

**Report to:** Neighbourhood Forum Task Group  
**Date of meeting:** 27 September 2016  
**Report of:** Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer  
**Title:** Neighbourhood Forum Task Group: Survey of Councillors' Views

## **1.0 Summary**

- 1.1 At the Neighbourhood Forum Task Group meeting on 19 July, it was agreed that officers would undertake a survey of councillors' views on Watford Borough Council's Neighbourhood Forums, particularly the use of Neighbourhood Forum budgets – also known as Community Engagement Funds.
- 1.2 An online survey was devised and emailed to all councillors on 31 August. The survey comprised 18 questions. These addressed the current operation of Watford Borough Council's Neighbourhood Forum budgets, as well as seeking councillors' feedback on alternative funding schemes and views on possible changes to the administration of the funds in the future. The survey was closed on 13 September.
- 1.3 24 responses were received to the survey, representing some 67% of councillors. At least one response was received per ward. Ten wards submitted two or more responses. The findings are set out in full in Appendix A.
- 1.4 The report summarises the responses to each of the 18 questions, where applicable using tables and graphs to interpret the results. Some questions invited further comments. These are also summarised and, where there was a significant number of responses, reproduced in full in two further appendices to the main report.

## **2.0 Recommendations**

- 2.1 That the task group considers the results of the survey to inform its recommendations about Watford Borough Council's neighbourhood forum scheme.

### **Contact Officer:**

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**Report approved by: Carol Chen, Head of Democracy and Governance**

## **Appendices**

- Appendix A – Neighbourhood Forum Task Group Survey of Councillors' Views: analysis of results
- Appendix 1 – What do you feel is the purpose of the Neighbourhood Forums? What do they achieve? Summary of comments.
- Appendix 2 – Do you think the Neighbourhood Forums provide value-for-money? Summary of comments.

**Neighbourhood Forum Task Group**  
**Survey of councillors' views – analysis of results**

**Overview**

An on-line survey comprising 18 questions was sent to all councillors on Wednesday 31 August seeking their views on Watford Borough Council's Neighbourhood Forums, particularly the use of Neighbourhood Forum budgets – also known as Community Engagement Funds.

The survey closed on Tuesday 13 September.

24 responses were received in total, representing some 67% of councillors. At least one response was received per ward, with ten wards submitting two or more responses.

**Question analysis**

**Q2 Which ward do you represent?**

All respondents answered this question.

Responses were received from every ward. Two or more responses were received from Councillors representing: Callowland, Central, Holywell, Leggatts, Nascot, Oxhey, Park, Stanborough, Vicarage and Woodside.

**Q3 What do you feel is the purpose of the Neighbourhood Forums? What do they achieve?**

All respondents answered this question. Two main themes emerged from responses:

