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Meeting	Special Committee (Constitution Review)
Date	14 <sup>th</sup> April 2011
<b>Subject</b>	<b>Review of Residents' Forums and Area sub-Committees</b>
Report of	Head of Governance
Summary	The Committee are asked to consider the report and options contained in Appendix A and Appendix B and make recommendations to Council.

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Officer Contributors	Aysen Giritli, Head of Governance Jeremy Williams – Business Governance Manager
Status (public or exempt)	Public
Wards Affected	All
Enclosures	Appendix A – Improving Area Based Governance Structures: Options Paper Appendix B –Conservative Group Proposal - The Future of Area Environment Committees and Resident Forums Appendix C -Democratic Engagement at the Local Level: Qualitative Research
Function of:	Council
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## **1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 That the Committee consider the attached options papers and qualitative evidence in relation to Forums and Area Environment Sub-Committees and the specific issues in relation to Area Planning Committees referred to in paragraph 9.15 of the report and make recommendations to Council as appropriate.**

## **2. RELEVANT PREVIOUS DECISIONS**

- 2.1 Special Committee (Constitution Review), October 13<sup>th</sup> 2010, 'Constitution Review: 2010/11'

## **3. CORPORATE PRIOTY AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 3.1 To ensure that the Council has robust corporate governance arrangements, the Constitution requires to be kept under review and amended/ updated periodically such that it continues to be a living document.

## **4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

- 4.1 That the Constitution will become outdated if not reviewed, and will not accurately reflect the corporate governance arrangements or requirements of the day.

## **5. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 5.1 The decision making processes of the Council, as enshrined within the Constitution, need to be transparent and accessible to all sectors of the community. The regular review of the Constitution will help ensure that this is the case and ensure the Council is meeting its equality obligations.

## **6. USE OF RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS (Finance, Procurement, Performance & Value for Money, Staffing, IT, Property, Sustainability)**

- 6.1 None.

## **7. LEGAL ISSUES**

- 7.1 None arising from this report.

## **9 CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS**

- 8.1 Article 12, paragraph 12.03 (a) – one of the functions of the Monitoring Officer is to maintain an up-to-date version of the Constitution and ensure that it is widely available for consultation by members, staff and the public.

- 8.2 Part 3, Section 2 of the Constitution details the functions of the Special Committee (Constitution Review) which are "Proactively to review and keep under review all aspects of the Council's Constitution so as to ensure that it remains current and fit for purpose, and to make recommendations thereon to the Council.

## **9. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 9.1 At the meeting on 13 October 2010, the Special Committee (Constitution Review) instructed officers to review the current structure of Area Environment Committees and Residents' Forums and report back to the Committee.
- 9.2 The Council's governance arrangements currently include three sets of structures that mirror parliamentary constituencies, i.e. Hendon, Finchley and Golders Green and Chipping Barnet.
- 9.3 Resident Forums provides an opportunity for any resident to comment on any aspect of council service, plans and proposals. They are also a mechanism for ward members to debate oral representations and petitions on local issues and to reach some local consensus before a matter is considered by an Area Environment sub-Committee. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman are appointed by Council.
- 9.4 The remit and powers of Area Environment sub-Committees include discharging the Council's Functions relating to Highways use and regulation (excluding Executive highways responsibilities), contaminated land, pollution, air quality and gaming, entertainment, food and miscellaneous licensing (but not individual applications) in accordance with Council policy and within budget, apart from matters of significance to the whole borough or crossing sub-committee boundaries.
- 9.5 There are a number of factors for the Committee to consider relating to the current structure. As outlined in Appendix 1 (Section 5), Barnet scores relatively poorly in surveys on whether residents feel involved and able to influence local decisions. Resident Forums are sometimes poorly attended and perceived by some as having very little value added outcomes. Area Environment sub-Committees are also poorly attended and meetings are regularly cancelled due to lack of business. Furthermore, neither structure gives residents any real input into decision making or policy development.
- 9.6 When considering ways to improve the current structures, three main requirements were identified. These were influence i.e. enhancing the level, constructiveness and quality of public involvement so that residents have more power and influence over local decisions and the Council and public services gain greater insight and intelligence into their customers, localism, i.e. devolving governance closer to local neighbourhoods and being cost-effective i.e. any new system should not require additional public resources to support it and should ideally save money on the existing system.
- 9.7 Appendix A provides full details on a number of options for the Committee to consider and sets out a number of options for the reform of Residents' Forums and Area Environment Committees in the context of the localism agenda. It provides an analysis of the Council's area-based decision-making structures i.e. those that bring Ward Councillors and the public together at sub-Borough level and the way in which these might be reformed to enhance democratic engagement.
- 9.8 Section 7 of Appendix A outlines the options for change. In summary, these options are;

**9.8.1 Existing Resident Forums with minor changes to the format**

This option would seek to redress some aspects of the current Resident Forums to ensure that they work more effectively as originally envisaged.

