

trust in democracy

strengthening public confidence
in local decision-making



LONDON
COUNCILS

foreword



With Parliament's reputation badly damaged by the MPs' expenses scandal, the public's trust in our national politicians has been sharply eroded. Yet, outside the Westminster village, the hard work and dedication of local councillors mean that they command significantly higher public confidence than their parliamentary colleagues.

It is hard work that is the key to this difference in public perceptions – and London has many examples of good practice where councillors are acting as community leaders, tackling vital issues on behalf of their local area. Indeed, a recent poll by London Councils marking Local Democracy Week found that more than two thirds of respondents in the capital think their borough makes a positive difference compared to a national average of just 55 per cent.

London's governance structures are complex and at times working out who is accountable for what can be extremely difficult and confusing. Looking for answers, people will often turn to their local councillor for help, with the councillor becoming the first port of call for their concerns, issues or complaints about a whole host of subjects, many not even under the council's control.

And councillors can and do help because we are uniquely placed to get to the heart of what really matters to a local community, empowering and facilitating communities to take an active role in decision-making. Indeed, 38 per cent of Londoners already feel they have

a say in the decisions made by their local council, with the capital's local authorities committed to increasing this number even further.

This showcase of borough practice highlights some councillor-led initiatives in seven London boroughs, and shows how different local initiatives on widening public engagement can make a positive difference to the lives of Londoners.

It builds on London Councils' highly successful *be a councillor* campaign which encourages people to get involved in local democracy who wouldn't usually consider standing for election. For London to meet the many challenges it faces, it needs to widen its pool of talent and experience.

In the coming months, the stress on the public purse will also put pressure on all agencies to target resources ever more efficiently. Local councillors are at the heart of this process and these studies show how councillors can strengthen their engagement with their local communities.

The initiatives showcased here are further testament to the responsive and proactive approach of London's local government. We at London Councils hope you enjoy reading about these examples as much as we've enjoyed finding out about them.

Cllr Merrick Cockell
Chairman, London Councils

introduction

“Every citizen has the right to shape the communities in which they live. Crucially that means the right to elect their local leaders, the right to have services that meet their needs and the means to demand action where change is needed. Strong local democracy is dependant on councils that are effective, responsive and accountable and well positioned to serve local people.”

The Rt. Hon John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

All political parties are promoting policies for a strong local democracy. Placing the power back in the hands of the people and their locally elected leaders is a central theme, in varying degrees, of the main political parties’ rhetoric. Indeed the government has just finished consulting on democratic renewal and whether local government has the powers it needs to meet today’s challenges.

Boroughs are complying with the new Duty to Involve to embed a culture of engagement and empowerment within communities as a matter of course and gearing up to comply with the Duty to Promote Democracy. Many boroughs have also prioritised National Indicator 4 which looks at the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.

To explore these areas further, London Councils has put together this publication. Councillors, representatives of the voluntary sector, residents and council officers from seven London boroughs have been asked to share their experiences and the barriers they face (see pages 18-19) in bringing communities and councillors closer together to tackle local issues.

This publication also illustrates the balance between participatory and representative democracy and showcases some real councillor-led examples from boroughs who have worked to overcome these barriers ahead of the London local elections in May 2010. These examples aim to help boroughs work more closely with the communities they serve, so that the public have confidence in their councils as strong, trusted and responsive organisations and in councillors as their first port of call.

Data collection for this publication was carried out through in-depth interviews. All the examples have been evaluated using aspects of the Network of Empowering Authorities’ *Framework for an ideal empowering authority* and the London Empowerment Partnerships’ *Community empowerment evaluation model*.

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Influential Councillor scheme

Newham's Influential Councillor scheme was established in 2004 to support and enhance the role of councillors as community leaders at the heart of local decision-making.

The scheme recognises that effective councillors need to develop a thorough understanding of local issues, listen to the views of the whole community and find local solutions to local problems. Equally, members need to be at the forefront of local activities to meet council goals and targets.

The purpose of the Influential Councillor scheme is to address these needs and to support councillors in delivering a responsive and effective political leadership – in particular, one that restores the public's faith in local democracy in the current political climate.

As part of this, the scheme aims to strengthen and broaden relationships with the community by working with other councillors, officers, residents, community forums, the police, health services, businesses, voluntary and community groups to work together to find local solutions.

'Influential' councillors are identified and champion several overlapping areas of work to radically improve communication and responsiveness between themselves, council officers and the community.

The first strand is to identify and promote local priorities, such as reducing anti-social behaviour, increasing recycling or priorities that link to corporate goals. These

issues are identified through engagement with community forums, public meetings and casework with residents.

