

Area Committee Case Studies

1. London Borough of Waltham Forest

The London Borough of Waltham Forest (LBWF) introduced Community Ward Forums which replaced Community Councils in January 2011. The ward forum meetings take place three times a year and are attended by the three relevant ward members, officers and members of the public. Community Councils in Waltham Forest had more limited formal decision making powers than their Southwark equivalents, and smaller budgets. The change from Community Councils to Community Ward Forums was put in place after feedback was received from residents who expressed a wish for more localised forums. The change resulted in savings of £150k and in one post being deleted.

In terms of the forum meetings, officers have described these as being informal engagement forums. They are open to individual residents, community groups and business representatives who want to help shape and improve their neighbourhoods. They are advertised as providing an opportunity for local people to get together, meet their ward councillors, and discuss the important issues affecting their area.

Significantly, the forums have no formal decision making powers. Each ward is allocated £10k annually to be spent on improvements to the area. All projects must benefit residents in the ward. Voluntary, community, sports or arts groups are not able to directly apply for this funding. Rather the projects are delivered by the council or its partners. There is a discussion on how this money is to be allocated at one meeting during the year, and the forums then put together recommendations on what they would like to see funded. These recommendations are formally decided on by the Assistant Director of 'Residents first' in consultation with the three ward councillors.

2. Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

The Royal Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames (RBK) has four Neighbourhood Committees. One of these covers three wards, two cover four wards each, and one covers five wards; their membership therefore also varies: They comprise nine, 12 or 15 ward councillors respectively.

The committees have devolved powers and make decisions about local issues such as traffic, parking, highways, planning applications, grants, youth clubs, parks and open spaces and local libraries; and decide on the local budgets for these services.

The committees also comment on planning policy, by making recommendations to planning committee, and on other documents like the climate change strategy. The committees also have a devolved down budget called Neighbourhood Improvement Fund which they use to fund projects to improve the local environment instead of well-being of the community.

The meetings themselves are formal council meetings and strategic in nature. While residents can have a say at the meeting, there is no special focus on engagement and sometimes meetings are only attended by members and officers, despite it being a public meeting. Attendance by members of the public can vary depending on the topics discussed. The meetings link in with and field the views of partner organisations, for example the police or business improvement districts.

It is worth noting that Kingston do not have an individual decision-making (IDM) process for cabinet members.

3. London Borough of Lambeth

There are no formal geographically based committees in Lambeth.

Since 2008, town centre offices have not had a community development role in Lambeth. However, there are area forums which operate within Lambeth and fulfil this role. The forums are, however, not council bodies, but community-led forums some of which have grown out of, or are the successors to the Town Centre Forums which had been supported by the Town Centre Offices (TCO). The TCOs which do still exist now have a more traditional business focus, rather than their previous community development focus.

There are currently 12 forums in Lambeth which vary in size from those which mirror old Town Centre areas such as Streatham and Norwood through to much smaller geographic areas such as Loughborough Junction. There are also areas of the borough which are not currently covered by any of these forums.

The Lambeth Forum Network is an umbrella group for the various forums which meets regularly and is aiming to be fully constituted by the end of 2011. The forums are predominantly made up of residents/volunteers. Although councillors participate in their meetings, they are not formal council meetings and as such have no formal decision making powers. Some of the forums are also part of multi-functional voluntary organizations, such as the Stockwell Partnership.

The council supports the 12 forums with two officers whose role is to provide capacity building support. The Lambeth Forum Network is assigned a budget of £100k for the current financial year which is held by the council and for which the forums have to submit bids. In order to qualify for this funding, the forums must fulfil the stipulations laid out in the council's "standard conditions of grant aid" which ensures a high degree of transparency and accountability.