

# Neighbourhood Services & Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission Report

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## **Ward Community Meeting Improvement Project: Initial Evaluation Results**

Assistant City Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood  
Lead director: Miranda Cannon

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7<sup>th</sup> January 2014

## Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All wards
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- Report version number: 1

### 1. Summary

The Ward Community Improvement Project has been live for over fifteen months, this report at the request of the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission aims to highlight findings and evaluation results for the pilot. It intends to review what has worked well and not so well and areas for further development and consideration. The findings included in this report are interim findings and detailed, specific, targeted results will be sourced throughout January. These will enable a detailed evaluation report to be brought back to the commission for consideration and review in March 2014.

### 2. Recommendations

Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission (NSCI) is asked to note the report and to make any comments or observations on the initial feedback received, to date, to feed into the wider evaluation of the pilot.

### 3. Background

The Ward Community Meeting (WCM) improvement project has been live for fifteen months and started with just four wards and has now progressed into managing a further five wards as part of the second phase of the pilot. At the NSCI Scrutiny Commission in November, a request was made for further clarity regarding the initial evaluation results, including lessons learned and good practice, from both phase 1 and phase 2. As well as a response to the WCM attendance figures report prepared by the Chair.

This reports aims to provide interim findings and evaluation results from phase 1 and phase 2 to date. As previously stated in a report to the commission in September, due to the first phase only having four wards, it was to some degree difficult to provide tangible areas of good practice and to demonstrate impact, trends and correlation in results. It is worth highlighting at this point that this report aims to provide anecdotal and informal feedback received to date. Specific detailed evidence will be provided as part of the final evaluation.

A key principle within the project is that there is a need to encourage flexibility. Another core objective of the overall project was to release the Member Support Officers from the WCM process and instead develop an alternative resourcing arrangement for WCM moving forward which would improve the links with frontline services and communications. Therefore part of phase 2 was to test and evaluate

the introduction of Ward Community Engagement Officer role and the potential, possibility and impact of moving the responsibility of WCMs into Community Services

To ensure any lessons learned, good practice and resourcing requirements can be considered as part of the transition. An agreement has been made to close the pilot will effect from the end of January, communications will be sent to all pilot councillors early in January to outline the arrangements and to conduct the final structured evaluation.

### **3.2 Analysis and Findings**

The findings and results listed below are drawn from comments formally and informally received from councillors during, both phase 1 and phase 2, officers involved with the pilot and residents.

What has worked well:

- The introduction of targeted publicity, this includes sending leaflets to 500 residents who live within the closest proximity to the WCM venue. There is evidence of the impact in Westcotes where they have had an increase in attendance figures from the June meeting which was attended by 19 residents, to October meeting which saw 31 residents attend .Feedback forms received to date indicate nearly 50% of those forms were completed by new residents.
- The trialling of new venues has been positive in attracting new members of the community. Although attendance figures haven't necessarily increased there is early indication to suggest new residents have attended. This has been particularly positive in the Coleman ward where the quarter three meeting was held in a hall at a Sikh Temple and plans to consider utilising a Muslim community venue for their quarter 4 meeting.
- The introduction of smaller tailored 'patch walks' to supplement WCMs has been effective in both the Coleman and Thurncourt ward. These walkabouts have required less organising and support than the Eyres Monsell Model. Whilst still enabling specific issues to be dealt with by the relevant officers. As part of the final evaluation a specific review of patch walks and resourcing requirements will need to be considered to ensure they are a feasible option moving forward
- The broader role of the Community Engagement Officer has made an impact in many wards. This has enabled councillors to utilise the resource for wider activities that do not necessarily fall within the WCM structure. This includes developing a community first panel in Coleman, preparing arrangements for merging of community panels and ward meetings in New Parks and supporting the development of a food bank in Spinney Hills. It also enabled detailed and specific support to applicants applying for funding, because officers are clearer about the local ward priorities and are able to work with the applicant to ensure the bid meets the needs of the ward and its residents. The role also helps to provide a dedicated officer to coordinate issues and ensure appropriate follow on of actions on behalf of the community and ward councillors
- The administration of funding bids and payments has also been improved. Leading to a smoother, more efficient way to process bids. This includes

once bids are processed on the system, providing they are a BACS payment, we will release funding within one day, rather than the original thirty days. Anecdotal feedback suggests that has been positively received by applicants.

#### What has not worked well:

- There has been insufficient communication and a lack of systematic sharing of good practice and lessons from both within the pilot and out. The pilot has been largely focused on delivering individual objectives within each ward and informally sharing good practice where appropriate. In future this will need to be a core part of the role of the Community Engagement Officer.
- Early indication suggests the level of resource required to undertake the broader role was to some extent underestimated. This unfortunately has resulted in some wards receiving greater support and could have an adverse effect on the level of impact the pilot has made across all pilot wards. It is also recognised that the level of support required for individual wards is dependent on the how established or effective the current meeting is, as well as the level of experience of the councillors. This is something we will need to consider as part of the wider evaluation.
- Despite best efforts and the trialling of new ideas, there is still an absence of improved attendance in some wards. Even items that have been seen to have a positive impact on attendance, i.e. targeted publicity and a change in venue, have not necessarily proved effective in all wards.
- Trying to implement new and exciting agendas remains a challenge and unfortunately many of the important issues being raised by residents tend to be very specific and could arguably be dealt with more appropriately within a councillor surgery.
- There has been inadequate capacity from both internal officers and councillors to effectively test the use of social media. There also seems to be insufficient understanding of what this actually means and whether this is the best form of publicity and method of engaging with councillors.
- The work regarding involvement of young people has not progressed as quickly as hoped, due to differing pressures and priorities of the youth involvement team. It is also recognised that delivering change within this area is significantly improved if undertaken at the beginning of the youth councillor term rather than half way through when work plans have already been created. This is something that will need to be considered post the YPC elections.
- Despite concerted effort to seek more resident and front line officer feedback, the return rates still remain low.

