



Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

November 2016

Contents

	Page
Task Group members	4
Proposed recommendations	5
Background to the task group	7
Historic context	7
Overview of the task group's work	7
Recommendations and comments	9
Bibliography/background papers	12
Appendices	13-29
1. Task group scope and proposal	13
2. Meeting agreed actions: 19 July 2016	19
3. Meeting agreed actions: 07 September 2016	23
4. Meeting agreed actions: 27 September 2016	27

Task group members

Councillor Stephen Cavinder
Councillor Kareen Hastrick
Councillor Anne Joynes
Councillor Mo Mills
Councillor Rabi Martins

Chair, Councillor for Woodside Ward
Councillor for Meriden Ward
Councillor for Leggatts Ward
Councillor for Vicarage Ward
Councillor for Central Ward

Officer support

Carol Chen
Ishbel Morren
Caroline Harris
Sandra Hancock
Alan Garside
Jodie Kloss

Head of Democracy and Governance
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer
Democratic Services Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

Proposed recommendations to present to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

General

1. Continue Neighbourhood Forum funds and increase the amount to £3,000 per ward.
2. Focus future funding on local organisations, groups and charities.
3. Rename “Neighbourhood Forums” to “Neighbourhood Locality Funds”.
4. Relaunch the funds using the Council’s communications team, providing links to all relevant forms and information on the Council’s website.

Guidelines

1. The Head of Democracy and Governance to review guidelines to clarify:
 - how often recipients can receive funding (normally not more than once a year, however the type of project, rather than the organisation, should be the guide)
 - proportionality criteria
 - declaration of members’ interests.

Process

1. Officers to investigate the feasibility of allocating money to individual wards to spend by a given date, e.g., mid-December. After this point, any remaining funds should be pooled so that all wards can bid for the available funds. At the end of the year, any remaining money in this pool should be allocated to the chairman’s chosen charities.
2. Officers to look into the feasibility of requiring recipients to apply for funds directly, preferably using online forms.

Value for money

1. Encourage wards to minimise their administration costs for meetings in order to seek the most cost effective means, particularly in regard to advertising the meetings.

2. Require recipients to complete a feedback questionnaire on their completed projects. Any funds not used for the specific purpose granted should be returned to Watford Borough Council.

Background to the task group

In February 2016, the Head of Democracy and Governance, in conjunction with the Mayor, proposed that a review of the operation of Neighbourhood Forums should be undertaken, particularly the use of Neighbourhood Forum budgets.

It was suggested that the task group should review the Neighbourhood Forum Community Engagement Budget criteria, focusing on historic spend and uses of the funding for the future.

The task group was agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March and the membership was approved at its June meeting.

Historic context

Neighbourhood Forums were established in 2008 in response to changes in the way councillors engaged with their local communities.

Prior to 2008, Area Committees had provided open forums for residents to discuss issues of concern. However, councillors increasingly wished to provide practical assistance for small, local projects in their wards.

Initially, an annual budget of £5,000 per ward was agreed, to be divided between meeting and project activities according to individual ward requirements. In 2011, this amount was reduced to £2,500 following a review of actual expenditure levels.

When the Neighbourhood Forums were established, councillors were provided with guidance about the funds together with the rules governing their expenditure. Following an audit review in 2011, this guidance was amended.

Overview of the task group's programme of work

At the task group's first meeting, the Head of Democracy and Governance advised that there were a number of important issues which should be reviewed:

- funding criteria and guidance
- operation of the Neighbourhood Forums, particularly the uses to which funds were put and the bodies receiving those funds
- historic overview of actual spend
- future uses for the funding
- ensuring value for money.

In order to carry out its work, the task group agreed three key actions:

- officers should undertake a historic review of previous spend, dating from 2011 when the ward funds were reduced from £5,000 to £2,500
- officers should review other local authority funding schemes, including Watford Borough Council's small grants fund
- officers should undertake a survey of members' views on the application for, and use of, Community Engagement budgets.

The task group met on three occasions. Around these meetings, the agreed research and analysis was undertaken by officers to inform the task group's deliberations.

Recommendations and comments

General

- 1. Continue Neighbourhood Forum funds and increase the amount to £3,000 per ward.**
- 2. Focus future funding on local organisations, groups and charities.**
- 3. Rename “Neighbourhood Forums” to “Neighbourhood Locality Funds”.**
- 4. Relaunch the funds using the Council’s communications team, providing links to all relevant forms and information on the Council’s website.**

The survey of councillors’ views found wide-ranging support for the continuation of Neighbourhood Forum funds, which enabled them to carry out their work in their local communities and made possible activities which would not otherwise take place.

