are becoming the norm in presentation of planning applications at the area committees. More area committees are now meeting with their local community planning partnerships. All of these developments are to be welcomed.

Details of the specific actions which should be considered are as summarised below:

A. General

- i. All members should consider an occasional visit to other area committees to see how they operate.
- ii. Councillors and area managers should be kept advised of any service related events or issues in their areas.
- iii. Information on planning gain disbursements should be shared with area committee members before any other forum.
- iv. Methods to broaden the central committee experience of all members should be investigated.

B. Area committee operation

- i. It should be reiterated that Tuesdays are set aside for area committee business, with the strong presumption that no other meetings will be arranged for Tuesdays.
- ii. Greater consistency is needed where area committees respond to requests to speak from interested parties in the context of planning applications. Standing Order 11(5)⁴ should be reiterated.
- iii. There should be greater facilitation of officer “attendance” by the increasing use of technology.
- iv. Increased use of shared events, across two or more areas, on matters of mutual interest/ concern, would be beneficial.
- v. To encourage greater public understanding of planning considerations by the area committee, the use of data projectors be urged, (where not currently used,) and their use extended to all other services.
- vi. Occasional meetings should be held between the area committee and the area management team.
- vii. Methods of increasing area committee fiscal and resource decisions should be investigated. For capital plan projects due to be progressed in any ward, local members should be involved from conception to completion.
- viii. A mechanism for area members to get items on area committee agenda (Recommendation 5.2.2 of previous investigation) should be reconsidered.

C. Area management team

- i. Area chairs should be afforded the opportunity to attend an occasional meeting of the area management team. This can only foster improved working together and awareness.
- ii. Attendance of nominated officers at area management team should be mandatory and not optional. Participation should be supported by the appropriate head of service.
- iii. Clarity and consistency should apply across all areas in sharing with members the work of the area management team.

D. Performance Indicators

- i. Performance Indicator (PI) reports would be better considered split to allow specific service officers to attend to speak to their reports. Where possible, or necessary, in the absence of an appropriate officer, the area manager should be prepared to respond to member questions.

⁴ In the case of deputations concerning planning applications (a) Any request for the Council or any of its Committees to receive such a deputation in relation to an undetermined planning application shall be submitted in writing, duly signed, shall state the subject application on which the deputation desires to be heard and whether the intended speaker is in support or opposes the planning application; (b) Every such application shall be addressed to the Area Manager within the particular administrative Area of the Council that the planning application relates to and shall be in his or her hands by noon of the fourteenth calendar day before the date of the Council or Committee meeting concerned. If, in the opinion of the Chair of the Council or Committee concerned, the subject on which the deputation desires to be heard is competent, the request shall be put on the agenda of the Council or appropriate Committee after its receipt. Thereafter, the deputation shall, at the discretion of the Council or Committee, be accorded the opportunity of being heard at that meeting, subject always to adequate notice having been given to parties holding an opposing view e.g. if any deputation should comprise those objecting to a planning application, the applicant should also be given the opportunity of being heard; and (c) No more than two members of any such deputation or identified parties holding an opposing view shall be permitted to address the meeting and the total time allotted to such deputation or identified parties holding an opposing view shall not exceed 10 minutes. It shall be competent for any elected member of the Council or relevant Committee, with the leave of the Chair, to put any relevant questions to the deputation, but no elected member shall express an opinion upon the subject, nor shall the Council or Committee discuss the subject on which the deputation has been heard, until the deputation has withdrawn to the public benches.

E. Interaction between area and policy committees

- i. The agreed proforma for the reporting of area committee comments on policy issues should be confirmed as the sole acceptable vehicle for such comments.
- ii. Area comments on policy items should include individual comments only if listed as such and if requested by the specific Councillor, and otherwise rely on the Chair summing up consensus at the end of discussion.
- iii. Timely feedback should be provided to the area committee members on the outcomes of issues on which they have been asked to comment.
- iv. The same feedback should be provided to advise local members of the Infrastructure Services Committee's determinations on planning applications referred to them under the scheme of delegation.
- v. Policy input timing should be arranged to avoid the oral reporting of area committee comments to policy committees as far as possible.
- vi. Area committees need to provide serious reasons for deferring the consideration of policy, or other, items.
- vii. Members need to be given all appropriate support to be able to determine all matters on first consideration where possible.
- viii. Officers should consider better ways to allow local member input to Council promoted projects, as area representatives, without prejudicing any planning process.

F. Multi-member wards

- i. There should be more public education on multi-member wards (MMW). This would include (a) consideration should be given to having ward posters, to inform the local public, displayed in public places appropriate to that ward and (b) clarification on each relevant page of the council's website that there is more than one local member.
- ii. In working within the multi-member ward focus, members should coordinate responses as far as is possible.
- iii. There should be better and more consistent use of shared ward briefings and discussions as far as possible, potentially "hosted" online in web ward pages, if face to face meetings can not be held. These should be the norm and not the exception.

G. Links to community planning

- i. Greater efforts should be made to nurture links between the area committees and the community planning structures in each area.
- ii. Joint meetings to consider and shape local community plans should become the norm, not the exception. Community planning should be at the core of an area committee's operation, seen as an integral function and not a rival structure.
- iii. Area managers should adopt a consistent approach to the sharing of community planning information with the area committee, including regular reports by the community planning officer and greater use of ward pages to share information.
- iv. Local members should have access to all relevant council based information before it is presented in a wider public forum.

- v. More information on the central community planning board should be cascaded to all members of Aberdeenshire Council.

Arising out of consideration of the above, and in the context of the current fiscal challenges, the Committee also suggests that the scheme of delegation and financial regulations be reviewed. This might allow greater member involvement in, and the direct scrutiny of, the allocation of smaller funds.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Scrutiny and Audit Committee

1.1.1 Within Aberdeenshire Council's Scheme of Delegation, the Scrutiny and Audit Committee is empowered to:

- Review the effectiveness of Council policy implementation and Council service delivery and to identify potential improvements;
- Undertake an annual programme of reviews; and,
- Make recommendations regarding improvements to the performance of Services.

1.1.2 In carrying out its reviews, the Scrutiny and Audit Committee is able to:

- Call upon any officer of the Council or Chair/Vice-chair of the Council's committees to give evidence or provide written reports, as appropriate; and,
- Call upon expert witnesses or members of the public to give evidence, where necessary.

1.1.3 The Committee operates according to the following principles of working:

Deliberative	Outward-looking
Investigative	Inclusive
Open	Influencing
Evidence based	Proactive
Transparent	Flexible
Accountable	Non-partisan
Responsive	

1.2 This investigation

1.2.1 The Scrutiny and Audit Committee, at its meeting on 1 April, 2009, (Item 10, page 2163,) agreed that an additional investigation be undertaken to review the previous investigation, Decentralisation of Decision-making in Aberdeenshire Council (No.10). This was in response to a decision by Council in early 2009 that the application of the recommendations made in the 2005 investigation be reviewed in detail. The work began in June, 2009.

1.2.2 The Committee chose to accept the topic referral from Council because it believes that the issue of decentralisation of decision-making requires to be monitored and assessed, and also to ascertain the impact of the alterations to the committee processes applied in 2007. These had including the reduction of the number of members serving on each central committee, meaning that each member served on a single committee as opposed to the previous two, and the introduction of named substitutes. There had been an attendant commitment to involve the area committees in the consideration of "policy" construction and review.

It was agreed that the purpose and objectives of the investigation should be to:-

- 1) consider the implementation of the actions agreed as a result of the previous investigation into decentralisation (Investigation No. 10, September, 2006);
- 2) consider how effective the implemented actions have been in providing a more local perspective, delivery of services and engagement with Aberdeenshire communities;
- 3) consider reasons for delays, if any, in implementation;
- 4) consider good practice from elsewhere;
- 5) consider how the outcomes of the 2007 Working Group, including the move to multi-member wards and smaller numbers on policy committees, have impacted on the operation of council business; and
- 6) recommend any improvements which might be made for achieving an improved decentralised decision-making process.

The detailed brief for the Committee's investigation is attached as Appendix A.

- 1.2.1 The Scrutiny and Audit Committee members who were involved in this investigation were Councillors Peter Bellarby (Chair), Amanda Allan (Vice Chair), Nan Cullinane, Sandy Duncan, Tom Fleming, Ian Gray, Fergus Hood, Mike Sullivan and Robert Thomas. Councillor Ian Tait joined the Committee as it drew up its recommendations and has participated in taking the report to conclusion.

There was also input from the six Area Chairs – Councillors Moira Ingleby, Martin Kitts-Hayes, John Loveday, Sydney Mair, Paul Melling and Stuart Pratt. In addition to meeting with the Chairs on an individual basis, a joint meeting of the Committee with five of the Area Chairs was held in December, 2009.

- 1.2.2 It has been agreed that the Scrutiny and Audit Committee should appoint independent external experts to assist with its investigations where appropriate. For this investigation, it was determined that there would be no added value in such an appointment.

2 HOW THE INVESTIGATION WAS PROGRESSED

The Committee undertook a range of different activities to enable it to carry out this investigation.

2.1 Documentation

- 2.1.1 A range of background documentation was provided to the Committee at the commencement of the investigation. This included information from both within and outwith Aberdeenshire Council:

Committee Papers:-

1. Extract Minute of Meeting of Aberdeenshire Council of 22 January, 2009;
2. Report to Scrutiny & Audit Committee, 11 February, 2009;
3. Extract Minute of Meeting of Scrutiny & Audit Committee of 11 February, 2009;
4. Report and Extract of Minute of Meeting of Aberdeenshire Council, 30 November, 2006;
5. Reports and Extracts Minutes of Meeting of Policy & Resources Committee of 22 February and 19 April, 2007; and
6. Extract Review of the Work of the Committee report to Scrutiny & Audit Committee, 11 February, 2009.

Background Information:-

7. Investigation Brief for Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council (Investigation No. 10);
8. Witnesses who gave evidence to Investigation No. 10; and
9. A report by the Scrutiny & Audit Committee on Decentralisation of Decision-making in Aberdeenshire Council (September, 2006).

2.1.2 The Committee also considered extracts of the Minutes of meetings of the various area committees on specific policy topic reports, (on Cluster School Management and Education, Learning and Leisure Grants), looking to chart how the items were recorded at area and then those comments incorporated into the final report to the policy committee for consideration. In this way, the reports which went to the Education, Learning and Leisure Committee of 12 December, 2009 on (a) Cluster Schools Management and (b) Review of the Grants Scheme were considered, along with notes taken by an observer in attendance at the area committees.

2.2 Witnesses and evidence gathering

2.2.1 Members of the Committee met a cross-section of Aberdeenshire Council officers. The Committee sought their views on the current operation of the area committees, the success of the decentralisation initiatives put in place following the previous investigation, and potential improvements which might be considered. Officers interviewed included: the Chief Executive, all the Directors and Area Managers, the Head of Policy, Area Committee Officers and sample members of the area management teams. The full list of Aberdeenshire Council staff who appeared as witnesses during the investigation is given in Appendix B.

2.2.2 Individuals with relevant expertise from a wide range of organisations were invited to give evidence to the Committee. Amongst those who appeared before the Committee were: Steve Grimmond, Executive Director, Housing and Communities, Fife Council and William Gilfillan, Corporate Manager, Highland Council, and Aberdeenshire community representatives, Commander Chris Hunneyball of Garioch Community Council Forum and

Mike Powell of Marr Area Partnership. A full list of the external witnesses interviewed during the investigation is given in Appendix B.

2.2.3 Members of the Committee also heard in detail from the chairs of the six area committees, Councillors Ingleby, Kitts-Hayes, Loveday, Sydney Mair, Melling and Pratt.

2.2.4 On behalf of the Committee, visits were made to each area committee over a 6 week period. "Score sheets" were completed by the observer and agreed by any Scrutiny and Audit member present and these were compared across the six areas. It was intended to consider the volume and range of business, time given to debate, officer and public attendance and participation and level of engagement in policy formulation papers. A summary of the observer comments and scores, together with the score sheets is included in Appendix C.

Observations were also made on the detailed discussion on policy matters, in order that the area committee input into items considered at the policy committees, with their reduced representation, should be considered.

2.2.5 Full details of the evidence given to the Committee by witnesses are contained in the agenda papers for the Scrutiny and Audit Committee meetings on 3 September, 4 November and 16 December, 2009. These are located on the Council's Arcadia intranet system and will be lodged on the Council's website along with this report when published. These are public documents and can be made available on request.

3. THE PERSPECTIVE OF ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE, CORPORATE DIRECTORS AND POLICY UNIT

A. Lead Service Briefing – Policy Unit

1. The Lead Service briefing was given by Roger White, Head of Policy. Mr. White began by rehearsing the evolution of Aberdeenshire's decentralisation since its inception as a shadow authority in 1995. From the outset, the political commitment to an area based structure had been emphasised, and six administrative areas were chosen to try to capture the differences in communities across Aberdeenshire's geographical expanse. At that time, the principles focused on providing first class services and being accountable. Councillors and officers needed to strike a balance between being efficient, effective, economical and meeting local needs. Members had aimed "to be neither remote and centralised nor a set of self-contained mini-councils". Mr. White also highlighted the deliberate will by most councillors in 1995 to "break the mould" with six areas which did not conform to previous boundaries in order to promote a new Aberdeenshire culture and approach.
2. A scheme of delegation was formally approved which stated clearly that all decisions should be taken by area committees unless it was a statutory requirement for full council determination; first class services would be adversely affected; the Council had agreed to a single standard impossible to achieve at area level; would threaten ability to compete (under the previous compulsory competitive tendering regime); would threaten the allocation of resources between areas; would affect overall policy direction for the Council; would involve external communication on a matter reserved for the centre; would lead to a need to resolve conflict between committees; or would affect the civic identity of the Council as a whole.
3. The intention was always that council-wide policies would be set by the central committees, Mr. White reported, but that areas could suggest or influence these policies. Where possible, policies would be shaped to allow scope for local decisions to affect local circumstances. Area committees were acknowledged as the main point of contact with Aberdeenshire's communities, their representative organisations and community councils. But no specific guidance was provided as to how this should be undertaken. Mr. White said it was considered that "how they do this is up to them" as it would be different in each administrative area.
4. From the outset it was clear that to help area committees in their decision-making, it was critical to improve the flow of information to the Council about local needs and views and to encourage local initiative and activity. The area committees expressed area wishes for services and facilities in their area plans, reviewed annually to measure achievement.
5. In 1997, the Council published, ahead of many of its peers, its statutory decentralisation scheme, based on the work of a cross-service decentralisation team in 1996. The area top-up scheme was also introduced at this stage - £2,500 per area per annum. At this stage, all councillors served on two central committees which had a membership of about 27; and there were no named

substitutes, which allowed a wider range of substitute members to participate in the work of policy committees on an informal basis.

6. Mr. White reported that the years from 1997 to 2007 were periods of stability, with no major changes of principle but some improvements to practice. The Scrutiny and Audit investigation report of 2006 had looked at the effectiveness and efficiency of the then scheme and made recommendations for improvement. This had been augmented by the deliberations of the “2007 Working Group”, which had been set up to consider processes for the effective operation of the new multi-member wards with an enhanced role in policy formulation, changes to the area top-up budgets, improved consultation of local members and other arrangements to make multi-member wards work.
7. From 1997 to present, the finances allocated on an area basis had increased substantially. Mr. White advised the Committee that from a £2,500 area top-up in 1996, the allocation had increased to £15,000 in 1997/98 and was £315,000 in 2009/10. Similarly, Area Partnerships, also funded directly from the Council’s economic development provision, was currently allocated £30,000 from a starting point of zero. The funding for Community Councils had also increased from £41,000 to £61,000. Taken together, this meant direct control of sums in the region of £406,000 across the six areas.
8. Mr. White reported that the current scheme of delegation listed 38 separate functions delegated to area committee decision, setting this in the context of practice elsewhere as assessed in recent Best Value Audits (BVA) by Audit Scotland. In 2006, assessments had been made of Aberdeen City, Moray, Angus, Highland, Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders.
 - Aberdeen City (2008) – was seen as not a good example: its three neighbourhood committees and departmental structure were identified as a major cause of a very poor Best Value Audit;
 - Moray (2006) – showed as having no political or senior management decentralisation, but it was acknowledged as a very small council so there were no significant criticisms relating to decentralisation;
 - Angus (2004) – was the first, “pilot” Best Value Audit in 2005/6 when the Council had no committee decentralisation, provided local service interface with some local “one-stop” shops and used area forums for consultation. There was no comment or criticism of decentralisation in this early audit, and the authority is to be a “pathfinder” for the new style Best Value Audit;
 - Highland (2006) – showed decentralisation to 8 areas within the boundaries of the former district councils. The audit found “the emphasis on local solutions to local problems often delivers appropriate and effective arrangements for its residents but it needs to bring corporate coherence to these decentralised and varied structures”. It was recommended that the council review its political and managerial structures with a view to retaining the best features of existing local arrangements and addressing variation, inefficiency and duplication.
 - Dumfries and Galloway (2009) – provided good leadership and support working with four areas based on clear principles. “Area committees have considerable delegated powers. The Council continues to develop the way that its services are delivered at area level. There is still some inconsistency of policy and

- service delivery between areas, but the Council is addressing this through a strengthening of working arrangements between areas and their links with the corporate centre”; and
- Scottish Borders (2006) – was found to have “open and transparent decision-making, especially through the area committees which make decisions on local planning, allocate part of the roads maintenance budget and some quality of life funding; parking surpluses; set priorities for rapid response service for minor day to day environmental issues.” The Council then recognised that it “could make better use of its area committee arrangements to drive improvements at the local level and provide valuable feedback on what people think about council services.”
9. Mr. White suggested that the validity of the recommendations made in the 2006 Scrutiny and Audit Committee report on decentralisation could be seen echoed in the assessments reported above. The overall conclusion had been that, having considered all the evidence, “there is no alternative, much better model of decentralisation that could be adopted by Aberdeenshire Council. There is, however, scope for improving the operation and increasing the benefits gained from Aberdeenshire Council’s current scheme.” The Policy & Resources Committee in 2007 had agreed (a) to strengthen area committees; (b) that information and discussion papers be on area agenda; (c) that the area committee monitoring and scrutiny of service delivery be developed to include large capital contracts, improved performance indicators and more explicit service standards; (d) to increase area top-up budgets; (e) that there should be a job description for area management team participants; and (f) that meetings should be held between the area committees and area management teams.
 10. It was reported that, as members had been advised through the review of previous investigation report which went to the Committee every 6 months, it had not been possible for area management team responsibilities to be incorporated in job descriptions, that the level of area top-up budget had increased and that officers believed that all other recommendations were being successfully actioned.
 11. Mr. White advised the Committee that although each area manager was part of the Chief Executive’s Management Team, which allowed a further strand of local/ central interface, there were proposals currently under discussion which, if accepted, would install a new tier of management between their posts and the Chief Executive. He indicated his belief that one of the key strengths of the area managers was that they had between 10 and 14 councillors with whom they worked closely, seeing this as important to meeting the area’s needs. Future local/ central interface would need to be very carefully managed.

B. Chief Executive

1. The Chief Executive, Colin Mackenzie, spoke of the journey, since the previous investigation on which many tangible benefits had been achieved. He believed that a systematic approach had been established which allowed comprehensive input from the areas into policy formulation and policies which reflected this input. Mr. Mackenzie acknowledged this had had a staffing and resource allocation

pressure. "A balance must be struck," he felt, in trying to achieve community involvement, resource allocation and best value for the Council. The proposal for "discussion" or "information" items to be included on the work of the area committees had been compromised by this, as much as conflicting pressure on area committee time. It had been hoped that the impact of the new planning legislation would reduce the work demands on the area committees in considering development control applications, but that did not appear evident yet. The situation would continue to be monitored.

2. Mr. Mackenzie understood that the reporting methods to facilitate and report area committee consideration of, and comments on, policy formulation was not yet perfect. He thought it was becoming more formalised, allowing comment and input at a detailed level. He also acknowledged that there was also merit in increased informal discussion, in addition to the consideration of specific items at formal meetings of the area committees.
3. It was suggested that there had already been appreciable evidence of the increasing challenge of performance indicators by the area committees and that services were gearing up to provide more information.
4. Acknowledging that it had not been possible to amend the job description of officers participating in the area management teams to reflect this responsibility, Mr. Mackenzie suggested that, to function effectively, involving the efficient deployment of staff and resources, there should be formalisation of area management team members. "We must continuously develop and support area committees and area management teams. We are determined to become the best council in Scotland by 2012 and this is part of achieving that." Mr. Mackenzie spoke of previous discussions with the area managers as to who should be invited to participate in area management team. "The area managers know who these people need to be and also who should be invited for the discussion of specific items on the agenda." Agendas should be planned carefully to reflect local issues and "we must get better at including community planning on the agenda." He suggested that a local community planning officer might attend, as it was "important to bring our teams together to discuss common issues". "The area management team and area managers will get smarter if there are specific items to focus on", he felt.
5. Mr. Mackenzie believed that the challenges facing the area committees were much greater than when the Council had been set up. It was therefore very important that the area committees developed their role in local community planning. The strength of the current arrangement was that the Council was working in conjunction with local communities. The role of the local authority was, he believed, to drive community planning and the driver must be the area committees. "This means more than receiving reports: Community Planning must be on the agenda and there must be engagement with other organisations".
6. The Chief Executive thought there could be increased understanding by members of those parts of the Council's operations which were not managed on a geographic basis. He commented on an instance in his previous incarnation as Director of Housing & Social Work, when site visits to local facilities had been

arranged to allow a better understanding of local issues and needs. This could be done to help in what might otherwise be fruitless discussion at area committee of something generally unfamiliar to the members. Some services, especially those provided on a needs basis, were far from obvious to most people until there was a personal involvement in demand. He felt that there had recently been more engagement with the area committees from the Education, Learning & Leisure service, as well as social work, but there was still a way to go.

7. Mr. Mackenzie believed the call for an increased area top-up budget to be a red herring. Some areas did not spend their current allocation. He noted that not being able to carry forward funds could be a barrier to effective spending. If an increase were proposed, there must be clear evidence to support how, and where, the money would be spent. Marr's use of its area budget to, amongst other things, filter resources into addressing community issues in Huntly was an excellent example of partnership working. Seed capital from the area top-up budget was used to facilitate the meeting of a local strategic need.
8. There was felt to be a missed opportunity in sharing good practice between areas, area management teams and area committees. Mr. Mackenzie spoke of a need for area managers to meet regularly to do so and suggested that a similar mechanism could be established for elected members.
9. With reference to the agreed alterations to the senior management structure of the Council, the Chief Executive reported that the new post of Assistant Chief Executive would create a structure to help the Council achieve what it was trying to achieve. The structure would cost less and push responsibility further down the layers of management, helping decentralisation at the same time. It was felt that this move would strengthen area committees' responsibilities and corporate role. Mr. Mackenzie did not think the role of area managers would be lessened by the new structure. He believed that "power and influence comes from a person's personality and character, not where they lie in the organisation." He expected that the role of the new Assistant Chief Executive, working closely with directors, area managers and heads of service, would bring some clarity to the role of area managers, not least by extending a corporate remit for each in addition to their geographical based work.

C. Corporate Directors

The Committee heard evidence from all four service Directors – Iain Gabriel, Director of Transportation & Infrastructure, Christine Gore, Director of Planning & Environmental Services, Ritchie Johnson, Director of Housing & Social Work and Bruce Robertson, Director of Education, Learning & Leisure. All were outspoken in their support for the area committee structure, although concerns were expressed about the volume of staff time necessary to make the relationships between the area committees and central policy formulation effective.

