

# Neighbourhood Services & Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission Report

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## **Ward Community Meeting Improvement Project: Final Evaluation**

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

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## Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All wards
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### 1. Summary

The WCM Improvement Project has been running for the past 15 months, initially in four pilot wards across the city: Charnwood, Westcotes, Freeman and Eyres Monsell, the latter following a community walk about model. It then included a further six wards: Coleman, Thurncourt, Spinney Hills, Evington, New Parks, Braunstone and Rowley Fields. Key objectives were to raise public awareness, improve admin arrangements, strengthen community engagement and release the current Member Support Officer resources to focus on providing a dedicated scrutiny function. Over the past few months, the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission has received regular progress report on the pilot's work to date. The pilot ended as of 31 January 2014 and this report outlines the lessons learnt, final evaluation results, recommendations and next steps. An e-mail communication has recently been sent to all councillors detailing the new structures that are now in place.

### 2. Recommendations

Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission is asked to note and comments on the evaluation findings, lesson learnt and recommendations.

### 3. Background

In April 2013 the Executive received a report which outlined phase one of the pilot and set out arrangements for phase two. In phase two the two project members have been supported by a Community Engagement Officer (CEO), seconded on a six months basis with the aim of trialling how such a role might work longer-term. The Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission has received regular reports outlining progress and interim findings. The pilot has now concluded and an e mail communication was sent by the Head of Community Services to all councillors detailing arrangements for the transition of support to community services.

#### Report

This report aims to summarise improvements trialled in the pilot and provide final evaluation results from officers and formal feedback received from councillors. It builds on the interim findings report presented to the commission on 7 January 2014.

## **Summary of Improvement Activities**

### **Meetings Format**

This relates to the administration and set-up of the meetings to make them less bureaucratic and more community/people friendly:

- Edited the agenda to make it less bureaucratic and formal, which helped to make the meeting feel more informal. In some wards this had a positive affect when included alongside other improvements.
- Room layout and trailing of new venues to encourage better participation from residents and improve attendance i.e. a 'cafeteria' style format (tables to accommodate 4 to 5 people), use of meeting room in a Sikh Temple. The utilisation of new venues helped to attract new members of the community and is something that all wards should continue to explore.
- Used action logs instead of minutes – these made the meetings feel generally more informal and flexible. Pilot tests indicated no issues in data or accuracy in use of action logs and enabled faster turn-around of notes. Also had a benefit in relation to efficient use of officer resources
- Introduced simple and concise conduct guidance to help members and officers in the smooth running of the meetings. Although no pilot meeting had to formally use the guidance it provided a tool for councillors if required.

Encouraged the use of planning meetings to determine not just agenda items for the WCM but also an opportunity to discuss local issues, work of partners, budget statement and community bids, inclusion of appropriate front line staff as well as performance of previous ward meetings and future changes. Where these meetings occurred they enabled greater thought and planning resulting in a more focused and targeted meeting,

### **Communications**

This area investigated new methods for marketing ward meetings with an aim to improve awareness and increase regular resident attendance.

- Feedback forms were redesigned to encourage and collect suggestions for improving ward meetings. Unfortunately despite repeated efforts and reminders, response rates have been low. The few responses that we had were generally positive particularly from residents who had not attended a meeting before saying that they found the experience useful and they would attend future meetings. Continuing to capture resident and officer feedback is crucial to the ongoing development and improvement of ward meetings.
- The project 'tidied up' the e mail distribution lists which had incorrect addresses, duplicate entries and groups/organisations that no longer existed. To ensure the correct residents and individuals who maybe involved were contacted. Unfortunately there is no evidence to suggest this improved attendance rates however as a matter of best practice all wards should have a focused and up to date publicity database to enable communications to be

targeted.

