

Title of Report	Ward Forums Support
For Consideration By	Constitution Committee
Meeting Date	13th July 2022
Classification	Open/Exempt
<u>Ward(s) Affected</u>	All
<u>Group Director</u>	Mark Carroll

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This paper provides an update on Ward Forums following the concerns expressed that some Members were replacing Ward Forums with meetings that focused on issues within a Ward with residents' meetings that concentrated on a single issue. The Head of Policy and Strategic Delivery and Head of Scrutiny and Ward Forums were asked to provide information on Ward Forums covering how these meetings operated, the frequency of meetings annually and the resources available to support future meetings.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. **To note the update provided in this report**

3. Background

- 3.1. Ward Forums (WF) were introduced in 2014 to support Ward Councillors' community leadership roles. The aim was to create an ongoing way for Councillors to engage with residents about key local issues and for this insight to feed into wider Council insight. Ward Forums benefit from the fact that Ward Councillors are close to the local community and are best placed to identify the needs or areas of concern to local residents in their ward.
- 3.2. Ward Forums are described in the constitution as a committee of the Council with the following role. *'Ward Forums provide an opportunity for effective engagement between ward Councillors and local Citizens. Ward Forums enable local discussion and a locally developed way of taking issues forward in order to make a difference to local areas. Ward Forums are run by the*

*ward Councillors for each ward area with the support of Council Officers. All Ward Forum meetings are held in public at a venue within the ward area.*¹

- 3.3. When the Ward forums were originally set up, each ward had a named link officer but this role was serviced by officers who volunteered their time on top of their day job from across the organisation. As the organisation has shrunk, and people's workloads have increased and become more pressured, this model has become unviable. There has never been a dedicated budget for staffing to support ward forums, so it has not been possible to propose an alternative that still assigns a named officer to each ward forum. Instead, there is a consistent offer of central support offered across all 21 Wards and Ward Councillors are expected to lead meetings without officer support in the meetings.

4. **Background**

Current Ward Forum Offer and Support

- 4.1. Responsibility for Ward Forums sits with the Head of Scrutiny and Ward Forums who reports to the Head of Policy and Strategic Delivery. It therefore sits with a manager who has a wider remit to support Ward Councillors' community leadership through participation in Scrutiny. All ward forum planning goes to this officer who has oversight to ensure each ward forum is arranged and officer resources provided if required. There is no dedicated officer support covering this provision of service but if required, officer support is drawn from the wider Policy and Strategic Delivery Service area. In addition, there is a small budget available for Councillors to use to promote their ward forums but this budget is reviewed annually.
- 4.2. There are no formal dates set aside in the Council Calendar for Ward Forum meetings. Ward Councillors can choose to hold up to 3 meetings a year and at a date that suits their availability. There is a small budget available for each ward to cover promoting ward forum meetings.
- 4.3. The following support is provided to ward councillors when they are setting up a ward forum meeting:
- Help to draft the ward forum leaflet to promote the meeting.
 - Help with facilitation and coordination of invitations to speakers to attend the ward forum meeting
 - Submitting a request to Print Services for the printing of the ward forum leaflet produced and booking a courier service to distribute the ward forum leaflet across the ward or to specific streets
 - Assistance with booking the venue or room.

¹ [Hackney Council Constitution](#) - Part 1 (Summary) - Section Council Committees and Sub Committees

- 4.4. There is no compulsory cycle for ward forums or start time but generally we suggest holding ward forums around the cycle below and starting the meetings at 7pm.
- June / July
 - October / November
 - March / April.

4.5. Requests to hold a Ward Forum meeting are sent to the Head of Scrutiny and Ward Forums or Members Services.

4.6. Our aim for officer support is to ensure Ward Councillors are supported to answer queries from residents. The officers asked to attend a Ward Forum will be from the relevant service area for the topic of discussion. The officer attending will be there to feed into and inform the topic(s) being discussed. The officer in attendance from the service area will not take notes of the Ward Forum discussion but note any actions they themselves need to take forward or follow up for the service area.

Ward Forums During Covid

4.7. During Covid ward forums were held virtually and Members could hold their ward forum using the Zoom platform or Google Meetings. The only restriction we had was not being able to run concurrent meetings on the same day in Zoom. Therefore we could only hold one WF meeting per evening. We did not have this limitation for meetings set up in Google Meets.

4.8. Like physical meetings, ward councillors were responsible for the operation of the Ward Forum meeting in the virtual environment. Information and guidance was provided to Members to help set up their Ward Forum meetings as securely as possible. It was not possible to provide ICT support for Ward Forum meetings and they were not live-streamed.

4.9. Ward Forum meetings are defined in the Constitution as public meetings and therefore needed to be accessible by any member of the public. To ensure accessibility we published the meeting details on the website. Although this is contrary to our approach for formal council meetings, Ward Forum meetings needed to be accessible to any member of the public right up to the time of the meeting. This carried some risk which ward councillors had to manage at the meeting if required. To mitigate this risk of 'meeting bombing'. We identified the best platform to use was Zoom because it had the waiting room facility. Giving ward councillors control over who entered the meeting area.

4.10. We still provided printed copies for distribution and an electronic copy of the ward forum leaflet for distribution by ward councillors to residents on their mailout list and to promote the meeting using social media. Councillors still had access to the same offer of support as outlined in the section above.

Next Steps

- 4.11. As we come out of the pandemic and revisit what we have learnt more broadly about place based working and the leadership role Ward Councillors play, there is an opportunity to review the potential impact Ward Forums could have if they were aligned with other work, either within the Policy and Strategic Delivery service or other services within my wider service area and this will consider resource capacity. Our review of ward forums is aimed at considering how we can better align Ward Forums to community partnership and the place-based work by the Council. Our objective is to ensure ward councillors are better placed to engage at a local level with the wider community partnership work taking place and also assist officers in the council to look holistically at community needs across the borough.
- 4.12. There is potential for ward forums to support ward councillors in their community leadership role to help resolve issues related to locality / place, negotiating solutions and bringing together all parties. This could be linked to fulfilling their ward pledges as key community leaders of place in their Ward and provide a feedback loop to residents. However any review will need to consider resource allocation in tandem.

Equality impact assessment

- 4.13. This report is for information only and no new decision is being proposed. There is therefore no equality impact assessment.

Sustainability and climate change

- 4.14. This report is for information only and no new decision is being proposed. There are no new considerations regarding Sustainability or Climate Change.

Consultations

- 4.15. This report is for information only and no new decision is being proposed. There is therefore no consultation proposed.

Risk assessment

- 4.16. This report is for information only and no new decision is being proposed. There is therefore no risk assessment.

5. Comments of the Group Director of Finance and Corporate Resources.

- 5.1. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

6. **Comments of the Director of Legal, Democratic and Electoral Services**

- 6.1. Article 10 of the Council’s Constitution governs the role and function of Ward Forums, the timing of such meetings and the basic principles under which they are to be administered and held. The Article provides for Ward Forums to be held three times per year, for the meetings to be held in public and advertised in advance and for those meetings to be led by Councillors in each ward with support from Council Officers. The primary objectives of Ward Forums are ‘to hear views of citizens to help improve the local area and to agree actions that can be taken to address issues that arise’. The Article also makes clear that Ward Forums have no decision-making powers
- 6.2. There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Ward Forums held 2020-2022

Background documents

None

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