Education, Learning and Leisure – Bruce Robertson

1. Mr. Robertson spoke of being aware of the commitment given to the area dimension before taking up appointment as Director of Education, Learning & Leisure in early 2007. He had previously been employed in Highland Council which had also adopted an area-based structure and was aware that his service needed to be revised to focus on supporting the decentralisation of decision-making. Three heads of service posts were created at that time – each with responsibility for covering two area committees. This staffing allocation would be reduced in late 2009 with the loss of one of the Head of Service posts, leaving the two remaining with responsibility for three areas each. The revised structure also strengthened the number, quality and seniority of officers working to deliver the service and included locating nine out of twelve new Quality Improvement Officers in the areas.
2. The Director of Education, Learning & Leisure reported that decentralisation of decision-making in his service went further than the area committee role, with other devolved management. Mr. Robertson referred to delegation and decentralisation to Head Teachers, Community Development Groups and the Community Learning and Development Service. Each was, in Mr. Robertson's opinion, a clear manifestation of decision-making being devolved as closely as possible to the point of service delivery. Experience across all these strands had demonstrated decentralisation to be a complex area of work.
3. The Education, Leisure and Learning directorate management team met weekly, with area committee business as a standing agenda item. This allowed the future planning and consideration of reports for submission to the area committees. Mr. Robertson was personally advised of how matters had been received by the area committees each Tuesday, after the item of business had been concluded: he believed it was crucially important to be kept informed.
4. Mr. Robertson saw the primary role of the area committees to be the scrutiny of the delivery of council services in their areas. Input from this would allow the service to improve Performance Indicators and the application of the recommendations made in Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) recommendations for schools. Area committees also looked at the ongoing development of policy in their area: this allowed for the assessment of how to best serve the differing communities of Aberdeenshire. The needs of Westhill, for example, were very different to those of the north coastal communities, Mr. Robertson suggested. Finally, he considered the third role of the area committees as providing advice to the central committees in the shaping of service policy decisions. Mr. Robertson commented that the process should be a cycle of information: as a large service covering a varied range of provision, it was important that all efforts be made to ensure that the area committees were provided with reports and information fully reflecting the work of the service.
5. In recent months, there had been a degree of tension in some instances where the area committee's role to determine planning applications had limited its input into the drawing up of specifics for developments such as the integrated library provision at Westhill. Mr. Robertson acknowledge there was a clash between

the role of area committee members in determining planning applications and their role as local members best able to represent the needs and wishes of their constituents. Mr. Robertson indicated his support for area committees having more involvement in decision-making, both with regard to shaping policy and the allocation of resources. He cautioned that care would have to be taken that such decisions did not lead to large discrepancies in the delivery of services across Aberdeenshire, and stressed that any bid for additional finances would need to be approved by the relevant policy committee.

6. In answer to complaints that policy was sometimes too rigid to support the diversity of Aberdeenshire's communities, Mr. Robertson believed that the opportunity to be flexible in approach was taken when it could be. Aberdeenshire was a diverse and mixed economy and he stressed that the delivery of services must be according to local needs.
7. Attendance at the area management teams was often a challenge for Education, Learning & Leisure staff. "We try to ensure that an area representative goes along to the meetings, particularly when there are important matters to discuss". Mr. Robertson stressed that this was not the sole route to be involved in integrating local activity.
8. Mr. Robertson believed that the area committees should become more involved in the allocation of service resources – but in Education, Learning & Leisure, at least 80% of the budget must, by statute, be devolved to head teachers. In Aberdeenshire, 93% of the schools-based budgets was devolved in this way. He felt that greater involvement in the resource allocation of the remainder would have to be very carefully managed so as not to generate inconsistencies across Aberdeenshire.

Transportation and Infrastructure – Iain Gabriel

1. While fully supportive of the need for decentralisation and the effective delivery of services, Mr. Gabriel suggested that there was not much more which could be delegated. Some matters were more readily disaggregated to an area level than others, primarily those functions with a strong link to the area structure. Others, such as the property service, had a Shire-wide application. Similarly, there were areas of operational decisions, for example, school transport provision, which would not make sense on an area basis. Mr. Gabriel suggested that economic development sat in both sectors, with part of its work on a regional basis, and other aspects capable of being delivered on an area basis. Nothing had altered greatly, since the last investigation in 2006, in how, and what, was reported to the area committees from Transportation & Infrastructure.
2. As the stated focus of the Council was to function on an area basis, structures and officers were put in place to deliver this, but Mr. Gabriel stressed that the cost of decentralisation had never been looked at. "We don't know the cost and we don't know if it is value for money". Democracy, he suggested, might always come at a cost. This was perhaps, one of the weaknesses of the current system – not knowing the cost of decentralisation and the development of policy.

3. Mr. Gabriel believed that Council policy was flexible enough to accommodate the differing needs of the areas, but felt that there was a balance in operation on the ground. "We don't take the budgets (for roads maintenance and landscape services) and divide them by six. We look at the need and take that into account." In economic development, there was a stronger investment in the north. Mr. Gabriel was convinced that the Council had, and always would, look to the needs of the area, with priorities determined on that basis.
4. The area committees were seen by Mr. Gabriel as helpful and useful in respect of decision-making in Transportation & Infrastructure. Tenders, leases, sale of properties and economic development were all reported to the area committees, in addition to budgets for roads maintenance and landscape services. Mr. Gabriel advised that officers also worked hard to give councillors "starter papers" on policy reports. About 250 reports were provided annually to the area committees, 40% being tenders, 20% asking for determination of an issue, 10% on policy development and 30% more general business. "I sometimes hear councillors say that area committees are only planning committees and that is not a fair comment (but)... it should be more about the importance of the issues raised than the number of reports on the agenda."
5. Mr. Gabriel praised the forethought in setting up the area structure for Aberdeenshire Council originally. "It was a brave decision ...and it has worked well...As a way of getting the cultural differences dealt with, it has been very effective."
6. Policy papers going for area committee consideration should never be considered a *fait accompli*, but Mr. Gabriel suggested there were occasions when there were limited options available to resolve a complicated issue. "We have to get to a point where policy committees come to a Shire view. Not every comment will be accepted and as a result members may feel that they are not being listened to."
7. Although director attendance at an area committee was not a common event, and may be viewed with suspicion by members and officers, Mr. Gabriel felt that more regular attendance would be helpful to both councillors and the directors themselves, without encroaching on the remit of more regular attendees.
8. Given the scope and diversity of his service, Mr. Gabriel acknowledged it could be difficult to manage full representation on the area management teams, although he stressed these were positive and helpful in supporting the Council's local service delivery. Discussions were held with the area managers as to who should attend to represent the service. Mr. Gabriel stressed that it was important that these officers saw themselves as working in the team on behalf of the wider Council and not just as service representatives. If there were other specific issues, other officers from the appropriate part of the service could be called in to help progress the matter. He felt that the experience of cross-service working in partnerships, such as the Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership, had enabled more joined-up thinking: a similar process should occur with officer participation in the area management teams.

9. Mr. Gabriel thought that the area managers' main role was to support the area committees. They were also to be a champion in the community, chair the area management team and allow for a joined-up approach to be taken. "They do it in different ways but they are all pretty effective". Consideration of area managers' spending power compared to other, sometimes "more junior" officers was irrelevant, in his opinion. Mr. Gabriel believed the area managers had all the influence and authority they needed and "very few officers have real authority to spend money – it is done through the due processes."
10. In terms of the Council's ability to shape its service provision to suit the needs of its communities, Mr. Gabriel felt that the Council's policies did reflect diversity and local decision-making. "I feel that the Council does variation well and this is not always recognised because it can be very subtle, but it is to the credit of the Council." The arrangements had, in his opinion, worked well for the last 13 years, with a good balance between the centre and the areas. "If it didn't work, there would be complaints and, by and large, our local residents are pleased with the services we provide in their area".

Planning and Environmental Services – Christine Gore

1. Dr. Gore indicated that she had not changed anything in the management structure of Planning & Environmental Services since the previous investigation into decentralisation. Decision-making was already rather decentralised, with six area development management teams, each with a planning officer with a degree of delegated authority. A similar position in terms of delegation and area base could be seen in building standards and environmental health. Whilst there were not enough trading standards officers to have one permanently based in each area, the teams were area based. Decision-making was decentralised as far as possible, based on the management structure and in accordance with the Council's scheme of delegation. However Dr. Gore reported that some sections of her service were more functional, rather than area, focused. This included the environment team, which concentrated on conservation and heritage, and the policy section. Since 2006, efforts had been made to make these sections more area focused, reflecting the recommendations made in the previous investigation and weaknesses which the service had itself identified. Waste Management policies were developed centrally but their implementation was managed in each area by one of six area waste officers, with waste operations run through three area teams, (North, Central and South), each encompassing two administrative areas of Aberdeenshire.
2. Dr. Gore believed that there was a lot of autonomy amongst staff in the areas, with officers happy to exercise the authority delegated to them in pursuit of their jobs. She cited an example in Peterhead, where waste officers had developed a visual aid assisted presentation, delivered in the workplace to help the understanding of recycling requirements for a large migrant population and those living in houses of multiple occupation. This was not standard procedure but was a common sense adaptation of standard operational practice within officers' delegated authority.

3. It was not currently possible for all the development management teams to be based in the geographic area for which they were responsible. Dr. Gore spoke of continued efforts to find accommodation for the Marr team, currently housed in Viewmount, Stonehaven. The remoteness of the team from the communities it served was not ideal. Similarly, although Dr. Gore wished to see increased trading standards presence in the areas, this was an area where discussions about the possibility of a shared City and Shire provision were ongoing. If successful, the shape and location of trading standards officers would be a matter for mutual agreement and might not follow Aberdeenshire Council's decentralisation structure. The advent and application of the Worksmart initiative also required to be considered as it was expected that this, although reducing the necessity for a member of staff to work permanently out of any single geographical location, would allow greater flexibility which should improve services provided for customers. Accessibility of staff for customers would always be a problem if there were no area based staff. Various explorations had been undertaken, and would continue to be made, to look at maximising the number of face-to-face meetings of the right officer with the customer.
4. Dr. Gore saw the area committees as having a significant role in the decision-making of the Planning & Environmental Service, especially for development management and policy development. She acknowledged that, with the exception of reports on the village orderly scheme, provision for public conveniences and accommodation for gypsy travellers, the majority of the reports to area committees from Planning & Environmental Service related to planning matters. The implementation of the 2006 planning legislation was still an unknown quantity in terms of impact on the workloads of the area committees. Dr. Gore did not expect a great deal to change, as the Council's scheme of delegation had not changed as far as it might have. If two or more councillors were minded to grant/ refuse applications, the matter would have to be heard at the area committee. The Infrastructure Services Committee was to monitor the affect of the legislation on the workloads of the area committees and the number of applications being heard.
5. While there was a need to maintain consistency across Aberdeenshire, Dr. Gore stressed that this could not be absolute. Aberdeenshire was made up of six very different areas and whilst the current Local Plan could not support different policies being applied in the different areas, cases for diverting from the established policies could be validly made on a case by case basis, with local factors a determining consideration. The new Local Development Plan provided an opportunity to recognise the different characteristics of the six areas with a greater level of flexibility in policy application. It was her expectation that the Infrastructure Services Committee would accept any reasonable recommendation made by area committees in identifying specific sites for inclusion in the Local Development Plan.
6. Similarly, there was no problem with operational matters being diverse. For example, the village orderly scheme enabled the area committees to determine where they should base their orderlies. Some had decided to restrict the activities to a specific town; others had decided not to base them in specific

settlements. Each approach was valid given the different reasons applied in different areas.

7. Dr. Gore hoped that the Worksmart initiative would improve the service provided to customers of the Planning & Environmental Health Service, in increasing the number of face to face meetings with customers. The accessibility of staff to those requiring services continued to be an issue for the service and it might be resolved though more flexible working and the ongoing review of accommodation across the area.
8. Area committees played a highly significant role in the decision-making of Planning & Environmental Services, especially for development management and policy development. The vast majority of reports to the area committees related to planning issues. It was, she felt, helpful and enormously valuable that local issues, affecting the local communities, were dealt with at area committee level. Other service decision-making was regulatory and would not require committee approval. This would encompass environmental health regulations and building standards matters. The Infrastructure Services Committee received an annual report on issue such as food safety and health & safety in the workplace.
9. Dr. Gore felt it was extremely useful for area committees to receive policy papers before the decisions were made at the policy committees. There was a balance to be struck in the level of detail provided. There were occasions where it may have been beneficial for the area committees to be approached with a “blank sheet” and asked to make recommendations on an issue. This applied, for example, to local development plan consideration where it was not appropriate that areas be confronted with set views of what should be included. At other times, a fuller paper, with more examples of what the service might consider appropriate, would be more constructive as a starter paper. Dr. Gore believed that, with hind-sight, had area committees been more involved in the decision-making process when changes were made to the waste collection service, the experience would have been less painful.
10. Dr. Gore acknowledged that the level of debate required on any policy issue might vary. She believed that the policy papers did receive enough attention, and suggested that some items, such as the village orderly scheme, did not require lengthy debate. On the other hand, it was very useful when area committees set aside time to discuss specific items, such as Supplementary Planning Guidance on carbon-neutral policies. This was very helpful to planning policy staff. Sometimes this could increase demands on staff and elected members, especially when there was only one member of staff available to provide specialist support. For example, there was only one officer within the service able to assist in discussions on the issue of provision of accommodation for gypsy travellers, a matter considered by all area committees. Dr. Gore believed that this was a matter for the service to address in terms of staffing, to minimise specialists in specific disciplines.
11. Attendance at area management teams was sought from representatives both of the planning and environmental sections of Planning & Environmental Services.

Dr. Gore reported that attendance was better in some areas than in others, and that her service had recently altered its representative from the traditional area planning officer to a representative from the planning, policy and environment section. This was thought to benefit management team as it was more likely that matters under these headings would be discussed rather than development management issues. The service representatives who attended area management teams took active roles.

12. Integrated local service delivery was done where necessary and appropriate. The Committee were advised that initiatives such as “street scene” allowed a road worker to report faulty street lighting rather than ignore the problem. There was a great deal of cross-service working between the Planning & Environmental and Transportation & Infrastructure Services on a regular basis and, when needed, with Education, Learning & Leisure and Housing & Social Work. Dr. Gore advised that there were occasions when discussions between services had not happened as they ought, but she felt that participation in the area management team had helped to establish cross-service relationships between staff. It was not always appropriate to work across services, but Dr. Gore believed that Planning & Environmental Services was as corporate as possible.
13. Dr. Gore spoke of having a good working relationship with the six area managers. She was also confident that her service could raise issues, if required, at the area management team meetings. “I am confident that service representatives... report the necessary information to the service management and share information with their colleagues across Aberdeenshire where relevant.” In terms of environmental health, there was common representation as one officer attended more than one area management team.
14. In terms of scrutiny of Performance Indicators (PIs), Dr. Gore spoke of proposed changes to the reporting which may allow greater flexibility, allowing councils to identify their own PIs in certain circumstances. This would make Performance Indicators more relevant than some of the existing which recorded matters over which the Council had no control. For example, Environmental Health had to report noise nuisance complaints, despite having no influence over such events. The Infrastructure Services Committee was also looking at the use of terminology to establish a more sensible use of words.
15. That local decisions were made locally, within the caveat of council policies was, Dr. Gore believed, a major strength of the current arrangements. Care was required to ensure that staff resources should not be spread too widely – this was a potential weakness of the current practice. Dr. Gore recommended that workloads be planned better centrally: “Our teams should know when certain items need to be reported to an area committee.” Of similar benefit was the “committee work programme” used by the Garioch Area Committee to plan ahead. This allowed the service to set aside an appropriate amount of time for the item to ensure an appropriate amount of input is provided. This approach was of great benefit, she suggested, to both the area committee and the service.
16. Dr. Gore had not heard from either area managers or area committee members that additional authority was required. There were, she reported, occasions of

criticism when area committee determinations of planning matters were not supported on consideration by the Infrastructure Services Committee.

Housing and Social Work – Ritchie Johnson

1. Mr. Johnston believed that, in principle, decision-making should be devolved to the lowest reasonable level. The Housing & Social Work Service sometimes needed to respond urgently in some cases, but this was undertaken in the clear caveat that decision-making could not be a “free-for all”. Under the scheme of delegation financial authority was devolved to heads of service and other specific posts, but there were always specific parameters. There were prescribed quantities enabling staff to have certain buying powers, but these were formally delegated to the post within the service and not to specific employees.
2. The management structure of Housing & Social Work had two elements. The Social Work team was designed on a functional basis across the Shire. Mr. Johnston reported that the sectional heads of social work had oversight across all the geographic areas. This allowed a strong system of a greater level of consistency to be achieved and a firmer grip on budget management. There was a need to strengthen the area dimension and ensure that the different areas are being appropriately represented across the service. This would also apply in service representation on the area management teams.
3. The housing service was based on a geographical structure, which brought benefits in terms of repairs, letting options and estate management. Housing was divided into four areas: Buchan, Banff & Buchan, Garioch/Formartine and Kincardine & Mearns/ Marr. Constructed on a division of the number of council houses across the shire, the four divisions allowed local focus and coordination. There was a challenge in achieving consistency of services across Aberdeenshire but Mr. Johnston felt a recent assessment by the Scottish Housing Regulator, praising the provision indicated that the challenge was being met. Mr. Johnston suggested that this four division structure had a greater affinity with, and was more easily recognised by, the area committees than the structure in social work.
4. Devolving decision-making was, Mr. Johnston suggested, not only about having the confidence in staff to make certain decisions, but also ensuring that they were comfortable in having responsibility to make those decisions. It was important that staff should be confident in seeking the views of their line managers if they felt unsure or uncomfortable in making decisions delegated to their post. At no point, however, would an officer have dual responsibility for spending and duties to monitor the spend. All delegation conformed to the Council’s due processes and financial regulations.
5. Mr. Johnston saw two main roles for area committees in decision-making. The first was their role in influencing policy and strategic direction. The Social Work & Housing Committee looked for this input, seeking to gain from the view of the area committees. There were some issues for the service in how to best reflect the comments of the area committees and present their views for consideration by the policy committees. The second role was in determining specific local

issues, where the area committee may display a keen interest in changing a key service, revise the way in which a service was being run, or suggest a new site for the service. There were difficulties, Mr. Johnston believed, in combining this with the role of local members acting as a committee to determine planning applications as the roles must be kept distinct.

6. For works being taken forward from the Council's pre-approved capital plan, Mr. Johnston suggested that there was appropriate service engagement with both planning officers and the area committees. He cited the example of a recent care home replacement discussion at Inverurie. The area committee were expected to input as locally informed on the service to be provided and also to determine the planning application, sitting as the "planning committee". The process had raised issues for the services supporting the members in both these roles and had identified issues over which more awareness was required as more of capital plan works come to areas for consideration.
7. Mr. Johnston was unsure whether the Council was getting the best out of the area committee structure at present. "There must be an opportunity for the area committees to contribute to the key policies and strategies of the service. We must support them in this role." He referred to mixed experiences of the area committee role in service decision-making. This was, in part, due to the differences of the areas, having an element of "each to their own". The consultation processes were different, with each area committee having their own arrangements for formal agenda, informal discussion and seminar sessions.
8. Before considering if an additional policy decision could go to area committees, Mr. Johnston felt that a distinction had to be made between policy decisions and strategic decisions. The costs, in terms of financial implications, staff time and resources also required to be considered. The process of circulating papers could slow things down so it was important that appropriate reports go to area committees. Mr. Johnston believed that this linked to the need to be a slimmer, fitter and faster council. There was a balance to be struck between needing greater clarity on items which go to area committees and also providing area committees with the reports they expected to receive.
9. Mr. Johnson felt that the interaction of his service with both the area committees and area management teams was often split between the housing and the social work sides. It was, he understood, easier for members to interact with housing as it was structured on a geographic basis. The functional structure of social work often meant that a single officer might be unable to answer specific challenges or queries at an area committee. The service would try to pre-judge which questions might be raised and ensure that an officer able to answer the question would be present. He stressed again that there needed to be a balance in having officers present at all area committees in case questions were raised and the effective allocation of staffing resources.
10. The use of specifically targeted sessions for certain items or having information bulletins circulated to area committee members might, Mr. Johnston suggested, be considered in making the operation of some functions more apparent to area committees. This might also address any reduction in general awareness that

might have come through the reduction in number of members sitting on central committees. An effective way to cascade service information was still to be identified but would assist area committees to become more familiar with the less obvious service implications. Mr. Johnston suggested that consideration of an annual service update report might be considered or regular interactive discussion between officers and the area committees.

11. Mr Johnston also believed that the area management teams operated differently from area to area. This was not unreasonable as the areas were very different from each other. However, there was a need to clarify what area management teams were expected to do. Some appeared to have passive agenda. Mr. Johnson felt that it was the outcomes which should be the focus. Housing and social work issues did not often feature on area management team agendas. Again Mr. Johnston felt that there was the potential to use the area management teams more constructively to influence matters. A key area where this might apply would be in the joining up of service delivery. There was value in this corporately as everything should not be approached on a service by service basis.
12. Area managers were also taking an increasingly customer-focused approach and some were taking corporate oversight roles in respect of local issues to great effect. The role of the area management team supported this intervention, if the local members were being kept up to date on developments. Mr. Johnson suggested that similar processes could be applied if area managers were supported in taking forward asset management across the principal towns of Aberdeenshire. With the coordination of the area management teams in support, area managers were well placed to undertake this work. To be best equipped to undertake such tasks, the area management teams needed to be dynamic.
13. Mr. Johnston believed that the current arrangements enabled all members' involvement with the decision-making process. The principle of this was sound and it was good that key policies and strategies relating to service delivery had the backing of the councillors. Having an area focus also meant services were not so distant from the local community. However, a balance required to be found between recognising the roles which area committees played and not slowing down the processes over much. Area committees should not be overloaded with papers and reports, with agendas managed to provide some order and consistency. "I have seen officers spending all day at area committee meetings but have not been taken forward for discussion." This was not an effective use of officer resources. While it was difficult to anticipate the length of discussion on individual items, it was helpful if an indicative timescale could be given for the officer attending to speak to a report. In some cases, the officer might be able to base themselves in the meeting location and be called to the committee only at the appropriate time. It could allow officers to be able to attend and speak with authority, but would not resolve the distance of travelling to the committee location for an officer based elsewhere. Video-conferencing did not, Mr. Johnston suggested, work as well as face-to-face discussions but it could be considered as part of a range of approaches. It would be helpful if area committees could "sit jointly" to share officer support for certain issues, perhaps by way of shared seminars or briefings.

4. THE PERSPECTIVE OF AREA COMMITTEE CHAIRS

In the course of learning more about how each area committee operated under the current system, the Committee met separately with each area Chair. A joint session, looking at the issues raised, was held in December 2009.

A. Strength and weaknesses of the area committee system

1. Cllr. Ingleby saw the area committees as the face of the Council in the local area. She felt it was important, given the geographical spread of Marr that the committee move its meetings around the area to be a visible presence. The area manager was a particular strength to the area system. More formal involvement with community planning might be considered a weakness but steps were being taken to address this.
2. The Kincardine & Mearns Chair, Cllr. Melling felt Aberdeenshire's unique area system represented the area dimension. It was extremely important that this be maintained as the geography of Aberdeenshire was so vast. The local presence was crucial to input to the corporate whole, bringing local democracy as close as possible to the communities which members represented. It was hard to say if the public were aware of the face of the Council in the local areas. Whilst Cllr. Melling would like to think that this was the case, he suggested that more could be done to raise the area committee profile. Often people chose to find out only when faced with a particular problem. Cllr. Melling felt that raising the profile of the area committee by his attending community council meetings, and sharing experience and giving advice, was a benefit.
3. Cllr. Loveday saw the strength of the area committees as giving all members more access and a feeling of inclusion in decision-making.
4. Cllr. Sydney Mair had not been a supporter of the area structure when initially created, but had, over the years, come to accept it as a good idea. It did not, he thought, operate correctly: the area committee should have the strength to undertake a proper role as the face of the Council. The inability of the area committees to carry out a budget function to any great degree was a major weakness.
5. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes also saw the strengths of the area system lying with members knowing the local area, the people and the community councils. "The area structure strengthens the relationship between the community and the Council and negates any sense of remoteness."
6. Cllr. Melling also spoke of the positive aspects and sharing engendered by the Community Council Forum in Kincardine & Mearns. "It's improved over time. Its positives are about bringing them all together, allowing them to get to know each other and share information, to help each other, and if a particular problem has arisen, to work together to identify the best means to see what can be done." The type of joint working was now aspirational, covering the bigger picture of Aberdeenshire and leading away from "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBY) type

responses. It was very valuable to recognise the common voice as well as individual view-points.

