

# Neighbourhood Services & Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission Report

**Update on Ward Community Meetings**

**13<sup>th</sup> October 2014**

Assistant City Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood  
Lead directors: Liz Blyth and Miranda Cannon

## Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
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- Author contact details: 37 1831
- Report version number: 1

### 1. Purpose & Summary

- 1.1 The report provides an update following the transfer of the Ward Community Meetings function to the Community Services Section in April 2014.
- 1.2 With the recent changes to the staff support provided to Community Ward Meetings, (CWM), and the proposed new ward boundaries, it is timely to consider the approach to the meetings and to look at consistency of principles whilst recognising that different communities may require meetings which meet different needs.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Scrutiny Commission is asked to note the report.
- 2.2 The Scrutiny Commission is invited to comment on the observations contained in the report.

### 3. Supporting information including options considered:

#### Background

#### Previous Position – pre April 2014

- 3.1 The support for Ward Community Meetings was previously provided by a central team of Democratic Services Officers (DSOs), and Members Support Officers (MSOs). The DSOs provided support such as publicising meetings via Modern.gov, booking of venues, booking any equipment needed, taking notes in the meetings, typing minutes and distribution of the minutes and action notes. The MSOs took responsibility for collecting information and applications for ward funding bids, supporting the Councillors during the meetings and following up on funding decisions and other matters arising from the business of the meeting. Other Council officers dealt with the detail of funding and payment of the ward bids as appropriate. Senior Officers attended the meetings to present specific items of interest to local residents.

## **Changes in April 2014**

- 3.2 In April 2014 the tasks undertaken by MSOs were passed to the Community Services section, whilst DSOs continued in relation to the support they provide. Community Services had recently undergone an organisational review which created the posts of 3 Neighbourhood Development Managers (NDMs), and 9 Community Engagement Officers (CEOs). The objective of the two roles is to increase community cohesion using a community development approach. It was considered appropriate, and a suitable fit, for support to ward meetings to be provided through Community Services.
- 3.3 Since April 2014 all Ward Community Meetings have been supported by Community Services through the Neighbourhood Development Managers and Community Engagement Officers who have been assigned to specific wards. Following discussions with the DSOs, who were also assigned to specific wards, a clear understanding about respective roles and responsibilities were agreed for the smooth operation of the meetings. It is acknowledged that in the early days of this transition there have inevitably been some teething problems in some wards which Community Services have sought to work through on a ward by ward basis.
- 3.4 As the new arrangements have bedded in, it has become clear that there cannot be a one size fits all approach and as a result there are differing expectations from some Ward Councillors about the amount of involvement the NDMs and CEOs should have in their areas. For example, in Castle Ward the Councillors take a lead role in community development and following discussions a specific set of guidelines and procedures have been agreed that set out how the Castle ward meetings will operate. Therefore it was agreed with the Ward Councillors that there would be minimal officer input.
- 3.5 For most wards pre-agenda meetings are used as an important part of the process of determining the agenda for the next ward meeting and clarifying expectations in terms of roles, responsibilities and levels of input. This is very helpful in ensuring expectations are clear and realistic for all involved. In some wards there is an expectation that a significant level of support be provided through CEOs to follow up issues with residents; co-ordinating other internal and external services to attend meetings; proving administrative and co-ordination support for community walks and other local meetings. At present the CEOs are able to provide this level of support but this will need to be monitored to ensure it remains sustainable in terms of the resources available.
- 3.6 Many of the people who had been coming regularly to ward meetings were contacted via email. The contact list is currently being updated. Other methods of communication through social media are also being pursued to ensure that the attendance at meetings is maximised.