- Used corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote WCMs and produced branded posters and flyers with agenda items to encourage attendance. The continued use of corporate Twitter and Facebook accounts should continue and be rolled out across all wards. However the introduction of targeted bespoke social media initiatives would be the responsibility of the ward councillors.
- Trialled targeted publicity which included sending leaflets to a minimum of 500 residents living in closest proximity to the WCM venue. Results were mixed. In four pilot wards it was successful and led to increased attendance with new people attending. However in two wards, there was limited to no impact. Due to the noticeable impact in some wards, our view is this should be implemented as a matter of best practice.

### **Community Ward Budgets**

The application process has been re-developed to include a comprehensive set of questions about the proposed community project to be delivered, a set of guidance notes to help the applicants fill in every section within the form, and a set of policy notes.

Every section in the application form is mandatory. A section has been introduced to aid the new Neighbourhood Development Managers to collect data for marketing and monitoring purposes. This offers the opportunity in the future to undertake some analysis to show the types of projects that are funded and to identify for example groups/ individuals who could benefit from community initiatives and are unaware of the available funding.

In addition to the above, a set of guidance notes has also been developed for councillors to help them make a fair and proportionate assessment of the bids received. The guidelines include information on the types of activities/projects that can be funded, a section with case studies on previously successful bids and the benefits they brought into the community, and other potential ideas.

The whole application pack, including grant application form, guidance for completing the form, policy for the allocation of community grants, evaluation form, and the councillor policy guidance, is currently in draft format and waiting for final sign off by community services. These documents will then need to be shared with councillors.

Good progress has been made in pilot wards to ensure that budgets are spent more effectively and evenly across the year, to prevent large amounts of carry forward at the end of the financial year.

### **Community Engagement Officer (CEO)**

The introduction of the new CEO role made a strong impact with a number of pilot wards who utilised the resource for wider activities that do not necessarily fall within the WCM structure. This included developing a community first panel in Coleman ward and managing a research exercise to produce a directory of community groups

and organisations, 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 helped to provide a dedicated officer to coordinate issues and ensure appropriate follow up of actions on behalf of the community, and ward councillors. The introduction and trialling of this post was deemed successful and is now being embedded within the new community services structure with flexibility to be moulded to suit future needs.

### **A Councillor guide**

A draft guide for Councillors was produced to support and promote ward meetings. It provided advice on ward budgets, conduct guidance and defined the roles and responsibilities of Councillors, Democratic Service Officers and other council officers attending ward meetings. The draft was shared with pilot ward councillors, divisional directors and the NSCI Commission. Views received ranged from 'good and useful' for new councillors to 'not so useful' for more experienced councillors.

It was generally agreed that the draft was a good starting document but that it required further development in conjunction with councillors to make it a useful, live, working document that captured relevant ward information i.e. up to date ward census data within the context of the city, etc.

### **Community walkabouts**

Councillors in Eyres Monsell (EM) replaced traditional ward meetings with innovative community walkabouts on a trial basis for a year. In total, three walkabouts were held (approx. 2 hour duration each).

The walkabout consisted of a moving road show on a pre-determined route and gave residents a choice of being involved in all of it or they could 'pick & mix'. Communication of the walkabout was seen as vital and included photographs on the day, website information, video clips for social media, publicity insert in the local newspaper (Monsell Mail), leaflets going through every house in the ward, posters and lamp post notifications in advance of the walk.

To make the first event visible on the day, placards (lollipops), helium balloons and high visible jackets were used. Front line service officers included customer services staff, city warden, housing, environment, highways and rapid response team and partners such as police and community representatives, all playing a key role alongside ward councillors and senior management.

The walkabouts were tied in with maintenance schedules and other works i.e. graffiti removal, tidying up grot spots, sorting any transport and tree cutting issues, etc. Acton logs were used to record key points for actions from the day and volunteers from the local community were welcomed to assist with the process.

The first walk about was a success but after that, the process struggled to secure on-going engagement in particular from officers, and councillors did not feel assured that issues logged by residents had been actioned and/or communicated effectively.

Overall the approach done in this way is very resource intensive and it was evident that this is difficult to sustain.