Once identified, councillors co-ordinate work on tackling priorities in consultation with the community, and this is arranged through Local Service Review meetings, attended by managers from service areas across the council.

Councillors also visit community organisations and attend local events - such as those organised by the Active Community Teams - to ascertain local groups' views on priorities affecting their area and to develop partnerships for promoting these.

These areas of work are underpinned by the Local Fund, launched in 2007/08 to enable councillors to respond quickly to local issues and 'calls for action' from residents. The fund is for any project with a 'one-off cost' that improves the well-being of residents and the environment. The fund currently has £11 million for projects proposed by councillors, in consultation with local communities.

Many councillors have used the fund to initiate or develop long-term physical improvement works, such as the painting of street signs and lamp posts. Other areas have used the fund to pilot new initiatives such as street stencils, CCTV, or localised environment campaigns – all in response to a suggestion or concern from the community.

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Expo events

Lambeth Expos are events developed collaboratively by the council and community groups to enable community engagement on a wide scale.

Expos give residents the opportunity to meet the people who make decisions affecting their daily lives, and ask questions about their area in an informal and enjoyable setting.

This successful model involves having a core theme, a market place for service providers, a local question time and very importantly community entertainment and refreshments. The borough's Local Community Action Fund (formerly known as the 'Ward Purse') also gives backbench councillors the means and the money to deliver some visible results for their localities.

The development of Expo events is led by the community forums with a budget to organise events in every key area of the borough twice a year. A range of partners are brought together and this is usually linked to a local festival. The Expos provide a range of fun activities together with tents or exhibitions from a range of community service providers. All the main service teams have a stall, such as the home adaptation team which attracts a lot of interest from older people.

All the senior officers and elected members attend, and there are structured debates for the community to engage with their political representatives. In fact, more than 4,000 people have taken part in some Expos and at one event 700 people made direct contact with public services for the first time.

There is also a direct link into the Local Community Action Fund as residents' views on future projects for funding are both listened and responded to at the Expos.

The Local Community Action Fund is an annual budget of around £12,000 for capital expenditure, which ward councillors can use to address a particular need that has been brought to their attention by local people.

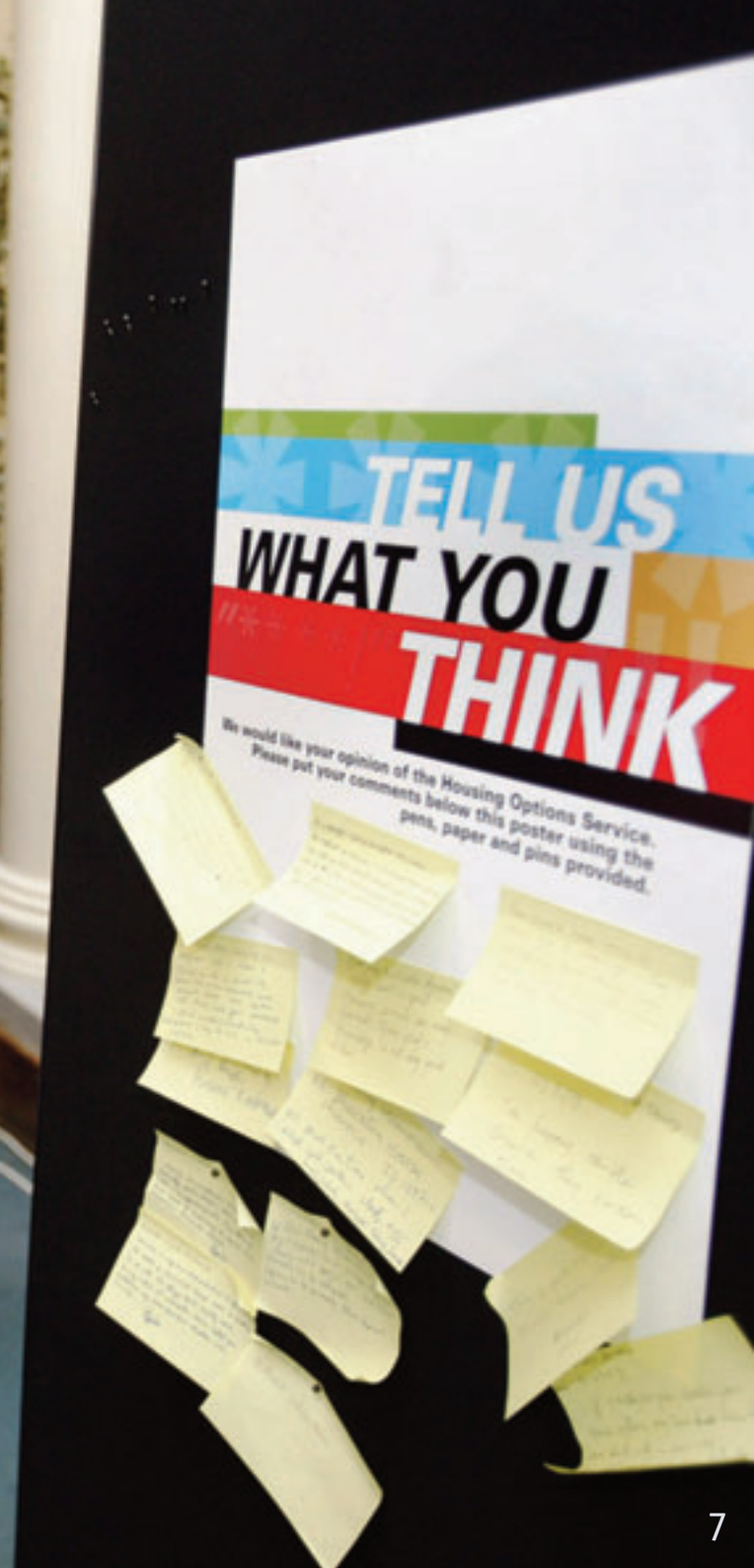
To date, the fund's initiatives have bought about positive outcomes across the borough, such as tree planting, computers purchased for charitable organisations, and improvement to community spaces.