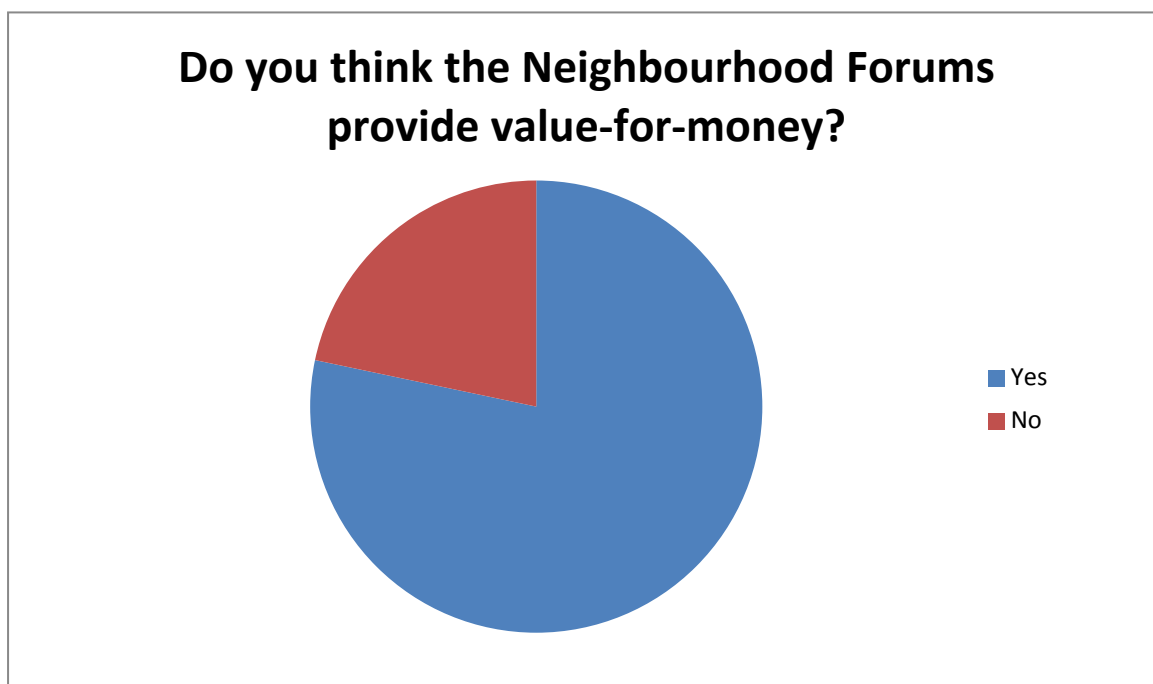
- to hold meetings, which provide an opportunity for residents to raise issues of concern and for councillors to pass on relevant information to residents. Meetings are increasingly uncommon, but when held are well attended.
- to provide funding for small, often voluntary and not for profit, groups to promote activities for the benefit of the local community. It is suggested that the availability of funds makes possible activities which would not otherwise take place.

A full list of comments is attached at Appendix 1.

#### Q4 Do you think the Neighbourhood Forums provide value-for-money?

There were 23 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	78.3%	18
No	21.7%	05
Please explain your response here		21
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>23</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>01</b>



21 respondents provided comments. The central themes which emerged were:

- the wide-ranging benefit to local communities from a relatively small amount of money, funding activities which would not otherwise take place
- the need to ensure that funds are used proportionately
- doubts about the value of meetings, taking into account the administrative costs and the number of people attending, versus the importance of using meetings to allow public accountability
- concerns about the funding of projects which should be financed by Hertfordshire County Council, e.g., roadside fencing projects

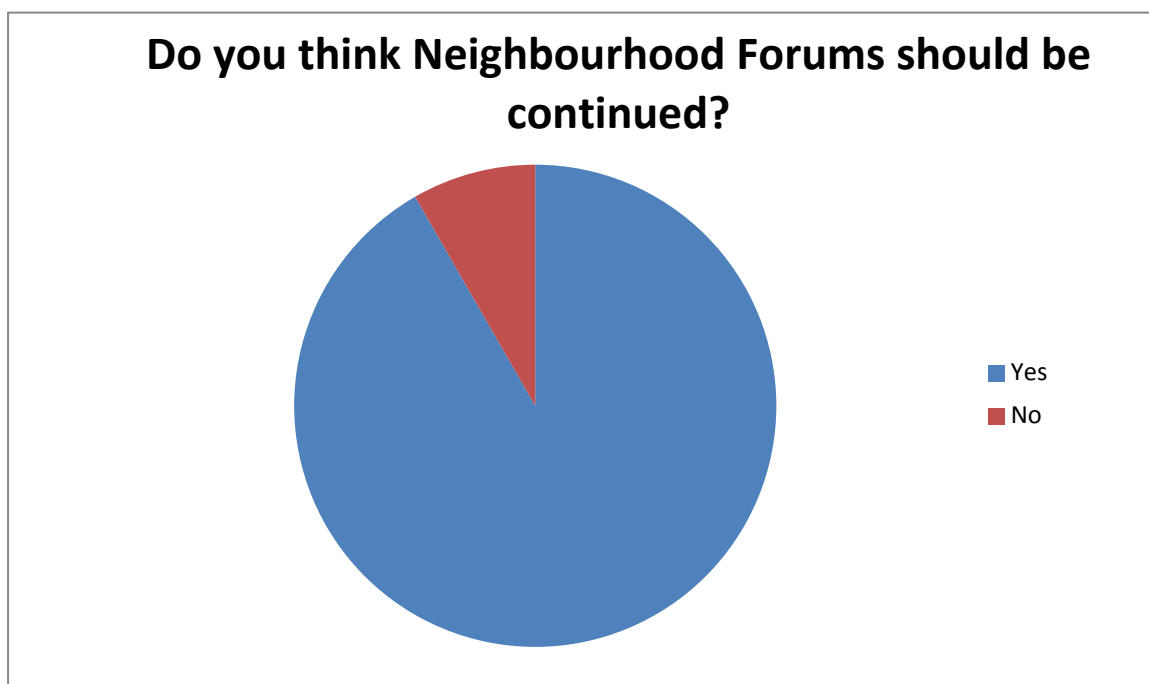
- the limited number of requests for funding in some wards.