7. Cllr. Ingleby felt the Marr Area Committee was a very cohesive area committee which did not demonstrate members' political affiliation when working on area matters. This would be borne out by considering voting divisions. She felt that there was sufficient decentralisation. Marr took general business (i.e. non-planning matters) at the beginning of the agenda and the items were discussed fully.
8. The Kincardine & Mearns Area Committee was also seen to operate as a cohesive group, particularly in considering service papers. There was always effective and detailed discussion and this was seen as very positive. "Despite there being three political groups represented by the members of the Kincardine & Mearns Committee, the more discussion there is of topics, the greater the move towards a consensus response... the sessions do encourage joined up thinking." Cllr. Melling felt this was democracy in action.
9. Marr Area Committee was well attended by members of the public and included a public question time as part of their formal committee meetings. Requests to be heard on planning applications, unless already heard on a previous occasion, were usually agreed. Cllr. Ingleby reported that those taking part seemed to welcome the opportunity to be heard, even if the resultant decision did not go in the speaker's favour.
10. Cllr. Ingleby agreed that the order of business on the Marr agenda meant that people attending to hear, or be heard on, planning applications occasionally had to wait. She suggested that their feedback was generally one of interest in the other matters under discussion. "They often indicate that...they found the debate interesting and had no idea that we covered so many diverse interests." Although planning applications were considered later in the day than at some area committees, Cllr. Ingleby felt that a fair hearing was still given. "We deal with everything evenly. All members contribute positively to the debate and we pay particular attention to the views of local members and they have always done their homework."
11. In Kincardine & Mearns, the agenda also considered other matters before determining development control applications. This was hoped to make people more aware that the area committee was not just a planning function. Cllr. Melling felt that information about this travelled faster by word of mouth than any formal news release or campaign. Although the area committee usually met in Stonehaven, other venues had been explored, including the use of academies. Cllr. Melling suggested that it might be a very useful exercise to hold meetings in educational establishments. "Young people are perceived as not voting and being politically unaware... [allowing] them to come and listen to debate might encourage a life long-interest and awareness." He wondered if this might also be a suggestion for succession planning.
12. The Formartine Area Chair, Cllr. Loveday, thought that the predominance of development control applications at area committees could be seen as a

weakness in terms of public perception. Whilst it was an important part of the area committee work, and one which the residents of Aberdeenshire expected to have determined locally, this should not distract from the other matters which the committees consider. “The press and public tend to leave after the planning applications.” This was echoed by Cllr. Pratt. “It is difficult to get press publicity for the area because they tend to leave after planning.” In Buchan, planning was taken first on the agenda because “most people come for planning and it saves them waiting around.”

13. Cllr. Loveday also felt that the area committees did not have a great deal of control or input into decisions regarding policy committees. “We tend to get things...that have already been decided.” It was not that area committees wanted to make strategic decisions, but there would be merit, he believed, in giving input to the fine detail: “We want to be able to input the local aspect.” Licensing was an area which Cllr. Loveday suggested could be undertaken by the area committees as this would also benefit from local input. He felt that the process of hearing people at area committees should also be looked at again. Previously three or four representatives from Formartine Community Councils had attended the area committee, answering questions or otherwise becoming involved in the meeting. Hearing individual interested parties on planning applications “did not seem to work” and sometimes was even counter-productive. “I am not happy with the addressing of the committee and I would like community councils to be allowed back round the table.”
14. The Buchan Area Chair, Cllr. Pratt, spoke about coming to give evidence to the Committee’s previous investigation. Not much had changed, he felt. There had been no vast improvement. More things were coming to the area committees, but it was still seen primarily as a planning committee. Whilst one or two more reports were being submitted, they tended to be for comment rather than decision. “It is seldom a report changes as a result of comments that have come from an area committee.”
15. Cllr. Pratt believed that the area committees would be strengthened by having more decision-making and spending power. He used the example of upgrades to Peterhead Academy, submitted to the area committee to approve as tendered work. “We should have had more input into the type of work that was to be done.” He felt that a general thrust in reports considered by the areas was the presentation of an end product for approval.
16. Cllr. Pratt was concerned that there was a lack of support for area structures. This was evidenced in a lack of respect for Tuesdays, meant to be set aside exclusively for area committee work but increasingly with other meetings called. He was also anxious that “the new management structure seems to be leading to a change in the role of the area managers and their reporting to the chief executive... it looks as if the areas are being downgraded. I think this is a backward step.”
17. The Garioch Area Chair, Cllr. Kitts-Hayes, felt the area was perceived to lack ability to influence things at a policy level and by the lack of financial powers to act at a strategic, but local, level. “More policy papers are coming to the area

committees for consideration” and “I would like to see greater financial capacity to address local problems and issues that are of concern to local residents. Each of the areas is different and they should be able to focus on things that are important to them.”

18. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes also would wish to see the area managers having more influence over the area management team. “They need to...be more involved at an individual service level in terms of what is going on and what the issues are in their particular area.”
19. Cllr. Mair felt that the participation of directors at occasional area committee meetings would be beneficial. “If area committees are the face of the Council, as important as they should be, then we should get visits from directors.”

B. Service policy paper consideration

1. The increase in policy items coming for area committee consideration was welcomed by all the area chairs. Cllr. Ingleby reported that the Marr Area Committee always had appropriate officers to present these and discussed the matters at length with the press present. Having policy papers first allowed officer participation to be better timed. It also afforded members the very important opportunity to input to central policy decisions. Monitoring was another ongoing development of area committee work and one where the number of service papers submitted to the area members was increasing.
2. Cllr. Melling advised the Committee that in Kincardine & Mearns there was an increasing volume of business put to area members for review. For example, he reported that there had been an increase in Education and Community Planning matters. There was the potential to accept more of these type of papers, but only where the matters had a specific local implication, as opposed to a general one. He stressed that it was crucial that area committee comments be properly reported to the central committee, citing an occasion where the ultimate recommendations appeared to reflect an agenda other than the detailed area committee comments received. There was no point in area committee considering matters which were then determined without their comments being heard.
3. Cllr. Melling thought that the area committee was an undervalued resource of local knowledge on some matters. Area committee consideration should be used to complement officer assessments.
4. The Formartine Area Chair, Cllr. Loveday, had concerns about timescales previously experienced in bringing policy matters to the area committee for comment. One report had come two weeks after the formal consultation period had expired, and only two days before the central committee was to determine the matter. He questioned how effective area committee input could be in these circumstances.
5. In Buchan, Cllr. Pratt acknowledged that service policy papers were coming to areas more regularly and were being discussed more. However, “We have less

people who have background to the papers. Sometimes this means that the papers are more difficult to get into.” There had been a clear increase in the volume of central to area committee consideration since the previous Scrutiny & Audit Committee investigation.

6. Cllr. Mair reported that, following a meeting with the Chief Executive and Directors, policy papers did come to the area committee more frequently. He felt that more options should be put to the areas, rather than a “fait accompli”: “the policy never gets changed.” This was disappointing as “the six areas are very different and what may be a good option for one area may not be good for another.”
7. In Garioch, a difficulty was that papers on service issues sometimes came at a late stage in the process. “The Committee has little opportunity to influence them.” Cllr. Kitts-Hayes felt that some services were excellent at responding to area committee comments included in the minutes of meeting. Others did not share this strength.

C. Information or briefing sessions

1. Information or informal briefing sessions were held regularly in Marr, and, on occasion, with the Garioch Area Committee on matters of joint concern. Cllr. Ingleby reported that these sessions were felt to be very helpful and turnout by Marr councillors was generally very good.
2. There had been fewer seminars in Kincardine & Mearns, but Cllr. Melling felt that all members could learn from them. The discussion at such sessions fostered relationships and could allow good ideas to come out. “By providing additional information and dedicated time to explore issues, seminars can add value and increase area committee input to policy considerations or decisions by allowing area members to be better informed.” Cllr. Melling suggested that more sessions would be beneficial. Regardless of when the sessions were held, i.e. either on an area committee Tuesday or another date and time, 100% attendance would never be achieved on every occasion. He acknowledged that comments were frequently heard from councillor colleagues about “information overload”.
3. Cllr. Melling understood that the sessions were not equally engaging to all members across all the services, officers or subjects. He urged members to recall that officers had given their best shot at presenting the material. Any positive feedback, together with suggestions for possible improvements, would be feed back via the area manager.
4. In Formartine, Cllr. Loveday was disappointed with the level of reports coming on policy service items to the area committee. “Housing has improved...and we have had presentations that have been relevant and interesting”. In terms of consideration at informal briefing sessions, the Formartine Area Committee had both seminars and informal briefings. Cllr. Loveday reported that some sessions were more successful than others, and that this did not relate exclusively to the accessibility of the topic under consideration. It was better, he felt, for the

committee to identify the need for training or ask for additional information on a particular topic.

5. Cllr. Pratt spoke of the Buchan Area Committee's great use of Tuesdays to become better informed. "It is very rare for us to have a Tuesday without some area business. We do site visits out in the area to bring members up to speed with what is happening. We may have local informal sessions on policy papers as well." Most of the seminars were on topics suggested by the members, arising from issues in reports presented or complaints received. "We get at least 75% attendance and if they didn't get anything from them, they wouldn't come." Seminars were particularly good, Cllr. Pratt suggested, when they came down to a local level of relevance.
6. The Banff & Buchan Area Committee held seminars quite often, Cllr. Mair reported. If there was an item on a lengthy area committee agenda which it was difficult to give a fair hearing, the committee would defer the item for detailed consideration and better scrutiny to the following Tuesday. The events were well attended.
7. The Garioch Area Committee had regular and useful seminars, generally on the Tuesday following that of the area committee formal meeting. They covered a wide range of topics, both requested by members and suggested by officers. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes reported that, conducted on an informal basis, the sessions facilitated better discussions with officers. Joint seminars with Marr or Formartine Area Committees were also welcomed as a better use of officer time. Attendance was sometimes a problem, especially for councillors with other jobs, but in general there was always a good turn out.

D. Local performance reporting/ Performance Indicators

1. In Marr, service specific reports on local performance could be either requested or were sometimes provided. On all occasions the area committee had the right to request further information if they were not satisfied. Cllr. Ingleby reported that some services reported less frequently than others, but "members recognise that the Housing & Social Work and Education, Learning & Leisure budgets have to be consistent through out Aberdeenshire and are therefore controlled centrally."
2. Whilst some services reported local information such as maintenance and adoption of roads, Cllr. Melling felt that there was a general lack of reporting on the application of budgets locally. This type of information was very helpful to councillors, both in terms of general ward awareness and to feed to local community councils and constituents. It would be welcome if more services were able to present additional information such as this, but he was aware that there may be additional work for officers in preparing this. Cllr. Melling suggested that there could be a trial of the process both to ascertain its value to members and to ensure that councillors were not overloaded with information if it were not worthwhile.

3. In Formartine, Cllr. Loveday reported that area budgets were presented from Transportation & Infrastructure's Roads and Landscape services sections. It would, he thought, be nice to have an input before the report was presented.
4. Cllr. Pratt agreed that some services were better than others in reporting local performance management issues than others. Buchan had had very little from Social Work, for example, and despite a local social work tour, Cllr. Pratt felt that "they could do more to interact with the area committee."
5. In Banff & Buchan, reports on local works and developments were generally received from Roads and Housing, and, to a lesser extent, Education. Other services, such as Social Work, reported Cllr. Mair, provided "very little."
6. Local performance management issues were only reported to the Banff & Buchan Area Committee in response to local requests, Cllr. Mair reported. This was generally true across all services, although Cllr. Mair acknowledged that there had been a big improvement with Education, Learning & Leisure, who previously would have been the least likely to submit matters to the area committees, now reporting more.
7. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes felt that more services should be reporting more frequently to the area committees on the work undertaken at a local level.
8. There had been recent improvement to the Performance Indicators reported to the Marr Area Committee by Housing & Social Work. A more detailed explanation was being given in the revised report and areas for concern highlighted. This was greatly welcomed by Cllr. Ingleby.
9. Cllr. Melling felt that the Performance Indicator "tick boxes" were helpful in concentrating members' focus on factors which had crosses and how those "crossed" performances might be improved. He felt that there was a balance to be maintained between rightful scrutiny and being seen as too distrustful of what officers were doing. "If this fails, the system is not going to function at all. There has to be an element of trust."
10. In Formartine, Cllr. Loveday reported that the committee officer provided a précis which highlighted exceptions on Performance Indicators. This allowed serious consideration to be given to the report. The pre-empting of questions integral to this work had allowed for better discussion to take place. Formartine currently looked at all its Performance Indicators in a single sitting. Having been advised that some other committees split the information to several separate considerations, with two services being considered at single occasion, this practice was now being looked at again.
11. Performance Indicator reporting was welcomed by Cllr. Pratt. "I think they are fantastic and they tell a good story if you look at them properly." Whilst Buchan looked at them quarterly, looking at one service in depth, with relevant officers in attendance, Cllr. Pratt would like to have them separate: "It would be less daunting for people to look at in smaller amounts." The current reporting could still be improved: "sometimes the explanation doesn't give information about the

action that is being taken to get things back on track.” However, some of the indicators were “not worth the paper they are written on”. These were primarily statutory Performance Indicators on matters over which the Council had no control.

12. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes echoed this view. He was also concerned that some of the Performance Indicators currently reported were meaningless and did not measure performance at all. “The sooner we get a relevant set of Performance Indicators developed the better.” The current system was a bind to officers: there were too many of them and they took up too much time. “You need to know what you want to measure and why you are measuring it, what the target is, and what you have achieved. Then you can look at whether or not it has been achieved and if not, why not.”
13. Cllr. Mair believed that the layout for Performance Indicator reporting had improved, but felt it was not good to present all of the information on a single occasion. “It would be better to have the information split into single services and have officers present at the meeting to answer any questions. I put a lot of store in Performance Indicators, but I don’t like the way they are presented at the moment.”
14. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes felt that there was room for significant improvement in Performance Indicator reporting. “The language and method of presentation was [originally] confusing and overly complicated. Things have not really improved.” The Garioch Area Committee split consideration of the quarterly performance indicators across three meetings, with two services reporting to each meeting. This gave members the opportunity to scrutinise the Performance Indicators in detail, without being swamped. It was important to have officer support in considering the matter: “As a Committee we have agreed that we will not discuss Performance Indicators unless an appropriate officer is present... it is very annoying when officers can not seem to answer any questions.”
15. In Garioch, Cllr. Kitts-Hayes reported that an annual report on schools’ attainment levels was of more relevance than the education Performance Indicators submitted quarterly. “This is the type of paper I would prefer to see at the area committee.”

E. Area top-up budget

1. Cllr. Ingleby reported that the Marr Area Committee believed that the sum available for area top-up was adequate. “Unless there is a dramatic increase, we can’t undertake major projects and we will only be doing more of the same.” Concerns were also expressed that a large increase may generate inconsistency. Cllr. Ingleby felt that there was no great need for the area committees to become more involved in the Capital Plan.
2. Cllr. Melling suggested that if the areas had a bigger budget they could use their powers to impact on local causes and issues and provide financial support. This would highlight locally greater awareness of the Council and its involvement in, and responsiveness to, local issues. The increase in the funds available had

raised wider awareness of the scheme. He liked the applicants to attend the area committee when their requests were being heard. "This allows the Committee to make an assessment of the worthiness of the funding by allowing more information than can be contained in an officer report." Additional top-up funding would not, Cllr. Melling believed, create a series of mini councils. He suggested that there were missed opportunities to increase local control of resources, but acknowledged that to direct more money to area committees at present would merely impact on the central budgets.

3. The Formartine Area Chair, Cllr. Loveday, thought the area top-up budget was good. "It gives the areas something to use". The increased amount available had, however, caused problems. Either there was a flood of applications, many of which were not eligible, with some coming in very late in the financial year with insufficient information to process properly, or few applications were received. The application form had been customised to better suit Formartine's request for more detail, but Cllr. Loveday acknowledged that this meant a different process to that applied in other areas. Applications from outwith Formartine had been received, showing there was confusion amongst applicants. "I do not think I would want much of an increase as we find it difficult to find general things to do with it." When the area committees had direct control over an area plan, as opposed to input to the local community plan, the area top-up funds could be used to move projects forward. "I have suggested creating an area plan again."
4. Cllr. Pratt, the Buchan Area Chair, wished to see the areas being given more powers to spend. If part of every service budget were to be devolved to the areas, it would need to be done under a strict set of criteria. However, the area committee funds accounted for one tenth of 1% of the Council budget. "Officers have more delegated powers than the democratically elected members and I think that is wrong." Cllr. Pratt suggested that more area committee input would not necessarily mean "wiser spending", but that the councillors would be responsible and have control. "Community Development Groups have control over more funds than the area committees."
5. The area top-up budget should definitely be increased, and could be without creating a series of mini-councils, Cllr. Pratt suggested. "We could spend it many times over. A lot of communities have done small projects and are now looking for bigger things". Whilst increasing funding to £250,000 had been suggested in discussions, Cllr. Pratt believed that "it wouldn't be out of order to have £1million given to each area as long as it were spent under strict criteria." Cllr. Pratt was clear that the funds could never be used for core funding, and would be on a one-off basis.
6. Cllr. Mair felt that the area committee budget control was crucial to the function being taken seriously. While the area top-up scheme had allowed a number of small schemes to be accomplished, it was very limited. Cllr. Mair would like to see £250,000 allocated to the areas to allow the pursuit of "something meaningful rather than small projects." This would allow the areas to take responsibility and be accountable for schemes in the area.

7. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes felt that the area committees needed to look at all area budgets so there could be influence on prioritisation. “We are able, through local knowledge, to flag up other areas where we feel things need to be done.” The committees could not become involved in writing service plans but should be able to discuss priorities at an early stage. The area top-up funds had been used in Garioch to great effect to enhance Council services, but Cllr. Kitts-Hayes reported “with the exception of roads and landscape services we have little knowledge of what other services spend locally... and I believe the area committee should know.”
8. In Garioch, the area top-up budget could be better applied, if additional funds were available, to make significant contributions to particular projects, currently outwith the scope of the scheme. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes commended its use as leverage funding. “At present the budget is sufficient to help small projects, but not big enough to make a strategic difference.” He suggested that £250,000 would be a “good level for the area top-up budget although it would have to have pretty strict criteria to ensure it was used efficiently.” He felt that “If we are serious about giving the area committee a bigger role, then you need to trust it to be responsible and make the right decisions.”

F. Engagement with area management teams

1. Cllr. Ingleby believed that engagement with area management team and the local community planning groups was increasingly effective in Marr. All members were involved: some through roles on either the community planning executive or local group, and others in more informal ways. A welcome recent development was the holding of formal meetings between the area committee, area management team and local community planning board. This was “successful and very informative”. Marr community forums, held three times a year, were also, Cllr. Ingleby reported, becoming more effective and focused.
2. The Marr Area Manager was credited with the effective working of the area management team. Cllr. Ingleby found him to be “an effective leader [who] communicates well with the committee and his team.”
3. In Kincardine & Mearns, Cllr. Melling reported that there had been joint meetings with the area management team. However, these were not regular. Cllr. Melling thought that although the work of the area committee and the area management team were in tune, more could be done to encourage more formal and regular exchanges. As Chair of the area committee, he met with the area manager on a monthly basis. Cllr. Melling was happy to speak directly to officers such as planners and building standard staff who were dealing with specific matters.
4. Cllr. Loveday felt that the area committee did not have enough discussions with the management of services. Even when meetings with the area management team were requested, these did not always happen and this caused some problems. “I don’t really know where the problems are [in services]...and what the staffing issues are. It’s a major concern that we don’t have a seat at the table with the local management team.”

5. Whilst it might be nice for area managers to have direct input to the line-managing the services representatives for their area, Cllr. Loveday suggested that this might lead to six mini-councils. "If you have the... power of persuasion you are ok...you need someone in post that can liaise with everyone."
6. In Buchan, Cllr. Pratt reported that although no formal meetings of the area committee and area management team took place, informal sessions and meeting at formal area committees allowed positive interaction. Any process could be made more effective, but generally the current processes were operating effectively.
7. Cllr. Mair informed the Committee that there was no great level of overlap between the work of the area committee and the area management team in Banff & Buchan. "They have their meetings and we have ours." Whilst understanding that it may not be appropriate to have all management team meetings open to the area committee members to visit, he thought it would be beneficial "to have a meeting to discuss issues, even if it were only annually".
8. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes reported that the area committee used to meet quarterly with the area management team to discuss the area plan. Not all services attended: it tended to be the same people. There was, he felt, a need to meet informally with the area management team to work together on area matters such as budgets and build up relationships. "I believe staff appreciate an interest being taken in their work and it enables us to better understand the problems and issues they face."

G. Relationships with local community planning

1. One area on which more work was required, was the interface between community planning and the area committee in Kincardine and Mearns. There were also, Cllr. Melling believed, barriers in public perceptions about what was meant. "People hear planning and think bricks and mortar." It was a difficult subject to present to the area committee. Cllr. Melling suggested that part of the challenge may be that community planning was trying to embrace so much; there also seemed to be areas of duplication. An "organogram" would be helpful, but Cllr. Melling had been told it would be difficult to produce. "If senior officers find it difficult to understand enough to create an organogram of the structures and relationships involved, how can elected members be expected not only to understand but be able to explain [community planning] to the general public?"
2. Community planning was also a challenge in Formartine. Cllr. Loveday reported that despite being the councillor representative on the community planning group, he felt that elected members did not have enough input. "Nothing comes to [the area] committee other than the Community Plan, but that is a fait accompli, so that is not good... there is resentment that Community Planning is taking over and a feeling that members don't want to know about it."
3. Cllr. Pratt suggested that relationships with the local community planning groups could also be better. "We have had a session about community planning initiatives and we have more coming up relating to the community plan." He

believed that there may still be room for an area plan, feeding into the local community plan: “Most things in the community plan we have no control over.” All members received the minutes of the local community planning group on which he sat as Chair of the area committee. Discussions were being held with the local community planning officer on how to get members more involved. Cllr. Pratt thought there was a fear that community planning was taking over Councillors’ roles...“but things move on and we need to adjust.”

4. The Banff & Buchan Area Chair reported that there was not a lot of contact between the area committee and the community planning groups. This was not a criticism, as Cllr. Mair felt that the groups were still finding their feet. In time the relationship would improve.
5. Cllr. Mair welcomed the quarterly update reports on Community Planning which came to the Banff & Buchan Area Committee. He saw no great distinction between the previous area, and the new community planning, plans. “It is basically the same plan under a different name. It is just about terminology. The idea is that it contains items that will benefit the area.” Cllr. Mair felt that the area committee had enough influence in the local community plan, and reported that the area committee had met with the local community planning group to discuss items taken from the area plan.
6. The Garioch Area Chair, sitting on the local community planning board, also suggested that the relationship with community planning could be better communicated. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes acknowledged: “There is a communication issue but I probably need to circulate more information and engage better with fellow councillors.”

H. Multi-member wards

1. Cllr Ingleby acknowledged that multi-member wards might mean that members no longer have a feeling of “ownership” in the same way. The move had, in Marr, created good active groups for each ward, with members sharing responsibility and making sure that the work was done. This appeared to be working well regardless of whether the members were new to local government on 2007, (thus having no experience of anything other than multi-member ward working), or had previously worked the one member, one ward system.
2. Cllr. Melling was not overly impressed with the operation of multi-member wards. Some worked well, but only where the individual members were willing to work together. In some wards, there could be a political element in this, with three members working together and the fourth not participating. In Kincardine & Mearns, the ward members met regularly with the area manager: this was seen to be very useful in terms of both getting together and sharing information. “The area manager often gets information that we don’t as members and vice-versa.”
3. The Formartine Area Committee’s work had not, in Cllr. Loveday’s opinion, been impacted by the introduction of multi-member wards. He felt that the system meant that there were more people with local knowledge. Formartine’s bigger

geographical wards had benefitted as the ward members were spread across them, allowing better more local awareness.