Another more unusual project was the refurbishment of two Victorian sewer vent pipes, neglected for many years but rejuvenated as a piece of community art through the fund's money. The chair of a local area society said: "The pipes make an attractive piece of street art and their conservation cost is small compared with the cost of commissioning new street art."

There are 49 known pipes in Lambeth and, as a result of the fund initiative, moves are now being made to refurbish more of them.

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Kensington and Chelsea

Ward Initiatives

Kensington and Chelsea's Ward Initiatives programme is intended to explore the concept of localism and the opportunities for devolving power and influence to local communities.

Ward Initiatives are a chance for residents to influence how money is spent in their area and ensure funding focuses on what matters to local people.

The initiatives are also an opportunity for councillors to hear local opinion on spending priorities for Ward Initiatives and to report back on local progress from ward events, which are held bi-annually.

Following the initial pilot programme in 2008/09, the second year of the pilot is enabling even more wards in the borough to sign up. Each pilot ward receives £30,000 a year for two years to spend on specific local projects of benefit to the community.

In the Colville ward, councillors set up a panel of residents to make suggestions and approve funding applications to support local projects. The funding also enabled members to set up a 'community kitty' in the short-term to fast-track approval for funding for community engagement events.

Monica Press, resident chair of Colville area forum says: "The provision of £30,000 per year has been invaluable. Although not a large amount in council terms, it has meant we can move ahead with ideas and residents can see results quite quickly."

In the Royal Hospital ward, the money has helped to create a community arts facility based at a local primary school. This initiative has already received strong support from the school and parents, and work is underway to encourage the involvement of the local community. Fundraising efforts are also taking place to support the project and provide match funding.

Additional wards are now signing up to the initiative. In the Notting Barns ward, a further £60,000 over two years is being spent on a range of projects including streetscape and environmental projects, improved community engagement and health and wellbeing initiatives.

As part of this particular Ward Initiative, a survey was sent to over 5,000 local people in September 2009 to encourage residents to identify priorities and take part in a ward forum. Additional match funding has been secured by councillors from Well London to enable feasibility work on a number of environmental and streetscape projects in the ward.

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Waltham Forest

community councils

Waltham Forest has developed community councils to bring together participatory and representative democracy.

The format works through regular public meetings, which are well attended and councillor-led in their development, so as to get closer to residents and their views on local priorities.

There are six community councils that meet four times annually, each covering three or four wards and chaired jointly by a councillor from one of the wards and a local member of the public. This joint chairing works well as it allows the meetings to be focussed on the issues that matter most to residents without party political discussions.

Residents are notified of issues that will be discussed in advance, so as to allow people to attend as and when an issue is of interest to them. Outside agencies such as the police, the arms length management organisation and the primary care trust also take part.

Using the structure of community councils, residents can discuss local priorities with councillors before members make a decision. Councillors are also able to score quick wins with £10,000 allocated per ward to fund initiatives and an extra £5,000 contingency per community council. Local residents, together with ward councillors, have the opportunity to vote to fund proposed projects, so residents can really see they have made a difference.

