

**SCRUTINY PANEL REVIEW PANEL 1
'GOVERNANCE'**

MINUTES

Tuesday, 28th November, 2013

PRESENT: Councillors: Young (Chair), Anjum (Substitute for Cllr Byrne), Bagha, Ann Chapman, Susan Emmet, Gallagher, Gordon (Vice-Chair), Gurmit Kaur Mann, Rajinder Mann and Rose.

Also Present

Tan Afzal	- Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, LBE.
Harjeet Bains	- Scrutiny Review Officer, LBE.
Dennis Frost	- Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, LBE
Evelyn Gloyn	- Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, LBE
Kofi Nyamah	- Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, LBE
Lee Teasdale	- Democratic Services Officer, LBE.

1. Apologies for Absence

(Agenda Item 1)

Apologies were received from Cllr Stacey.

2. Urgent Matters

(Agenda Item 2)

There were none.

3. Matters to be considered in Private

(Agenda Item 3)

There were none.

4. Minutes (26.09.2013)

(Agenda Item 4)

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Panel held on 26 September 2013 be agreed as a true and correct record.

5. Declarations of Interest

(Agenda Item 5)

There were none.

6. Neighbourhood Governance

(Agenda Item 6)

The Panel gave consideration to a report led by Dennis Frost, Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator which asked the Panel to consider and make recommendations for further improvements to the running of neighbourhood governance within the borough.

A new model for neighbourhood governance had initially been approved by the Cabinet in November 2007. It was agreed that each of Ealing's 23 wards would have a separate ward forum, at which, at least three meetings would take place per year. Each forum was provided with a £40,000 annual budget (which was subsequently reduced to £37,500 in 2012) which could be spent on small scale local projects following the recommendations of the ward councillors and their residents.

The project began with a one year pilot in 2008 which had been considered a significant success. Following a review of the pilot by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September 2009, it was recommended, and subsequently approved by Cabinet, that ward forums be made permanent. It was confirmed that since the inauguration of the pilots in 2008, over 12,500 people had attended 361 different forums, averaging out at approximately 35 people per meeting.

Over 1,000 ward funded projects had been undertaken, supported by ward funding totalling £3.7 million. These projects had varied in value from as little as £500 grants, to as much as £50,000 to install a signalised pedestrian crossing.

Ward projects came about through suggestions from residents and ward councillors, and these were then worked up into relevant recommendations by Council Officers. The projects were often linked by a number of common themes; they were often projects that had previously been considered as too small, too difficult or involving too many agencies.

Ward forums were also about listening to and acting upon the views and wishes of local residents. They had developed into conversations with a continuing and developing dialogue between local people and their elected councillors. This had proved to be an especially valuable element in a time of declining monetary resources, where often difficult decisions taken by the Council needed to be relayed in a cohesive discourse with local residents.

The Chair thanked the Neighbourhood Governance Team for their comprehensive report and invited members of the public at the meeting to make brief representations regarding their experience of ward forums and how they felt advances could be made.

The first speaker was Mr Arthur Breens who was representing Kingsdown Residents Association. He expressed concern that the forums were not given enough opportunity to put relevant Officers under scrutiny.

He raised the example of the Corridor 1C plan. This was a Transport for London led initiative in which they had been working in conjunction with Ealing Council to make changes to the West Ealing and Hanwell corridor of the Uxbridge Road. It was felt that Officers had made decisions on the plan without taking into account money saving recommendations made at the forum and without further feedback being provided to the forum attendees, resulting in an impression that the consultation on the plan was purely a 'box ticking exercise'. Because of this, communication was felt to be compromised.

He also stated that three meetings a year were not enough, and that there should be scope to hold meetings more regularly.

The next speaker was Ms Nancy Duin, a resident of the Acton Central Ward. She had many years of experience in attending Acton forums due to her prior involvement in the arrangement of the Acton Christmas Fair.

She stated that the remit of the forums was not made entirely clear. It was felt that this issue could be partly attributed to the nature of the forums changing depending on which political party were in power at the time. Where under Conservative leadership monies were given out without much scrutiny of the projects they were funding, under Labour leadership it was considered that bureaucracy had gone too far in the other direction, with all decisions being made by the Leader of the Council. She felt that there needed to be a compromise between the two approaches.

She expressed reservations about the way the forums were run, with Councillors taking too much of the lead, and without enough 'grass roots' input. A more user friendly and less parliamentary style would be welcomed. There was also concern that in some cases issues important to the area were brought to ward forums too late for the residents to have any say on the matters involved.

Miss Miriam Galena, a resident of the Elthorne Ward was then invited to speak. Her central concerns were focussed around the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of public money.

She was concerned that residents at her local ward forum were not advised of what money had been spent and where. She considered that this left funding open to being abused. It was felt that as this was public money being spent, that the public had a full right to know where it had been spent with fully transparent budgeting.

Councillor Chris Summers was then invited to speak about his experience of his local forum in the Northolt Mandeville Ward. His key concerns focussed around the attendance of his local forum being made up of residents all of a similar demographic background.