Other pilot wards expressed an interest in the EM approach with two pilot ward's successfully trialling a tailored, scaled back version which was well received by residents, officers and partner organisations. Another ward expressed interest in implementing the EM model after April 2014, but has now put their plans on hold, pending dialogue with their new NDM and residents. Other pilot wards said they really like the EM model but felt that it was too resource intensive, required extensive pre-planning, offered limited residents engagement in the wider local ward issues and/or that their ward configurations were not compatible to the model.

### **Involvement of young people**

There was a strong commitment in the pilot project to engage with members of the Young Peoples Council (YPC) to consider why generally young people don't attend ward meetings, what would make them attend, how would they benefit and also, are they the right forum for engaging with young people.

To discuss this issue, a small working group led by a member of the pilot project team was set up and included reps from the LCC's Youth Involvement Team and two pilot ward councillors.

Various options were discussed i.e. participation strategy, proposals for joint surgeries with ward councillors and young people, young people to shadow/work with councillors to build ward priorities and assist to analyse ward bids particularly those relating to young people, to research and advocate on young people's issues and concerns at a local level and to promote WCM structure to young people across the ward.

The working group recommends that the above options be put on hold in recognition that

- the current YPC reps are in process of standing down
- elections across the city will be held in March 2014 to recruit new YPC members
- there is a new YPC support officer who needs to get to grips with the YP work and training programme
- the transfer arrangements for WCMs need sufficient time to bed down within localities and
- to enable an audit to be carried out of good practice examples at ward level that engage/involve young people i.e. Youth JAG in New Parks, Braunstone Grove in Saffron and Your Choice in Beaumont Leys.

The pilot was also contacted by a resident who was interested in assisting young people to engage with WCMs. He drafted a proposal which will be forwarded to Community Services to include for consideration in wider discussions.

It has been agreed that the working group will meet again in six months' time, it will be led by the Head of Community Services and will include additional members – CEO and NDMs reps.

### **Attendance**

As per previous discussions with the Commission, resident's attendance, despite a variety of approaches, remains the biggest challenge for ward meetings. A range of issues impact on low attendance making it extremely difficult to provide quick solutions that can be utilised by all ward's and recognition also needs to be given to the fact that for some wards, attendance is not a priority, they would prefer more efforts to be made on broader engagement activities.

### **Councillor evaluation and findings**

Evaluation forms have been sent to all councillors who were part of the pilot process to assess the impact and performance of the overall project. Where feedback has been received this has been included in Appendix A

### **Impact and expectations**

- There was a strong indication that councillors were pleased with the level of support and advice received from pilot officers, with 86% of the feedback strongly agreeing with the approach pilot officers had taken
- Some pilot wards felt their expectations and objectives were met, one ward saying it had exceeded their expectations and with others feeling that it was 'work in progress' requiring more time
- Some wards felt that their meetings were now more focused and effective and the format for minutes has improved
- Increased resident attendance was noticeable in some wards particularly in Coleman and Thurncourt
- Taking learning from the Eyres Monsell model, two wards successfully supplemented their WCMS with a mini version of the community walkabout approach. This enabled good progress to be made on local issues
- It was highlighted that in some wards there was better communication of the support and advice available and a greater understanding of the interface between officers and ward members
- Improved joint working to ensure integrated approach with services and ward councillors
- One ward has successfully trialled a new venue (Sikh Temple) and another will be trialling a Bowls Club
- One councillor felt it worked well when officers provide a summation of the agreed bids to the meeting with support from the chair
- Figures suggest that in some wards, targeted publicity has had a positive impact on attendance figures

### **Barriers to implementation**

- Local public apathy and engagement from residents continued to adversely impact attendance figures
- Lack of staff resources in pilot team to develop improvement activities and fully implement changes equally across all wards
- Some wards felt the communication and expectations between councillors and officers differed
- Difficulty to achieve a community based approach whilst operating within a bureaucratic structure
- CEO six month secondment in the pilot was not sufficiently long enough to

allow significant improvement and change to be made particularly given the cycle of meetings

