

Communities Scrutiny Panel

Area Committees

Approaches by Other London Boroughs

Introduction

Many boroughs have reviewed their structures for area based bodies, such as area committees or forums, following the 2010 local elections. The drivers for this appear to be ensuring that structures reflect the priorities of the new administration and the need to make budget savings. There were a number of common threads running through several of these reviews. There appears to have been a view shared by several boroughs that their area based bodies were often poorly attended, did not always mirror natural communities and frequently attracted the same people. Several boroughs have also looked at additional ways of facilitating better engagement between local Councillors and their communities through, for instance, the use of on line tools such as web portals.

There appear to be two general models that have been adopted by nearby London boroughs. These are;

- Area based bodies covering a number of wards which work on a formal basis and often have some delegated powers, particularly in relation to local planning issues. This approach is followed by, amongst others, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey.
- Less formal ward based bodies, This is a relatively recent phenomenon with several boroughs abolishing their area based bodies and replacing them with these. These are less formal and are considered to provide a more flexible approach which is not entirely meetings based. A significant number of authorities have recently moved towards this model including, Camden, Hackney, Islington, Waltham Forest and Hounslow.

The specific models adopted by neighbouring boroughs are outlined below:

Enfield

Enfield has seven area forums, each comprising of three electoral wards. It reviewed their role in 2011 and made a number of changes:

- Their remit was widened slightly to include a greater range of issues and so that better links could be developed with, amongst others, groups representing young people and carers and parents. It was nevertheless recognised that the meetings based format would not necessarily suit some sections of the population.
- Whilst the number of meetings per year of each forum remained the same (4), the number of locations for meetings was increased.

- A less formal style of meeting was introduced. Agendas have been restructured to allow for more discussion, including the greater use of ward based break out groups.

Barnet

Barnet reviewed their Residents Forums in 2011. They had previously had three Forums, which mirrored the parliamentary constituencies within the borough. At these, any resident could comment on any aspect of Council services, plans and proposals. Barnet also had area based environment sub-committees whose role was to discharge the Council's functions in relation to highways use, regulation, contaminated land, pollution and various licensing matters. Residents Forums were viewed as being poorly attended and dominated by the same faces. The Council decided to amend the structure of Residents Forums so that they took a more specific role and complemented the work of the area environment sub-committees.

Each residents forum has a formal membership of two – a Chair and a Vice Chair. However, ward Councillors are encouraged to attend. Attendance at forums is open to anyone on the electoral roll for the constituency that they cover. The range of issues that can be raised by residents is now specified and they can now only comment on specified local public works issues as well as crime. Items to be raised must be notified at least 24 hours beforehand. Issues raised at the resident forums make up the agendas for the area environment committee that follow immediately afterwards. All forum meetings are formally constituted and minuted.

Camden

Camden replaced area forums with area action groups in October 2010. This was intended to be a flexible ward based model that gave local areas scope to decide their precise format. The new model provided officer support for the equivalent of up to four events per year but removed the £200,000 fund previously allocated to area forums for local initiatives.

The new model was intended to build on aspects of the area forum model that were considered to work well, such as a Councillor-led approach which was recognised as key to ward-based engagement, with ward Councillors exploring with residents and local stakeholders issues that mattered most to their local area. The new model was viewed as representing a shift to a more streamlined and flexible approach, with greater emphasis on member leadership, lighter officer support and a desire to introduce a mixed model of engagement mechanisms over time. Ward Councillors were also given the option not to have an area action group if they did not see the benefit of having one and no single model was imposed. In addition to area action groups, Camden has also developed the "We are Camden" web portal, an on-line engagement tool to supplement the traditional evening meeting format. Early indications of the new arrangements have shown an increase in attendance by residents but it is unclear whether or not this can be attributable entirely to the new format.

Islington

Islington abolished its four area committees in 2011. The area committees had powers delegated to them that were not dissimilar to those that Haringey's area committees currently have. Not all wards were covered by area committees. They had been funded by Islington Strategic Partnership but this arrangement ended in March 2011. The committees were replaced by a system that is intended to enable ward councillors to play a greater role in influencing decisions and services within their area.

The area committees were replaced by 15 "ward partnerships". Although there was no funding allocated to the partnerships, a link officer has been appointed to each partnership to facilitate action arising. The intention was that the partnerships would not focus purely on Council matters but would have a wider remit covering a range of issues concerning the area in question. There had been a number of issues – mainly concerned with planning - that previously would have been determined under the powers held by area committees. These decisions are now taken in consultation with the ward partnerships and, although they may not be formally making decisions, there is nevertheless an explicit requirement for them to be involved. It is left up to ward councillors to decide how many times their ward partnership will meet. Each ward partnership is nevertheless expected to hold one public meeting or event per year to provide an opportunity for local residents/service providers to come together to discuss local issues. It is up to each partnership to agree the format. There is a limited budget available to support this.

Hackney

Earlier this year, Hackney abolished its four neighbourhood forums. It was felt that the areas that the neighbourhood forums had covered were too large to deal with the very local issues that people wanted to discuss. The cost for each neighbourhood forum meeting was estimated to be around £3000, which equated to £150 per resident attendance at a meeting and this was not felt to be cost effective.

The neighbourhood forums were replaced by 19 ward forums, each meeting three times per year. Wards have the option to create two and three ward forums if felt appropriate. Meetings are led by Councillors and they can determine whether or not there is a specific role for residents in managing the business of the forum. One key role for Councillors in respect of the forums is the development of improvement plans for each ward, which provide the starting point for agendas.

The same amount of funding that was provided for the neighbourhood forums is also been provided for the ward forums. The changes have been cost neutral as, despite the additional total number of meetings involved, they require a lower level of officer support as meetings are no longer formally constituted. Support is nevertheless provided by officers to book venues for meetings, to provide publicity for meetings, to ensure that there is a record of issues that will be followed up and to facilitate communication at a ward level between Members, partner organisations and residents. There is some funding (£10,000 for all wards) for additional consultation and engagement. It is emphasised that the forums are not just about the meetings but cover a range of activity in each ward.

Waltham Forest

In 2010, Waltham Forest agreed to abolish its area committees and set up community ward forums. This was part of a wider community engagement strategy. The new bodies were intended to better reflect the way in which residents had indicated they wished to be engaged with on issues in their local areas. The aim of this was, working within ward boundaries, to bring individual Members closer to their local residents, contribute to improved evidenced based decision making and enhance the understanding of local areas and the accessibility of the Council to its local residents. The principal elements were:

- More local and relevant meetings with reduced formality, led by Councillors;
- Ward budgets of £10,000 each to provide councillors and residents with dedicated funding to address local issues;
- Developed role for local ward Councillors as community champions and undertaking increased outreach and engagement activity;
- More emphasis on using the information gathered through local area working to inform service improvement and place shaping;
- Exploration of the development of local charters that reflect the priorities of neighbourhoods; and
- Improved communications between meetings.

As with other boroughs using a similar model, the forums are not formally constituted bodies and do not have decision making powers. Each Forum meets three times per year but Members are encouraged to arrange other meetings in their wards. They have the option of joining up with a neighbouring ward if being joined is more reflective of the communities that they serve. Issues raised at the Community Ward Forums are dealt with by councillors through casework and member services routes. Support in relation to booking venues and publicity is provided by Council officers.