#### Further early observations and considerations

- To operate a complete community development based model, whilst still working within the constraints of a bureaucratic and systematic approach is difficult and at times can stifle creativity. It also presents a level of formality that some residents find intimidating, uncomfortable and unproductive and this in turn has an impact on future attendance figures. It is also particularly hard when attempting this in the middle of an annual meeting cycle and financial year.
- There is clearly a correlation between the budget and attendance at ward

meetings. In some cases ward agendas have become totally dominated by funding applications and bids. Therefore once funding has ceased the attendance levels drop.

- Further clarity needs to be sought to ensure we are clear about the term community engagement and development and the best way to achieve this. It is clear this will be something different in each ward, due to the demographic needs.
- The need and purpose for ward meetings in some areas is not always clear and greater freedom and support needs to be given to those councillors to provide the options for the best mechanism for engagement. In some cases this may not be a ward meeting. Further consideration needs to be given to utilising existing community forums and meetings, rather than recreating those meetings under a WCM structure.

### Attendance

The increase of attendance figures still remains the toughest outcome to predict. Despite a change of venue, leaflet and poster design, targeted publicity, refreshing of communications and publicity databases. We have recognised there are a series of obvious variables that affect attendance figures, i.e. a specific ward issue, time, venue, season and publicity. However even when these some of these have been improved, in some wards, we still seem to receive the same results. This makes it hard to find a consistent piece of good practice that all wards can utilise and demonstrate improvement from. Due to many of the attendees also remaining consistent, it is difficult to gauge a full picture of how meetings can be improved from a resident feedback form by just engaging with those residents. This still remains an area for further exploration, however due to the amount of variables it should not be the only outcome that we use to measure success of WCM. Other success criteria could include how satisfied residents are who attend, the volume of new residents, quality of community bids, feedback from key stakeholders and partners, and ward councillor satisfaction. Increased attendance is not an issue for all wards as there are other methods for engaging with residents. The Community Engagement Officer role will be important in working on the ground across the wider range of engagement opportunities.

The feedback observed to date will now be formally shared with pilot councillors in January to enable them to consider how this may be utilised or implemented for their quarter four meetings. To avoid further confusion this learning will remain within the pilot until official closure, to ensure what detailed information is released to all wards has the appropriate context and the right resource to support the level of change required.

Overall early feedback suggests that there have been some positive changes made, that can easily be transferred to other wards, at the appropriate time. It is unfortunate that due to lack of communication this has not been achieved before. There are early signs that councillors have responded well to the Community Engagement Officer role, which has a broader focus and remit. This will only be strengthened when the responsibility fully transitions into Community Services. It is disappointing to note that there is a possibility due to a number of factors that the level and impact of the improvement across all wards could potentially differ. However this also reinforces the need for a consistent community based resource,

which has a greater understanding of what is currently happening in wards as well as more capacity to support and develop ward priorities and tackle ongoing issues or concerns.

### **3.3 What happens next**

As outlined earlier in the report the wider transition arrangements which remain in draft format will be taken forward for approval early in the new year. The pilot will come to a formal conclusion at the end of January. A communication to outline the arrangements for closure and support over the transition period is critical. It is also important that the initial evaluation results featured here are shared with pilot councillors and feed into the overall report. This communication will happen in January, however the timing will need to be closely managed to avoid mixed messages and confusion, and form part of the wider transition.

Structured evaluation will be sourced and analysed with key stakeholders with a final report being produced and approved in February and then the final evaluation results being sent to the NCSI Scrutiny Commission in March 2014.

## **3. Details of Scrutiny**

Update reports have been previously presented to the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission.

## **4. Financial, legal and other implications**

### 5.1 Financial implications

There are no specific financial implications arising from this update report; however the cost and funding of particular initiatives should be fully evaluated before implementation. Colin Sharpe, Head of Finance, ext. 37 4081

### 5.2 Legal implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Kamal Adatia. City Barrister and Head of Standards

### 5.3 Equality Impact Assessment

The main equality impact is increased participation, influence and voice in local community affairs by local residents through the ward community meetings. The benefits of local engagement would apply to all protected characteristics.

Irene Kszyk, Corporate Equalities Lead

### 5.4 Other Implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)

None.

**5. Background information and other papers:**

None

**6. Summary of appendices:**

Appendix A - Pilot Evaluation and Closure Plan

**7. Is this a private report (If so, please indicated the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?**

No

**8. Is this a “key decision”?**

No