- 3.7 The publicity for meetings has traditionally been carried out via leaflet drops and mailshots. These at times have been carried out by City Wardens and the Police but unfortunately this option is no longer available as those resources reduce and refocus. A common practice has been to post leaflets to 250-500 homes in a radius around the meeting venue. This has not led to a large number of people coming to meetings and is a relatively costly approach. Given the financial constraints faced by Leicester City Council, and the move away corporately from producing expensive printed materials as a routine way of communicating, it is proposed that the focus in terms of publicity is on the use of social media and other more cost effective methods of publicity. The ward meetings are regularly promoted via the corporate social media profiles e.g. Twitter and Facebook, and training has been developed to provide an overview to councillors about getting started with, and using, social media and the Corporate Communications Team propose to run a session shortly on this.
- 3.8 Some wards were involved in a pilot project during 2013 looking at alternatives to the traditional meetings. In some wards the new approach includes patch walks. These can be very staff intensive. To date no detailed analysis has been undertaken to gauge the efficiency and effectiveness of this approach. These depend on the outcomes expected by the Ward Councillors, for example, if the patch walks are related to mapping of a specific area, identifying grot spots and local issues.
- 3.9 There have been 24 Community Ward Meetings that have taken place across the city since April 2014. The attendance has varied from ward to ward and in many cases the larger attendances have been due to the local issues of the day on the agenda. Attendance at meetings can vary from 3 people to large gatherings of 60+ where there are specific issues arising of widespread community interest. The Belgrave and Latimer Wards continue to hold joint meetings.
- 3.10 Between April 2014 and August 2014 there have been 305 applications for Ward Community funding across the city and during this period £113,618 has been paid out to groups. There were 150 applications that were approved; 3 applications were rejected, 12 applications were withdrawn; and 140 applications awaiting approval or deferred for further information. Of the 305 applications, there were 129 which were submitted to more than one ward making up 42% of all applications received. In some cases these have been rejected by one ward and approved by another, but not awarded the full amount which can create a pressure on the event or activity which may not be viable as only part funded. Some wards are already close to the annual limit of £18,000. Some groups and organisations are becoming increasingly reliant on an annual ward funding payment to cover their “running costs” which is not the intended purpose of the funding and collectively we need to be mindful of not creating a dependency on

ward funding as a continued source of funding.

3.11 In the early days of the transfer to Community Services there were some delays in payments being made to ward funding applicants due to the payment system however this was quickly resolved. There was one application which was approved and not paid until some months later when the matter was raised by a Councillor. On checking the system this was the only application that had fallen through the net. However, overall it is clear that there are improvements that can be made to the administration of ward funding applications and the administration of payments for approved bids. Both these processes are therefore being reviewed in order to streamline the processes and ensuring a transparent and timely approach.

3.12 Community Services recognise the following as important factors which underpin the continued improvement and development of ward meetings:

- The need to provide a forum for communities to effectively engage with ward councillors, public sector partners, council officers, voluntary sector community organisations and local residents.
- Agreement of clear principles and protocols between officers and members, about how meetings are managed.
- Making the best use of Ward Councillor time and Officer resources for the benefit of local residents
- Increasing awareness and usefulness of the ward meetings in the community
- The development of ward priorities to help shape the agenda of meetings over a given period

3.13 Community Services propose that the following are the focus of further improvements in the short term:

- New Ward boundaries – assessment of the impact of changes to the ward boundaries
- Continue to identify methods of positive engagement with local residents particularly via cost effective methods such as social media
- Simplify the ward funding application process
- Improve payment processes to ensure applicants receive payments in an effective and timely manner.

3.14 The work of the NDMs and CEOs will be to continue to work with Ward Councillors to improve the engagement of local residents through Ward Community Meetings; patch walks; and roadshows. The work will also include the development of a standard protocol following feedback from Ward Councillors for Ward Community Meetings and the Ward Funding Scheme. A report will be presented to the Scrutiny Commission in March 2015 to indicate the progress made.

#### **4. Details of Scrutiny**

This report is being considered by the Neighbourhood Services and Community Involvement Scrutiny Commission on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

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

##### 5.1 Financial implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Colin Sharpe, Head of Finance, ext. 37 4081.

##### 5.2 HR and Legal implications

There are no Legal implications arising from the Recommendations in this Report

Greg Surtees, Legal Services, ext. 37 1421

##### 5.3 Equality Impact Assessment

The availability of a forum for ongoing community engagement as well as for consultation on specific proposals that affect local residents enables the council to more effectively meet its Public Sector Equality Duty where the importance of consultation is cited as good practice. The ability of local people and councillors to bring up issues of local concern for debate also achieves one of the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty, the fostering of good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. Further local positive outcomes are achieved through the expenditure of ward budgets on activities that benefit local residents. It would be useful for ward committees to monitor such outcomes and the protected characteristics of those who benefit to be able reflect back to the community on how they too contribute to equality outcomes.

Irene Kszyk, Corporate Equalities Lead, ext. 374147

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

###### Environmental Impacts

This report does not contain any significant climate change implications and therefore should not have a detrimental effect on the Council's climate change targets.

Louise Buckley, Graduate Project Officer (Climate Change), 372 293

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

**7. Summary of appendices: None**

**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**