**9.8.2 Resident Forums in a new format**

The Council and other partners are able to instigate a more strategic dialogue and various tools of public consultation and engagement would be used. A number of possible reforms are outlined in section 7.2 in Appendix A.

**9.8.3 Merger of Resident Forums and Environment sub-Committees into Area Committees**

The Resident Forums and Area Environment sub-Committees can be merged into a single meeting.

**9.8.4 Devolved Budgets**

Many authorities allow their Area structures to directly control a portion of the Council budget that is devolved to them, traditionally for environmental and other local matters.

**9.8.5 Ward level Committees**

Section 7.5 of Appendix A outlines the option for ward level committees.

**9.8.6 Mixing and matching options**

Section 7.6 of Appendix A outlines a number of options which could be mixed and matched.

**9.9 Further to these options, Appendix B is the proposal put forward by the Conservative Group for the Committee's consideration.**

9.10 The Conservative Group's proposal is to merge the Resident Forum and the Area Environment sub-Committee. This meeting would be in two parts. The first part of the meeting would be the Resident Forum (commencing at 6pm) followed by the Area Environment sub-Committee at 8pm. The first part of the meeting will provide residents with the opportunity to raise local matters ("Public Works"). All matters raised at the Resident Forum shall be items on the agenda for the Area Environment sub-Committee, together with any statutory business that may need to be discussed.

9.11 In addition to this, the Conservative Group's proposal also includes the introduction of a Cabinet/Executive Forum. It is proposed that annually, the Leader or nominated Cabinet Member should chair a themed Resident Forum on any subject the Leader decides and for which the Leader and Cabinet have executive responsibility. Full details of the Conservative Group proposal are attached at Appendix B.

9.12 The authority has also engaged in qualitative research with residents, the results of which are contained within Appendix C.

9.13 In January 2011, two 90 minute focus groups were completed focussing on three areas-

- Awareness, experience of engagement foras
- Motivations and barriers to attending face to face council engagement foras
- What a successful engagement model would look like in the future

9.14 Appendix C concludes that the group of residents were all interested in local issues and were keen to become involved. However, there was little awareness of current democratic engagement mechanisms. Furthermore, some practical steps to encourage resident participation should include better feedback, topics should be of specific local interest and those with the appropriate decision-making authority or technical expertise should be present to give answers. Greater publicity, both of forthcoming meetings and positive results that had been achieved from previous meetings, should also take place.

9.15 Although not dealt with in the Appendices, Members may want to give consideration to the arrangements for Area Planning Sub-Committees and whether the reduced levels of workload for these Sub-Committees are more appropriate for a reduction from three to two area based Sub-Committees. The change could be implemented on an east-west division rather than the present system organised around the Parliamentary constituencies. Falling within the east area would be the Wards currently in the Chipping Barnet Area Planning Sub-Committee together with East Finchley, Finchley Church End, West Finchley, Woodhouse wards. The west area would comprise the Wards currently in the Hendon Area Planning Sub-Committee together with Childs Hill, Garden Suburb and Golders Green Wards. Representation would continue to be on a Ward basis.

## **10. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

10.1 None.

Legal: JEL

Finance: MC

## APPENDIX A

### IMPROVING AREA BASED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

#### OPTIONS PAPER

##### 1 INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report has a specific remit to analyse the Council's area-based decision-making structures, i.e. those that bring Ward Councillors and the public together at a sub-Borough level. It presents a series of options for how they might be reformed to enhance democratic engagement.

It does not cover the way Cabinet engages with, and is held to account, by the public through mechanisms such as Leader Listens and Questions to Cabinet. Neither does it cover community engagement more generally, although it has been informed by work that is in progress to develop an engagement strategy across the One Barnet Partnership.

##### 2 POLICY CONTEXT

The new Government has emphasised its commitment to localism. This agenda has two facets: it includes devolving power from Central to Local Government, but simultaneously granting communities more power and influence in their local areas. The Prime Minister said that 'we need to create communities .....neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them' and that power should be devolved, not only from central to local government, but down to communities, to neighbourhoods and individuals.<sup>1</sup>

The regulation of local government by Central Government, quangos and inspectorates is being cut back. Instead, local people are being given more transparent and extensive access to data and information, to make their own judgements. This is accompanied by new powers ranging from calling referenda on local issues to taking over the management of services. In this environment the level of influence that local residents have over public services will increase.

Improving Area Based Governance supports the principles of the Council's One Barnet transformation programme, as follows;

Relentless drive for efficiency/ Better Services with Less Money	Any proposal must be proportionate and supportable by a central council core that will be smaller than it is at present  Enhanced involvement results in more informed decision making, and the delivery of services that are closer to residents needs
New Relationship with Citizens	New arrangements will result in a more informed, two-way dialogue between residents and elected members over the mutual expectations of citizens and the local 'state'.  This in turn should result in citizens having more influence over decisions that affect them, which in turn results in better customer service and improved outcomes.
One Public Sector approach	Ward members have the democratic legitimacy to champion their constituents' interests with other providers of local services. Proposals to bring other public services more formally into local democratic structures are included.