In addition to their continuation, the task group proposed that the Neighbourhood Forum funds should be increased from £2,500 to £3,000 per annum.

Having reviewed the recipients of funds over the preceding five years, the task group noted that the Neighbourhood Forum budgets had especially benefitted small, often voluntary and not for profit, groups promoting activities for the benefit of the local community. The task group suggested that future funds should target local organisations, groups and charities, rather than larger, national bodies, which were thought to have more resources or opportunities at their disposal to raise money.

In recognition of the proposed changes in the organisation and focus of Neighbourhood Forums, the task group decided to rename the forums “Neighbourhood Locality Funds”. This change in name provided an opportunity to relaunch the funds using the Council’s communications team and particularly to ensure that all the relevant forms and information were readily available on the Council’s website.

Guidelines

- 1. The Head of Democracy and Governance to review guidelines to clarify:**
 - **how often recipients can receive funding (normally not more than once a year, however the type of project, rather than the organisation, should be the guide)**
 - **proportionality criteria**
 - **declaration of members’ interests.**

Although the majority of councillors found the guidelines for expenditure clear and understandable, the survey of members' views raised some questions about how the funds were used and the current guidelines which explained this process.

In regard to how the funds were used, councillors questioned the number of times an organisation was able to receive funding, even where this was for different activities. The task group suggested that there should be some clarification of the rules, and that this should normally be not more than once a year. However, in recognition that some organisations, e.g., residents associations, undertook a range of activities for different groups within their local communities, it was suggested that the type of project, rather than the organisation itself, should be the determiner.

Two further queries were raised about the clarity of the Neighbourhood Forum guidelines.

The first concerned the rules on how the proportionality of a funding application was assessed. The task group considered that funds should benefit a large section of the local community, rather than a small number of individuals.

The second concerned the extent of councillors' interests which needed to be on an application, 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.

The task group proposed that the guidelines on these points should be clarified by the Head of Democracy and Governance.

Process

- 1. Officers to investigate the feasibility of allocating money to individual wards to spend by a given date, e.g., mid-December. After this point, any remaining funds should be pooled so that all wards can bid for the available funds. At the end of the year, any remaining money in this pool should be allocated to the chairman's chosen charities.**
- 2. Officers to look into the feasibility of requiring recipients to apply for funds directly, preferably using online forms.**

In the survey, councillors were asked if they supported the idea of a different form of administration for the Neighbourhood Forum budgets. The majority of respondents agreed to a change of the current arrangements, with particular support for placing any unspent budgets into a single pot at a specified date – at which stage all wards could bid for the available funds.

The task group proposed that officers should investigate the feasibility of this arrangement. This, together with the proposal that at the end of the year any remaining money in this pool should be allocated to the chairman's chosen charities, would ensure that unspent funds were not lost to local groups in future years.

In a further change to how the funds were administered, the task group proposed that officers should investigate whether it would be possible for groups to apply directly for funding, preferably using online application forms.

It was suggested that this would establish a clearer point of contact for the funds and improve monitoring and value for money assessments.

Value for money

- 1. Encourage wards to minimise their administration costs for meetings in order to seek the most cost effective means, particularly in regard to advertising the meetings.**
- 2. Require recipients to complete a feedback questionnaire on their completed projects. Any funds not used for the specific purpose granted should be returned to Watford Borough Council.**

The task group considered that it was essential to ensure value for money in the use of the council's Neighbourhood Forum funds.

Members of the task group noted that local meetings were increasingly uncommon, with the majority of wards focussing solely on promoting activities for the benefit of their local communities.

Where held, meetings were generally well attended, however the task group emphasised the need for greater proportionality in the costs associated with their organisation. In particular, the task group questioned the cost of advertising the meetings and encouraged ward councillors to seek more cost effective means. This might include the wider use of social media, as well as appropriate Council communications.

Although in the survey councillors declared that they maintained contact with the recipients of funds in their wards, the task group proposed that there should be a more formal process of receiving feedback using a questionnaire. This should be completed and submitted online. It was suggested that the information captured could be included in the annual scrutiny review of Neighbourhood Forum expenditure.

