

Council Meeting	
Meeting Date	28 January 2026
Report Title	Area Committees Review
EMT Lead	Larissa Reed - Chief Executive
Head of Service	Philip Sutcliffe - Communications & Policy Manager
Lead Officer	Janet Dart - Policy & Engagement Officer
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. To consider the vote at Western Area Committee on 27 November 2025 requesting that for recommendation 4, Western Area Committee meetings should take place in community venues in the Western Area and not in Swale House. 2. To discuss and agree the 14 recommendations proposed by the Area Committees Review Member Working Group and recommended by Policy & Resources Committee.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 At the Council Meeting on 2 April 2025, it was agreed that the Chief Executive undertake a full review of the effectiveness of Area Committees, working with Area Committees, Parish Councils and the public and report back to the Policy and Resources Committee in the Municipal Year 2025/2026.
- 1.2 An Area Committees Review Member Working Group (ACRMWG) was set up, the membership being the current Chairs of the four Area Committees. Between June and November 2025 they carried out the review with the Chief Executive, supported by the Policy & Engagement Officer.
- 1.3 The ACRMWG proposed 14 recommendations to the Policy and Resources Committee on 26 November 2026 where it was agreed to recommend to Council they agree the recommendations proposed.
- 1.4 At the Western Area Committee on 27 November 2025, Members discussed recommendation 4 and agreed that Western Area Committee meetings should take place in community venues in the Western Area and not in Swale House. This decision is not within the gift of the Area Committee and they asked that their vote be considered by Council at tonight's meeting.
- 1.5 Before taking the proposals to Council, Policy and Resources Committee agreed to refer recommendation 3.9 on voting arrangements to the Constitution Working Group.

- 1.6 The Constitution Working Group considered the recommendations on 5 January 2026 and requested amendments to the wording for recommendations 9, 10 and 14 to provide clarity.
- 1.7 The revised recommendations went back to Policy and Resources Committee on 13 January 2026 where they were agreed with minor amendments.

2 Background, Context and Proposals

- 2.1 Following the 2019 local elections, one of the objectives of the Swale Borough Council (SBC) administration was to diffuse power among Members and improve public engagement in decision-making. To achieve this, the administration put in place arrangements to set up four Area Committees in Swale and the first round of meetings took place in September 2020. Each year there are four rounds of meetings which take place in February, June, September and December. So, in total 16 meetings take place each year. Membership includes all ward Members in the area and the Committees' boundaries are aligned with those of the wards it covers. Substitute Members are not permitted on Area Committees and only those councillors who are Members of SBC are able to take decisions.
- 2.2 The purpose of Area Committees is "*to enhance the quality of life and of Council services in the relevant area and to bring local insight to bear in Council decision-making*". The terms of reference agreed by Cabinet in February 2020 are set out in the SBC [Constitution](#), paragraph 2.5.4.
- 2.3 For the first year, meetings took place remotely as the COVID pandemic legislation was still in place which allowed formal meetings to be held virtually. Once restrictions were relaxed, the meetings started to take place face-to-face in village halls and community centres. However, many members of the public and councillors agreed that a lot of people would prefer to continue to be able to attend the meetings remotely, so the meetings became hybrid. This has been very effective and allows for wider engagement with people across the Borough, regardless of their accessibility needs, giving them the choice to participate either in person or remotely.
- 2.4 For the first three years, each Area Committee was allocated funding which equated to each Member receiving an identical amount. This was established at the Annual Council budget meeting each year and to be allocated to projects in consultation and agreement with the Area Committee as a whole and in-line with the terms of reference. A total of £534,000 was allocated by the four Area Committees over the period September 2020 to May 2023 to a wide variety of projects. At the February 2023 Full Council meeting, members agreed that one of the measures to address the budget gap was to stop providing funding to Area Committees.
- 2.5 An important function of Area Committees is to engage with the public, parish/town councils and community groups. This is very much a two-way process with the Council providing information about new and changing Council

services and policies, updates on projects, and changes to Government legislation which may have an impact on residents. Area Committees are also a mechanism for the Council to listen to residents. The Council have incorporated provisions in the Constitution for there to be a session for members of the public or local organisations, including parish and town councils, to propose items for future agendas for consideration by the Committees to ask relevant questions and make relevant comments to the Committee.