A full list of comments is attached at Appendix 2.

#### Q5 Do you think Neighbourhood Forums should be continued?

All 24 respondents answered this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	91.7%	22
No	8.3%	2
Please explain your response here		20
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>



Comments on this question largely reiterated points made previously. However some new themes emerged:

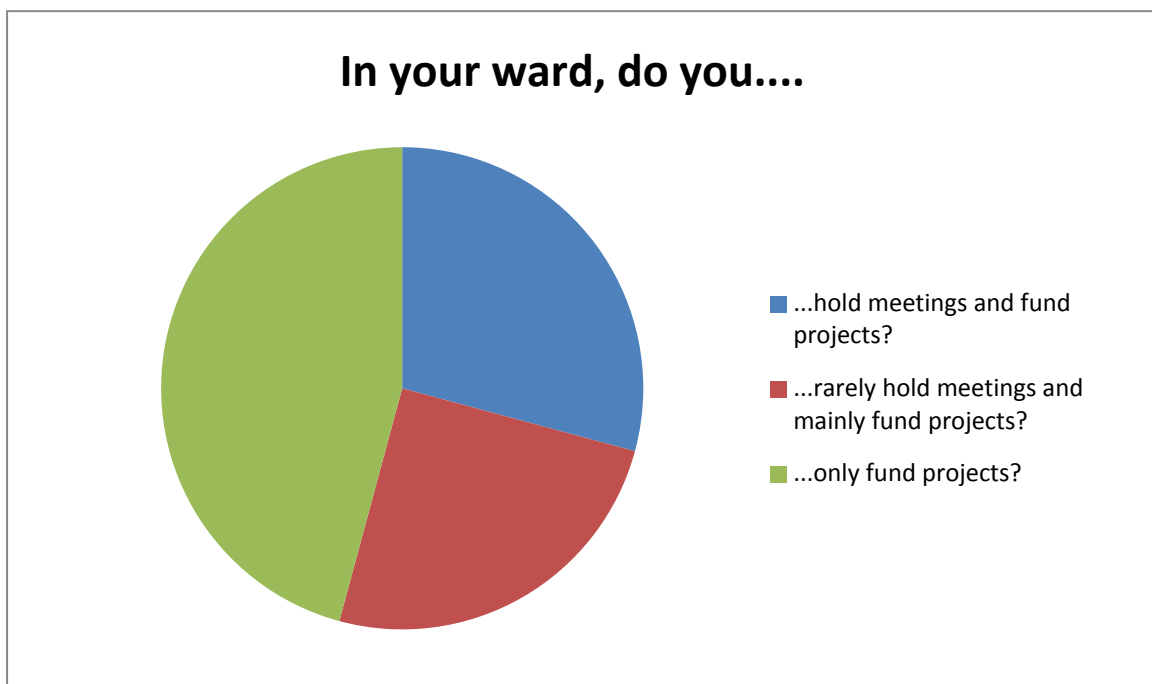
- funds play an important part in enabling councillors to carry out their work in their local communities
- funds incentivise people and should be advertised more widely

- the discontinuation of the funds would put pressure on council services, e.g., street cleaning because community clean-ups would no longer take place, and could also result in increased anti-social behaviour
- funds could be merged with the council's Small Grants Fund so that organisations could apply irrespective of their ward location.