4. In Buchan, Cllr. Pratt reported that multi-member wards were “an absolute disaster”. His personal preference was for single member wards as the effectiveness of multi-member wards in working for their communities “depends on the personalities involved.”
5. Cllr. Mair spoke of the multi-member system as working well in his ward, with good interaction amongst councillors without the need for regular ward meetings. He would not expect to be consulted on everything the other members did, but if there were an important issue, the ward members asked each other for input. This did not necessarily apply to all wards in Banff & Buchan: “you might find a problem, but that is down to the individuals.”
6. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes spoke of his wholehearted support for multi-member wards. He was not aware of any in Garioch which were not working well. There were regular ward meetings and the Inverurie ward members were also involved with the Inverurie Partnership Group. “I think we would all agree that we work well together despite the political differences. Politics is not so important at a ward level.”

I. Reduction in numbers on the policy committees

1. In Marr, the reduction in numbers of members on the policy committees had been positive. Cllr. Ingleby reported that policy committees were felt to be more focused, with members feeling more responsible for their remit and more able to feedback information to the rest of the area committee. “If clarification were sought about a policy decision a representative on that committee would be asked. I believe it has improved the flow of information.”
2. Cllr. Melling suggested that the reduction in numbers serving on the central committees had raised some difficulties. On a couple of occasions, the policy committees had struggled to be quorate. Cllr. Melling felt that if the committees were reduced too much this would hinder their operation and also make them less representative.
3. Unlike Marr, where Cllr. Ingleby had reported no difficulties in communication from the policy committees to the area, the Kincardine & Mearns Area Chair, Cllr. Melling, felt that the flow of information had been compromised. Cllr. Melling reported attending a working group which was “very much driven by officers and not enough by elected members”. However this might relate, he suggested, to information overload and also that some matters were more accessible than others to councillors.
4. Cllr. Loveday felt that the move to single central committee duties for each member, and the reduction in the size of these committees, had impacted negatively on the flow of information and consideration of business at the Formartine Area Committee. “When most members were on two policy committees, you would have a reasonable cross-section of information around

the area committee. Now you may have one of the committees where you don't have anyone represented." In contrast, policy committees had, he felt, benefitted by better discussions.

5. In Buchan, Cllr. Pratt felt that the reduction in numbers and increased consideration by area committees allowed more discussion at the area level of central issues. This, however, was only a strength and a positive if that debate were informed. "We have less people who have the background to the papers", he reported. "I see being on only one policy committee as more of an issue for less experienced councillors as there is a lack of knowledge and interaction between councillors." He was also concerned that despite more matters being brought to the areas, there were very few instances where changes were made in the light of area committee input. This made it hard to see that the areas' comments were being considered in any real way.
6. Cllr. Mair agreed that the smaller numbers on policy committees were beneficial to better discussion. However, he felt that an opportunity for members to get to know and recognise other councillors had been lost. "Previously you were in contact with many more councillors, being on two policy committees, which were larger in number."
7. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes was content with the reduced number on the policy committees. He felt the smaller numbers made it easier for members to contribute. It was also more important that the members participating did understand the issues and contribute. One of the weaknesses of the current system was the allocation of places on the policy committees by the political groups which did not take account of a balance of representation across the areas. Cllr. Kitts-Hayes did not think that this was insurmountable: "It is quite easy to find out about what is going on if you want to."

5. THE PERSEPCTIVE OF THE AREA MANAGERS

As in 2007, the Committee met with all six area managers, in three sessions, to hear of any improvements or changes since the previous investigation into the decentralisation of decision-making in Aberdeenshire.

A. Changes since 2007

1. Mr. Munro, Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager, believed that the area office now provided more support to members than it had previously. Regular ward meetings were held to support the multi-member wards but the new system took more time and kept the area manager in the office, rather than seeing things on the ground.
2. Community planning, with its replacement of the previous area plans with the more recent local community plans, was also highlighted as a major change, with the area manager's role altering. Mr. Munro felt that there was a need to involve members more in the process.
3. The Marr Area Manager, Mr. Allan, felt that there had been an increasing workload, not necessarily because of decentralisation changes, but as a result of efforts put into community planning and community engagement. The increased number of items coming to area committee for input had also a time resource implication. Although the Chief Executive supported area managers well, Mr. Allan was concerned that, dealing with a huge range of things at any one time, "we don't have the staff...to take decisions for us." He suggested there may be a need to look at whether the current area office was correctly staffed.
4. Mr. Fowell agreed that the areas were becoming more of an arm of community planning and that this was a growth area. This was also true in Formartine, Mr. Newton advised the Committee. However a real sense of disassociation in terms of governance, roles and responsibilities was reported. It was important that the area committees had input into the local community plan, as only one member, usually the area chair, sat on the local community planning group.
5. Mr. White, Buchan Area Manager, suggested that despite the large turnover of councillors since the last investigation, and similar changes in police, fire and education officers, there was still a lot of locally responsive work ongoing in terms of local community planning. The challenge was to engage with the communities and to deal with a lot of issues with a very small budget. In this regard, he commended the work of Corporate Communications, to better inform people about what was going on.
6. The Garioch Area Manager spoke of his increasing day to day contact with the Garioch councillors as being new since the last investigation. "Previously the Provost and Leader were Garioch councillors and they had a PA in Woodhill House. Also a number were policy chairs, all of whom used support through Woodhill." The alteration, and increase in number of members from twelve to fourteen under the multi-member ward system had produced a feeling of much

more engagement. Mr. Fowell thought that the relationship with services had remained greatly unchanged.

7. Unlike his counterparts in Garioch and Buchan, Mr. McAuslin reported that the Banff & Buchan Area Committee composition had not been significantly altered by the 2007 election. There was only one councillor who had not been a councillor before. The development of community planning had been the greatest impact on the workload of the Banff & Buchan area office.
8. Mr. McAuslin also felt that the perspective between the services and the area manager had not really changed in the last three years. "The services have their own structure and if things are going well, there is no reason for me to become involved." He felt that, when issues arose, staff were very cooperative. While 13 years ago there appeared to be a feeling, at some levels, that the area structure was not appropriate, he advised the Committee that it was now not an issue: "Staff will do their job regardless of the structure." Mr. McAuslin was, he suggested, very fortunate with the officers in the Banff & Buchan Area. "It is a partnership approach that is taken."
9. The Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager felt it was important to reinforce the role of the area managers as acting on behalf of the chief executive. Mr. Munro suggested that this would still be the case, despite now being "one step away" from the chief executive by the creation of the new post of assistant chief executive. There were occasions of not being able to resolve an area issue at area management team level, with resolution relying on the input of the service director. "This can be very frustrating. If we do act on behalf of the chief executive, then we should be able to be more effective and be able to get things done."
10. There had been improvements to staff perception about the area and its work, but the relevance varied depending on the service involved, the Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager thought.
11. Messrs. Munro and White were convinced that further decentralisation would be possible without creating a series of mini-councils. The Capital Plan was based centrally but Mr. White suggested that it could be "flipped" to put a focus on what communities require. The areas had no discretionary budgets which could be applied to address issues swiftly. Mr. Munro felt that, in an ideal world, it would be possible to define a minimum service level across Aberdeenshire and then allow area committees to vary services above this level to meet the local needs.
12. The Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager reported that he was the local officer with least authority to spend money in the area. He felt it would reflect well on the Council if area managers could do more. Even more delegated authority over the area top-up budget would allow him to be able to react and make things happen more quickly.

B. Area management teams

1. Mr. White reported that the services which had structures aligned to the area system were more participatory in the work of the area management team. For others, such as Social Work and Education, it was more difficult to get involved. It could be difficult for officers to identify where priorities lay when they were “doing their day job as well.” He reported that it was much easier when there was a clear mandate to which officers felt they could contribute. Buchan examples of this would include Aden Park or RAF Buchan projects, both of which had benefited from cross-service input at area level. The area management teams across the six areas were currently taking part in a Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis to identify what was working and what was not.
2. The Formartine Area Manager agreed with his Buchan counterpart. He felt that since the planning gain list was now considered by the area management team, there had been better interest from the services which had not previously engaged well with the structure.
3. In contrast, Mr. McAuslin had “found that some of the services who are not aligned to the area system to be the most participative and able to look beyond their own professional remit.” He acknowledged that this may be down to the individuals and felt that he had been lucky that his team wanted to take on issues. He stressed that “work is not generally being carried out by the management team, but projects are undertaken by services working in partnership.”
4. There might be a requirement to look again at the role of the area management team in the light of the revised community planning focus. Mr. Munro suggested that “we need to look at the relevance for services and of representation.” It was often hard, he felt, to get services to bring items forward at the area management team. “The enthusiasts make it work...but not everyone is giving the same input.”
5. Mr. Allan felt that he had a lot of support from officers on the area management team. “I don’t have power over them, but I don’t particularly want that. Pulling rank doesn’t really help: I prefer to work with influence.” He cited feedback from the recent SWOT of area management teams which saw officers seeing a great benefit in being part of the teams, liking collective input to projects and working together to solve problems. If officers were on more than one area management team, the increased workload was counter-productive. “The analysis shows that workload and area management team are compatible, but this tends to be for people who have an area based function.”
6. The Garioch Area Manager saw each area management team as being very different. In Garioch it had been a struggle to get attendance and suggested items for agenda from the representatives. “It is about whether people see value in it and can bring something to their day-to-day job...It tends to work if the individual is enthusiastic.” Mr. Fowell would expect those attending to be able to

speak to colleagues and to feedback to all parts of their service, but “most don’t have a good mechanism to liaise with other parts of their service.”

7. In Formartine it was also felt that “the success was also down to the individual representatives of the service and how they communicate the information throughout their service.”

C. Discussions, seminars and information sessions

1. In Buchan, every Tuesday was used for some form of area committee business. Where possible, informal business was held after the formal committee; these sessions were useful for getting a consensus from members on an issue or “getting a point of view” without the press being present. Other Tuesdays were used to inform members about contentious issues or hold study tours to see services in operation. Mr. White felt that both he and the councillors had benefited from these sessions. Buchan did not operate formal ward meetings: some wards already worked in collaboration, and some issues would have relevant to more than one ward (such as Peterhead North and South). In the latter case, to hold separate ward meetings would be duplication and a shared briefing would be more effective.
2. Mr. Munro reported that Kincardine & Mearns also held additional meetings most Tuesdays, including site visits, seminars and ward meetings. The events were reasonably well attended, and members seemed to find them useful. He suggested that this way of working had been “a good way of getting the area committee to work as a team and get to know officers.”
3. The Marr Area Manager thought that the regular use of seminars as opposed to direct presentation of policy matters to the area committees was of great benefit, particularly when joint sessions across a number of geographic areas could be achieved. These events were held when needed, trying to fit in as many as possible without overloading councillors.
4. In Garioch, seminars and other events were held every third Tuesday, the week following the formal committee meeting. Mr. Fowell reported that there was generally a seminar held in the morning with a ward meeting in the afternoon. “It has been brilliant. Sometimes we have one long discussion, sometimes workshops, or speed networking.” The events were well attended with about two thirds of members taking part regularly.
5. Mr. McAuslin reported to the Committee that there often appeared to be a lack of communication within services themselves in relation to matters on service delivery and policy that may be coming to the area committees. The Banff & Buchan Area Committee invited presentation on topics arising from matters considered at formal area committee. Informal sessions allowed free and frank discussion of the issues involved. The third Tuesday of the cycle was set aside for this work. “The seminars are very helpful and they allow the members to better understand the issues.”

6. In Formartine, the sessions were sometimes held at the end of the area committee meetings. Mr. Newton reported that the members, particularly those elected in 2007, found them helpful and the number of seminars had increased. He welcomed that services were now engaging with the area committees at an early stage. Attendance varied depending on the other calls on councillors' diaries.

D. Management of area committee business

1. Mr. White acknowledged that the order of business varied across the area committees. In Buchan, planning applications, which traditionally formed a major input of area committee business, were dealt with first. This had been agreed by the previous and current Buchan Area Chairs, because "that is what the public and press has the interest in." The discussion of policy items was better for some topics than others. The area implications of some items were easier to grasp than others, Mr. White suggested. On occasion it could be difficult to identify what was a committee view, as opposed to the view of an individual member. In order to minimise officer waiting time, in addition to being advised of an indicative timescale for their item to be considered, space had been set aside in Arbuthnot House for officers to "hot-desk", if it were not their allocated work base.
2. In Kincardine & Mearns, policy items were taken at the start of the agenda. Mr. Munro was convinced this was the better way to progress business. "When the planning applications were first we discussed these in great detail and we sometimes didn't have the time or energy to discuss policy papers." He felt the previous order also left officers waiting longer to have their papers heard, sometimes for little debate. Mr. Munro thought that having the press and some public there to hear the consideration of matters other than planning was crucial: "It is important that there is public awareness of these items."
3. Both the Buchan and Kincardine & Mearns Area Committees tended to meet in the same location, using the council chamber facilities of the former District Councils headquarters. There was, Mr. White advised, a cost in moving the committee around; this may be necessary and advisable in Marr, the largest of the six areas, but in Buchan "everything is within half an hour's drive." The area managers agreed that if there was an item of specific local impact, consideration would be given to locating any meeting to give the local community easy access.
4. Mr. Allan advised the Committee that the Marr agenda dealt with policy items first, started at 9.30am to allow more time for discussions, and began consideration of planning matters no later than 11.00am. If all other public items had not been disposed of by 11.00am, they were deferred till the planning applications had been determined. Given the nomadic nature of Marr Area Committee, moving across a range of locations in the area, travelling time was also a factor. "It has led to long days and this has influenced the way the committee behaves. Both officers and councillors are encouraged to be concise."

5. In Formartine, policy items were taken at the beginning of the meeting, called for 9.45 a.m. This had been changed following the previous Scrutiny & Audit Committee investigation and Mr. Newton thought it was working well. No planning matters were considered before 11.00 a.m. The order “allows the area committee to have more ownership of policy items. It was also to encourage councillors to stay right to the end of the meeting.” There had been increased public engagement which Mr. Newton welcomed: “this helps to spread the word about the other things that the Council does.”
6. In Garioch, the agenda considered Performance Indicators first, then planning, followed by individual service reports. Mr. Fowell reported that “it works well from a public point of view, but I don’t think that it works well for policy items...there is a cost because the timescale is less predictable for items which are later on the agenda.” He was concerned that there may be a reduction in the quality of debate and a tendency to rush items.
7. Mr. McAuslin reported that the Banff & Buchan Area Committee still took planning matters at the start of the agenda: “with the increased public attendance the committee wanted planning applications to be taken first... planning is what our members think the public is interested in.” He challenged his Formartine colleague’s suggestion that changing the order of the agenda really encouraged the public to stay. “If they really want to hear about things, they will stay.”
8. Buchan and Kincardine & Mearns regularly accepted requests to speak at the committee. These focused on development control planning applications and although a good channel to allow the public input to decisions which would affect their lives, the impact on the area committee’s deliberations was not discernable. Mr. White explained: “I cannot think of a single decision that has been positively affected by a request to speak. My committee feels that the report is adequate and has found that addressing the committee has not added a lot.” In Kincardine & Mearns, although “members like it... and speaking sometimes carry some weight with the committee”, the impact was not always positive. Mr. Munro reported: “Some agents do abuse the system and don’t add much to what is already there. It also leads to a lengthening of the meeting time and asking questions adds to this further.”
9. Mr. Allan was pleased that central policy issues were coming to the areas more frequently. He had concerns that there were discrepancies in how the deliberations were minuted: “It should be the collective view that should influence policy.”

E. Area top-up

1. In Buchan, the area top-up increase had allowed “more of the same”, including contributions to Homecoming Scotland and extra support for Planning for Real. Mr. White reported that “£2,000 is kept back for me to allocate in consultation with the area chair and this is used for things that I would not normally be able to deal with.” Although the amount had increased, it was still “a tiny amount in the overall scheme of things.”

2. Mr. Munro agreed that the increase in funding had been welcome. The Kincardine & Mearns Area Committee had not yet refused any applications submitted for committee approval. Mr. Munro felt that reference should be made to the community plan to assess the relevance of proposals before considering top-up applications. He suggested that “the level of funding available for allocation could quite comfortably be increased.” To have a discretionary fund set aside for disbursement in consultation with the area chair, as happened in Buchan, would also be welcome.
3. Mr. Fowell did not think that the additional £10,000 top-up budget made a lot of difference to the way in which the scheme operated; it was still used as grant money and tended to be reactive rather than pro-active. There was, he felt, a reluctance to use the money to enhance Council services: “the Committee would rather give funds to outside bodies throughout the year and only really consider Council services at the end of the financial year if funds remain.” Additional funding would have to be allocated more strategically.
4. The Marr Area Manager also felt that the additional funding had made little difference. The scheme was still project based. The only revenue support assistance had been allocated to open the public toilets in Banchory for a longer period than the service had originally proposed. “We...don’t have a problem giving money to third party groups as it gives better ownership.” He agreed with Messrs. White and Munro that there should also be money to solve problems which came up. Mr. Allan also commented that it was often hard to achieve spend in the year funds were allocated and reported that “grant money takes a long time to administer for the small amount of money involved.”
5. In Formartine the area top-up had been “enough to provide a good amount for local projects, but not enough to make a significant change to service delivery.” However, Mr. Newton reported that the impact on communities had been very good and that this reflected well on the Council. “Small grants do a lot to help raise the standard of the overall environment in communities.”
6. The Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager felt that there were elements of other budgets, discretionary in council services, where there might be scope for councillors to get involved in allocation of funding. Mr. Newton agreed: “there are a number of budgets that should be dealt with at the area level e.g. education grants, partnership funding but also approval of parts of service budgets should be delegated to an area committee. It would also be useful to have a budget to do short-term fixes.” Mr. McAuslin agreed, in principle.
7. The Garioch Area Manager thought that “rather than have services coming along with a list of what they intended to do, a larger area budget would allow area committees to have more say in what is being done.”
8. Mr. White spoke of the “community facility” funds generated by planning gain. These came to the area management team for discussion and were a welcome area input. Mr. Munro agreed. In Kincardine & Mearns an assessment form had been designed which linked consideration of project proposals to the local community plan, as well as demonstrating that the need was generated or

exacerbated by development. Proposals were discussed with ward members, whose comments carried weight with the area management team in their deliberations.

9. In Formartine local members were also consulted before the area management team agreed the allocation of planning gain funds earmarked for “community improvements”.

F. The area manager’s role

1. Mr. Munro felt that area managers powers were extensive, “almost unlimited.” This allowed them to be quite reactive to what was coming up in communities. He felt a key aspect of the area manager’s role was in managing public expectation. Matters were discussed at the relevant ward meetings and the scheme of delegation made it clear what needed to be discussed at the area committee for formal approval.
2. The Banff & Buchan Area Manager advised the Committee that he had “never felt constrained in anything I wanted to do,” adding the caveat, “but if it is significant, I wouldn’t do it without first speaking to the area chair or local members.” A further constraint was the resource implications: “without financial power there isn’t much that you can do.”
3. Mr. Newton echoed Mr. McAuslin. He added, “There is a great deal of trust between the area committee and the area manager. I think that is what allows everyone to work better.”
4. Mr. White suggested that the key pressure was splitting time between corporate responsibilities and maintaining a local presence. “We are also expected to be sitting in our office at the end of a phone.” However he felt it was very important to have Council-wide responsibilities because “it allows you to see the bigger picture and have a different perspective/ profile.” It was hard, on occasion, he reported, to have to “defend things that you find difficult to defend” when the priority for one area did not match the overall Council priorities. Mr. Allan agreed: “As an area manager I have to defend the Council position whether I agree with it or not.”
5. Mr. Fowell advised the Committee of the need for him to have a role between the area and policy committees in areas where responsibility for decisions was grey. He cited the recent examples of a replacement care home in Inverurie and a library at Westhill coming to the area committee as planning applications only. He questioned whether the area committee input should have been to the proposals themselves, not just the development control aspects of the policy committee approved projects.
6. Mr. Allan agreed that this was an area where greater clarity might be welcomed. “As area managers we are expected to know and deal with anything and everything.” The issue was often one of ensuring that the area committee got the information it needed, whether by formal or informal communication. “If the area manager and the area management team are working well on the

communication side, then the issues of delegation won't matter because the work will be being done and everyone will know why."

7. Mr. McAuslin also had concerns where policy committee decisions which had delegated authority to officers to progress projects did not sit well with some of the local members. "There have been occasions that the area committee has been wholeheartedly against decisions that have been taken at policy committees."
8. The Formartine Area Manager spoke of the changes in senior management structure and wondered how this would impact on the role of area managers and their links with directors and the chief executive. "Area managers will not be as centrally located in terms of management team and some issues will need to be teased out."

G. Multi-member wards/ reduction of numbers on policy committee

1. In Buchan, Mr. White thought that the multi-member wards had bedded down better than expected. "By and large there is good discussion and consensus."
2. Mr. Munro reported that the new system had not been as work intensive as had been feared. "The ward meeting itself and follow up is extra work, but is not a huge issue and is worthwhile."
3. In Banff & Buchan the new arrangements had had almost negligible impact. In 2007 only one new councillor was elected. Mr. McAuslin felt most members "were well able to look after themselves and know their way around." This had also meant that ward meetings were generally not required, with councillors working together informally.
4. The Formartine area had seen half of the committee change with the 2007 elections. Mr. Newton reported that the wards displayed differing levels of collaboration, depending on the attitudes of the local members. Regular informal ward meetings were held which provided an opportunity to discuss ward meetings in full, with the relevant officers invited to participate where appropriate.
5. There was no perceptible difference in Kincardine & Mearns by the reduction of numbers serving on each policy committee. Mr. Munro felt that the increasing submission of policy matters for area committee consideration addressed the cascade of information, albeit with increased workload issues for the area committee. He suggested that overall awareness amongst members had been increased in the new process.
6. The Garioch Area Manager spoke of his concern that the reduction of members on the policy committees had meant that councillors did not know as much as they used to about what was being reported to policy committees. This meant there was greater reliance on what came to area committees in terms of new or revised policies.

H. Barriers to effective communication

1. Mr. White drew parallels with Peterhead's twin towns where heads of service regularly met together. Aberdeenshire was about to have a significant amount of upheaval in its senior staff, including a reduction in heads of service posts. This meant there would be a change in officer remits and the need to rebuild personal relationships.
2. Mr. Munro shared the Buchan Area Manager's concerns. "The communication tools are there, but it comes down to people using them properly...It is about recognising who and what can add value to what is going on."
3. The Marr Area Manager felt that Aberdeenshire was quite good at communicating. Sometimes structures could get in the way, but "if people want to do it, it will happen." Mr. Allan referred to ongoing work to develop the presentation of information to councillors electronically which he believed would make it better for services and councillors to communicate.
4. Mr. Fowell thought that communication could always be improved. There was, he suggested, a natural tendency for directors to think "staff" and not think "area." "Some times they don't tell ward councillors or forget to copy in the area manager."

I. Potential additional improvements to decentralisation

1. Mr. Munro felt that more influence should be afforded both area officers and the area committees, with more budget control at a local level. "Quite a lot [of services] are demand led...but where budgets are not fixed there should be the possibility to input and there could be an appropriate level set for virement of money within constraints."
2. Mr. White agreed that more input to resource allocation would be helpful. "It is amazing that the Community Development Groups can have more money to allocate than area committees." He suggested that it would be an interesting exercise to "see the Capital Plan split into seven and ask the area committees to set their priorities."
3. Both the Buchan and Kincardine & Mearns Area Managers believed that both area partnership and community development group monies would be under better democratic control if the funds came under the influence of the area committees. Mr. Allan felt that it would not be possible to absorb the area partnerships as they were separate bodies. "In Marr it is an excellent organisation that we work very closely with and purchase services from." He understood the concern that there could be over-many groups and suggested that the area forums could perhaps deliver work currently allocated to the community development groups. "It is about making the playing field clearer to everyone and finding a way to fit under the community planning banner would make it simpler."