<sup>1</sup> David Cameron, Big Society speech, 19 July 2010

### 3 SUMMARY OF THE CASE FOR DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Democratic engagement brings demonstrable benefits to the governance of an area. A ward member brings to their relationship with their constituents the **legitimacy** of direct election, **accountability** through direct election, and a public **visibility** in the locality. This then gives them the **authority to act as a ‘champion’** promoting the interests of the ward and residents with a range of parties, from the Executive side of the Council to other organisations providing the services that affect residents lives, be they public, private (eg utilities) or voluntary and community sector.

This places ward members in a strong position to lead debate and dialogue, through committees and forums, about policies relevant to their local area. This is in addition to more individual dialogue with residents- eg through surgeries, newsletters, blogs etc.

### 4 EXISTING PROVISION

The Council's governance arrangements currently include three sets of structures that are decentralised below Borough level. Each have three bodies which mirror parliamentary constituencies, ie Hendon; Finchley and Golders Green; Chipping Barnet.<sup>2</sup>

	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Remit and Powers</b>	<b>Frequency 10/11</b>
<b>Resident Forums</b>	Chairman and Vice-Chairman appointed by Council.  Any member may attend.	Provides opportunity for any resident to comment on any aspect of council service, plans and proposals. mechanism for ward members to debate oral representations, petitions etc on local issues, and to reach some local consensus before a matter is considered by an area environment sub-committee. Consider planning issues in the same way.  Only consultative and advisory-comments are reported to the relevant decision maker.	<b>6</b>
<b>Area Environment Sub-Committees</b>	1 Cllr plus a sub for each of the 7 wards covered	To discharge the Council's Functions relating to Highways use and regulation (NB NOT Executive highways responsibilities) contaminated land; pollution; air quality and gaming, entertainment, food and miscellaneous licensing (but not individual applications) in accordance with Council policy and within budget, apart from matters of significance to the whole borough or crossing sub-committee boundaries	<b>4</b>

<sup>2</sup> Full details are contained in the Council's Constitution

<b>Area Planning sub-committees</b>	1 Cllr plus a sub for each of the 7 wards covered	Determine planning applications in accordance with Council policy and within budget, relating to town and country planning and development control- except those reserved to Planning and Environment Committee	<b>11</b>
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The role of the Area Planning Sub-Committees is specific and could not be easily merged with other functions, and is therefore not addressed in this paper.

## 5 CURRENT PROBLEMS

- Barnet scores relatively poorly in surveys on whether residents feel involved and able to influence local decisions: the ineffectiveness of local forums is an influencing factor
- Resident Forums are poorly attended; dominated by 'point scoring' from the same faces and off putting to other residents
- Area Environment Sub-Committees are poorly attended and their purpose is not entirely clear other than for historical reasons. Scheduled meetings are regularly cancelled for lack of business
- Neither structure gives residents any real input into decision making or policy development
- No devolution of budgets to either body
- Current structures do not give us good intelligence on our customers
- We fail to engage and involve people in a genuine two way dialogue
- There is no neighbourhood (ward level or lower) dimension to decision making structures

It should be noted that most other authorities provide more extensive opportunities for local engagement- either because it is more localised, or because the forums have greater powers or more budgets. A step change is therefore required if Barnet is to improve democratic engagement.

## 6 OBJECTIVES OF REVISED ARRANGEMENTS

Within the overall objective of enhancing democratic engagement and civic participation, any new arrangements should have three broad objectives:

- i) **INFLUENCE**- Enhancing the level, constructiveness and quality of public involvement, so that residents have more power and influence over local decisions and the Council and public services gain greater insight and intelligence into their customers
- (ii) **LOCALISM**- Devolving governance closer to local neighbourhoods and developing the role of the Councillor as Ward member, working collaboratively with local communities and agencies to improve their area
- (iii) **COST-EFFECTIVE**- any new system should not require additional public resources to support it, and should ideally save money on the existing system

The trade-off and prioritisation of these three goals will govern what options are chosen.



## **7 OPTIONS FOR CHANGE**

The following options are the broad categories of possible change, but are not mutually exclusive and could be mixed and matched to provide an ideal hybrid solution. There are numerous permutations, but some examples are given at the end.