#### Q6 In your ward, do you....?

All 24 respondents answered this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
...hold meetings and fund projects?	29.2%	7
...rarely hold meetings and mainly fund projects?	25.0%	6
...only fund projects?	45.8%	11
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>



#### Q7 How do you publicise the availability of Neighbourhood Forum funds to local residents?

There were 24 responses to this question.

Although some councillors considered that the availability of funds was widely known in their wards, most took active steps to promote them.

Similar activities were undertaken in wards:

- social media, newsletters, emails to local groups and individuals, displays on community notice boards
- word of mouth
- face to face contact in meetings, during door-to-door canvassing, on ward walks and in local councillor surgeries
- pro-actively approaching groups, including in writing.

#### **Q8 How do you decide which projects to fund in your ward?**

All respondents answered this question.

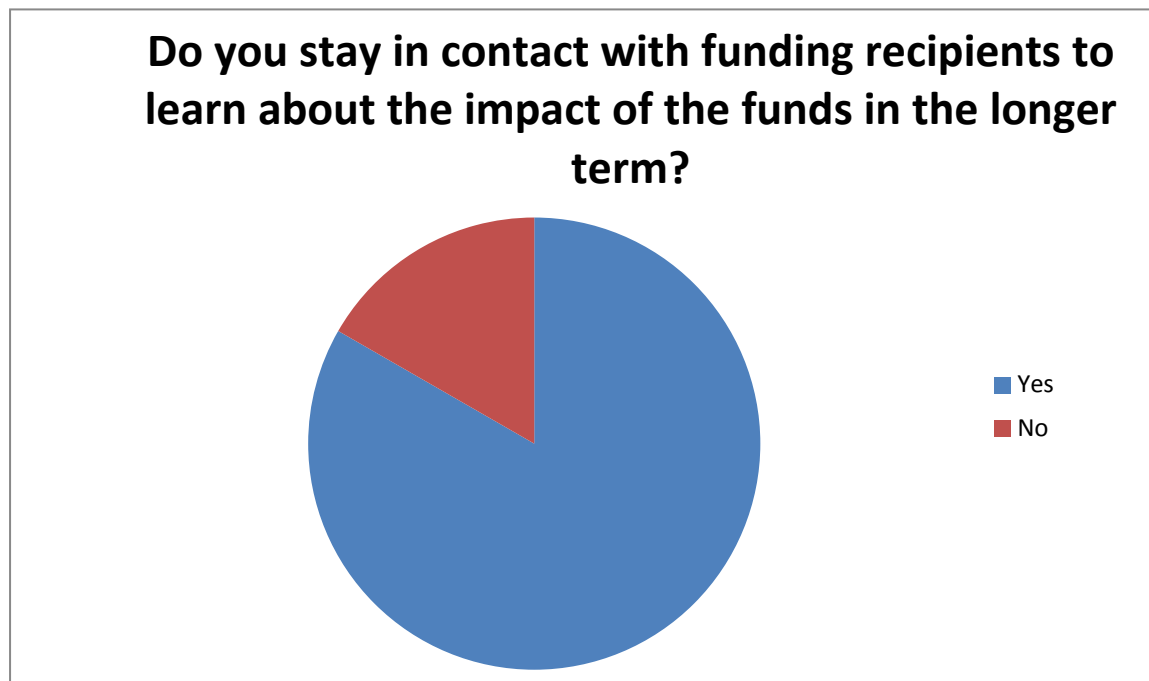
Most responses described a process of discussion amongst the three ward councillors, often following contact with local groups. Proposed projects were evaluated against a range of criteria, including:

- value for money
- likely impact and reach of the project, including the number of residents who would benefit
- level of need and the existence of other funding sources
- whether the project provided a service not currently available
- whether the project would act as a catalyst for other community involvement
- sustainability
- specific benefit to the local community.