Whilst he fully welcomed their attendance and input at each meeting, he considered that as the attendees were largely white, 'middle class' and in the fifty plus age group, significant demographics in the ward did not have their interests represented. More therefore needed to be done to attract people outside of the usual attendees to each meeting.

A final member of the public, Mr Eric Leach of the West Ealing Centre Neighbourhood Forum was invited to speak to the Panel. He also expressed concern that three meetings a year were too few. He considered that it would be beneficial to see residents become more involved in the agenda setting process.

He also expressed concern regarding the structure of the wards, feeling that the shape of some did not lend naturally to dealing appropriately with local issues and caused occasional difficulties. He also considered that whilst the ward forums had some issues, he still considered them to be "better than nothing".

The Chair thanked the members of the public who had registered to speak for their input. He also noted the written representations made by members of the public and included on the Agenda, which had been considered by the Panel. He then invited members of the Panel to comment and ask questions.

Councillor Ann Chapman agreed that ward forums being defined by their ward boundaries rather than 'natural neighbourhoods' often proved problematic. She considered that larger cross-boundary meetings could sometimes prove beneficial, and that a degree of flexibility with regards to the amount of meetings held would be helpful.

She expressed concern regarding certain forums not receiving feedback on how monies were being spent, as she felt that her forum was always kept up to date.

Dennis Frost advised that whilst it could prove problematic from an administrative perspective, it was essentially at the discretion of each forum individually as to how many meetings it wished to hold in a given Council year.

The Chair asked for clarification of the process whereby projects are 'vetted' before decisions are made by forums.

Tan Afzal, Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, explained that there was no 'bidding' system involved, but so that all necessary information about the projects could be accrued, a strict vetting system had to take place.

A comprehensive information pack was provided for the project initiators to complete and return to the Neighbourhood Governance Team who would then forward the information to the audit and legal teams for further vetting before the Leader reviewed the project to consider whether it would contribute to the needs of the organisation.

All money paid out to an organisation as a contribution to their project is first considered by the respective ward councillors. The Neighbourhood Governance team would follow up with the organisation, by inviting them to attend a ward forum meeting, at which a report on the activity was provided by the organiser. In some instances officers, councillors and partners would attend the activity and when possible the organisation was invited to a meeting with the Neighbourhood Governance Coordinator to provide feedback on the project.

The Chair then returned to discussing the main report. He advised that as part of the report, as well as attending several ward forums within the borough, he had also attended some meetings in the Hounslow and Brent boroughs. He had found that meetings were much better attended in Ealing with more vocal and involved attendees.

It was agreed though, that meetings could still have better attendances in most cases, and queried how Officers and Councillors went about promoting their forums.

Councillor Summers stated that if ward forums were to be advertised in print media such as the Ealing Gazette, then the adverts would need to be nearer the front of the paper, as advertisements in the notices section at the back of the paper were often ignored.

Kofi Nyamah, Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, advised that there were approximately 3,700 addresses on the current mailing list for information about forthcoming meetings and consultations. The Chair expressed surprise that there

weren't more on the list, noting that he had 700 addresses on his personal mailing list for his ward alone.

Councillor Gallagher also noted that he and Councillor Sabiers held a large personal list for their South Acton Ward email newsletter.

Tan Afzal advised that in addition to the email addresses, in some wards, particularly those in the Southall area of the borough, a significant proportion of residents were contacted by postal mailings.

Discussion then took place around other ways of promoting forthcoming meetings to the public, including ideas such as posters for meetings being put up in shopping areas, church noticeboards, trees in popular parks etc. A member of the public attending the meeting considered that the forums may draw more people if promotional materials were 'spiced up' with an attractive logo and a less dry presentation.

Councillor Anjum re-emphasised the importance of encouraging all demographics to attend meetings, so that all residents within a ward feel the benefits of the projects that are funded.

Councillor Sue Emmet felt that Councillors themselves needed to take some responsibility for leafletting to promote forthcoming meetings that may be discussing important local topics.

The Chair queried how the publicity for each ward was funded. Dennis Frost advised that each ward was allocated an administration budget each year for publicity and the hire of meeting venues (approximately £1,000). The Chair then asked if members were able to take more control over the publicity budget should they wish to. This was confirmed, with South Acton noted as a ward where this had taken place. Councillor Gallagher advised that some extra monies had been freed up for publicity by moving to a cheaper venue for meetings within the ward.

A brief discussion then took place regarding the cost of venues. Tan Afzal advised that whilst in some wards venues were available free of charge, others could charge up to £350 per meeting for use. It was considered to be unfortunate but unavoidable that some wards were more constrained by choice of venues than others.

The Chair then wished to discuss the recurring complaint that Council officers did not attend the ward forums as often as requested. It was queried whether there was a protocol in place to determine whether they should attend.

Dennis Frost advised there was an understanding that officers did not attend as a matter of routine. He considered that in many cases, the Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinators themselves had enough seniority to be able to sit and discuss issues with relevant officers before feeding back and providing advice to the forums. He stated that one-off meetings about particular key issues were still attended by senior officers.

The Chair asked whether ward forums could consider paying officers to attend from their budgets. Dennis Frost stated that it could be considered; he also advised that

the Neighbourhood Governance team were considering inviting Envirocrime Officers to attend each forum once a year.