One cabinet member in the borough believes participatory budgeting is key to the events' success: "The scheme has really worked in Waltham Forest. Residents come along to improve the area and the money has definitely helped."

Equalities monitoring is undertaken at every community council to ensure that the profile of meeting attendees broadly reflects the equalities profile of the area.

As a result, community councils have been able to contribute to the borough's equality priorities. For example, positive advertising of community councils to people with disabilities has ensured a consistently high number of disabled people attending - 21 per cent of all attendees during the first two cycles of community council meetings for 2008/09.

Councillors attend regular focus group meetings in the borough's most deprived neighbourhoods to ensure that the views of disadvantaged residents inform the delivery of services in their areas.

The council has also developed 'search for a star' events in each of the borough's towns. Based on *The X Factor* format, these events are used to showcase young people's talents whilst at the same time canvassing their opinions which are fed back into the community council process.

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Neighbourhood Working

In October 2007, Brent launched Neighbourhood Working across all ward areas to allow local residents and councillors to work together to improve their communities from the grassroots upwards.

The aim is to support members' consultation with residents in their ward and to develop action plans, with support from an annual ward budget, which take forward community issues raised by residents with colleagues across the council and external partners such as the police.

Members take the lead on consulting with residents in the ward, and all three ward members play an equal role so that the process remains non-party political and can focus on giving local people more of a say in how resources are spent in their area.

Consultation is member-led and is proactive; for instance, through councillor walkabouts, talking to parents outside schools, going to youth clubs and day centres and canvassing views at local festival stalls.

Neighbourhood Working also makes use of existing forums and meetings such as the police's Safer Neighbourhood Team ward panels, area housing boards and voluntary organisations to hear from residents. Brent do not organise meetings directly, as the focus is on reaching people who would not usually attend meetings.

Equalities monitoring is conducted to ensure all sections of the community are able to participate and work is carried out with communities that are under-represented.

Neighbourhood Working also has an annual ward budget of £420,000 to spend on local ward initiatives. An additional £63,000 is available for publicity and used to produce neighbourhood bulletins, delivered to every household twice a year and specific to each ward. In fact, views are often obtained from tear-off slips in neighbourhood bulletins and leaflets which members and residents find useful, particularly older people.

Neighbourhood Working's focus is on residents and councillors working together from a local perspective to decide what needs to be done and how a ward's money is spent. However, it also encourages work across departments and with other partners to develop new solutions to more complex problems, or to look at clusters of issues, rather than immediately applying an old response without questioning its efficacy.

One cabinet member in Brent said: "Neighbourhood Working has definitely anticipated the strategic direction of Brent; we no longer move in a departmental way but as one council. Having the local leverage helps to facilitate activity. It breaks down silos, shortcuts bureaucracy and reinvigorates people's faith in local democracy."

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local committees

In September 2007 Sutton adopted six local committees, each covering between three and four wards, to encourage residents to put forward ideas and make it easier for them to find out about what developments are occurring in their area.

Each committee meets in a public building up to six times per year to discuss local issues. The committees are chaired by a local ward councillor, and the work is supported by a lead officer and area co-ordinator from the council.

Local committees are Sutton's way of encouraging residents to get more involved in decisions affecting local services and the development of their local community. By working closely with councillors both inside and outside of meetings, residents help to identify the issues that are most important to local people, discuss ways to address these issues and influence how public services are provided.

Since the local committees were set up, residents have put forward and discussed a range of projects identified as eligible for local public realm funding across the borough. These have included replacing old playground equipment, purchasing new benches and fencing, investing in new sports equipment and installing traffic calming measures, all in areas that have been important to local residents.

Local residents have also organised petitions on matters of importance to them, and in some cases have given presentations and led discussions at their local committee. At a recent meeting in Sutton, residents led important discussions about closing a local park toilet, and have successfully helped to identify a solution. In the St Helier, the Wrythe and Wandle Valley local committee, a local business owner raised concerns about changes to parking bays, and successfully negotiated an alternative parking area.

Local committees have helped generate and discuss ideas to put forward under the new Sustainable Communities Act, which aims to give more local power to councils to undertake activities to promote the economic, social and environmental sustainability of local areas.

Updates on decisions made at local committees, such as projects funded by the public realm spending programme or invitations to respond to council consultations affecting particular wards, are regularly updated in *Sutton Scene*, the council's bi-monthly magazine distributed to households across the borough. Dates and venues of future meetings are also promoted to encourage as many people to get involved in shaping their community as possible.