#### **Q9 Do you stay in contact with funding recipients to learn about the impact of the funds in the longer term?**

There were 24 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	83.3%	20
No	16.7%	4
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>



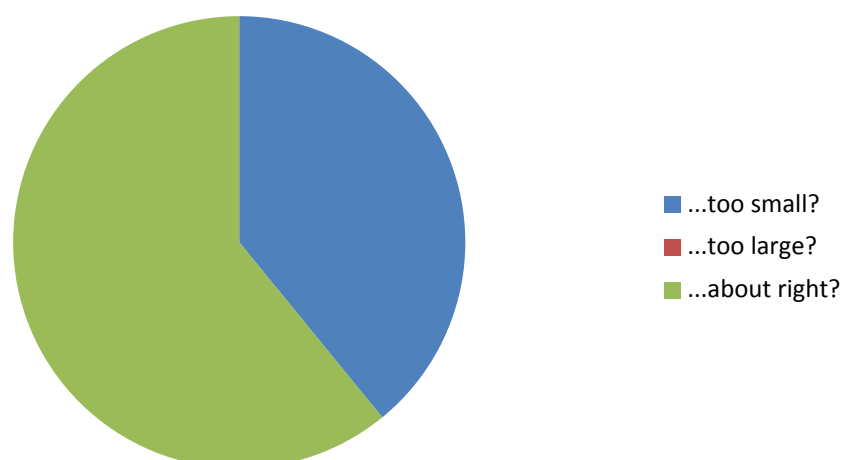
**Q10 What do you think about the size of the Neighbourhood Forum budget (£2,500 per ward)? Is it...**

There were 23 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
...too small?	39.1%	9
...too large?	0.0%	0
...about right?	60.9%	14
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>23</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>1</b>



## What do you think about the size of the Neighbourhood Forum budget? Is it...

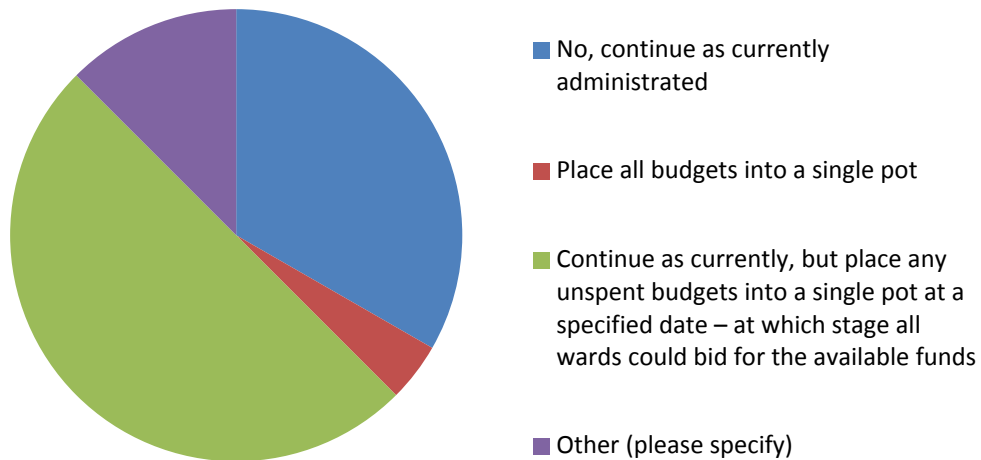


### Q11 Would you support the idea of a different form of administration for the budget?

There were 24 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
No, continue as currently administrated	33.3%	8
Place all budgets into a single pot	4.2%	1
Continue as currently, but place any unspent budgets into a single pot at a specified date – at which stage all wards could bid for the available funds	50.0%	12
Other (please specify)	12.5%	3
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>

## Would you support the idea of a different form of administration for the budget?



Three respondents provided comments, suggesting:

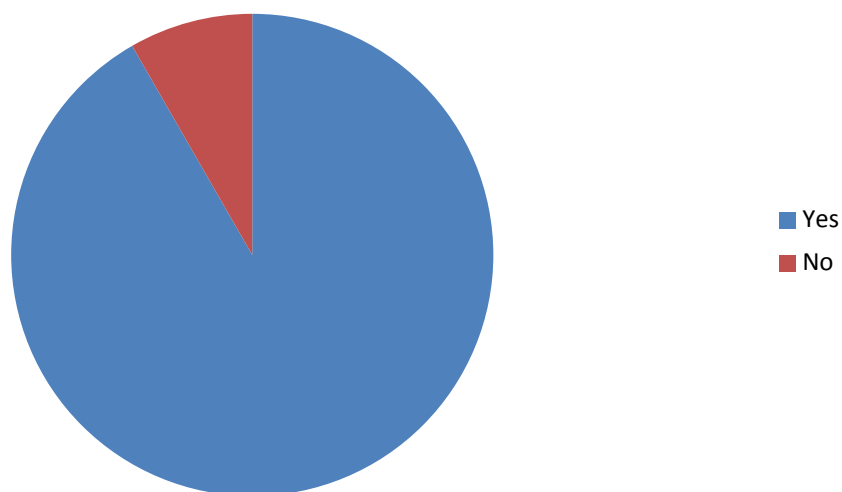
- carrying funds forward to the next financial year
- simplifying the administration of the funds, including allowing local groups to apply directly.

### Q12 Are the guidelines for expenditure clear and understandable?

All respondents answered this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	91.7%	22
No	8.3%	2
If no, please say why.		5
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>

## Are the guidelines for expenditure clear and understandable?



Five comments were received suggesting the need for:

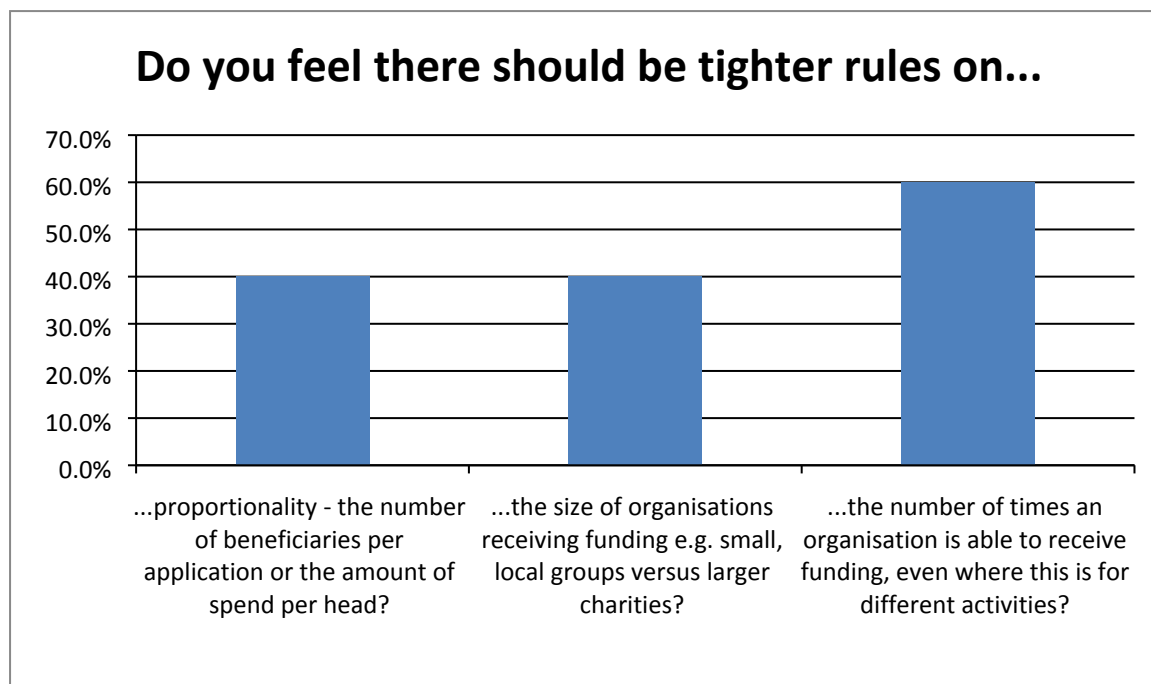
- training on the Neighbourhood Forum funds for new councillors
- review of the restrictions on supporting residents groups<sup>1</sup>
- review of what funds could be spent on in order to provide greater flexibility.