1. Existing Resident Forums with minor changes of format
2. Existing Resident Forums in new format
3. Merger of Environment and Resident Forums into Area Committees
4. Devolved Budgets
5. Ward level committees

### **7.1 Existing Resident Forums with minor changes of format**

This option would seek to redress some of the negative aspects of the current Resident Forums, to ensure that they work more effectively as originally envisaged. Possible changes to enhance their effectiveness include:

- Remove barrier of 'top table' layout
- Rules to limit extent to which one individual can speak
- Ensure Members able to chair better and fully briefed on policies they may be required to defend
- Improve behaviour and body language of officers and members
- Ensure tighter 'closing' of issues and ensuring action taken and outcomes communicated

#### **Advantages:**

- **Low cost and easily implementable**

#### **Disadvantages:**

- **Unlikely by itself to address fundamental objectives outlined above**
- **Lacks constructive dialogue so will not improve low levels of civic trust**
- **Misses opportunity for step change in engagement**

### **7.2 Resident Forums in new format**

It could be argued that the adversarial question and answer format of the Resident Forums does not contribute to the quality of public debate and a more sophisticated approach is required, in which the Council and other partners can instigate a more strategic dialogue rather than passively respond to individual queries. The various tools of public consultation and engagement (further addressed in the forthcoming One Barnet Engagement Strategy) would be used.

Reforms that could be introduced include:

- A segment of the evening where 'casework' that currently comes to Resident Forums can be considered privately between the resident, ward member and Officer as appropriate
- Workshops on a specific topic identified by the Council, partners or residents, to debate in a less confrontational way an issue where the community needs to make choices, similar to the Borough-wide Civic Network (in Westminster those attending have a choice of three concurrent workshops)
- Bringing partners into the process so that the Forums consider 'One Barnet' and not merely Council services.

#### **Advantages**

- **Retains capacity to address 'single issues'**
- **Makes such issues less confrontational in nature**
- **Allows more in depth and focused discussion on local issues**
- **Covers all local services**

#### **Disadvantages**

- **Is not fully 'local' – if existing boundaries used, debate might either deal in generalities, or locality-specific interests that residents from another neighbourhood will have no interest in**
- **'Casework' section could duplicate existing Councillor surgeries**
- **Some partners are easier to involve at a local level than others- for example the Police have neighbourhood structures. Health is being reorganised around clusters of local GP's who will take on commissioning responsibilities. Other local partners serve a more specific client group or are Government Departments.**
- **Further work would be required if partners were involved in actual decision making; at present in Borough wide partnerships, eg LSP, One Barnet Programme Board, sovereignty is not pooled and partners must gain individual authority from their own governance structures to agree to decisions or commit resources.**

### **7.3 Merger of Resident Forums and Environment Sub-Committees into Area Committees**

As the remits and geographical coverage of these two formats overlap, and given poor attendance, they could easily be combined into a single meeting (suggested title- Area Committee). The reforms outlined above could also be applied to these new meetings.

#### **Advantages**

- **Easy to implement- Environment Subs regularly cancelled anyway, and geographical basis is the same**
- **Reduces number of meetings and hence costs**
- **Grounds Resident Forums in more practical issues by giving them a specific remit for street based issues**

#### **Disadvantages**

- **Could be accused of reducing opportunities for participation**
- **Still lack formal powers or a compelling reason for public to attend**
- **Does not by itself address the deficit in democratic engagement**

## 7.4 Devolved budgets

Many authorities allow their Area structures (whether referred to as forums or committees) to directly control a portion of the Council budget that is devolved to them, traditionally for environmental and other local matters.

This could be on two levels:

- Elected Members make the final decision after a process of dialogue with and input from community members
- Communities themselves collectively make the decision.

Budgets could be allocated either for schemes commissioned by the Council, or community-led projects for which local groups (or even individuals?) would be able to apply.

### Advantages:

- **Gives people a direct stake through influencing actual resource allocation**
- **Can provide focus for local ownership and community pride, led by ward members**
- **Allowing communities to spend their own budgets is a key 'Big Society' principle**

### Disadvantages:

- **The ability to hold decision makers to account is key to local democracy. If the power of decision is delegated to residents, controls will be required in terms of governance and financial regulations to ensure probity and transparency. These should be proportionate to the risk involved but will have an additional cost.**
- **Devolution of budgets to too local a level – danger of loss of economies of scale**

## 7.5 Ward level Committees

A famous dictum is that 'All politics is local'. The current division of the Borough into three units, each the size of a large District Council, does not make them local in any meaningful sense. There is much academic research to suggest residents associate more with a neighbourhood. In addition Leader Listens events, which were very neighbourhood based with invites at polling district level, were a success with higher attendances than for other local events.