- 2.6 The resource required to administer and support each round of Area Committees includes hall hire which is on average $4 \times £100 = £400$ per round. It is estimated that the total amount of time staff spent administering and supporting each round of meetings is 150 hours. Officers involved include the Senior Management Team, the Policy & Engagement Officer, Democratic Services, Communications and a variety of officers from different service areas responding to issues raised at meetings and preparing briefings and presenting updates.
- 2.7 Area Committee Chairs each receive a Special Responsibility Allowance of £2,036.00, the total per annum is £8,144.00.
- 2.8 Since funding for Area Committees to support local projects ceased, there has been a drop in attendance at meetings. This is variable between different areas and dependant local interest for specific agenda items. Appendix I gives a breakdown of attendance at each Area Committee meeting between June 2023 and September 2025. It also provides information on items which generated discussion at the meetings and the number of decisions made.
- 2.9 The ACRMWG consulted widely as part of the review. Details of the consultations carried out can be found in paragraph 5.1 of this report. The feedback was used by the Working Group to develop their proposed recommendations. The different consultations focussed on whether Area Committees, in their current format, achieved their purpose and questioned how they could be improved or if alternative methods of engagement would be more effective.
- 2.10 Following review by the Constitution Working Group and Policy and Resources Committee, the proposed recommendations are as follows:
 - 1) The name of Area Committees should be changed to “Councillors and Residents Forum”. This will make the purpose of the meetings clearer.
 - 2) As the December round of meetings are generally poorly attended, the frequency of the meetings to be reduced from 4 rounds a year to 3 rounds.
 - 3) The summer round of meetings to provide a networking opportunity with refreshments, which will provide residents with the opportunity to interact with their ward councillor/s.
 - 4) The Sittingbourne and Western Area Committee meetings should be held in the Committee Room at Swale House. Swale House is easily accessible

for those residents and provides a saving on room hire which could be used to fund the summer networking meetings.

- 5) The venues for the Eastern and Sheppey Area Committee meetings should not move about as this has caused confusion in the past. Where possible the venue should remain the same for each Area Committee.
- 6) Ward councillors to be encouraged to lead on agenda items, this to be in agreement with the Chair in advance of the agenda being published.
- 7) Agenda items to be area specific, including items that are of interest to members of the public in their area.
- 8) The Public Forum item to be scheduled as early as possible on the agenda.
- 9) For certain items, members of the public and parish/town councils have the ability to vote/express/indicate a preference. It will be agreed by the Chair in advance which item/s this applies to and be made clear on the agenda. The potential outcomes of the vote will be explained to the public before a vote is taken.
- 10) Only ward councillors to vote to refer items to Service Committee Chairs. In this context, ward councillor means a Swale Borough Councillor who is a member of the relevant Councillor and Resident Forum.
- 11) The Matters Arising Report to incorporate a “You Said, We Did” section.
- 12) Communications to provide fuller explanation of items to be discussed and all ward councillors to take an active role in encouraging attendance.
- 13) To improve the sound quality for people attending remotely, an expansion microphone to be purchased to use with the Owl Labs device at a cost of £249.
- 14) Chairs to meet before each round of meetings to review and forward plan. In particular this meeting will consider and agree future items that are suitable for the public vote/indication.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 To consider the vote at Western Area Committee on 27 November 2025 requesting that for recommendation 4, Western Area Committee meetings should take place in community venues in the Western Area and not in Swale House.

- 3.2 To discuss and agree the 14 recommendations proposed by the Area Committees Review Member Working Group and recommended by Policy & Resources Committee.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 The alternative to the recommendations proposed by the ACRMWG is to do nothing and to continue with Area Committees in their current format. This is not recommended as the meetings are poorly attended and not fully achieving their purpose which is to “enhance the quality of life and of Council services in the relevant area and to bring local insight to bear in Council decision-making”.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 Consultation was widely undertaken and included the following: a public consultation was carried out between 1 August and 31 August 2025 and 54 responses were received (see Appendix II); an SBC Member survey was carried out between 1 August and 31 August 2025 and 17 responses were received (see Appendix III). The text responses have been summarised using artificial intelligence. Discussions took place at the June/July 2025 round of Area Committee meetings a summary of those discussions are at Appendix IV.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The proposed recommendations align with the objectives of the corporate plan, in particular the Community objective “To ensure active and effective engagement mechanisms are in place so that all residents and communities have the opportunity to engage with the Council”.
Financial, Resource and Property	Administering Area Committees has financial and resource implications. These are estimated in paragraph 2.6 of this report.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	The proposed recommendations were referred to the Constitution Working Group who agreed changes to the Constitution should the recommendations be adopted by Council.
Crime and Disorder	None identified at this stage.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	None identified at this stage.

Health and Wellbeing	None identified at this stage.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified at this stage.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None identified at this stage.
Equality and Diversity	None identified at this stage.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified at this stage.
Local Government Reorganisation	None identified at this stage.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendices Ia to Id: Area Committees Review – data on meetings between June 2023 and September 2025
- Appendix II: Area Committees Review – summary of public consultation responses
- Appendix III: Area Committee Review – summary of SBC Member consultation responses
- Appendix IV: Area Committee Review – summary of discussions held at June/July 2025 round of Area Committee meetings

8 Background Papers

None.