### Q13 Do you feel there should be tighter rules on...

10 respondents replied to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
...proportionality - the number of beneficiaries per application or the amount of spend per head?	40.0%	4
...the size of organisations receiving funding e.g. small, local groups versus larger charities?	40.0%	4
...the number of times an organisation is able to receive funding, even where this is for different activities?	60.0%	6
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		10
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		14

<sup>1</sup> Funds should not to be spent on: catering (other than refreshments at meetings); outings; projects which will involve ongoing revenue costs/maintenance, except where approved by the appropriate Head of Service and the councillors are satisfied that there are other budgets in place that will meet those costs; party political purposes; and as a reward.



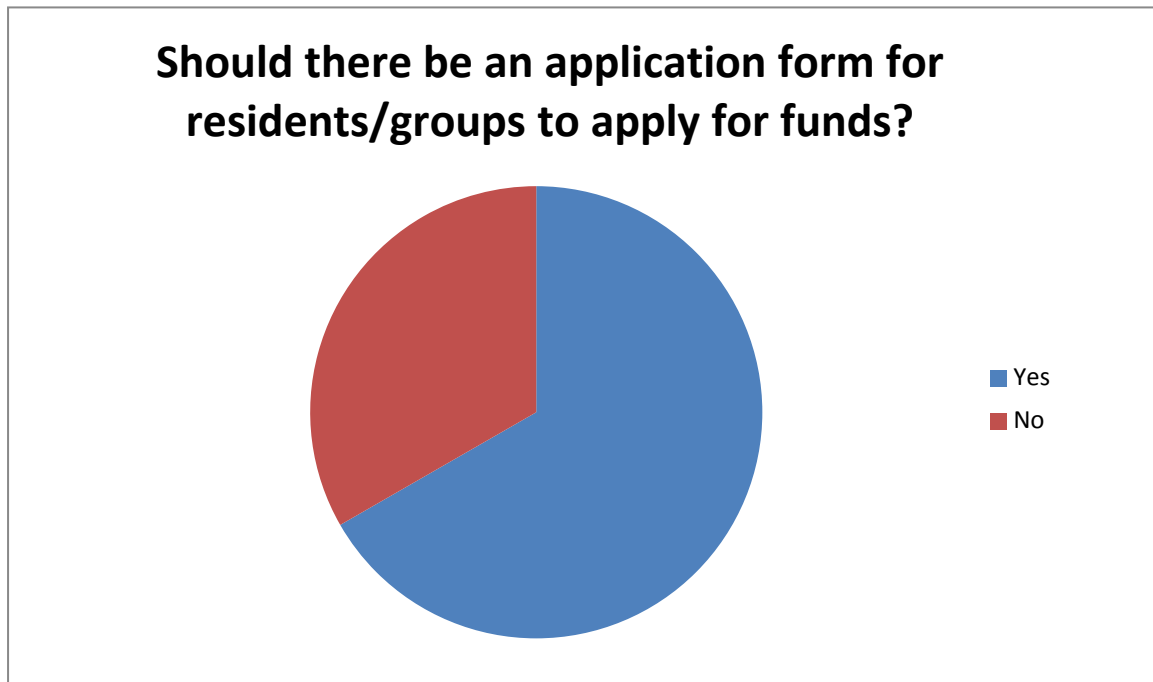
Commenting on the above suggestions, seven respondents provided additional feedback raising the following points:

- restrictions could be placed on categories of projects rather than on specific organisations
- different approaches were possible to restricting the number of times an organisation could apply for funding, e.g., on no more than two consecutive years or only once within a given time period
- in the event that a restriction were placed on the number of times an organisation could apply, special consideration should be given to residents' groups because funding is often intended for a diverse range of activities and interest groups
- larger groups and charities had access to other funding options. Neighbourhood Forum funds should be focussed on smaller groups where there was most need.