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area forums

Camden's area forums offer local people the opportunity to raise and discuss issues with council officers, councillors and local agencies, and provide funds to enable quick solutions in response.

The area forums are the borough's key involvement strategy at a local level. These are engaging and dynamic community events that take place at a ward level two to three times a year. It's local people's chance to raise concerns and pose questions that really matter to them to the people that can really get things done, be it more cycle parking, litter bins or better street lighting.

The forum setup is informal, with café type tables for participants. There is a presentation followed by discussions and then a plenary session. All the relevant agencies attend, whether it's the primary care trust, the police or the Fire Brigade.

But the area forums are committed to taking action rather than just discussing issues. Camden has allocated £10,000 annually per ward to directly implement some of the ideas that come up at the forum. This is backed up by a further £20,000 contingency pot available across the borough.

Examples of how area forums' money has been spent have included more flower baskets hung to improve local street scenes; extra community seating on long busy high streets with older people particularly in mind; and projects to change traffic light phasing carried out in conjunction with Transport for London to improve road safety.

Forums have successfully introduced ward councillors to residents who would not ordinarily meet them, and the community has an opportunity to put forward their views and influence local decision-making in a more personal face-to-face way. Minutes of each forum are available both to participants, and to other residents via the forum pages of Camden's website.

As one Camden cabinet member says: "I am very much an enthusiast of the area forum model as it is about looking at a local area and finding out what is important for the people in that area. This is very important, particularly in boroughs like Camden which are very diverse in terms of areas of affluence and areas where there are significant levels of deprivation."

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barriers to effective engagement

London Councils recently surveyed people's perception of the influence their local council has and their own ability to have their say on local issues (see page 2).

In addition, London Councils asked councillors and council officers, as well as community and voluntary sector organisations, to share their experiences of the barriers they faced in bringing councillors and communities together.

These groups were also encouraged to suggest how the role of councillors in engaging with their communities could be developed and made easier, to achieve real results on the ground. Collectively, the following barriers were mentioned that could be removed to help councillors perform their role more effectively:

silos working

Officers, councillors and voluntary groups said that a 'silo culture' still exists within some councils. Some departments were not well informed of what other parts of their authority were doing and inter-departmental communication could be improved.

support for councillors

More support should be given by councils to help councillors use their time and the council's resources to best effect. This is especially important for backbenchers who can be empowered through initiatives like the ward

budgets as they enable visible results to be demonstrated on the ground.

training

Councillors expressed an interest in more effective training for their roles, particularly for those on the backbench. The leadership and mediator role of a councillor is becoming increasingly important and some backbench councillors (and longer serving members) feel they are not sufficiently prepared for how demanding this aspect of their role can now be.

It was suggested that there could be a bit more 'buy in' from councils to promote these aspects of a councillor's function. Councillors need to have a full knowledge of their local area, how councils work, the legal frameworks and the role of councillors as commissioners of services, including knowledge of the role of the voluntary and community sector. This is especially important with the increased devolvement of boroughs.

grasping opportunities

With responsibility for their communities' needs and the public purse, there is a concern that councils can at times be overly cautious and potentially miss opportunities that require an element of risk. A balance needs to be struck between caution and traditional ways of working, and greater consideration of the benefits risk can often bring.

clear communications

It's important for councillors to have clear messages and information available to inform their communities of local decision-making and gain their trust. Residents can only engage with local democracy if they understand why choices are made, or not made, and can contribute to this process. Clearer communications about delivery and timeframes between directorates would help councillors inform the public quickly and accurately, and negate the impact of the local media or other sources who may not convey all the information about the options available.

dealing with external organisations

External organisations find it hard to liaise with councillors. They are often unsure as to what the councillor's role is, the political mandate that councillors hold and what it means for them as a business. Further work needs to be done on raising the profile of councillors with outside agencies.

legal restrictions

There are legal restrictions on representing communities or individuals. In particular, restrictions around appearing before planning and licensing committees mean councillors often feel they cannot represent their constituents properly. This is seen by councillors as a limiting factor in the effectiveness of their role and function.

community representation

Effective local democracy is representative democracy. London needs more women, young people and ethnic minorities to stand for election as councillors to fully reflect the diversity of the capital's communities.

London Councils' *be a councillor* campaign aimed to persuade these groups to stand for election as councillors in the 2010 London local elections. The initiative was so successful it was rolled out nationally. Councillors (cabinet and back bench) spoke highly of this campaign and the need for a representative group of leaders for local communities.

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