A Ward Forum or Committee might do any or all of the functions outlined in options 3 or 4 ie,

- Provide 'surgery' facilities
- Bring all public service partners together
- Debate themed issues
- Agree allocation of a devolved budget

### Advantages

- **Brings decision making to lowest possible level**

- Places the ward councillor at the heart of the process
- Encourages local diversity- priorities differ according to needs of particular neighbourhoods
- Builds social capital through encouraging contact between people in their local neighbourhood

#### Disadvantages

- Resources- three a year would require 63 meetings to be organised and staffed. Two a year is still 42. The current (scheduled) number of Resident Forums and Area Environment Subs is 32.
- Can a smaller Council support the administration required? Likewise other public services may not have coverage to fully support
- Some local interests work at a neighbourhood level- eg a school, a Residents Association. Other players, eg a hospital or a voluntary group representing a particular community of interest rather than place, are more difficult to marshal and engage at the neighbourhood level.

The *cost* could be mitigated by teaming up neighbouring wards in a cluster, although this would dilute the *localist* nature of these. If seven clusters of three wards were to be established, and to hold quarterly meetings, the total number of meetings would be 28, which is fewer than the current schedule.

The challenge then is to analyse demography, natural communities and local cultures to generate clusters that residents can associate with, and which make sense as coherent units.

#### 7.6 Mixing and Matching Options

Depending on the weight attached to each of the three goals of this exercise, options could be mixed and matched as follows:

##### **OPTIMUM 'INFLUENCED' OPTION**

Hybrid of Options 2 and 4, ie mixed agenda with surgeries and themed workshops, and all partners included; and budgetary powers

##### **OPTIMUM 'COST' OPTION**

Option 3, and can include elements of options 1 or 2 but excludes option 5, ie fold Area and Environment Committees into one and retain the 'parliamentary constituency' as unit of governance

##### **OPTIMUM 'LOCAL' OPTION**

Option 5, ie devolve to Ward Committees. Preferable to include elements of Options 2, 3 and 4.

**Establish seven three-ward committees that meet quarterly (diluted version of option 5). They would assume the roles both of Resident forums and Area Environment Subs (option 3) and be allocated small budgets from existing council resources (option 4). The agenda would be restructured to give more opportunity for real dialogue with residents and greater partner involvement (option 2).**

## **8 IMPLEMENTING CHANGES**

Depending on the direction chosen the next stages would need to include:

- Formal costing
- Determination of boundaries for any new clusters of wards
- Approval through Special Committee (Constitutional Review)
- Assess members' development needs for new system
- Review Democratic Services staffing and competencies required

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Conservative Group Proposal - The Future of Area Environment Committees and Resident Forums**

#### **Format of Proposed New Meetings**

##### **Reasons for change**

The current Area Forums, while to some extent engaging local people, lack a clear focus or work programme. They do not feed into improvements to the local area to any meaningful degree.

The Area Environment Committees whilst having a clear constitutional role have drifted.

Linking the two could mean that Residents Forums could take clear direction from local residents on the physical improvements that they wanted to see within their area (within a prescribed framework), and this could then set the Agenda for the Area Environment Committee in the second half of the evening giving it a clear purpose and direction.

##### **1) Regularity**

The Area Environment Committees and Resident Forums will meet quarterly on a Parliamentary Constituency basis at a venue within the Constituency determined by Democratic Services in consultation with the Chairman. This may be at the Town Hall or at other premises such as schools.

##### **2) Attendance**

Attendance at the Forums is open to anyone on the Electoral Roll or the Business Rates list for that Parliamentary Constituency. This would be ensured by attendees signing in on arrival. Whilst Ward Councillors within that Constituency would be encouraged to attend, normal attendance rules would apply permitting any Member of the Council to attend. The appointment of Chairmen and Vice Chairmen of the Resident Forums would as now be a matter for Full Council.

Resident Forums would be served and minuted by Democratic Services and officers from Planning, Environment and Regeneration with a senior officer from that directorate present.

The Area Environment Committees will be composed of 1 Councillor per Ward covered plus 1 Substitute per Ward plus a Chairman appointed by Full Council, as at present.

##### **3) Times**

The Resident Forum will meet at 6pm, followed by the Area Environment on the same night and same venue at 8pm. They might have the same Chairman and Vice Chairman (or the Chairman of the Resident forum might be Vice Chairman of the Area Environment and vice versa) but that will be a matter for Full Council to determine.

##### **4) Residents' Items**

The Resident Forums will give residents the opportunity to raise local matters (basically “Public Works”). Items must be emailed to Democratic Services a clear 24 hours before the meeting on a dedicated email address. There will be a guarantee that if a qualifying matter is submitted as above it will be discussed. A Six Month Rule shall apply preventing matters that have already been dealt with from being raised again within that period.

The types of matters that could be covered are:

- Parks and Greenspaces
- Trees
- Allotments
- Highways
- Pavements
- Traffic
- Parking
- Utility issues
- Refuse
- Street cleaning
- Local crime

This may also be forum for certain consultations from the Council as decided by the Chairman. (This would not be referred to the Area Environments).

Petitions (on matters relevant to the Constituency only) can also be presented.

Matters raised must **not** relate to Planning or Licensing Issues.