4. There was also a need for more councillor engagement with local community planning “as some feel that they are detached from this.” Mr. Munro reported that he would also welcome more area management team input to community planning matters.
5. Mr. White agreed that both area committees and the area management team needed to be the channel for increased community engagement and suggested that there needed to be better coordination of consultation in Aberdeenshire’s communities.
6. The Garioch Area Manager spoke of room for the area committee and area managers to have authority to do more things and to be able to provide things when required. Whilst not advocating the reinstatement of the previous area plans, Mr. Fowell suggested that there may be an argument for having an separate action plan for area priorities.
7. Mr. Fowell suggested that additional consideration should be given to how an area committee could raise policy issues and get them debated. He felt that area committees should be able to identify local issues and raise them to a higher level.
8. The Formartine Area Manager thought that there had been a missed opportunity in looking at the educational grants scheme, with the suggestion that the Rural Youth Transport Grants revert to the centre. He suggested that the opposite should be the case: much of the work of the Education Grants Sub-Committee could be undertaken by the area committees. They would have a “much clearer and in-depth knowledge of local issues than an Aberdeenshire-wide group could have.” Mr. Newton was concerned that this typified a centralisation move which was pulling things back. The same argument could, he felt, be made for the minor planning applications considered by the Local Review Body. The area committee would be dealing with bigger applications than the centralised review body.

6. THE PERSPECTIVE OF AREA MANAGEMENT TEAM REPRESENTATIVES

The Committee met with Kathy Davidson, Support Services Manager, Housing & Social Work, and Ian Rendall, Roads Manager, Garioch & Formartine, Transportation & Infrastructure. Mr. Rendall had previously given evidence to the 2006 investigation. Both were named participants in area management teams and were asked to comment on their experiences.

A. Area management team

1. Mr. Rendall saw the area management team as the executive branch of the area committee. It discussed local and strategic issues, highlighted by the area manager from the senior management team. Community planning matters were also discussed, as was the use of allocated planning gain moneys.
2. Mrs. Davidson understood the area management team to have three main roles: to be (a) the link between the councillors and the services; (b) the link between councillors and the public; and (c) the link between different services in the locality. She saw it as “pertinent to the resolving local issues.”
3. The relationship between the area management team and Transportation & Infrastructure was, Mr. Rendall suggested, very good. He felt that participating in the area management team was a good way for services locally to interact. It also afforded the opportunity for representatives to cascade information down their own teams, and also to channel information from their own services to the area management team’s cross-service representatives. The management teams worked better, in Mr. Rendall’s opinion, when all services were represented by active participants.
4. Mrs. Davidson spoke of her service having representatives from both housing and social work on the area management teams. It was easier for housing, having a decentralised structure, to engage with the area focus. Social work, having a functional structure with its services delivered on the basis of individual need, considered matters which were less pertinent to the area management team. Mrs. Davidson stressed that there were, however, issues such as the development of strategic plans, consultations on joint community care plans and other specific issues relating to tendering and third party leases which needed to be discussed at an area level. She felt it was important for there to be service representatives from all services round the table at the area management team, to provide information and respond to queries.
5. Both Mr. Rendall and Mrs. Davidson thought that the area management teams were effective. “Made up of [staff] members who know the local area and have local knowledge make it effective...the representatives of the service know this local information,” Mrs. Davidson suggested.
6. The management team representatives commended the fact that issues for discussion at area management team meetings came from a range of directions, with the area manager often acting as conduit. This augmented suggestions from the services directly, via their representatives on the area management

teams. The area management team was used as a locally informed, cross-service “think tank” to consider issues highlighted by local residents and community councils, or topics suggested via community planning.

7. Mrs. Davidson thought that the area management team could be further improved by increased cross-service discussions on how corporate initiatives such as Worksmart were being applied in the local area. She felt that the agenda often concentrated on work arising from the area committees, community planning and planning applications, leaving little time for discussion of other matters.
8. Mr. Rendall advised the Committee that being the service representative on both the Formartine and Garioch Area Management Teams was not problematic. He saw benefits in being on both. There were often local issues of cross-boundary interest to be handled.

B. Relationship with area committee

1. Mr. Rendall saw the area management teams as being very responsive to the priorities set by the area committee. He spoke of an annual “speed dating” meeting, initiated in Garioch to introduce members of the management team to the area committee. Mr. Rendall commended it as a good way of interacting with the councillors to discuss local policies and issues. Building on this and officer attendance at the formal area committee, informal seminars and briefing sessions on specific topics, Mr. Rendall felt that he, and other members of the area management team, were known and accessible to the members of the area committee. “Officers can speak to the councillors on a one-to-one basis.”
2. Mrs. Davidson was also pleased to be involved in the “speed dating” process, finding it beneficial to those officers who attended. She suggested that other areas might consider this method of integrating area management team and the area committee members.
3. The Roads service reported its annual work programme to the area committees, based on professionally assessed priorities. Mr. Rendall suggested that although the programme was set, area committee comments were taken on board as far as possible. Any works which could not be incorporated into the current year’s schedule were added to a “reserve” list, and would be considered in the case of additional funds or slippage in other planned works. If unable to be undertaken in the programme for any one year, the works would be included in the work programme for the following year. In addition, a roads officer would attend each area committee to comment on planning applications, as the service was a regular consultee.
4. Mrs. Davidson had fewer occasions to report directly to the area committee, coming from a service with a strategic, or functional, orientation. In Social Work, budgets were devolved to the managers to determine care packages, for example, for client group services. Managers’ functions could include community care, commissioning, learning disability, mental health, criminal justice and children’s services. These were not matters for councillor input. The Housing

part of Mrs. Davidson's service, with managers having local responsibility for matters within their local area, had greater interaction with the area committee on a regular and formal basis. She was therefore less familiar with the area committee members than her housing colleagues would be.

5. Reference was made to the in-service "news release" produced for Social Work & Housing staff to update them on decisions made at the formal committee meetings. Mrs. Davidson suggested that the introduction of a similar post-committee briefing for the area committees, to be cascaded to all area staff, might improve awareness. "Some staff don't realise the work that is being done at a local level and there is a lot of work being done."
6. Officers in social work might appear to have greater influence over budgets than local members in the areas, but Mrs. Davidson stressed that officers had to conform to a strict set of limits of delegated authority. "There is a particular policy which specifies the spending limits for every officer in the service and this ensures that everyone is aware of their spending limits." The budgets were spent on the basis of priority of the client following proper assessment of need.
7. Both officers stressed that, since the last investigation on decentralisation, there had been improvements, and that the situation was one of continuous improvement. There were no restrictions perceived by the officers in making improvements. The relationship between members and officers, regardless any future improvements, was excellent. "I don't think of a "them and us" situation," Mr. Rendall advised the Committee, "we should be working as one big team. The local contact with councillors and the detail of local information improves the arrangement we have."

C. Decentralisation

1. Mr. Rendall thought that officers' initial concerns about working with the area focus, as opposed to having a completely "in-house" service outlook, had been overcome. "There needed to be a better interface with the public and decentralisation has helped with this. The public are now aware of the local presence and it is used more. You can't beat local knowledge."
2. Mrs. Davidson agreed that the success to decentralisation lay in officers' ability to tap into local knowledge. "It is an opportunity to gain local knowledge and for the services to work together at a local level."

7. THE PERSPECTIVE OF AREA COMMITTEE OFFICERS

The Committee heard from Liz Farquhar, Ann Riddell and Theresa Wood, Area Committee Officers, of their perception of any changes and improvements since the last Scrutiny & Audit investigation into the decentralisation of decision-making.

The roles of all three officers covered all aspects of area committee work, with additional tasks allocated either to support local initiatives, (such as clerking the Peterhead Prison Visiting Committee), cross-area work (such as the Gordon Fishings Management Committee and the meetings of area managers/ area chairs) and corporate projects such as the Information Technology Group, currently looking at further developing Councillors' Arcadia (the in-house intranet for members) and ward pages. All were involved in area work outwith formal support for the area committee and its meetings. They reported to members the usefulness of twice yearly meetings of the area managers' teams, and the specific allocation of set-aside time for the area committee officers to meet together. This augmented the more regular informal contact between the post-holders if there were matters of concern or shared interest.

A. Are staff aware of the area structure?

1. The area committee officers agreed that most staff were aware of the area structure. This would alter depending on the relevance of the area committee to the individual officer's role. Mrs. Riddell suggested that the building up of good working relationships between the area committee officer and staff operating in the area and reporting to the area committee was crucial. Mrs. Wood reported that the officers from Law & Administration, Planning and Roads, as regular attendees at the area committee, were most fully understanding of the area structure. There could be less of an understanding with those officers who did not feed into the area structure as regularly. In Buchan, as in other areas, informal presentations were being scheduled to increase engagement as well as provide detailed information for round table discussion by members. Other members of staff might not know about the area structure because their role meant they had no need to know about it.
2. Mrs. Farquhar also commended the use of informal briefing sessions as "an excellent way to share information and get a good response from members". In Marr, Mrs. Riddell also got positive feedback from officers attending the informal sessions. "At the area committee there is often a pressure to move things along but at informal sessions there is more time for questions and discussions."
3. The role of the area management team as highlighting the area dimension to staff was also stressed. Mrs. Farquhar reported that this had changed in recent years. "Alterations to the area management team membership have allowed staff from different service structures to give input to the area, regardless of whether their role is functional across a large area, or more locally operational."
4. In Buchan, the area manager had participated in "back to the floor" exercises. One exercise had seen him working alongside gardeners allowing them to touch

upon the area structure. Mrs. Wood suggested that, although sitting in the Chief Executive's service, the area staff were in touch with all the services.

5. It was not felt necessary for there to be any line management responsibility from the area managers to staff working in the area. Mrs. Farquhar felt that it could be reassuring for staff to know that the "buck stops" with the area manager, but it was not necessary for direct overseeing of all staff in the area. There was a need for someone who could deal with cross-service issues and the area office often received complaints or requests for information. Sometimes it took a fair degree of investigation across several services to get the information required to respond.
6. The area committee officers all acknowledged that there had been an increase in more regular reports dealing with subjects other than planning applications coming to the area committees.

B. Are the public aware of the area structure?

1. The area committee officers believed that there was a considerable understanding of area structure by community groups and the public. "We have the public coming into the office fairly regularly and we are there to assist them with their enquiries," Mrs. Wood reported. This contact was preferred by some groups and individuals in Buchan, the area office having built up a rapport with them. Mrs. Riddell acknowledged that, where appropriate, calls were directed to the Council's contact centre. Mrs. Farquhar agreed that very positive feedback had been received from those passed onto the contact centre. "We have been told that the service is exceptional."
2. Mrs. Riddell spoke of the Marr Area Committee's travelling around the area to be more accessible to the public. The Committee had inherited the practice of hearing members of the public, particularly on planning applications and this, she believed, encouraged public attendance. Meetings had also been made more accessible by carrying and using portable equipment such as microphone and hearing loop systems. A recent further development was the display of planning application information on a projection system. This "often eases debate and discussion." Individual members of the public with an interest in any agenda item were advised of a likely start time. "We don't hear any planning applications before 11.00am and hear any other items before this time. Mrs. Riddell felt it was therefore relatively easy to advise interested parties of an optimum attendance time.
3. In Banff & Buchan, Mrs. Farquhar reported that more members of the public were attending area committees than in previous years. "We have come along leaps and bounds in helping the public understand the area structure." In Buchan, Mrs. Wood reported that there had also been discernable growth: "Planning applications are first on the agenda and generally the press and public leave after they have been heard. Occasionally, someone might stay on for the duration of the meeting".

4. In Buchan and Banff & Buchan, the planning matters were dealt with at the start of the meeting. Both areas had trialled, or discussed with local members, reversing the agenda order but had found difficulties. Sometimes members of the public had to wait for some considerable time to hear planning applications, so Mrs. Farquhar reported that the Banff & Buchan Area Committee had reverted to dealing with planning first to accommodate this. Mrs. Wood advised the Committee that it was also hard to schedule business, especially exempt items, taking planning at a different start time. "It is difficult to advise the press and public what time to arrive if planning applications were not heard first."
5. In all three areas, press attended the meetings. Sometimes they stayed, or arrived early, (depending on the order of agenda business,) to cover non-planning application matters; sometimes they had to leave at a set time, regardless of the agenda item. In all case, the area committee officers regularly dealt with post-meeting enquiries from the press, and public, on committee business.

C. Supporting the area committee

1. Despite an increasing staff awareness of the area structure, the area committee officers reported that there were still tensions between services and the areas. For example, scheduling officer attendance to present papers to the area committee could be difficult. This was especially critical if a policy item were going round all six area committees. In the early days of additional policy items being considered by the areas, the services would often try to cover two area committees in single day. This benefitted the services' processes by shorting the turn around for area comments to the centre from a possible six plus weeks, to a three plus, timeframe. However, it could be hard to arrange if the same officer planned to cover both committees.
2. Mrs. Riddell commended the Marr Area Committee's dealing with non-planning application business before 11.00am as being helpful for advising officers of the time their items were likely to be taken at the area committee. Mrs. Wood reported that officers presenting at the committee were encouraged to hot-desk at Arbuthnot House, if this was not their staff base, until advised that their item was to be imminently considered. All officer attendance was confirmed with the area chair at the briefing held a couple of days before the formal committee. A similar practice operated in Banff & Buchan where the committee venue, the County Hall, was not a staff base at all. In this case, the ante-room to the committee room was available for staff to work at until such time as they were required to present to the committee.

D. Area committee input to policy papers

1. All three area committee officers stressed the importance of allowing the area committees adequate time to contribute to policy consideration. Sometimes the matter might be better deferred to seminar, informal sessions or presentations. Every attempt was made to ensure the area committee allocated enough time to consider the matter, including deferring consideration to a separate meeting to enable proper discussion of the item.

2. It was acknowledged that there could be difficulties in minuting responses to the consultation papers, depending on how the recommendations were written. The area committee could be asked to comment in general, or on specific matters. Mrs. Farquhar suggested “the committee needs to know what is hoped to be achieved from the report and more specific recommendations can be helpful in achieving this.” Mrs. Wood suggested that the range of comments should be minuted and considered in full by the policy committee. Mrs. Riddell felt that it was especially useful when reports highlighted the local area focus rather than an Aberdeenshire-wide focus. Mrs. Wood and Mrs. Farquhar agreed that often reports made general statements of what they meant for the whole of Aberdeenshire: “each of the six areas is so different that these papers can mean very different things to different areas.”
3. There had been a significant improvement in the timescales allowed for area committee consideration of policy items, the area committee officers reported. But there were still occasions where the area committee consideration was too close to the date of the policy committee. On those occasions, extracts of draft minutes could, and were, turned around promptly. However these were not always transferred to the agreed reporting proforma. Sometimes no evidence could be discerned of even oral reporting to the policy committee, or of officer response to the area committee comments.

E. Consideration of performance indicators

1. The area committee officers advised the Committee of differing operational practices in dealing with Performance Indicators. It was felt that improvements could still be made to this, including consideration of focusing on particular service or services at one time, or otherwise splitting the summary quarterly report into more manageable pieces.
2. Mrs. Wood suggested that having officers to speak to a particular focused service was very beneficial. “They were able to answer questions and provide explanations where necessary.” This was needed as often services were unable to provide explanations in the paper format of the Performance Indicator reports. Mrs. Riddell agreed: “Issues may not be properly addressed in the absence of appropriate officers and face-to-face attendance allows for on the spot explanations.” Mrs. Farquhar reported that the Banff & Buchan Area Committee were currently considering how best to process the Performance Indicator reports. The existing practice either required an officer from each service to attend the area committee, which took a lot of time, or have no officers attending which she felt, “risks having no answers to the questions.”

F. Multi-member wards

1. Mrs. Wood reported that the application of multi-member wards meant that consultation on certain matters, such as traffic issues, needed three or four letters and not one or two, but otherwise not much difference was experienced.

2. Mrs. Farquhar agreed that the expected issues tended not to have materialised and certainly had not had a negative impact on the operation of the area committees.
3. Mrs. Riddell suggested that the suggested improvements to Arcadia would assist in the management of common ward pages. This would provide support to a system of joint working that was already operating well.

8. THE PERSPECTIVE OF AREA PARTNERSHIP AND COMMUNITY COUNCIL FORUM REPRESENTATIVES

The Committee met with Commander Hunneyball, Chair of the Garioch Community Council Forum and Mr. Mike Powell, Development Officer, the Marr Area Partnership.

A. Does the decentralisation structure enable the Council to address local needs?

1. Cdr. Hunneyball felt that the area committee modelled decentralisation structure was helpful in enabling the Council to address local needs. However there were “grey areas where there can be a debate as to whether matters may be centralised or not.” He cited a high profile local planning application which had been dealt with at area committee level, and wondered if it should have been processed centrally. However he felt that “the nitty gritty things are better dealt with locally provided that at a local level the decision-making is filtered down and it is explained to the local community what is happening.” Not all decisions needed to be taken centrally and Cdr. Hunneyball supported decentralisation: “When it works it works well.”
2. Mr. Powell agreed it was very important for Aberdeenshire Council to consider the implications of policies at a local level as such policies require to reflect the diverse needs of the different local areas. “The impact...on the community needs to be assessed and reviewed to ensure they meet their intended purpose.”
3. The function of the area office and the area manager, as access points for the public were seen by Mr. Powell as “absolutely invaluable.” “People get confused as to whom they should consult...the area manager and area team is a huge asset in facilitating the public’s access to council services.” There was a greater confusion, Mr. Powell thought when some of the service boundaries were not organised along area boundaries, such as the community networks around Education.
4. Cdr. Hunneyball felt it was very important that the area managers be consulted and kept fully briefed by services. This he saw as a route to greatly improve communication. Both representatives suggested that there should be improved feedback to the communities if requested improvements or alterations were not taken forward.
5. Cdr. Hunneyball suggested that the test of effective decentralisation should be assessed by its impact on the “man in the street”. “Should he wish to resolve a problem with regard to housing, council tax, gardens, roads etc, he needs to know who to approach.” Cdr. Hunneyball felt that he knew more than most people about who to get in touch with to address specific issues, but suggested that the Council could do more. He also suggested that services could be better at advising local communities about proposals which impacted on the location. “The local community may find out something is in hand and have no idea about it and in fact do not want it.” Cdr. Hunneyball was aware of the contact centre but felt the service was not well advertised and that people may be put off by the

0845 number as certain phone tariffs meant that the customer paid this extra charge. Mr. Powell suggested that not keeping up with new technology meant that the Council was unaware that the 0845 number was no longer the most beneficial to the public.

6. Both representatives saw communication as key to decentralisation. There were so many different groups to be advised, it was a challenge for the authority. It also required to be acknowledged that there was a danger in swamping people with too much information.
7. Mr. Powell agreed that the determination of policy centrally would reduce the risk of the creation of “mini-councils”. He saw a role for the area committees in influencing these policy choices. “There is a balancing act. Policies are a key cornerstone of what makes Aberdeenshire Council an entity in its own right.” However, he stressed, “Policies must be flexible. Bureaucracy should not limit the effectiveness of the delivery of services.”
8. Neither Cdr. Hunneyball nor Mr. Powell could suggest alternative models of decentralisation as improvement to that currently operated by Aberdeenshire Council. Cdr. Hunneyball suggested that consideration may be given to cascading decentralisation to the community councils, perhaps by giving them money raising powers as enjoyed by parish councils in England. He was aware that the Scottish Government had recently undertaken a consultation on improving community councils and that a SNP manifesto commitment to offer extra powers had not yet been addressed.

B. Role of the area managers

1. Cdr. Hunneyball saw the area managers as “vital” and a “key link in the system.” He felt that “much of the perceived success of the Council depends upon the area manager.” It was suggested that the role would become more effective if the area manager had more power, or were able to expect that a service would “prioritise his demands in a certain way which would give him more positive direction.”
2. Mr. Powell agreed that the area managers had crucial role, requiring invaluable skills to make them work effectively. He was concerned that the function was very stretched. “They require to be very visible and accessible and to facilitate getting things done.” Mr. Powell suggested there may be tension created between this role and the area managers’ corporate role in getting things done across Aberdeenshire.

C. Community planning and interface with the Council’s area structures

1. Cdr. Hunneyball suggested that part of the difficulty with community planning was that the Council did not have control over most of the agencies involved. He also believed that “service integration” would be a more valid title for all agencies working in partnership to decide how best to serve the community. Mr. Powell agreed that it was not always understood that community planning was not a council-run initiative. He reported that the communities already expected

statutory agencies to work together and in Aberdeenshire, he saw evidence that this was happening.

2. Mr. Powell spoke of the Council's role to support local community planning groups. Compared to five or six years ago, there was an increasing role for the area managers to coordinate the local community planning groups.

9. THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHER COUNCILS

A. Fife Council

The Committee met with Mr. Steve Grimmond, Executive Director, Housing and Communities, Fife Council.

1. Mr. Grimmond spoke of changes to Fife's system of decentralisation which had taken place since his authority had given evidence to the original Scrutiny and Audit investigation. The original scheme had adopted three areas, reflecting the previous district council boundaries. Since 1995, attempts had been made intermittently to address problems which the three area structure had provoked. In 2007, after the local government election, a seven area structure had been established in order to "reflect the natural structure of Fife's communities". At the same time, the previous 78 single member wards were replaced by 23 multi-member wards. Driven by the political administration, decision-making was devolved to area committees.
2. The Committee heard that work was ongoing to encourage the managerial structure of the Council to reflect the area dimension. "We are on an evolutionary journey with regard to the area teams." Mr. Grimmond reported that when the area committees had been established, existing heads of service had been given additional lead officer responsibilities for an area committee. More recently a decision had been taken to create specific area manager posts to have area operational management responsibility across services and support the area committees. These posts had not yet been appointed but the philosophy behind the role was that they would be based in one service but have a co-ordinating role. The area managers were to support the function of the lead officer post and work with the lead officer to deal with cross-service issues. It was expected that more services would be devolved to the area level, with potential to build into the existing area manager structure.
3. In a similar way to Aberdeenshire, some Fife services found it easier to align to the area committee structure than others. "This is happening at different paces", Mr. Grimmond advised. "Some services have clearly defined structures and functions with a growing level of accountability. Some services have been slower to evolve their management structure to reflect the area structure."
4. The area committees in Fife varied in size from eight to seventeen members. Each met on a four week cycle. Most met in the same location although some moved around a number of different locations within their area.
5. Unlike Aberdeenshire, not all members sat on strategic committees, although some councillors sat on more than one. In addition to the seven area committees, Fife had six strategic policy committees. These considered the impact of strategic policies on Education & Children's Services; Environmental, Enterprise & Transportation; Housing & Communities; Policy, Finance & Asset Management; Social Work & Health; and Standards & Audit. The strategic committees met on a six week cycle.