- Cosmetic changes need to be considered but within wider context of WCMs
- Focus and time spent on developing the meeting rather than engagement activities
- Insufficient time and resource to develop social media options

## **Assessment and Recommendations**

### **Assessment of findings and learning**

Taking into consideration all the feedback received from phase one and phase two, the following summarises the overall impact and key lessons learnt from the pilot:

- Raised the profile of WCMs with officers, residents and partners
- Better dialogue, understanding and join up of roles and responsibilities
- Continued support for the requirement for consistent community based resource to support ward councillors and WCMs
- A large amount of positive improvement has been made with the back office/administration process which has not always been visible to pilot councillors.
- A positive catalyst for the need for change and improvement but due to lack of resources and time, resulted in any significant changes having to be implemented post pilot
- Uncommunicated and differing expectations between officers and councillor of the priorities of the pilot
- Attendance still remains an issue for many wards and requires further work
- Insufficient amount formal mechanisms for sharing good practice
- Underestimated level of officer resource required therefore resulting in some wards not benefiting from significant improvement.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the above the following provides suggested recommendations to be considered for implementation across all wards:

- Consider other mechanism and vehicles for engaging with residents and where wards feel that there is limited appetite for ward meetings, consideration needs to be given to utilising existing community forums and alternate approaches
- The introduction of smaller scaled community walkabouts to link to other action days/events that maybe happening within the ward therefore reducing duplication and resources required
- Tailored approach relevant to ward's recognising that one size does not fit all however maintaining a balance of consistency of roles and support
- Introduction of ward based plans to enable better quality and volume of community bids, joint action at local level and enable agreed focus for both officers and councillors on outcomes/objectives
- Taking stock of previous year's performance to enable clear identification for improvement and monitor achievements throughout the annual meeting cycle



- Early consideration of communication options i.e. targeted publicity and social media bearing in mind that the latter will require extensive time and effort from councillors as per report issued by Communications Team and Legal Services to Standards Committee
- Create an approach to enable lessons learnt and best practice to be communicated effectively throughout the year
- Implement revised funding guidance and associated procedure once finalised with officers and councillors
- The draft guide be further developed by Community Services in conjunction with a small working group of Councillors, CEOs and NDMs and considered for roll out as part of the member training at the beginning of the next election cycle ( 2015)
- Consider providing an annual report to the Executive and NSCI scrutiny commission regarding the impact of wards meeting
- A report be presented to the NSCI Scrutiny Commission on the involvement of young people in 6 months.

### **Next steps**

As part of the transition arrangements pilot wards have now been formally transferred into the community service structure along with a selection of non-pilot wards. To ensure a smooth, managed handover and effective financial closedown, pilot team members and Members Support Officers are continuing to provide support to community services until the end of March. All other non – pilot wards will formally transition in March and as of the 1st April all wards will be supported by Community Services, this arrangement was outlined in the briefing note that was sent to Councillors on the 11th February.

Further discussion will be held with community services to agree on the appropriate mechanism and timing to brief all councillors on the lessons learnt from the pilot. As part of the review process a report will be prepared and presented to the NSCI Scrutiny Commission in Autumn 2014.

## **4. Details of Scrutiny**

Previous updates have been presented to the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission

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

### 5.1 Financial implications

There are no significant financial implications arising directly this report, although resource constraints are evident and may need to be considered in the future.  
Colin Sharpe, Head of Finance.

## 5.2 Legal implications

No direct legal implications arise from this Review report.  
Kamal Adatia, City Barrister and Head of Standards.

## 5.3 Equality Impact Assessment

- To ensure effective engagement with young people the actions to do so must be implemented
- All communication needs to be accessible to the wider community across the wards; consideration should be given to how to engage individuals from across protected characteristics and communities i.e. effective use of local media including use of local radio, etc. as another form of communication in addition to other methods.

Sonya King, Equalities Officer

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

None.

## **6. Background information and other papers:**

None

## **7. Summary of appendices:**

**Appendix A – Councillor Evaluation Forms**

## **8. 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

## **9. Is this a “key decision”?**

No