All matters raised at Resident Forum shall then make up the agendas for the Area Environment Committee that follows together with any statutory Area Environment business that may need to be discussed

The Area Environment Committee will decide on a course of action for each item. Whether just to do nothing, note it, ask officers to present a report to a future meeting of the Area Environment Committee, formally refer to the Cabinet Member, formally instruct an officer (within their powers) to take action, or to bring the matter to the attention of the Ward Councillors.

Democratic Services will ensure that resident who raised matter is emailed to with the decision of committee. Future meetings of the Area Environment Committee will of course deal with matters on which officers have been asked to report.

## **5) Cabinet/Executive Forums**

To replace Leader Listens it is proposed that annually the Leader or nominated Cabinet Member should chair a themed Resident Forum properly minuted and controlled by Democratic Services, on any subject the Leader decides and for which the Leader and Cabinet have executive responsibility. These may include:

- Education

- Housing
- Adult Social Care
- Community Safety (perhaps jointly with police)
- Public Health (perhaps jointly with the PCT)

They could also be used as part of the consultation process, for example on the Community Safety Plan.

The Executive Forums will discuss and question matters relevant to these areas, and to take questions. Attendees must be on the Electoral Roll or Business Rates list in the Borough, and will be required to sign in on arrival.

The relevant director and senior officers would be expected to attend and again residents would be asked to email questions to the dedicated address 24 hours beforehand (as per the rules for Resident Forums generally).



**APPENDIX C**

# **DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

## **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**February 2011  
Policy and Consultation**

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## 1 Executive Summary




The Council has been reviewing options for reforming its area-based decision making structures to improve local democratic engagement, to enhance the influence residents have and devolve governance closer to local neighbourhoods while still being cost effective.

Two 90 minute focus groups were organised in January 2011 to gain greater insight into how aware residents were of the current system, how attractive it was, and what would encourage them to participate.

Participants reported that they were currently involved in decisions that affect the local area through a wide range of community activities and attending meetings held by the Council, primarily consultation events or on planning matters.

They engage directly with the Council principally by telephone, letter and e-mail. There was very little awareness of Resident Forums or Area Environment Committees, which were also felt to have an insufficiently local focus. Residents' experience of Council meetings and other engagement activities was that the Council's mind was already made up and there was little interest from them in residents views, nor feedback or action as a result of discussions.

When asked what would encourage residents to get involved, the most common themes were:

-  Topics needed to be of specific interest and relating to their local area;
-  The Council should demonstrate they are taking action and feeding back what was happening as a result;
-  Engagement should be better publicised through a variety of methods.

As a result, their principal requirements for an attractive engagement model was that visible action resulted on the night from those with authority, which was then fed back. The system should also be more widely publicised, and there were a number of suggestions on how this be done including greater use of electronic communications. There were also suggestions that the council should make greater use of Barnet online and the web to understand the issues that were causing residents most concern within different areas.

In terms of format some participants said they did not like the top table format and would prefer the meetings to be more informal, with table discussions, mixing residents, councillors and officers on each table.

There were some requests for all local issues, including other public services, to be covered, and for meetings to allocate a small budget, but this was by no means universal.

## 2. Background Objectives and approach

The Council has been reviewing options for improving local democratic engagement through reform of the Council's area-based decision-making structures, i.e. those that bring Ward Councillors and the public together at a sub-Borough level.

The review revealed that Barnet scored relatively poorly in national surveys of whether people felt able to influence policy at a local level. Analysing the reasons for this, it was felt that existing structures (Resident Forums and Area Environment Sub-Committees) were poorly attended, and dominated by 'point scoring' from a limited number of the 'usual suspects'. They did not give residents any real input into policy formation or decision making, nor any direct opportunities to allocate a budget. In addition they failed to give people the opportunity to engage at a lower neighbourhood (e.g. ward) level. Current structures were failing to engage residents and the Council in a two way dialogue, and as a result the Council was missing a vital source of insight into residents' views.

The review identified the three main requirements of any reform of structures to be:

- i) **INFLUENCE**- Enhancing the level, constructiveness and quality of public involvement, so that residents have more power and influence over local decisions and the Council and public services gain greater insight and intelligence into their customers
  
- (ii) **LOCALISM**- Devolving governance closer to local neighbourhoods and developing the role of the Councillor as Ward member, working collaboratively with local communities and agencies to improve their area
  
- (iii) **COST-EFFECTIVE**- any new system should not require additional public resources to support it, and should ideally save money on the existing system

These focus groups were organised in order to assess in more depth the awareness residents had of the current system, their perception of it, and how future local democratic engagement mechanisms would need to be structured in order to encourage them to participate.

The purpose of the research was not to test specific options, but to gain greater insight into how people currently engaged, the attractiveness of the current offer and what would need to be designed into any new system to make residents feel it was worth engaging with.

## 3. Methodology

Two 90-minute focus groups were completed in January 2011, at North London Business Park, Barnet.