6. In broad terms, the Fife area committees dealt with planning applications and local service delivery issues for services such as housing, transportation, local community planning, engagement with community planning partners and the scrutiny of performance reports.
7. Area committees were also involved in providing advice and guidance to the strategic committees on policy issues. Mr. Grimmond advised the Committee that this was an evolving process with a variety of approaches taken. Some policies were developed to a mature stage and then circulated to area committees for comment before finalisation. On other occasions, early input had been sought from the area committees before a report was submitted to the strategic committees. Mr. Grimmond felt that “a significant amount of work is explored at area level.”
8. The Fife area committees had the right, defined in the council’s scheme of delegation, to raise issues of concern on policy matters to the relevant strategic policy committee for consideration. Mr. Grimmond reported that these concerns would be channelled through the area committee lead officer making a formal request for initial work to be done on the matter.
9. Each area committee developed a programme of work which was the mechanism to get a matter to the strategic committees. This programme was developed by elected members with officer support. As well as meeting formally, area committees adopted a workshop approach, hearing evidence in order to develop their understanding of particular issues. If there were any sign that a change of policy might be required, an indication would be made to the strategic committee to look at the issue and make any necessary changes.
10. Mr. Grimmond reported that although most development control applications were determined by the area committees, Fife had retained an overall planning committee. This dealt with policy matters but could also pull in applications from the area committees to review, in a similar way that Aberdeenshire’s Infrastructure Services Committee did. It was anticipated that changes in the planning legislation might lead to some applications only being seen by the central planning committee but this was yet to be determined.
11. The advantages of Fife’s revised structure were, Mr. Grimmond reported, three fold. The primary one was that the structure was driving forward an enhanced customer focus. “Members use the area structure to shine a light on service performance with scrutiny and attention at a far more local level.” He felt that a significant improvement could be seen in this approach.
12. The second advantage, Mr. Grimmond felt, was that the area structure was more responsive and allowed things to happen quickly. Meeting every four weeks allowed area committee consideration of matters to give regular visibility to key issues.
13. The size of Fife was a factor in what Mr. Grimmond felt was the third advantage of the revised area structure. The decentralised structure reflected a more settled view, providing an effective balance between the strategic direction of the

Council and local service delivery. "There is a genuine desire to decentralise decision-making without establishing seven autonomous mini-councils."

14. Mr. Grimmond reported that there were still tensions regarding strategic direction and local responsiveness evident in the evolutionary approach. The management of planning applications at small area committees had also been an initial concern over impartiality, given the small number of members, but Mr. Grimmond advised the Committee that this had not arisen as an issue. The cost of governance for the decentralised structure was, however, a consideration. Mr. Grimmond acknowledged that the financial costs involved were significant and not lightly committed.
15. In Fife, members exercised scrutiny over service delivery in two main ways: Each service provided a performance and scrutiny report to the area committees on a cyclic basis. The reports contained an analysis narrative to augment Performance Indicators. These were used as "a platform for debate and discussion with members."
16. The second role of scrutiny arose from the area committee's work programme, informed by private workshops over a number of months, to investigate issues of concern. Mr. Grimmond reported that the process was still evolving. "There is a level of frustration at area committees. The Councillors must have the correct tools to enable them to scrutinise properly. Some reports are interesting but do not have the right information or analysis to allow the committee to discharge their duty effectively."
17. When asked to compare Fife's decentralisation arrangements with those of Aberdeenshire Council, for whom he had worked in 1998-2000 as Garioch Area Manager, Mr. Grimmond reported that a significant number of similarities could be seen, particularly in relation to scale and geography. Although not close to recent developments in Aberdeenshire's structure, Mr. Grimmond reported that he had drawn from Aberdeenshire's model of decentralisation to inform that adopted in Fife.
18. There had, however, been "a consensus across the Council that decision-making with regard to budgets and service delivery should be made at area committee. The presumption is to decentralise." Fife had created dedicated area budgets, devolving several millions to area committees to invest. This was over and above the mainstream service budget which was delivered on a devolved basis. Mr. Grimmond advised members that some things were not devolved to the areas because it was more efficient to deliver them on a Fife-wide basis. In this way, library books were procured centrally. Similarly, fleet management and bin collections were not controlled at area level.
19. Although a Fife-wide community planning structure had been established, and the central community planning group chaired by the Leader of the Council's administration, local community planning was in its infancy. Mr. Grimmond reported that a number of workshops, looking at major issues at the local level, had been held. These issues were to form the basis of the local community planning agenda in the areas. There was an expectation also that the seven

area community planning groups would reflect, at a local level, the five central community planning themes. Area partnerships were to be involved in this process, but the focus for delivery was to be the area committees. “Partnership agencies...have been happy to engage at a local level with the seven area committees.” Mr. Grimmond suggested that the biggest challenge was to engage “the community” in community planning. “It should be about the interaction with the public itself, as well as between public bodies.”

20. Mr. Grimmond reported that multi-member wards worked very effectively in Fife. There had been concerns about how they would operate in a decentralised structure but there had been no significant difficulties. It was felt that the seven area committees afforded members further opportunities to work together. “I would characterise the area committees as being relatively non-political and more issue based. This reflects the geography of the area structure. There are limited party political issues on the agenda.”

B. Highland Council

The Committee heard from Mr. William Gilfillan, Corporate Services Manager, Highland Council of changes there had been since Highland Council had previously given evidence to the original investigation.

1. Mr. Gilfillan advised the Committee that there had been significant changes since the local government election of 2007. The Council, with 80 members, had become politically aligned; previously it had not been. The Council sat seven times a year. Under that, there were seven politically proportionate strategic committees, each with 22 councillors. There was also an Inverness City Committee which had 26 members.
2. In Highland, there were now eight area committees, supported by seven area managers. Two of the smaller areas shared a single manager. In addition, Highland had three corporate managers, each responsible for an operational area: Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross; Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch & Strathspey; and Ross, Skye and Lochaber. The key role of the corporate manager, Mr. Gilfillan reported, was to matrix-manage their area and “ensure that the services are delivered effectively in accordance with Council policies.”
3. Mr. Gilfillan advised the Committee that the three corporate areas were now reflected in Highland Council’s planning and licensing structures. There were now three planning application committees, distinct from the planning review body and three licensing committees and boards. The licensing system was currently under review, with the potential to establish a single licensing board being explored.
4. A key aspect which had changed since 2007 was that Highland Council no longer had area committees. “When we looked at decentralisation and decision-making,” Mr. Gilfillan advised, “it became apparent that area committees frequently noted their accord rather than made strategic decisions.” In their place, ward business meetings were held. Highland Council had 22 wards, each with three or four members. These wards were supported by 16 ward managers,

middle management level staff. The move from the previous eight operational areas had significantly reduced operational costs, leading to a saving of approximately £2M. The new structure had seen the removal of some 30 management positions.

5. The Committee were advised that each of the 22 wards had regular, fortnightly meetings with its ward manager and had care of a ward “discretionary budget” of circa £60,000 per ward. The discretionary budget, Mr. Gilfillan reported, pulled together various pockets of funding and meant that the wards made spending decisions together on the small projects, as defined in established criteria, approximately 20-30 per ward. “There is a real feel good factor. The key element is to encourage the multiplier effect of partner funding.” Often service representatives were invited to attend the ward meetings to discuss matters of interest and look for solutions to going forward.
6. The ward structure also generated five or six ward forum meetings per year, established primarily to allow council services, elected members and ward managers to meet with the public. Mr. Gilfillan reported that the public were asked to suggest discussion topics, and to suggest how things could be carried out better or differently. Relevant partners were invited to attend on appropriate topics, such as Scottish Water and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) who had participated in a recent Inverness City Forum on flooding. This public scrutiny could, Mr. Gilfillan suggested, be difficult, particularly when a question was asked as to why something had not been done. “It can put members and officers in a vulnerable position. However, as long as we remain honest and open and commit to providing a full response to all questions raised, then even the difficult decisions the Council may have to take are at least understood by the public, even though they may not always agree.” There was a concern about raising high expectations when engaging with the public in the ward forums, but the advantage was in the direct contact.
7. Mr. Gilfillan explained that the ward forums did not replace the role of community councils. It had been agreed with community councils that community councils should be key partners at the forums. “I have heard community councillors comment that the ward forum gives them the opportunity to meet other community councillors and discuss and share ideas.”
8. The work of the strategic committees set the policies for the Council, as voiced in the “Strengthening the Highlands” publication, Mr. Gilfillan reported. Under that overarching document, each service had a service plan, agreed by the relevant strategic committee. Highland had a very flat management structure; services had reduced from the pre-2007 nine to a current seven, with the merging of Corporate Services with the Chief Executive’s Service and Housing joining with Property & Architectural Services. The senior management structure was now a chief executive, an assistant chief executive, five directors and three corporate managers.
9. Mr. Gilfillan felt that the strength of Highland Council’s current arrangements had lead to a more clear direction of travel and identification of priorities. “The Single

Outcome Agreement is about working with partners and I have waited nearly 20 years to get such clear direction in partnership working.”

10. CURRENT ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The Scrutiny and Audit Committee has never operated in a vacuum; members are well aware of the economic crisis which Aberdeenshire Council, along with all of Britain's public sector organisations, faces. The Committee is also very well aware of the needs to apply the principles of policy led budgeting across all spheres of the Council's operation. There is a cost, as yet undetermined, in providing the staffing and other resources required to support a decentralised structure. Nevertheless, it is the often repeated aim of Aberdeenshire Council to operate with its six administrative areas in a decentralised system.

If it is the stated intention of the Council to operate this way, the concerns expressed by several of the directors of the challenges they face supporting area committees are, to a great extent, irrelevant. The Committee is well aware that staff will face increased pressures on their time and for some the support of an area focus may seem a distraction from their "day jobs". But that is how the decentralised structure works best, and if decentralisation is to be effective, it needs to be resourced adequately. There is a parallel responsibility on the councillors operating as the area committees to ensure that officer time is well used in supporting them – all should be applied to provision of the best services for the people and communities of Aberdeenshire.

The Committee had originally considered the request that more resources, both financial and staffing, be made to support the work of the areas, including the potential for a significant increase in the area top-up budget, to allow bigger projects to contribute to the local area through the intervention of seed capital provision. Many witnesses heard made this plea, including area chairs, across all parties. The amounts suggested varied greatly and reasons included attaining parity with the sums some properly approved officers could authorise; and making the public more aware of the area committee's standing by being more obviously involved in fiscal and resource decisions. It may be that other, more effective "hands-on" fiscal responsibilities should be considered.

11. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusions

It is clear to the Committee that Aberdeenshire's decentralisation structure is key to the Council's operations and democratic interactions with the people of Aberdeenshire. This approach is welcomed as allowing local circumstances to moderate a flexible approach, rather than a "one size fits all" response across the varied communities. However, a substantial percentage of area committee business to date has concentrated on the consideration of planning applications. Until 2007 attempts to involve the area committees in policy formulation was patchy at best, so there is still a public perception that they are primarily development control committees. More could be done to widen the range of business considered.

Analysis of both public and press attendance at, and reporting of, the discussions at area committees shows that people generally come to hear the debate on planning applications. Regardless of what other interesting topics are to be considered, the press and public benches at area committees usually empty after the planning matters have been decided. The same pattern applies to central policy committee meetings.

Area committee input into wider consideration of policy matters is a growing role. This is essential given the post 2007 re-formatting of the policy committee composition. Previously each member served on two policy committees, and there were 27 members on each committee. This allowed geographical cover as well as political proportionality to be more readily achieved. However, the revised, smaller size may present challenges in ensuring area committee input.

There is a proforma for reporting the views of area committees to the policy committees. Updates reported to the committee by the Area Manager, Kincardine and Mearns indicate that the process is being revised and reinforced. However, the two issues charted in the course of this investigation, on (a) the Education, Learning and Leisure grants review and (b) cluster school management, demonstrated that the established proforma is not always used. There may be a further issue when looking at how the comments are minuted across the areas. Should minutes reflect merely points agreed by the committee as a whole, or encompass all comments made by each member? If it is the latter, this would suggest that the consultation could be done with each individual councillor, outwith the area committee process.

There is a further challenge to the public perception of the area committees relating to the availability of officers to attend to speak to their reports. The committee heard from directors of the pressures on staff time in presenting to all six areas. Area managers spoke of their use as a conduit to present information to the members in the absence of report authors. Whilst there are some matters which clearly can be presented by an area manager, whose input and awareness of area committee interests is of great value, there have been occasional delays when a question raised can not be answered. Sometimes this means that the item will be deferred to allow further input.

The lack of financial responsibility, or input to project specification, is also seen as a barrier to the area committees being used effectively as a local decentralisation structure. Under current processes, certain approved officers have more direct budget allocation powers than area committees. The area top-up budget is a good start-up in allowing flexibility to choose to augment standard council provision with area specific initiatives. However, historically there has been a focus on small projects which may not have the greatest of impact on the area. Area top-up grants have supported many worthy local developments, but their annuality and relatively small scale means that there may have been missed opportunities to support real developments which might have had a far greater benefit to the area.

In approving the acceptance of contracts for major capital plan works, there is often a challenge between decisions made centrally and the feelings of the local members who may be seen to have a greater awareness of local needs and wants. For example, the design and specification for a major capital work are often set without local member input before the tenders are invited. It may be hard for the area committee to agree a priced contract for work which they might have shaped differently.

Some services are more practised than others in inviting local comment into the shaping of work priorities. These tend to be the services which are already set up to deliver on a geographical basis and include works undertaken in road improvements, landscape services works and the Non-Housing Revenue Accounts (Non HRA) funded remedial or improvement works to local authority housing stock.

The fact that some services are shaped around shire-wide strategic delivery rather than area based, service-wide provision, means that some services may seem remote to local members. It is similarly difficult, from an officer's perspective of having no local ownership, to contribute effectively to area committee business or the work of the area management team. It may all seem too remote from the focus on their "day jobs". This lack of engagement can be overcome. It may be possible to find, as some area managers and area management team representatives reported, an issue in common across all services. Examples reported included the application of Worksmart, or some other local cross-service project, such as the former Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership. These appear to have successfully engaged those colleagues with no apparent area focus. Again, more mutual awareness between the elected members of the area committee and those officers who rarely report to the committee can be encouraged. This was highlighted in the example of site visits by the Buchan Area Committee to local social work service operations.

The area management team is acknowledged to be a key focus of the Council's decentralisation scheme, bringing together those with local responsibilities across the services to a shared focus. The 2006 investigation found that this role was often seen as an "add on" to core job requirements and, on some occasions, received less attention than would be ideal for the team to focus effectively. It recommended, and it was agreed, that participation in the area management team be specifically included in the job description of area management team representatives. On the application of Single Status, members were advised that it was not possible to

incorporate this into the grading of posts, as participants in the area management team were not restricted to a certain job level.

In some areas, greater, round table, cross-service participation has been focused through Planning Gain's inter-service group. This collection of officers, looking at the possible future allocation of resources to offset the impact of any new development, succeeds in including more services in area based discussions. It encourages, with the lure of the carrot of potential resources, looking strategically beyond any specific service interest.

An area of concern for all elected members with whom the Committee spoke was the apparent lack of connection between the local community planning processes and the work of the area committee. It was often hard to accept the lead role played by non-elected, and therefore not democratically responsible, partners at all levels of community planning. This contrasts with the role of councillors, subject to public accountability. The replacement "overnight" of the previous local area plans, over which the area committees had final control, with local community plans where their input has been reported to be limited, at best, has been difficult to accept. In addition, the reporting back to area committee members of the work of the local community planning groups has been a slowly evolving process. It is also noted that there was a degree of inconsistency between area managers in how they chose to link the work of the area committee and the local community planning groups. In some cases, members giving evidence expressed concern that decisions were known by others within the community before they themselves had been advised.

In coming to its conclusions, the Committee looked at the questions posed in the terms of reference for the investigation, and would make the following observations:

1. "To consider the implementation of the actions agreed as a result of the previous investigation into decentralisation (Investigation No. 10, September, 2006)".

- 1.1 It was immediately clear to the Committee that, as reported every six months to the Committee in its regular review of previous investigations, most of the recommendations previously made, and accepted, have been, or are being, applied.
- 1.2 There are two main exceptions to this. The reporting of area committee comments to the policy committees is not being undertaken consistently, despite the creation of a proforma which seeks to standardise the process.
- 1.3 The incorporation of formal reference to management team role in job description of participating officers has not been done. Although agreed in the approved action plan, this recommendation was overtaken by the application of the job grading review undertaken for Single Status. The committee feels that more should be done to confirm the importance given to participating in area management teams, even if an amendment to the formal job descriptions is not possible.

- 1.4 To a lesser extent, more work requires to be done on the agreed incorporation of discussion items in area committee agenda. However, there may be pressures of other business, or councillor availability, which reduce the options for this to happen. The committee is pleased to see that more informal briefing sessions on a variety of topics, takes place, often on the Tuesdays in between the formal meetings.
- 1.5 In reverting to the 2006 investigation report, one of the recommendations does not appear in the approved action plan, as endorsed by the Policy and Resources Committee of 19 April, 2007. Paragraph 5.2.2 of the investigation report states, "*The Committee also believes that it should be made easier for an individual Councillor or group of Councillors (such as those representing a multi-member ward) to put forward an item for discussion at an Area Committee meeting. A mechanism other than the submitting of a formal Notice of Motion needs to be found*". This was not included in the action plan response. The Committee would seek to have this matter addressed.

2. "To consider how effective the implemented actions have been in providing a more local perspective, delivery of services and engagement with Aberdeenshire communities."

- 2.1 The Committee noted that area committees now received papers on a wider range of topics. The volume of papers submitted to area committees from all services has increased significantly since 2007. However, some services, and some functions within services, remain remote. The committee would wish to see increasing use of the area committees as a channel for debate and collective consideration. Although a proforma has been developed to report area committee comments to the central, policy-making committees, this is not always used. The practise of orally reporting area committee comments to the central committees, due to the lack of time between area and central committee consideration, should be used only rarely. The committee welcome the establishment and on-going development of the use of proforma reporting but would wish to have far greater consistency in its use.
- 2.2 It is acknowledged that some services are not primarily area based, such as personal care in social work, and can find it hard to engage with the area dimension in any of its aspects. This is true for both connections with the area committee and area management team. Evidence provided suggests that services are now more aware of their need to engage more effectively with local members. This would benefit members' understanding of what may be a need-based service, provided across the shire, with no reference to area-based provision. Given the reduction in size of the policy committees, and with each member now serving on only one central committee, this additional awareness may be critical to meaningful area consideration of such service matters.
- 2.3 Engagement with communities is reported as struggling in some areas, despite the community-driven community planning, the vehicle for engagement with the Single Outcome Agreement. It would appear that there is a dislocation between the role of the area committee, being democratically elected councillors, and that of non elected volunteers and partners inputting to the

local community plan. Several witness councillors spoke of feeling that they had only limited input to the local community plans which have replaced the previous area plans.

- 2.4 Other witnesses spoke of barriers to effective communication and joint working identified in community planning/area committee interface. Reassurances were given by the area managers that solutions, including better communication, were being sought. In some areas, joint meetings of the local area committee and the local community planning groups had taken place. These were to become regular events and would escalate mutual awareness of the business undertaken in partnership as well as confirming the distinct roles and responsibilities of each partner.
- 2.5 In terms of public engagement with the decision-making process at a local level, it is noted that public and press participation tends to focus on planning matters, regardless of how the area committee agenda is structured. This is most likely because individual attendance relates to issues in which the person had a personal interest. It may not be fully appreciated that whilst area committees may not always have the decision-making role for other items of business, their consideration for debate and onwards comment is important. The committee would also note that public attendance is no different for the central committees. The only central committee to have regular public attendance is the Infrastructure Services Committee. Here again interested spectators are primarily planning applicants and agents who leave after their own item.
- 2.6 The Committee noted that there may have been a reduction in the number of planning applications going to area committees for determination, because of the implementation of recent changes in planning legislation. However it should be stressed that those which now go are more complicated than the standard householder application and so take more time to consider. The cumulative impact may be that the time spent by area committees on planning applications has not reduced. This does not assist public perception of what area committees can and do cover. Even members were unclear about the full range and remit of area committees.
- 2.7 In terms of internal awareness of area function and roles, it is noted that some area committees are using "non committee" Tuesdays to have seminars and briefings on areas of operation which are not regularly the focus of their formal attention. These are often carried out in conjunction with adjacent areas on matters of mutual interest. Joint sessions are obviously resource effective and this may encourage wider consideration. These events may also be seen to increase staff awareness of the area structure, particularly for those in services which do not automatically have an area outlook.
- 2.8 The role of area committees in scrutinizing performance is increasing. In terms of considering the Performance Indicators (PIs) quarterly reported, some area chairs reported more effective consideration achieved through splitting the document into smaller sections over the quarter. This facilitated the attendance of appropriate officers to answer any issues, whereas before there might have

been reliance on the area manager to find out and report back to the committee, or try to guess which questions members might raise. Consideration on a service by service basis across the three month period may also reduce information overload on members on any single occasion. The committee consider that this approach would also make better use of officer attendance. Expecting all service representatives to attend on same day, at the same indicative time, is not thought to be an effective use of officer resources. To have no officer present equipped to answer matters arising also is felt, on occasion, to be a bad use of members' time. It may lead to the deferred consideration of items until an answer could be sought and reported.

- 2.9 Improvements in this area are also valued as addressing a comment in the 2008 Audit Scotland Best Value Audit, that more scrutiny and challenge of performance would be beneficial. The area structure is a channel for ensuring that all members are able to challenge across a wide range of issues.
- 2.10 Despite the concerns expressed by directors of the resource implications of officer attendance, it is felt that area committees are improving at reducing officer waiting times. This is obviously easier to achieve where the committees meet in accommodation in staff bases, rather than in other meeting locations. With advent of Worksmart technology, the committee believes that staff should be increasingly flexible in terms of work base and this will facilitate area committee attendance – increasing numbers of officers will be able to “hot desk” and carry on their standard work until “called” to present their paper. Other technological advances should be explored to allow officers to attend “virtually”, by video-conferencing and related techniques, also to improve the effective use of staff resources in supporting the committees.
- 2.11 The Committee considered whether the order of business on area committee agenda should be standardised as it might be that there was best practice that could be adopted in order to encourage public participation and interest in the work of the area committees. However, from the observations made at the area committees visited, the order of business does not seem to impact on public attendance. In a similar way, members' input does not diminish at various sections of business; members participate in those items on which they wish to comment. A member may not necessarily speak on an item under discussion but this should not be taken to display lack of interest; others may already have made the same points and there is no use in wasting committee time through needless repetition.
- 2.12 Some area committees, in considering planning applications, have moved to a more sophisticated presentation of information by use of a data projector and screen. In this way the information may be more readily displayed to members, and is also clearly visible to any public attending. The Committee would wish to commend this use as beneficial to both members and public.
- 2.13 A recent development which the Committee would wish to commend, as increasing local awareness to the decision-making process, is the practice of the Local Review Body. In determining planning applications, it can carry out site visits to be better informed of local circumstances, as required. This was a

challenge previously levelled against the central planning committee which did not visit the area when determining planning applications, recommended by the area committees for approval against council policy.

- 2.14 A suggestion was made by several witnesses that local perceptions about what area committees do, or have responsibility for, would be strengthened if there were more obvious financial resource decisions being made at a local level. This might include the increased potential to fund large projects through the area top-up budget; addressing a perceived imbalance between the funds awarded by approved and properly authorised officers and the local elected members sitting as the area committees; or having more services report their allocations for local consideration.
- 2.15 Arguments were presented to the Committee that area budgets should be increased. This might be to allow projects on a larger, more worthwhile scale to go ahead, or to address an apparent inconsistency where authority to spend might be greater for an individual officer than for the area committees. However, all acknowledged that any increased funding would require to come from existing allocations which are already allocated to services. Whilst having no difficulty with the principle of giving the areas more fiscal responsibility, the Committee feel that no real case has been made to justify increasing the area budget “top-up” scheme at the present time. There is a very real sense, however, that more should be done to allow area input across the range of resource allocation decisions and investigations should be undertaken of the best way to achieve this.

3. “To consider reasons for delays, if any, in implementation.”

The Committee believes that there are generally no significant delays in implementation of the recommendations previously made. The sole exception would be the recommendation that a process other than the submission of a notice of motion be afforded the local member(s) to get an item on the area committee agenda. This does not appear in the action plan previously approved. The Committee would ask that this be reconsidered in the context of the current review.

It is acknowledged by the Committee that changes to staff focus and procedures takes time to bed in. Greater attention should be paid to the process for reporting area committee comments to the centre, but, in the majority of cases the direction of travel is positive and better practice is being demonstrated.