Discussion continued regarding the attendance of officers. A member of the public stated that officers rarely attended meetings at his ward forum. He also felt that the problems of publicity ran deeper than ward forums themselves, as most residents within his ward were not even aware of who their ward councillors were. He considered that email contact lists were not of much use as they would only be sent to be residents who had already attended meetings in the past, meaning that they would see the same faces at each meeting, which in turn led to meetings being 'taken over' by activist groups.

Members of the public stated that parking and planning issues were always likely to attract attention, and officers involving the public from the earliest stages could avert some of the issues that arise. The Chair advised that planning applications often had associated legal issues that stopped them from being discussed in-depth at ward forums.

Councillor Rajinder Mann expressed concern that envirocrime issues could not be discussed fully without the relevant officers present at the meetings.

Councillor Susan Emmet had concerns that some wards appeared to be giving monies to small interest groups that did not benefit everyone in the local community.

Councillor Gallagher stated that the South Acton Ward Forum avoided giving monies to organisations unless they had been agreed with the Council; the 'Garden Project' was referenced as an example of this. He also took the opportunity to thank the members of the public who had come to the meeting and contributed to the feedback requests, stating how helpful and encouraging their input had been.

Councillor Summers, whilst agreeing with the principle, stated that there should not be a blanket ban on small groups receiving funding. He raised the example of the 'Kickz' group within his ward, which whilst not directly benefitting the entire community, was still doing valuable work within the community.

Councillor Gordon, whilst agreeing that ward forums proved significantly more successful than area committees, suggested that the Council consider one-off meetings on an ad-hoc basis between forums who have a shared interest in a project. He queried whether this was practicable.

Councillor Susan Emmet felt that this would not attract people to meetings within her ward, stating that big single issue meetings for the ward alone would be of greater interest.

Evelyn Gloyn, Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinator, advised that cross-ward meetings could be arranged upon guidance from relevant councillors. Dennis Frost stated that there were precedent examples where this had been arranged in the past.

The Chair then queried how note taking was arranged. He was aware that note takers were often in attendance during yearly budget meetings but it was the responsibility of neighbourhood co-ordinators for the rest of the year. He asked whether this caused difficulties in practice.

It was advised that it made sense to have a separate note taker at some meetings, but at most meetings it was not necessary to have an additional officer taking notes. There was flexibility in place to make arrangements where necessary.

Councillor Noori felt that there should be separate note takers at meetings, as the officers regularly had to speak and give advice, and therefore could miss some of the points raised whilst doing this.

Tan Azfal advised that it was the councillors' responsibility to chair the main body of the meeting and that Co-ordinators took comprehensive notes which were always fed back to the Councillors for input and agreement before publication.

The Chair then asked how long the notes took to be published. It was advised that the aim was to publish the notes within 15 working days of the meeting having taken place. Unfortunately, due to related pressures in other areas of the governance of the ward forums; this did not always prove to be possible.

Before the Chair drew the item to a close, public in attendance queried whether all monies to forums were being spent appropriately, or whether ward forums were now 'grabbing at straws' due to running short of spending ideas.

The Chair advised that this was unlikely and reminded those present that there were certain spending 'grey areas' such as recurrent items that needed regular replacement within the wards that were sometimes forgotten about.

Dennis Frost concluded by thanking all present for their valued input. He stated that the Neighbourhood Governance team would be working towards a more customer focussed delivery, and that issues raised such as those regarding local geography would be addressed.

Resolved: That

- (i) the report be acknowledged;
- (ii) the strong attendance and overwhelming response to the request for input from the public be noted: and

that the following be listed for possible recommendation in the final report:

- (iii) the concept of having a 'local spend' be supported;
- (iv) forums be given more freedom to manage their own affairs;
- (v) a written protocol regarding officer attendance at forums be considered;
- (vi) administration budgets for wards be clarified, with ward councillors having a greater say over how they are used;
- (vii) new ways of publicising meetings be considered, including the possibility of creating a new logo specifically for the ward forums;

- (viii) public notices of forthcoming meetings be posted in a variety of locations including schools, public noticeboards and churches;
- (ix) local leaflets for each ward be considered;
- (x) the current protocol for the filling of forms for project funding be reviewed to analyse whether the process could be simplified;
- (xi) ward forums be reminded that they can set the amount of meetings they wish to hold each Council year;
- (xii) occasional 'single issue' meetings be held if required; and
- (xiii) Neighbourhood Governance Co-ordinators be requested to ensure that the notes from each ward forum be made publicly available within 15 working days after the meeting.

7. Panel Operations in 2013/2014
(Agenda Item 7)

The Chair advised the Panel that interviews were on-going with Officers and Councillors as part of the governance review, results of those that had taken place so far had been included on the Agenda.

The comments raised would be incorporated into the recommendations that would be formulated at the next meeting of the Panel.

Resolved: That the report be received.

8. Date of Next Meeting
(Agenda Item 8)

Resolved: It was noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Panel is to take place on Thursday 6 February 2014.

Councillor Anthony Young, Chair.

The meeting ended at 8:45pm.