A discussion guide was developed in collaboration with Barnet's Corporate Policy team and the Consultation and Insight Team for use in the group discussions. The discussion guide was split into three sections:

- Awareness, experience of engagement foras,
  
- Motivations and barriers to attending face to face council engagement foras

- What a successful engagement model would look like in the future

Participants were recruited at random from Barnet Council's Citizens Panel. Over sampling was applied in terms of younger, and BME groups to ensure the focus groups represented a cross section of the population. Take up to invitations to focus groups was currently running at 7%, so 165 panel members were selected and sent invitations by post or e mail with a view to recruit 8-10 panel members to take part in one focus group. However, the subject matter generated more interest than usual, with 16 Citizens Panel members agreeing to take part. For this reason two focus groups were convened.

**Table 1: Sample profile**

Group	Ethnic Origin	Age	Gender	Ward
Group 1	Mixed	Mixed (18-65+)	Mixed	Mixed
Group 2	Mixed	Mixed (18-65+)	Mixed	Mixed

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### 4.1 Current methods of getting involved in decisions that affect the local area

- Participants cited many different ways that they get involved in decisions in their local area: joining community groups; neighbourhood watch meetings; community work; i.e. gardening projects, life coaching for women; setting up a job club; attending planning and environmental meetings; being an active member of a residents association; and two participants mentioned they were a member of their local political party.
- One participant mentioned that they got involved in local decisions by being a member of a local residents association, as part of this they cited organising an annual street party and the council agreed to close the street to traffic so that the event could take place
- The main driver to getting involved with these particular groups was if it was about issues that particularly interested participants and issues that affected them. Particular reference was made to planning, transport, environment, education, activities for young people and politics.
- Unprompted participants also mentioned that they got involved in decisions by taking part in council consultations regarding local planning developments and

- However, also unprompted, participants highlighted a key deterrent to getting involved was that when they engaged with the council, they often experienced a lack of response, feedback and action.

#### **4.2 How do participants currently engage with the council**

- When prompted with the question 'how do participants currently engage with the council', the most popular method cited was telephone, letter and e mail.
- One participant mentioned, as they are a member of their local political party, they regularly receive minutes from council meetings which they read.
- The groups were presented with a list of possible ways they could engage with the council.
- The preferred method was still letter, e mail and telephone, the main reason for this was that they had a record of the contact, speed of response and quick action.

#### **4.3 Awareness and experience of engaging with the council in existing face to face foras**

- There was virtually no awareness of existing Resident forums or Area Environment Committees
- Some participants had attended committee and planning public consultation meetings. One participant had been to a Leader Listens event and a few participants had attended other partners meetings, such as police meetings.
- When describing their experience of council meetings, participants felt that the councillors and officers often attend with a set attitude and that the decision had already been made. They felt councillors and officers were not interested in what the public are saying, do not listen and that there was little opportunity to be heard at council meetings.
- Some participants said they had attended face to face consultation events with the council via Citizen Panel consultative workshops: examples given were the Housing Strategy consultation and budget consultation workshops. However, although they had enjoyed the format and participating in these workshops, they were disappointed with the lack of feedback on how the council were using the outcomes of the discussions. Participants felt when they do get involved with council engagement activities the council is slow to respond, there is a lack of interest, feed back and action as a result of consultation and engagement discussions.

- One group felt there were no mechanisms in place for the council to hear what local people are saying about their local area
- When the area forums were explained, the majority of participants felt they were trying to cover too wide a geographical area and they needed to be much more local.
- The Area Environment Sub-Committees were criticised for not having resources of their own and for meetings taking place at the Town Hall rather than in the local area.
- Some participants said they did not feel the need to engage in face to face foras, and they just needed to know that they were being listened to via specific consultation and engagement activities, and that when they contact the council directly with specific issues they are resolved.

#### 4.4 What would encourage residents to get more involved in decisions in their local area?

##### Drivers:

- **Topics that are of particular interest** were seen as the main reason for getting involved in local decisions. This reinforces the findings from the Place Survey 08/9: when respondents were asked if they wanted to be more involved most Barnet residents said that it depended on the issue.

Particular reference was made to issues that relate to planning, transport, environment, education, activities for young people and local politics.

- Topics that **related to their local area** was also seen as a driver that would encourage residents to get involved in decisions
- **The council clearly demonstrating to residents that they are listening and action has been taken as a result** was viewed as one of the most important drivers to getting involved
- **Feedback-** participants also said it was really important that the council feed back what they are doing as a result of the engagement activities and they need to give clear explanations of the process
- **Knowing in advance what issues are being considered** was also seen as important in encouraging residents to get involved in decisions
- **Incentives** –some participants suggested cash or vouchers should be offered to encourage residents to participate
- **Information and publicity** –participants felt the different engagement mechanisms should be better publicised. A variety of methods, from posters in public buildings, buses, public areas in council estates and rented accommodation, the council’s website and newspaper adverts, to greater use of e-mail alerts, to sending schedules with other official Council communiqués

- **Language-** some participants felt the promotion of the engagement events should be promoted in different languages.