In respect of officer participation in the area management teams, the Committee acknowledges that it is not possible to have the role explicit in the job description of participants. However, it feels that more should be done to confirm the importance given to participating in area management teams, even if amendment to the formal job descriptions is not possible. If the area manager invites colleagues in other services to the area management team, those colleagues should make it a priority to attend and participate. It is not felt that giving area managers matrix management responsibility would improve the situation – some area managers have demonstrated that round-table, cross-service participation can be achieved, especially if there is a relevant matter to be discussed. For the area management team to fulfil its label,

there is a need for participation to be mandatory for named attendees, to be regular, and to be productive. The committee would support any initiatives to advance this.

4. “To consider good practice from elsewhere.”

Audit Scotland’s Best Value Reviews of Scottish local authorities for 2006 – 2009 would seem to suggest that Aberdeenshire fulfils the decentralisation requirements at least as well, if not better, than other Scottish local authorities. The Fife decentralisation scheme has obvious links to the principles adopted by Aberdeenshire. Highland Council altered its previous 8 area structure in response to Audit Scotland’s concern that the areas were too closely linked to the previous district council boundaries. Its new structure now has strategic decision-making committees at the centre, then ward fora with budget powers in each locality. This suits the expanded geographical range of that council’s area, but would be difficult to coordinate across Aberdeenshire, needing increased officer support at a local level.

Compared with Aberdeenshire, it would appear that both comparator local authorities with whom the Committee spoke disburse their funding at a more local level. In Fife the areas, and in Highland the ward fora, have been given more funding than that given to Aberdeenshire’s six areas.

5. “To consider how the outcomes of the 2007 Working Group, including the move to multi-member wards and smaller numbers on policy committees, have impacted on the operation of council business”.

From several councillors providing evidence to the Committee, concerns were raised that reduced numbers on the central policy committees had impacted negatively on the geographic, as well as party political, representation. Despite the increased use of area committees to comment on amendments to existing or proposed new policies, it was suggested that there may be a reduction of positive input by all members to core elements of council business. In particular, concerns were expressed of lack of optimum awareness of local issue in determining policies which will be applied across the shire.

The Committee feels that reassurance needs to be given that there will be consistent use of the established proforma to report area committee comments to the centre.

Smaller numbers on central committees was also raised as a concern about reducing the flow of information to area committee members when considering service policy papers. If an area committee has no representative on the central policy committee, there may be a gap in knowledge and experience available from a fellow councillor to assist the area committee in its deliberations. This may lead to an increased need for an appropriate officer to attend the area committee to talk through reports. The Committee is aware there may be cost and resource implications in doing this, but thinks that this should happen as a matter of course to assist in the effective engagement of the area committee with the topic concerned. It may also reduce the jeopardy of having items deferred due to lack of appropriate support and answers.

That acknowledged, the Committee feels that the smaller policy committees, created as a result of the 2007 Working Group recommendations are better forums for discussion. There may, however, be an issue if no local input is present when determining local issues. The Committee would suggest that consideration be given to creating mechanisms to address this. The Committee believes that the 2007 recommendations be looked at again in the context of decentralisation, with a view to ensuring that members are best informed while making decisions. This could include looking at other methods of broadening the central committee experience of councillors.

B. Recommendations

Since the evidence was heard in this investigation, there have been several initiatives established in operational practice where recommendations would otherwise have been made for change.

(a) Area Chairs Meetings are now taking place on a regular basis, to share ideas and compare practices. This should benefit cross-committee awareness, consideration of differing approaches and promote the sharing of ideas. It is commended.

(b) There is increased use of data projectors at area committee meetings. The Committee believes this to be a more interactive presentation method which assists the following of discussions at the area committee. It is understood that this system has expanded since the time of the evidence gathering. Again, this is to be commended.

(c) More area committees have met, and intend to meet regularly, with their local community planning partnerships. This can only increase mutual awareness of differing roles and further joint working. The Committee welcome this and would wish this to increase consistently across Aberdeenshire.

The Committee would recommend the undernoted be considered:

A. General

- i. All members should consider an occasional visit to other area committees to see how they operate.
- ii. Councillors and area managers should be kept advised of any service related events or issues in their areasⁱ.
- iii. Information on planning gain disbursements should be shared with area committee members before any other forum.ⁱⁱ
- iv. Methods to broaden the central committee experience of all members should be investigated.

B. Area committee operation

- i. It should be reiterated that Tuesdays are set aside for area committee business, with the strong presumption that no other meetings will be arranged for Tuesdays.
- ii. Greater consistency is needed where area committees respond to requests to speak from interested parties in the context of planning applications. Standing Order 11(5) should be reiterated.ⁱⁱⁱ
- iii. There should be greater facilitation of Officer "attendance" by the increasing use of technology.^{iv}
- iv. Increased use of shared events, across two or more areas on matters of mutual interest/ concern, would be beneficial.^v
- v. To encourage greater public understanding of planning considerations by the area committee, the use of data projectors be urged (where not currently used) and their use extended to all services.^{vi}
- vi. Occasional meetings should be held between the area committee and the area management team.^{vii}

- vii. Methods of increasing area committee fiscal and resource decisions should be investigated. For capital plan projects due to be progressed in any ward, local members should be involved at an early stage.^{viii}
- viii. A mechanism for area members to get item on area committee agenda (Recommendation 5.2.2 of previous investigation) should to be reconsidered.^{ix}

C. Area management team

- i. Area chairs should be afforded the opportunity to attend an occasional meeting of the area management team. This can only foster improved working together and awareness.
- ii. Attendance of nominated officers at area management team should be mandatory and not optional. Participation should be supported by the appropriate head of service.^x
- iii. Clarity and consistency should apply across all areas in sharing with members the work of the area management team.^{xi}

D. Performance indicators

- i. Performance Indicator (PI) quarterly reports would be better considered split to allow specific service officers to attend to speak to their reports. Where possible, or necessary, in the absence of an appropriate officer, the area manager should be prepared to respond to member questions.^{xii}

E. Interaction between area and policy committees

- i. The agreed proforma for the reporting of area committee comments on policy issues be confirmed as the sole acceptable vehicle for such comments.^{xiii}
- ii. Area comments on policy items should include individual comments only if listed as such and if requested by the specific Councillor and otherwise rely on the Chair summing up the consensus at the end of discussions.^{xiv}
- iii. Timely feedback should be provided to the area committee members on the outcomes of issues on which they have been asked to comment.^{xv}
- iv. The same feedback should be provided to advise local members of the Infrastructure Services Committee's determinations on planning applications referred to them under the scheme of delegation.
- v. Policy input timing should be arranged to avoid the oral reporting of area committee comments to policy committees as far as possible.^{xvi}
- vi. Area committees need to provide serious reasons for deferring the consideration of policy, or other, items.
- vii. Members need to be given all appropriate support to be able to consider all matters on first consideration where possible.^{xvii}
- viii. Officers should consider better ways to allow local member input to Council promoted projects, as area representatives, without prejudicing any planning process.^{xviii}

F. Multi-member wards

- i. There should be more public education on Multi-member wards (MMW). This would include (a) consideration of having ward posters, to inform the local public, displayed in public places appropriate to that ward^{xix} and (b) clarification on each relevant page of the council's website that there is more than one local member.^{xx}

- ii. In working within the Multi-member Ward focus, members should coordinate their responses as far as is possible.
- iii. There should be better and more consistent use of shared ward briefings and discussions as far as possible, potentially “hosted” online in web ward pages, if face to face meetings can not be held. These should be the norm and not the exception.^{xxi}

G. Links to community planning

- i. Greater efforts should be made to nurture links between the area committees and the community planning structures in each area.^{xxii}
- ii. Joint meetings to consider and shape local community plans should become the norm, not the exception. Community planning should be at the core of area committee operation, seen as an integral function and not a rival structure.
- iii. Area managers should adopt a consistent approach to the sharing of community planning information with the area committee, including regular reports by the community planning officer and greater use of ward pages to share information.
- iv. Local members should have access to all relevant council based information before it is presented in a wider public forum.
- v. More information on the central community planning board should be cascaded to all members of Aberdeenshire Council.

Arising out of consideration of the above, and in the context of the current fiscal challenges, the Committee also suggest that the scheme of delegation and financial regulations be reviewed. This might allow greater member involvement in, and the direct scrutiny of, the allocation of smaller funds.

12. THANKS AND INVITATION FOR FEEDBACK

1. The Scrutiny and Audit Committee would like to record its appreciation of the co-operation and assistance it received from internal and external witnesses.
2. Each investigation that is undertaken is part of a learning experience for the Committee and it would welcome any feedback or comments from participants or interested individuals on the investigation process and this report.

Cllr. Peter Bellarby
Chair,
Scrutiny and Audit Committee

Cllr. Amanda Allan
Vice-Chair,
Scrutiny and Audit Committee

APPENDIX A – INVESTIGATION BRIEF

Subject to be reviewed. – Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council (Review)		Investigation No	20
Scrutiny and Audit Committee – Investigation Brief			
Purpose and objectives of investigation			
<p>1) to consider the implementation of the actions agreed as a result of the previous investigation into decentralisation (Investigation No 10, September, 2006);</p> <p>2) to consider how effective the implemented actions have been in providing a more local perspective, delivery of services and engagement with Aberdeenshire communities;</p> <p>3) to consider reasons for delays, if any, in implementation;</p> <p>4) to consider good practice from elsewhere;</p> <p>5) to consider how the outcomes of the 2007 Working Group, including the move to multi-member wards and smaller numbers on policy committees, have impacted on the operation of council business; and</p> <p>6) to recommend any improvements which might be made for achieving an improved decentralised decision-making process.</p>			
Background papers	<p>Committee reports and Minutes on decentralisation (Nov, 2006 – present);</p> <p>Investigation brief for previous investigation No. 10 – Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council;</p> <p>A report by the Scrutiny and Audit Committee on Decentralisation of Decision-Making in Aberdeenshire Council (September, 2006);</p> <p>Scheme of Decentralisation;</p> <p>Annual budget information on Area Managers/ Area Committee's expenditure;</p> <p>Scottish Government Decentralisation Guidance;</p> <p>Resident survey findings;</p> <p>Strategic Plan, Chief Executive and Area Plans.</p>		
Witnesses to be invited to provide evidence	<p>External –Chief Executives other Councils (Highland, Fife and Aberdeen); Representatives of Area Partnerships and Community Council Fora);</p> <p>Councillors – Area Chairs;</p> <p>Chief Officers – Chief Executive; Area Managers; Director of Law & Admin and two service directors; Head of Policy;</p> <p>Staff –.Area Committee Officers; Service representatives on Area Management Teams.</p>		
Site Visits	n/a		
Consultation process	With Area Chairs.		
Trade Unions Contribution	n/a		
Project Team (officers)	Jan McRobbie, Chief Executive Service		
Other estimated costs	TBC.		
External expert	n/a		

APPENDIX B – INVESTIGATION PROGRAMME AND WITNESSES HEARD

Date	Time	Witness
10 June, 2009	11.00am	Lead Service Briefing – Roger White, head of policy
18 June, 2009	4.00pm	Evidence gathering session with area managers Willie Munro, Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager Chris White, Buchan Area Manager
25 June, 2009	2.00pm	Evidence gathering session - Area Chair Cllr Moira Ingleby, (Marr)
	2.45pm	Evidence gathering session - Area Chair Cllr John Loveday, (Formartine)
26 June, 2009	09.30am	Evidence gathering session - Area Chair Cllr Paul Melling (Kincardine & Mearns)
	10.15am	Evidence gathering session – Area Chair Cllr Stuart Pratt, (Buchan)
	2.15pm	Evidence gathering session - Area Managers Les Allan, Marr Area Manager Ian Fowell, Garioch Area Manager
19 Aug, 2009	2.00pm	Evidence gathering session - Area Managers Malcolm McAuslin, Banff & Buchan Area Manager; Keith Newton, Formartine Area Manager
20 Aug, 2009	10.15am	Evidence session – Director Bruce Robertson, Director of Education, Learning & Leisure
	11.30am	Evidence session – Area Chair Cllr Sydney Mair, (Banff & Buchan)
	2.00 pm	Evidence session – Area Chair Cllr Martin Kitts-Hayes, (Garioch)
2 Sept, 2009	11.30am	Evidence session – Director Iain Gabriel, Director of Transportation & Infrastructure
9 Sept, 2009	10.15am	Evidence session – Director Christine Gore, Director of Planning & Environmental Services
	11.30am	Evidence gathering session Colin Mackenzie, Chief Executive
16 Sept, 2009	2.00pm	Evidence gathering session – Director Ritchie Johnston, Director of Housing & Social Work
23 Sept, 2009	11.30am	Evidence gathering session – Area Committee Officers Liz Farquhar (Banff & Buchan) Ann Riddell (Marr) Theresa Wood (Buchan)

	2.00pm	Evidence session – reporting process Willie Munro, Kincardine & Mearns Area Manager
7 Oct, 2009		Evidence session – Area Management Team Kathy Davidson, Support Services Manager, Housing & Social Work; Ian Rendall, Roads Manager.
		Evidence session - Fife Council Steven Grimmond, Executive Director, Housing and Communities
		Evidence session - Highland Council William Gilfillan, Corporate Services Manager (Video Conference)
5 Nov, 2009	10.15am	Evidence Session – Community Councils and Partnerships Chris Hunneyball, Garioch Community Council Forum; Mike Powell, Marr Area Partnership
12 Nov		Initial wrap up
17 December, 2009	10.15am	Meeting with Area Chairs To consider decentralisation evidence
11 Jan, 2010	10.30a,	Wrap up 2
20 Jan, 2010	10.45am	Continuation of Wrap Up- Notes from meeting with Area Chairs, 17 December,2009 and notes of meeting of 11 January, 2010.
18 November, 1, 8 & 15 December, 2010 and 12, 19 and 27 January, 2011		Consideration of Draft report

APPENDIX C AREA COMMITTEE BUSINESS ASSESSMENT

OBSERVER OVERVIEW COMMENTS:

All area committees took adequate time to discuss all items – planning, policy and local related.

The discussions were focused and detailed where required, and all relevant comments. There was little evidence of politicising – impression of round-table debate on issues, acknowledgement of alternative views, but striving to work together for their communities.

Decisions and processes explained to public at each point, especially helpful if lengthy debate may have generated some confusion. Chairs of all committees also clarified what had been agreed. In some cases public expectation of what they could/ couldn't do was a point of pressure (e.g. Menie planning application hearing objectors/ applicant) - but dealt with calmly and effectively.

No evidence of prime interest solely in planning – all items discussed/ debated as necessary.

In some instances, non-core officer attendance neatly timed – very few occasions were officers waiting more than 30 mins to be taken. Those that did often had other work with them to do while waiting. Synchronising attendance observed to be easier in locations where the committees met in local headquarter areas – harder when officers have to travel.

No evidence of unwillingness/ inability of members to stay till business is concluded – Tuesdays are set aside clearly for area work – and officers ensure good use is made of “free” time for other, non-committee, area work.

Public attendance focused on planning applications – and other local “big issues”. The order of agenda didn't seem to matter – people came at the time they expected to hear their items, and tended to leave after that.

Press attendance again focused on newsworthy stories - mainly planning matters. Print deadlines may have impacted on when they left.

Public engagement and understanding of debate, particularly on planning applications, seemed to be amplified in those areas where power point presentations of planning photos/ maps etc were available to all. In other areas where the information was there, but displayed on the walls, it was harder to follow particular points of debate on location and other detailed planning consideration items.

COMMITTEE NAME	DATE	NUMBER OF ITEMS	Development control applications	Development Control Hearings	Policy papers	Inspection reports	Local decision	Area budget etc	General	Presentations/ briefing	Number of councillors present	Press present	Public present
Buchan	25 Aug, 2009	21	14	2	1	2	3	0	1	none	All	2	Max 20
Formartine	1 Sept, 2009	24	14	-	1	2	5	1	1	none	All	1-11 ⁵	Max 50
Marr	8 Sept, 2009	15	11	2	1	0	4	0	2	none	All	1	Max 6

⁵ There was a particularly high profile planning application under consideration.

COMMITTEE	DATE	NUMBER OF ITEMS	Development control applications	Development Control Hearings	Policy papers	Inspection reports	Local decision	Area budget etc	General	Presentations/ briefing	Number of councillors present	Press present	Public present
Garioch	15 Sept, 2009	17	7	1	1	0	3	1	4	none	13/14	2	Max 5
Kincardine & Mearns	22 Sept, 2009	9	3 (66 mins in total)	2	1		6	1	-	Yes – planning regulations	12/13	2	Max 12
Banff & Buchan	29 Sept, 2009	20	5	1	2	1	7	0	4	none	8	2	Max 5

Area Committee business – summary table

BUCHAN AREA COMMITTEE SCORE SHEET

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Buchan Area Ctte
DATE OF COMMITTEE	25 August, 2009
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	21
(a) development control applications	14
(b) development control hearings	2
(c) policy papers	1
(d) inspection reports	2
(e) local decisions	3
(f) area budget etc reporting	0
(g) general	1
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	0
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	11 (all)

Public at start = approx 25 – mainly interested in planning applications – none present for other areas of business. (Note add column PP for each item) 2 Press present – left after planning applications. Most there for applications (a) supported accommodation at Stuartfield and (b) Tuffed Duck.

Comments by recording councillor/observer:

- Very efficient and effective chairing – generally focused discussion – not lengthy reiteration “I agree with....”
- Members spoke to put a point – where clear consensus, no unnecessary debate.
- Was one vote- again no lengthy reiteration. Motion and amendment clearly and concisely put and put to vote.
- Time after meeting used for informal briefing session for all Cllrs by Area Manager/ officers on particular confidential issue.
- Authors were present to support all reports – none waited more than 30 mins for their item to be heard.

NB Throughout the level of engagement with items was excellent- and did not directly relate to number of speakers – (see comment above re focus in discussion)

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
1. Minute of 28 July	10.05		1	11 (all)	Y 2/20	n/a
2 a. OPP dwellinghouse 14 Gordon Street, St Combs 2009/0230	10.06	Y (W Forbes)	3	11 (all)	Y	Straight agreed – no need for protracted debate
2b. FPP demolish hotel, 8 flats Pit four Arms Hotel, Mintlaw 2008/4371 (hearing)	10.09	Y (W Forbes/ A Mackinnon)	5	11 (all)	Y	Straight agreed – no need for protracted debate
3a. FPP alteration & extension 10 Corsekelly Place, St Combs 2009/0089	10.14	Y (W Forbes)	4	11 (all)	Y	Straight agreed – no need for protracted debate
3b. FPP supported accommodation, Benaiah, Stuartfield 2009/0124 (hearing)	10.18	Y	33 (2 x presentations heard – approx 8 mins each)	11 (all)	Y	Good

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
3c. FPP staff accommodation block Tufted Duck, St Combs 2009/0005	10.52	Y (W Forbes)	6	11 (all)	Y	High
3d. FPP dwellinghouse Site 1, Tufted Duck, St Combs 2009/1162	10.58	Y (W Forbes)	7 (includes 2009/1163 below)	11 (all)	Y	high
3e. FPP2 dwellinghouses Sites 2 & 3, Tufted Duck, St Combs 2009/1163	Taken with above					
3f. FPP extension to agricultural building Bogengarrie, Ardallie, Peterhead 2009/0400	11.05	Y (W Forbes/ A Mackinnon)	7	11 (all)	Y 2/4	high
3g.FPP boundary wall condition 22 Newton Grange, Mintlaw 2009/0959	11.12	Y (W Forbes)	1	11 (all)	Y	high

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
3h. FPP 6 dwellinghouses Hillview Farm, Stuartfield 2009/1636	11.13	Y (W Forbes/ A Mackinnon)	7	11 (all)	Y	high
3i. OPP dwellinghouse Shantlerhill, Maud 2009/1611	11.21	Y (W Forbes)	9	11 (all)	Y	High- debate- vote
3j. Reserved matters application dwellinghouse West Knock Farm, Stuartfield 2009/1773	11.30	Y (W Forbes)	3	10 (Cllr Howie declared interest and left chamber)	Y	med
3k. FPP 17 flats Windmill Street, Peterhead 2008/4340	11.33	Y (W Forbes)	3	11 (all)	Y 2/1	High
3l. FPP wind turbine Bogenlea Farm, New Byth 2009/1541	11.36	Y (W Forbes)	7	11 (all)	Y 2/0	High – several comments (cross boundary issue)

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
4. "School Keep Clear" School Road St Fergus	11.43	Y (A Mackinnon)	1	11 (all)	N	High
5. Review of ELL Grants System	11.44	Y (T Stephen/ A Laird – arrived 11.28am)	9	11 (all)	N	High- lots of debate/ comments
6. HMle reports – Mintlaw Academy	11.53	Y (H Cowie/ A Simpson- arrived 11.30)	8	11 (all)	N	High – follow up report requested on CLG
7. HMle – Auchnagatt Primary School	12.01	Y (H Cowie/ A Simpson)	2	11 (all)	N	High – good news story- letter to head
8. Gerrie's Yard, Greenhill Road, Peterhead (exempt)	12.03	Y (G Daniels/ G Topp - arrived 11.44)	2	11 (all)	N	High
9. Grassum Lease of Site, Dales Ind. Estate, Peterhead (exempt)	12.05	Y (G Daniels/ G Topp)	2	11 (all)	N	High

FORMARTINE AREA COMMITTEE SCORE SHEET

NAME OF COMMITTEE	FORMARTINE AREA COMMITTEE
DATE OF COMMITTEE	1 September. 2009
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	24
(a) development control applications	14
(b) development control hearings	
(c) policy papers	1
(d) inspection reports/ Performance Indicators	2
(e) local decisions	5
(f) area budget etc reporting	1
(g) general	1
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	none
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	All

Press present Items: 1- 11 – left after Menie applications. (Included TV reporters)

Public present Items: All but 11n.

Comments: Prior to commencement of business of the meeting, vote on procedural issue raised relating to circulation v availability of representations on planning applications Motion to defer; Amendment to consider –Amendment carried.

Officers generally attended for items- planning and area manager and staff there all the time – not over long waiting to be heard on any occasion – Officers early attendance may have been due to awareness of public interest in agenda and need to get there promptly .

Poor volume/ acoustics – despite microphone system. Public strain to follow –observer sat in 2nd row – struggled on occasion – others were further away.

Use of ppt projector to display planning application details was very helpful- scale easily visible to public and Ctte alike. Felt more interactive than map on wall or overheads.

Planning application process - Cllrs asked general questions, local members first to comment, then debate – explained to public at all stages what was going to happen.

NB – was particularly pressured meeting in terms of high level media and public interest in specific planning application – despite lengthy day and late lunch break, members remained focused into the afternoon session and the matters it included.