Bibliography/background papers

Papers circulated to [19 July 2016](#) meeting:

- Protocol for Neighbourhood Forums
- Neighbourhood Forum 2016-17 Community Engagement Fund Guidelines for expenditure

Papers circulated to [7 September 2016](#) meeting:

- Review of spend: Individual ward spend analysis (2011/12 – 2015/16)
- Review of spend: Total annual expenditure in all wards (2011/12 – 2015/16)
- Review of spend: Average project value in all wards (2011/12 – 2015/16)
- Individual ward expenditure (2011/12 – 2015/16)
- Comparisons with other local authorities' funding schemes

Papers circulated to [27 September 2016](#) meeting:

- Survey of members' views report

Suggestions for topics to be scrutinised – evaluation table

A Member, Officer or member of the public suggesting a topic for scrutiny must complete Section1 as fully as possible. Completed tables will be presented to Overview & Scrutiny for consideration.

Section 1 – Scrutiny Suggestion		A Review of the Neighbourhood Forums including funding criteria
Proposer: Councillor/Officer/Member of public Carol Chen/Mayor Thornhill		
<p>Topic recommended for scrutiny:</p> <p><i>Please include as much detail as is available about the specific such as;</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>areas which should be <u>included</u> in the review.</i> • <i>areas which should be <u>excluded</u> from the review.</i> • <i>Whether the focus should be on past performance, future policy or both.</i> 	<p><i>Give details</i></p> <p>To review the operation of Neighbourhood Forums particularly the use of Neighbourhood Forum budgets.</p> <p>A review of the Neighbourhood Forum Community Engagement Budget criteria.</p> <p>Focus on historic spend and uses of the funding for the future.</p>	
Why have you recommended this topic for scrutiny?	The Mayor would like the Funding Guidance to be reviewed.	

<p>What are the specific outcomes you wish to see from the review?</p> <p><i>Examples might include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To identify what is being done and what the potential barriers are;</i> • <i>To review relevant performance indicators;</i> • <i>To compare our policies with those of a similar authority;</i> • <i>To assess the environmental/social impacts;</i> • <i>To Benchmark current service provision;</i> • <i>To find out community perceptions and experience;</i> • <i>To identify the gap between provision and need</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>A clear understanding by all members of what they can and what they cannot use the budgets for.</p>
---	---

<p>How do you think evidence might be obtained?</p> <p><i>Examples might include</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Questionnaires/Surveys</i> <i>Site visits</i> <i>Interviewing witnesses</i> <i>Research</i> <i>Performance data</i> <i>Public hearings</i> <i>Comparisons with other local authorities</i> 	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>Past examples.</p> <p>Other councils (HCC) schemes and their criteria.</p> <p>Views from members including cabinet.</p>
<p>Does the proposed item meet the following criteria?</p>	
<p>It must affect a group or community of people</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>The Neighbourhood Forums are designed to be a focus for each ward</p>
<p>It must relate to a service, event or issue in which the council has a significant stake</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>Each Ward has a budget of £2500 to spend annually</p>

<p>It must not have been a topic of scrutiny within the last 12 months</p> <p><i>There will be exceptions to this arising from notified changing circumstances. Scrutiny will also maintain an interest in the progress of recommendations and issues arising from past reports.</i></p>	<p>Not reviewed in the last 12 months.</p>
<p>It must not be an issue, such as planning or licensing, which is dealt with by another council committee</p>	<p>Again is an appropriate area for scrutiny</p>

<p>Does the topic meet the council's priorities?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making Watford a better place to live in 2. To provide the lead for Watford's sustainable economic growth 3. Promoting an active, cohesive and well informed Town 4. To operate the Council efficiently and effectively <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Please confirm which ones</i></p> <p>1,3 and 4</p>
<p>Are you aware of any limitations of time, other constraints or risks which need to be taken into account?</p> <p><i>Factors to consider are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>forthcoming milestones, demands on the relevant service area and member availability:</i> • <i>imminent policy changes either locally, regionally or nationally within the area under review.</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;">Include details</p> <p>I would suggest it is started if agreed in the next municipal year.</p>
<p>Does the topic involve a Council partner or other outside body?</p>	<p>No</p>

<p>Are there likely to be any Equality implications which will need to be considered?</p> <p><i>Protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Age</i> • <i>Disability</i> • <i>Gender reassignment</i> • <i>Pregnancy or maternity</i> • <i>Race</i> • <i>Religion or belief</i> • <i>Sex</i> • <i>Sexual orientation</i> • <i>Marriage or civil partnership (only in respect of the requirement to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination)</i> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Give details</i></p> <p>No. But will depend on any suggested new criteria</p>
--	---

<p>Sign off <i>(It is expected that any Councillor proposing a topic agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee will participate in the Task Group)</i></p>	
<p>Councillor/Officer C. Chen</p>	<p>Date 17.2.16</p>

Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

Tuesday 19 July 2016

Agreed Actions

Present: Councillor Cavinder (Chair)
Councillors Hastrick, Joynes Mills and Martins

Also Present: Head of Democracy and Governance
Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (IM)

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Cavinder was elected Chair.

2. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

3. Disclosures of Interest

There were no disclosures of interest.

4. Scope and Background Papers

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that the task group had been proposed by the Head of Democracy and Governance in conjunction with the Mayor. She advised that the task group had been agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March and the membership was approved at its June meeting.

Providing some context to the review, the Head of Democracy and Governance outlined the change from Area Committees to Neighbourhood Forums in 2008. This had been in recognition of the changing nature of members' engagement in their local communities, specifically the reduction in the number of residents' meetings and the desire to provide more practical assistance for small projects.

An annual Community Engagement budget of £5,000 per ward had been established, to be divided between meeting and project activities according to individual ward requirements. This amount had been reduced to £2,500 in 2011 following a review of actual expenditure levels.

The Head of Democracy and Governance suggested that there were a number of important issues which should be reviewed by the task group:

- funding criteria and guidance
- operation of the Neighbourhood Forums, particularly the uses to which funds were put and the bodies receiving those funds
- historic overview of actual spend
- future uses for the funding
- ensuring value of money.

5. Next Steps

There followed a wide ranging debate about the issues members of the task group would like to draw into the review. These included establishing:

- the purpose of the funds
- whether the current funding levels were sufficient
- how the funds were advertised and whether current practices optimised local engagement
- changing the application process, specifically requiring recipient bodies to apply for funding to ward councillors.

In addition, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that the task group might consider alternative ways of organising the budget allocation e.g., moving to a single pot of money, or merging individual budgets into a single pot of money after an agreed period of time during the municipal year.

Task group members considered that the views of other councillors should also be sought through the use of a survey. Recognising that there were a number of new councillors, it was proposed that the survey should have both a retrospective and prospective focus to encourage fresh thinking.

The task group agreed that this should be a swift review.

It was proposed that any recommendations should be considered at Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 24 November, to enable the report to be on Cabinet's agenda on 5 December.

It was agreed that the following actions should be taken:

- officers to undertake a historic review of previous spend. This should date from the decrease in ward funds from £5,000 to £2,500 in 2011
- officers to review other funding schemes. Councillors Hastrick and Joynes agreed to assist by providing an overview of their experiences with Hertfordshire County Council funding. They would also speak to other “twin hatted” county councillors to see if they had similar schemes in their wards
- officers to undertake a survey of members’ views on the application for, and use of, Community Engagement budgets. This should be an on-line survey with hard copies available to members on request. Members of the task group agreed that it would be important for them to encourage survey returns from their colleagues.

A draft survey would be sent to task group members on 12 August seeking comments by 19 August. The survey would go live after the August Bank Holiday.

Members should contact the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer with any additional ideas.

6. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 7 September at 6pm.

Any further meeting dates would be agreed on 7 September.

Chair
Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

The meeting started at 6.00 p.m.
and concluded at 6.45 p.m.

Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

Wednesday 7 September 2016

Agreed Actions

Present: Councillor Cavinder (Chair)
Councillors Hastrick, Joynes Mills and Martins

Also Present: Head of Democracy and Governance
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (IM)

7. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

8. Disclosures of interest

There were no disclosures of interest.

9. Minutes of the previous meeting

The notes and agreed actions of the meeting held on the 19 July 2016 were submitted and signed.

10. Historic review of previous spend

On behalf of the task group, the Chair thanked the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer for the research which had been undertaken since the last meeting to inform the task group's work.

Looking at the historic review of previous spend, task group members made the following observations:

- wards pursued a variety of projects, which broadly reflected the differing composition and demographics of each ward
- it would be helpful to include an explanatory cover sheet to the graphs to outline what had been included in each of the categories
- the costs of organising forum meetings differed widely between the two wards which continued to hold regular meetings (Central and Nascot). Although these meetings required non-political advertising

to promote them i.e., not through party newsletters, there was scope to explore more cost-effective methods, including the use of social media.

11. Review of other funding schemes

The review of other funding schemes was welcomed by the task group. During discussions on the review, the following points were raised:

- there was a wide range of funding criteria
- several local authorities had discontinued their locality funds or changed their focus in recent years
- Hertfordshire County Council's locality budget had been reduced from £10,000 to £5,000 in the current financial year in order to fund a highway locality budget. It was unclear what would happen in subsequent years.