**Q14 Should there be an application form for residents/groups to apply for funds?**

There were 24 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	66.7%	16
No	33.3%	8
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>24</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>

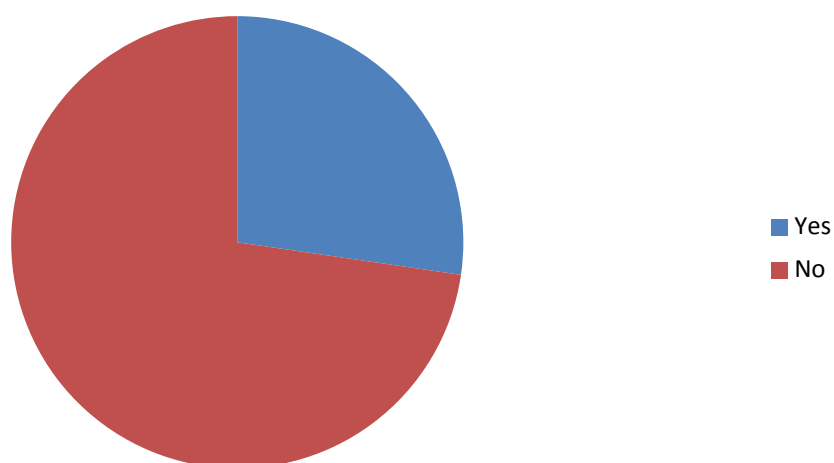


**Q15 Would you support the introduction of a match funding criterion for projects?**

There were 22 responses to this question

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	27.3%	6
No	72.7%	16
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>22</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>2</b>

## Would you support the introduction of a match funding criterion for projects?



### Q16 Are there any other changes you would like to see to the Neighbourhood Forums?

There were 16 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Count
	16
<i>answered question</i>	<b>16</b>
<i>skipped question</i>	<b>8</b>

Respondents provided an array of proposed changes, some of which repeated earlier themes. These were:

- projects which have already taken place should be considered for funding
- Neighbourhood Forum funds should be publicised through the Council's own communications, e.g., "About Watford", as well as in the Watford Observer
- training or study days could be used to learn best practice from other authorities in order to get the most from funds
- match funding should be obligatory

- applicants should complete the request for funds after discussion with councillors
- Neighbourhood Forum funds should be merged with Watford Borough Council's Small Grants Fund, with applications sent directly by groups or organisations
- clarification was required about the extent of councillors' interests which needed to be declared on applications, e.g., should an interest be declared if a councillor lived close to a proposed project, or if they or a family member made use of proposed groups or facilities which might be recipients of funding.

**Q17 Do you have experience of other funding authorities, which might help improve Watford Borough Council's processes and procedures? Please provide details.**

There were 16 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Count
	16
<i><b>answered question</b></i>	<b>16</b>
<i><b>skipped question</b></i>	<b>8</b>

Feedback was mainly provided on Hertfordshire County Council's Members Locality Budget.

Key learning points were:

- groups filled in their own application forms with approval being added by the relevant county councillor
- applications were completed on-line
- funds were mainly focussed on groups operating in councillors' own wards, except where projects cut across ward boundaries
- funds were sometimes aggregated across wards to fund larger, cross ward projects
- less strict controls were applied.

### Q18. Do you have any other feedback?

There were 16 responses to this question.

Answer Options	Response Count
	16
<i>answered question</i>	<b>16</b>
<i>skipped question</i>	<b>8</b>

The following comments were made:

- Neighbourhood Forum funding should be continued and increased
- it would be interesting to know the costs of administering the funding i.e., in terms of officer time
- locality budgets provided enrichment to the lives of the vulnerable and disadvantaged
- councillors administered these budgets with little or no direct officer support. This could be reduced further by removing the need for officer approval for projects say below £250.00
- money should be used to help groups rather than individuals as this is not supporting a wider number of people in the community
- funds were sometimes being allocated to projects which should be covered by other council (or county council) budgets, e.g., fixing fencing, repairing subways, replacing broken bollards, replacing/planting street trees
- if funds were merged with the Small Grants Fund, councillors would be able to apply directly for grants to spend on projects in their wards.