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/ Public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
1. Minute of 28 July, 2009	09.58	n/a	1	All	3/ 25	N/a- focus but no debate
2. Area Top Up Budget	09.59	Y (K Newton)	1	All		High focus and debate
3. Oldmeldrum Town Hall	10.00	Y (K Newton/ T Stephen) TS arrived 9.45	8	All		High focus and debate
4. Performance Indicators April - June	10.08	Y (K Newton)	18	All		High focus and lengthy debate
5. Review of ELL Grants System	10.26	Y (T Stephen)	12	All		High focus and debate
6. Formartine Community School Network Annual Report	10.48	Y (Mark Hearn (arrived 9.45)	11	All	3/45	High focus and debate
7. Formartine Bathroom Upgrades (C 16504)	10.59	?	>1	All	3/45	Straight forward agree - no need for debate

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/ Public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
8. Secondary school enhancement – Turriff Academy Swimming Pool (C 16404)	10.59	?	>1	All		Straight forward agree- no need for debate
9. Fyvie School Electrical Upgrade (C 16319)	10.59	N	>1	All		Straight forward agree- no need for debate
10. Pitmedden – Greenacres S/Hsg Boiler Upgrade (C16448)	10.59	N	9	All	3/50	High focus and debate
11a. FPP 3 wind turbines, Mains of Cairnbrogie (2008/4093)	Preceded by comfort break – started again at 11.15	Y (J White/ J Dawson) J Dawson there from start of meeting	31	All	3/50	High focus and debate – and vote
11b. FPP Vary Condition 2 – extend time – Wester Hatton landfill, Potterton (2008/4158)	11.46	Y (J White / J Dawson)	4	All	3/34	Agreed to defer on Chair's suggestion – no lengthy debate but high focus

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/ Public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
11c. FPP wind turbine Bogenlea farm, New Byth (2009/1541)	11.50	Y (J White/ Nicola / J Dawson)	12	All	3/28	High focus and debate
11d. OPP Golf course etc Leyton Farm, Balmedie (2009/1620)	12.02	Y (J White)	2hrs 20 approx Taken together with 11e- 11h inclusive. Applicant plus two objectors heard (four objectors invited) Repeat of motion to defer as at top of agenda (2:9) Voted for all five together – Rec carried 9:2	All	5/43	High focus and debate – and vote
11e. OPP golf course etc Hermit Point, Balmedie (2009/1623)	See above	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/ Public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
11f. OPP golf course etc Leyton Cottage, Balmedie (2009/1629)	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”
11g. OPP golf course etc Mill of Menie, Balmedie (2009/1631)	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”
11h. OPP Council land at Menie Estate, Balmedie (2009/1633)	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”	“ ”
11i. OPP dwelling house Deenik, Gask, Turriff (2009/1670)	Ctte adjourned for lunch – reconvened 15.00	Y (J White)	7		0/2	High focus and debate (show of hands refused site visit)
11j. FPP Agricultural building North Redbriggs, Greeness (2008/1549)	15.07	Y (J White)	4	All (Cllr Robertson declared non exclusion interest but took part)	0/2	High focus and debate

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/ Public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
11k. FPP Dwellinghouse & garage Northside of Glack, Meikle Wartle, (2007/4415)	15.11	Y (J White)	7	All	0/2	High focus and debate
11l. FPP Alteration & Extension to dwellinghouse 1 Stonegables, Kirkton of Bourtie, Oldmeldrum (2009/2010)	15.18	Y (J White)	>1	All	0/2	Unanimously agreed – no need for debate
11m. FPP Replace Dwellinghouse Cromlet Farmhouse, Fyvie (2009/1080)	15.18	Y (J White)	20	All	0/2	High focus and debate
11n. FPP Boundary Fence 1 Burgh Lane, Oldmeldrum (2009/2076)	15.38	Y (J White)	>1	All	0/0	Unanimously agreed – no need for debate

MARR AREA COMMITTEE SCORE SHEET

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Marr Area Ctte
DATE OF COMMITTEE	8 September, 2009
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	
(a) development control applications	11
(b) development control hearings	2
(c) policy papers	1
(d) inspection reports	0
(e) local decisions	4
(f) area budget etc reporting	0
(g) general	2
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	0
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	10 (All- Cllrs Argyle and Webster delayed)

Comments by recording councillor/observer:

Public Hall setting- but well provided microphone system and ppt presentation of planning eased public access.

Full and detailed consideration of all items of business – public tended to be present for planning applications only - arriving for them and leaving after. Applicants or agents only – addressed Ctte on application.

Press counting not appropriate as there is a different arrangement in Marr. Robert Duncan there as Council rep throughout. .

Officers – Area Manager (L Allan), Ctte Officer (A Riddell), Planning Officers and Legal (C Campbell) all the time. Walter Taylor, Mark Skilling and Malcolm Christie there for their own items/ planning comments.

Chair sums up after each item (– good for clarification)

Time after meeting used to discuss other area business- agenda for meeting with Community Partners etc.

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of engagement (high/med/low)
1. Sederunt and Declaration of Members' Interests	10.00am	n/a	4	8	0/0	n/a
2. Minute of Meeting of Marr Area Committee of 18 August, 2009	10.04	Y (L Allan/A Riddell)	1	8	0/0	Good
3. Review of Existing Grants System	10.05	Y (W Taylor)	11	8	0/0	Good.
4. Scottish Strategic Timber Transport Scheme Matching Funding - C43M Tough to Muggarthaugh Road Upgrade	10.16	Y (M Christie)	16	9 (Cllr Argyle arrived mid item)	0/0	Good
5. Aboyne Academy and Community Centre Replacement Lift - Contract 16430	10.32	AM (no property)	3	9	0/0	Good.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of engagement (high/med/low)
6. Speed Limit Assessments on the A93	10.35	Y (Mark Skilling)	18	10 (Cllr Webster arrived during item)	0/1	Good
7. Planning Appeal - Clashnae Hill, Kildrummy by Alford	10.53	Y (Marie Stewart/Colin Campbell)	20	10	0/6	Good.
8A. FPP Erection of Dwellinghouse and Garage at Site to the North East of Denmoss, Largue, Forgue, Huntly	11.23 (10 min break taken from 11.13)	Y (M Stewart)	5	10	0/6	Good.
8B. OPP Erection of Dwellinghouse at Site to North of Willowbank Cottage, Low Road, Aboyne	11.28	Y (M Stewart)	9	10	0/6	Good.
8C. FPP Conversion of Mill to form dwellinghouse at Units 1 and 2 Deveron Mill, Glass, Huntly	11.37	Y (M Stewart)	10	10	0/6- 0/4	Good.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of engagement (high/med/low)
8D. FPP Erection of Engine Shed at Milton of Crathes, Banchory - REQUEST TO SPEAK	11.47	Y (M Stewart)	27 Heard D Anderson for applicant- 2 nd named speaker not present. Chair checked no objectors there who'd want to speak/ fair hearing	10	0/5	Good. Vote 6/2/2
8E. OPP Erection of Workshop for Plumbing Business and Replacement Dwellinghouse at Site at Cottage of Collithie, Gartly, Huntly	12.14 – 12.16- debate temp pp versus FPP 12.16	Y (M Stewart)	16	10	0/3	Good.
8F. FPP Erection of Dwellinghouse & Car Port at Garden Ground at Woodcrest, Glassel, Banchory - REQUEST TO SPEAK	12.32 (taken with 8G)	Y (M Stewart)	38 Mins in total Speakers heard- fairness etc checked	10	0/3	good

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of engagement (high/med/low)
8G. FPP Change of Use of General Domestic Storage Building to Builders Store at Garden Ground at Woodcrest, Glassel, Banchory - REQUEST TO SPEAK	12.32 (taken with 8F)	“	“””””	“””””	“ “	“ “
8H. FPP Variation of Condition 5 (Change from Wet Dash Harling to Dry Dash Roughcast) of Planning Permission Reference APP/2006/2579 at Site Adjacent to Logie Coldstone School, Tarland, Aboyne	13.45	Y (Marie Stewart)	20	10	0/1	Good (vote 7:3)
8I. FPP Erection of Dwellinghouse at Site adjacent to Old Lynturk Kirk, Muir of Fowlis, Alford	14.05	Y (Marie Stewart)	12	10	0/1	Good.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of engagement (high/med/low)
8J. Full Planning Permission for Removal of Condition No. 6 from Planning Permission APP/2008/2354 at G M Timber Systems, Site to the South of Haugh of Sluie, Potarch, Banchory - REQUEST TO SPEAK	14.17	Y (Marie Stewart)	40 Heard agent. Chair checked happy with fairness etc.	10	0/1	Good.
9. Planning Application APP/2009/0970 - Woodcrest, Glassel, Banchory	15.01	Y (Marie Stewart)	2	10	0/1	Good.
10. Former Schoolhouse and house Plot, Beltie Road, Torphins	15.03`	N (L Allen)	3	10	0/0	Good.

GARIOCH AREA COMMITTEE

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Garioch Area Ctte
DATE OF COMMITTEE	15 September, 2009
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	
(a) development control applications	7
(b) development control hearings	1
(c) policy papers	1
(d) inspection reports	0
(e) local decisions	3
(f) area budget etc reporting	1
(g) general	4
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	0
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	13 (Cllr Cullinane on leave)

Comments by recording councillor/observer:

Time after meeting used to arrange site visit and discuss seminar arrangements for following week.

Debate focused in all cases – same attention paid to policy items as well as planning applications – no feeling that this was merely a planning meeting.

Press and public particularly in attendance for planning matters – officers only by items 11 and 12.

Core officers there throughout the meeting (Area staff, planners and legal). Other officers attending for their items – no waiting overlong. Sole exception - Anne Laird arrived at 11.30 for item 11 – not taken till 12.27.

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
1. Apologies	10.15am	n/a	2	12	2/2	n/a
2. Declaration of Members' Interests	10.17am	n/a	1	12	2/2	n/a
3. Minute of Meeting of Garioch Area Committee of 25 August, 2009	10.18	Y (I Fowell/ A Cumming)	2	12	2/2	Good.
4. Intimation of Public Question Time	10.20		0	12	2/2	n/a
5. Performance Indicators – Social Work and Housing – April-June 2009	10.20	Y (V Milne and male housing officer) – both left after item	14	13 (Cllr Stuart arrived)	2/2	Good- detailed questioning.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
6A. Site Visit 15/9/09- Change of use agricultural to garden ground, renovation & extension of existing dwellinghouse and erection of detached garage at Westseat Farmhouse, Echt, Westhill APP/2009/1591	10.34	Y (L Tierney)	26	13	2/5	Good. (Vote 8:5)
6B. Site visit 15/9/09 - Change of house type and erection fence at Plot 34, Phase 3, Westgate Residential Dev, Blackhall Road, Inverurie APP/2009/0720	11.00	Y (L Tierney)	12	13	2/3	Good. (Vote 8:5)
7A. Erection of 6 no. dwellinghouses at land adjacent to Timaru, Kirkton of Oyne APP/2008/3840	11.12	Y (Mr Davidson)	1	13	2/3	Site Visit agreed – little discussion needed.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
7B. Change of use of ground to create builders storage compound at land at Rosehall, Newmachar APP/2009/2084	11.13	Y (Mr Davidson)	>1	13	2/3	All agreed- no need to discuss
7C. Erection of Community Centre/Youth Cafe at site at Allandale Gardens, APP/2009/0528	11.13	Y (Mr Davidson)	27	12 (Cllr Ford declared interest and left chamber)	2/4	Good (vote 4:8)
7D. Residential development at Roadside of Corsindae, Midmar APP/2008/2582	11.40	Y (L Tierney/I Fowell)	40	13	2/1	Good.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
7E. Extension to Hotel, conversion of farm steadings to timeshare/holiday units and demolition of steading at Pittodrie House Hotel, APP/2008/1823 and APP/2008/1824	12.20	Y (L Tierney)	5	12 (Cllr Stuart declared interest and left chamber)	2/0	Good.
8. Renewal of Internal Lease at Unit 8, Harlaw Industrial Estate, Harlaw Way, Inverurie	12.25	N	>1	13	2/0	Nil – all agreed
9. Kellands School - Window Upgrades Contract 16604	12.26	N	>1	13	2/0	All agreed- no discussion.
10. Crombie School - Window Upgrades - Contract 16607	12.26	N	>1	13	2/0	All agreed – no discussion.
11. Review of Existing Grants System	12.27	Y (A Laird)	36	13	0/0	Detailed and probing discussion.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
12. Statement of Outstanding Business	13.03	Y (I Fowell)	3	13	0/0	Good.

KINCARDINE & MEARN'S AREA COMMITTEE

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Kincardine & Mearns Area Ctte
DATE OF COMMITTEE	22 September, 2009
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	9
(a) development control applications	3 (taking 66 mins in all)
(b) development control hearings	2
(c) policy papers	1
(d) inspection reports	1
(e) local decisions	6 (taking 10 mins)
(f) area budget etc reporting	1
(g) general	-
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	In the afternoon on planning regulations – 1hr 15 mins
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	12 (out of 13)

Comments by recording councillor/observer:**Agenda unusually light**

2 public from 9.15am – approx 12, and 2 press, from 9.30am.

Chair provided “housekeeping” intro - fire/ toilets etc and introduced people sitting round top table.

After formal meeting, Cllrs were updated on current outside body issue and Presentation to begin at noon. There was also discussion of need to schedule special meeting to look at policy implications of local development plan.

Acoustics good - planning displays could have been more accessible to the public/ shared by all members –observer had been impressed with ppt usage for “same sheet displays for all” in other locations as aid to discussion.

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
1. Sederunt and Declaration of Members' Interests	9.30am	n/a	3	12	2/11	
2. Minute of Meeting of 1 September, 2009	09.33	n/a	3	12	2/11	
*Public Q Time included here	9.36		8			Good
3. Cluster Primary School management	9.44	Y (T Birnie)	20	12	2/11	Good
4. Local Public Holidays 2010	10.04	Y (W Munro)	1	12	2/11	No need for debate
5. Performance Indicators	10.05	Y/N (W Munro- but no service reps)	19	12	2/16	Good/ medium
6. Sale of Former School at Netherley, by Stonehaven (Exempt)	11.36	N	2	12	n/a	Low – no need for debate

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
7. Statutory List of Public Roads, Hillview Road and Castlehill Gardens, Auchenblae	10.24	N (Cllr B – don't regard officer present as necessary for this item)	1	12	2/16	Low – no need for debate
8. Mill O' Forest School Window Upgrades Contract 16605	10.25	N	4	12	2/16	Good/ medium
9a. OPP Erection of 5 Dwelling houses at Land to South of Downies Village, Windyridge, Portlethen APP-2008-2977	10.29	Y (D Gray)	37 Presentations by objectors (x2) and applicant's agent	12	2/17	Potentially high – ctte will come back to after site visit.
9b. FPP Erection of 7 Dwelling houses (to replace existing dwelling) at 12 Findon Road, Findon, Portlethen APP-2007-4969	11.07	Y (D Gray)	18 Presentations by objectors and the applicant	12	2/10	Potentially high – site visit agreed.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss (in minutes)	No. of Cllrs present during item	Press/Public	Level of debate/ engagement (high/med/low)
9c. OPP Business and Industrial Development (Use Class 4) at Site Adjacent to the Smithy, Auchenblae Road, Fordoun, Laurencekirk APP-2008-0559	11.25	Y (D Gray)	11	12	2/2	Good.
Public Question Time Taken at 2 above	09.36		8	12	2/12	Good.

BANFF & BUCHAN AREA COMMITTEE

NAME OF COMMITTEE	BANFF & BUCHAN AREA CTTE
DATE OF COMMITTEE	29/9/09
NUMBER OF ITEMS ON AGENDA	20
(a) development control applications	5
(b) development control hearings	1
(c) policy papers	2
(d) inspection reports	1
(e) local decisions	7
(f) area budget etc reporting	-
(g) general	4
(h) presentations/ briefing sessions	-
NUMBER OF CLLRS PRESENT	8

Comments by recording observer: (NB arrived late (9.44am) – so earlier comments from Area Ctte Officer.

Press there for most of the agenda – public focused on planning applications.

Most officers attending to present papers arrived to do so – none waited overlong. Core officers there throughout.

Director of Transportation & Infrastructure was there (first Director seen at any of the 6 observed Area Cttes). This Ctte had meaty local agenda re economic development issues – and debated them in detail.

Layout and acoustics good – all ctte business accessible to the public benches. No ppts/maps etc for planning matters.

Assessment

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present During item	Press/public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
1. Declaration of Members Interests	09:30	n/a	14 mins in total – items 1-6	8	2/5	n/a
2. Minute of Meeting of 08 September 2009		n/a		8	2/5	
3. List of Outstanding Business at 29 September 2009				8	2/5	
4. Information Bulletin for Councillors – August 2009				8	2/5	
5A. LBC and FPP Installation of 6 Replacement Windows, 1 Door, Installation of Vent and Internal alterations to Dwellinghouse (Retrospective) at Carla, 15 Low Shore, Whitehills, Banff BB/APP/2009/1963 (LBC) & BB/APP 2009/2094 (FPP)		Y (D Ross)		8	2/5	

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present During item	Press/public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
6A. FPP Erection of Replacement Dwellinghouse at Kilbirnie Farm, Lonmay, Fraserburgh BB/APP/2009/1850		Y (D Ross)		8	2/5	Good.
7A. FPP Demolition of Existing Care Home and Erection of 13 Dwellinghouses, Replacement Properties at Rose Innes Home, South Street, Aberchirder, Huntly BB/APP/2008/2555	9.44	Y (D Ross/ A MacKinnon)	43	8	2/5	Good. (Vote 5:2:1)
7B. FPP Erection of Walls and Installation of Security Doors at Land at Banff Links, Banff - BB/APP/2009/2621	10.27	Y (D Ross)	1	8	2/3	No need- all agreed.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present During item	Press/public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
7C. FPP Erection of Four Dwellinghouses and Erection of Dwellinghouse, Sites at Cairnhill, Roseheart, Fraserburgh BB/APP/2009/1980 & BB/APP/2009/1005	10.28	Y (D Ross)	3 (Change of process- would not now come to Ctte)	8	2/3	Good- questions on issues.
8. Cluster Primary School Management	10.31	Y (W Weir)	14	8	2/1	Good.
9. Banff Academy and Ordiquhill Primary School	10.45	Y (W Weir/ A Bain)	16	8	2/2	Good.
10. Plans for Capital Investment in Banff Swimming Pool and Lifelong Learning Facilities in Banff	11.01	Y (R Stone)	6	8	2/2	Good.
11. Tarlair Swimming Pool Complex, Macduff	11.06	Y (R Stone/ R Leith)	28	8	2/0	Good.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present During item	Press/public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
12. The Accommodation Needs of Gypsies/Travellers in Grampian	11.34	Y (M Stephen)	11	8	2/0	Good.
13. Addition to the Statutory List of Public Roads - Troup View, Gardenstown	11.45	Y (A MacKinnon)	>1	8	2/0	Agreed without debate.
14. Economic Activity in Banff & Buchan - April 2008-September 2009	11.45	Y (I Gabriel/ M Harper)	20	8	2/0	Good.
15. The "Coast" Visual Arts Festival, May 2009	12.05	Y (M Harper)	13	8	2/0	Good.
16. Aberdeenshire Towns Partnership "Next Steps" and the Development Trusts - Progress Report	12.18	Y (B Clark/ I Gabriel)	12	8	2/0	Good.
17. Development of Tarlair Business Park, Macduff (Exempt)	12.30	Y (I Gabriel/ S Gray)	2	8	0/0	Good- little need for debate.

Item number/ name	Start time	Officer present? (Y/N)	Time taken to discuss	No. of Cllrs present During item	Press/public	Level of debate (high/med/low)
18. Support for Aberdeenshire Business Scheme – Reference No SAB/106/0385 (Exempt)	12.32	Y (M Harper)	12	8	0/0	Good.

APPENDIX D**ENDNOTES TO RECOMMENDATIONS**

ⁱ Services should ensure, when arranging events in local areas, or speaking with local members on particular topics, that the local councillor(s) and area manager is invited to attend or kept informed as appropriate. This is more than a matter of professional courtesy – while area managers do not need to be line managers of all officers active in their area, they should be considered as the Chief Executive’s representatives at the local level.

ⁱⁱ The Committee accept the need for members’ input into planning gain discussions to be carefully limited as it might compromise their ability to determine planning applications. However, information reports, as provided to the area managers on a regular basis, should be given to the democratically elected members before wide scale public release.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Council is at risk of claims of maladministration unless all requests to speak on planning applications are dealt with in the same way.

^{iv} The possible use of conference telephone calls and Video-conferencing (VC) input should be fully explored to assist officer attendance. This would augment hot desking already used, where appropriate, where area committees meet in existing staff bases.

The Committee believe it is good for staff experience, where they are based locally, to attend area committees. It forms bonds and increases awareness of the Area Committees, their members and functions. Unlike the approach suggested for PIs, Area Managers should not be expected to present major policy reports in the absence of an appropriate service officer. It is not always possible to prejudge which specific questions may arise. The lack of information can lead to delays, deferrals or confused consideration of reports. Endeavours should be made to having answers available on the day where possible, especially for potentially controversial reports.

^v This would facilitate and reduce calls on officer attendance and also allows better use of officer time by increasing pool of potential attendees. Not all members are able to attend each local event.

^{vi} The Committee believes this would make more accessible circumstance specific information to any spectators. The information may be hard to find in the paper version of the report. This display format is more accessible than site maps and elevation sketches being displayed on the walls of the meeting room. It is also more interactive and may assist in following the discussions of the area committee.

^{vii} In those areas where meetings have been held, these have been very productive and have been welcomed by members. The two way discussions facilitated in such meetings should become standard operating procedures.

^{viii} This is more than a matter of public perception or tick box reporting. The Committee feel that areas should be entrusted with additional responsibility. The importance of local knowledge as an input to resource allocations should not be underestimated.

^{ix} It would appear that the previous recommendation 5.2.2, “The Committee also believes that it should be made easier for an individual Councillor or group of Councillors (such as those representing a multi-member ward) to put forward an item for discussion at an Area Committee meeting. A mechanism other than the submitting of a formal Notice of Motion needs to be found“ has not yet been taken on board. It does not appear in the action plan agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee of 19 April, 2007 and so forms no part of the actions being currently assessed for implementation efficiency.

^x The Committee believes that attending and participating in area management teams should be a given, if invited to attend by the area manager. It should be a priority in instances of conflicting work pressures, and not just an add-on to the “day job”. The co-ordinating role of the area management team should be highlighted throughout the council to raise awareness.

^{xi} Mutual awareness of the team supporting the area manager and the cross-service work ongoing in the area can only improve working together to deliver services across the areas.

^{xii} To be aware of ongoing work in the presentation of PI to members but in the interim to stress that graphs used in PI reports are not sufficient on their own and require verbal explanation.

The explanation boxes should also identify what has been, and is being, done to address problems, or highlight the causes of successes.

^{xiii} Comments should be presented to the central policy committee with an officer response to the suggestions. It is important to have an audit trail of where area or other suggestions have, or have not, been taken on board by the service, and of the reasons for this. Without this linkage it may be hard to demonstrate that area comments have been considered at all, either by the service, or by the policy committee.

^{xiv} This is extremely important, as otherwise there is no benefit in seeking area committee views if what goes forward is merely a collation of views from individual councillors.

^{xv} A summary of feedback of outcomes to members, (copied to area managers), to be provided within 24 hours of a meeting, is urgently recommended. It is especially important for members to be aware of decisions quickly as their constituents may know and wish to discuss the matter further. Members should not have to rely on press coverage to provide information on council decisions in which they have participated.

^{xvi} The Committee is aware of issues regarding the recording, reporting and consideration of area committee comments on pre-published recommendations. It is very important that any paper be presented allow a “reasonable time” for area committee input. Whilst there may sometimes be external deadlines exerting timescale pressure, this needs to be balanced with allowing enough time in a paper’s

scheduling for the whole process. This may eliminate, or at least reduce, the need for oral reporting of area comments to the central committee.

^{xvii} This links to the provision of appropriate officer attendance, whether in person or via video-conferencing or other mechanisms.

^{xviii} The Committee would stress the importance of local knowledge, not always covered in geographic terms on each policy committee, as being crucial to decisions which impact on a local community.

^{xix} Does the Council itself, in presenting public information on Councillors, explain clearly enough the current geographical cluster – not the historical 1 member per ward – set up? This could potentially be linked to the effective publicity of members' surgeries.

^{xx} On the Council's website provision of Councillor contact details, each individual name click opens to a ward page. Could this be prefaced with a reiteration that there is now more than one "local member"? It is understood that the public tend to call the first name on the list, which may increase the workload of members relative to their alphabetic position. This does not apply in areas where there may be a historic association of an area with a long standing councillor – in these cases, the public will contact the known name regardless of multi-member ward designations.

^{xxi} Regular ward meetings should be held at least twice a year but ideally on a more frequent basis. The dates and scheduling should be up to members to decide, not officers. These should be encouraged as a productive way of discussing ward issues, round table.

^{xxii} In terms of area committee links to, and ownership of, community planning, more needs be done to share information of what goes on in each area with the local councillors.