12. Survey of members' views

The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer reported that a link to the survey had been sent to all councillors on 31 August. Subsequent to this, the Mayor had sent an email to encourage responses from as many councillors as possible.

To date seven responses had been received.

The survey closed on Monday 12 September.

In order to boost the response rate, the task group agreed the following steps:

- the chair would send a reminder to all members
- task group members would speak to their colleagues, particularly those in their wards
- Councillors Mills and Joynes would raise awareness of the survey deadline at their forthcoming group meeting.

13. Next steps

The task group agreed that no additional research was required. However, the results of the survey of members' views were needed before recommendations could be considered. Once the survey had been closed,

the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer would analyse the responses for the task group, drawing out the main themes and conclusions.

Agreeing recommendations from these themes and conclusions would be the main activity of the task group at its next meeting.

At this stage, the task group was interested to explore several areas:

- introducing an application form for applicants – it was suggested that this might assist value for money considerations by providing a single point of contact for feedback and updates. Hertfordshire County Council’s application provided a useful example
- restricting the number of repeat submissions from organisations. However, it was acknowledged that careful consideration would need to be given to overarching organisations such as residents associations
- operating alternative arrangements for the funds, specifically establishing a cut-off date at which point remaining funds could be pooled, or removed to an alternative funding body such as Watford Borough Council’s Small Grants Fund.

14. **Date of Next Meeting**

Tuesday 27 September at 10.30 am.

The need for any further meeting dates would be agreed on 27 September.

Chair
Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

The meeting started at 6.00 p.m.
and concluded at 6.45 p.m.

Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

Tuesday 27 September 2016

Agreed Actions

Present: Councillor Cavinder (Chair)
Councillors Hastrick, Joynes Mills and Martins

Also Present: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (IM)

15. Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

16. Disclosures of interest

There were no disclosures of interest.

17. Minutes

The notes and agreed actions of the meeting held on the 7 September 2016 were submitted and signed.

18. Survey of councillors' views – analysis of results

The chair invited comments from task group members on the survey conclusions.

During discussions, the following themes were identified:

- there was wide-ranging support for the continuation of Neighbourhood Forum funds
- expenditure on projects covered by other budgets e.g., highways projects otherwise covered by Hertfordshire County Council, was exceptional and limited to only a few projects per year. It should not therefore be excluded in the guidelines
- there was support for a new process of pooling any remaining ward budgets to a single pot after a specified period e.g., mid-December, at which point all wards could apply for the money. Two further suggestions were made on this point:

- the Task Group could continue to play a role, helping to assess applications to this single funding pot
- any money left over after this process – which was anticipated to be very limited – could be given to the chairman’s chosen charities for the relevant year
- Neighbourhood Forum budgets should not be merged with Watford Borough Council’s Small Grants Fund
- it was important that officers continued to be involved in the assessment and approval of projects, irrespective of their size or value
- there should be a change in the application process with applicants applying directly for funds, preferably using online forms.

19. **Task Group recommendations**

The task group agreed that it now had sufficient information to draw together its conclusions for Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

It was agreed to identify the main headings, with the feasibility of the recommendations to be investigated by the committee and scrutiny support officer outside the meeting.

The task group proposed that:

- forum funds should continue and the amount increased to £3,000 per ward
- funding should be focused on local organisations, groups and charities
- guidelines should be reviewed to clarify:
 - how often recipients could receive funding (normally not more than once a year, however the type of project, rather than the organisation, should be the guide)
 - proportionality criteria
 - declaration of members’ interests
- money allocated to individual wards should be spent by a given date. After this point, any remaining funds should be pooled so that all

wards could bid for the available funds. At the end of the year, any remaining money in this pool should be allocated to the chairman's chosen charities

- recipients should apply for funds directly, preferably using online forms
- recipients should complete a feedback questionnaire on their completed projects
- wards should be encouraged to minimise their administration costs for forum meetings in order to seek the most cost effective means, particularly in regard to advertising
- the name "Neighbourhood Forums" should be changed to "Neighbourhood Locality Funds"
- funds should be relaunched with all forms and information available on the Council's website.

20. **Next steps**

The full recommendations would be agreed by correspondence. This would include discussions between the committee and scrutiny support officer and other council officers to agree the feasibility and practicability of the recommendations.

It was not thought necessary to agree a further meeting of the task group.

The task group wished to note their appreciation to the chair.

Chair
Neighbourhood Forum Task Group

The meeting started at 10.30 a.m
and concluded at 11.40 a.m.