#### **Barriers:**

- **Lack of action** as a result of what is raised or discussed was the main deterrent to getting involved in the future
- **Lack of feedback and explanation** of the process was also seen as a key deterrent
- **Lack of time** was also a barrier to getting involved
- **Inconvenient time/day** - some participants felt if the engagement foras were held at inconvenient times this was a particular barrier to some residents. Reference was made in particular to mothers with children who would find it difficult to attend in the evening due to childcare
- **Inconvenient location** – if the event was in held at an inconvenient location and not in participant's local area
- **Confidentiality** - was also mentioned as a barrier to raising issues in face to face foras. Particular reference was made to raising anti social behaviour issues about neighbours.

#### **4.5 Requirements of a successful engagement model**

- Participants are principally interested in attending face to face engagement foras to resolve **specific local issues** rather than wider policy discussions.
- Some participants also felt meetings should be **conducted jointly with partners** and the forum should **look at all issues that affect the local area**, i.e., local hospitals, GP's, and policing issues, as well as LBB issues such as parking and environmental issues
- Both groups felt **action and feed back** on what was happening as a result of the issues raised were the most important aspect of a successful engagement model. It was felt if action and feedback was widely publicised this would encourage other residents to participate in the knowledge these mechanisms did resolve local issues. One participant suggested a 'you said, we did' model based on what they had seen in a leading supermarket.
- One group said that it was also most important that their **issue was resolved on the night**, or where that was **not possible the issue should be, tracked and reported to the next meeting**, and to clearly demonstrate that issues raised had been actioned as a result.



- It was felt essential that Council attendance was from those with the authority to make decisions. A high emphasis was also placed on **having councillors present and people with the appropriate technical expertise.**
- One group discussed the **allocation of budgets, for which there was limited appetite** although one respondent did suggest it would make the meeting more relevant.
- It was seen to be important to be able to **raise issues either through advance notice or on the night.** However participants reiterated they were more concerned with the content of the response given, feedback and action taken.
- **In terms of geography views were mixed. One group felt the meeting needs to focus on small areas at a neighbourhood level or ward level.** However in the **second group there was no real consensus** on the geography of how local a meeting should be to be relevant to them.
- Views were mixed on whether face to face engagement mechanisms should **discuss all issues that affect a local area, or if the meeting should focus on specific issues**
- In one group some participants suggested that the meetings should be **issue based (for example crime, education, parking, health).** The meetings should be held in each parliamentary constituency. It was felt this would encourage more residents to attend knowing the particular topic they are interested in is being discussed in detail. It was also suggested that these should be **widely publicised on an engagement year planner.**
- Some participants felt there should be an **area on the council's website where residents can fill in a form to identify their local area and the issues they are interested in. E mail alerts** are then sent when the topic of interest are being discussed at meetings.
- Others also suggested that this **form could be used to test the temperature of what particular issues residents were concerned about in a local area. This should then act as a trigger to call a meeting in that area to discuss the issue and how it can be resolved**
- One group felt that the Leader of the Council should **write to all residents informing them of the resident forums.** It was also suggested that the meetings could be publicised with a **flyer included in the council tax booklet.** The flyer could also ask residents which issues, topics and areas they are interested in and if they want to be more involved in their community to submit their email address. This could be used to **create an e mailing list to target and invite residents to local forums**
- In terms of format some participants said they did not like the top table format, as they felt it was a barrier to a discussion and only the loudest would speak. Some participants felt the **meeting should be informal, with table discussions,** mixing residents, councillors and officers on each table. Then the outcome of table discussions fed back to the whole meeting. Councillors and officers would then report back how they are going to act and resolve the issue.

- Some participants suggested **filming the meetings and putting them on the council website, YouTube and also showing the films in public areas** such as post offices, banks and GP waiting areas so that all residents have the opportunity to see what is being discussed in their local area. There was also a suggestion of having **councillor live web chats**.
- Some participants felt the **timing of the meetings should vary** –some in the day and some in the evening to ensure all residents have the opportunity to attend.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

This group of residents were all interested in local issues and keen to become involved. However there was little awareness of current democratic engagement mechanisms, and perhaps unsurprisingly no groundswell for their remit to be expanded.

However, they highlighted some practical steps which should be taken and which would make them more inclined to participate:

- 📌 **Better feedback as to what action is being taken as a result of listening to residents at these for a**
- 📌 **Topics need to be of specific local interest**
- 📌 **Essential that people with the appropriate decision-making authority or technical expertise are present to give answers**
- 📌 **Greater publicity both of forthcoming meetings and positive results that had been achieved from previous meetings.**