

CONSTITUTION WORKING PARTY		
Report Title	Neighbourhood Governance: Recommendations on new local structures for community engagement	
Key Decision		Item No. 4
Ward		
Contributors	Chief Executive	
Class	Part 1	Date: 7 June 2007

1. Purpose of the report

To respond to the Constitution Working Party's request for advice on potential alternative arrangements to replace area forums.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Constitution Working Party:

- 2.1 endorses the proposal to establish eighteen ward assemblies;
- 2.2 endorses the proposal that these replace existing area forums, which are to be discontinued;
- 2.3 endorses the proposal that ward assemblies are supported by six ward co-ordinators;
- 2.4 asks the Council to consider the changes to the constitution set out in section 5 below; and
- 2.5 asks Mayor and Cabinet to consider the financial implications of this report

3. Background

- 3.1 At the Council meeting on 26 July 2006 it was resolved that "The Council believes that local government is strengthened by engaging with the public at the lowest level. It notes the Government's desire for councils to deliver a community governance role and to develop closer links with local communities. Council therefore requests the Constitution Working Party to bring forward proposals as to how to replace Area Forums with a system of neighbourhood governance which involves devolved budgets and a range of powers developed in consultation with the local community."

3.2 This was further discussed by the Constitution Working Party at its meeting on 23 October 2006, which endorsed the view that “the Area Forum system had served its purpose and it was time to look for a new vehicle for community engagement.” The Constitution Working Party concluded that three wards for each forum was too large, and asked for further consideration of the resources and costs of an eighteen ward model.

3.3 The Mayor’s Commission on Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods was established in September 2006 to identify proposals for empowering citizens and communities. The Commission considered a number of options and has recommended a model that responds to the earlier conclusions of the Council and the Constitution Working Party.

4. Options considered by the Mayor’s Commission on Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods

4.1 The Mayor’s Commission on Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods discussed the national policy context and history of community engagement within Lewisham. In reaching its recommendations the Commission specifically considered the following alternatives:

- A continuation of existing neighbourhood arrangements through Area Forms and neighbourhood management
- The introduction of statutory Parish Councils
- The introduction of a new ward based approach

4.2 The Commission noted that existing neighbourhood structures provided an environment where citizens could engage with councillors and officers. Area Forums had been well attended, with good feedback from attendees and had in particular been useful opportunities for information exchange. However, there was a range of experiences suggesting that the level of engagement was highly variable across the borough. The Commission also noted that grouping together three different wards within a single Area Forum often made it difficult for people to raise and discuss local issues and had limited the opportunities for all councillors to play an active role.

4.3 The introduction of statutory Parish Councils could be a means to rapidly devolve a wide range of powers to a local level, and this could encourage higher levels of participation and engagement by citizens in public affairs. This option would mean establishing an additional elected tier, raising a range of governance issues as well as concerns about whether this would increase or reduce engagement in the democratic process and whether Parish Councils would introduce additional local taxation. The Commission took the view that even

where these issues could be resolved it was highly unlikely that Parish Councils would be a viable option for all wards of Lewisham.

- 4.4 The introduction of 'Ward Assemblies' as a universal ward based approach was proposed as a means to build on current arrangements, and complement existing locality work. The primary purpose of ward assemblies would be to influence wider decision making by identifying local priorities and concerns. A ward based approach would be supported through Community Services Directorate, and by councillors leading the involvement of local people and other representative groups. The Commission took the view that this proposal reflected the best balance between expanding and enhancing neighbourhood structures and the potential cost and constitutional implications that this could have. Achieving this balance would enable an early transition from existing structures.

5. The Recommended Approach: 'Ward Assemblies'

- 5.1 In accordance with the recommendations of the Commission, it is proposed that ward assemblies be established in each of the Council's eighteen wards, and that these arrangements replace area forums.
- 5.2 The proposal is that ward assemblies will provide residents of each ward with a structured environment for identifying, understanding and responding to local priorities. Ward assemblies will also be a regular and direct point of contact with locally elected representatives and a recognised channel through which the Council and other public sector service providers can work with local communities and neighbourhoods.
- 5.3 The ward assembly will be open to all members of the public with a core steering group expected to include:
- Three ward councillors
 - Local residents
 - Community and voluntary sector representatives
 - A representative from the safer neighbourhood team
 - Representatives from the local business / commercial sector
 - A community representative from a tenant management organisation, if applicable
- 5.4 Ward councillors will have a central role in providing leadership for ward assemblies. The expectation is that one councillor will normally chair meetings.
- 5.5 It is proposed that each assembly be supported by a ward coordinator employed by the Council. Six ward coordinators will cover Lewisham's eighteen wards, managed by a new post within the Council's Community Services directorate. These posts will provide day to day support for each assembly, circulating information, setting up meetings

and providing the link back to Community Services Directorate.
Financial implications are covered in section 10 below.

- 5.6 Each assembly will adopt a Charter setting out the expectations the assembly can have in relation to support from and influence of the Council, and the expectations the Council has in relation to the purpose, conduct and extent to which the assembly represents the local community. The Charter will take the form of a non-binding agreement. The detailed drafting of the Charter will be undertaken as part of the implementation of ward assemblies, and, to ensure consistency, it is proposed that all eighteen ward assemblies be covered by the same document.
- 5.7 Ward assemblies will be flexible in terms of frequency of meetings, membership and the specifics of how they operate, allowing them to respond to local circumstances and fit with existing structures including neighbourhood management, safer neighbourhood teams and other locality focussed activity. It is proposed that each assembly will produce an annual 'Priority Plan'.
- 5.8 If successful, consideration could be given in future as to whether these arrangements could be extended to include responsibility for budgets, ownership of community assets or devolving responsibilities for services. In each case this will be dependent on detailed consideration by the Constitution Working Party and the agreement of the Council as necessary.
- 5.9 These proposals are set out in more detail in the recommendations of the Mayor's Commission on Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods, which is included as an Annex to this paper.

6. Changes to the constitution

Based on the approach outlined above the following changes to the Council's constitution are proposed, additional text marked in bold:

- 6.1 PART II ARTICLES
Article 3 Citizens and the council
Section 3.2 Citizens participation in Council decision making

"For example, they may respond to consultation through the forward planning process, ask questions at Council Question Time, contribute to investigations by overview and scrutiny panels, participate in **their local ward assembly**, and take up one of the many statutory roles, such as becoming a school governor."

6.2 PART II ARTICLES

Article 6: Overview and scrutiny

Section 6.5 Roles common to select committees and the Business Panel

(d) Community representation

Third bullet

- To liaise with the Council's **ward assemblies** so that the local community might participate in the democratic process and where it considers it appropriate to seek the views of the **ward assemblies** on matters that affect or are likely to affect the local areas, **including accepting items for the agenda of the appropriate select committee from ward assemblies.**

Fourth bullet

- To keep the Council's **ward assemblies** under review and to make recommendations to the Executive and/or Council as to how participation in the democratic process by local people can be enhanced.

6.3 PART II ARTICLES

Article 12: Ward Assemblies

The Council has established a consultative network of **eighteen ward assemblies**. Though they are not decision making bodies, the **ward assemblies** are an important consultative mechanism **and provide a conduit to the council and other public service providers through which the local community can identify and prioritise local issues.** The Rules of Procedure at Part IV demonstrate how the views of the assemblies will be brought to the attention of the Council and the Executive.

6.4 PART IV PROCEDURE RULES – STANDING ORDERS

D Executive Procedure Rules

19 Who can put items on the agenda for a meeting of the Executive

(f) **Ward assemblies. Restricted to a maximum of two such items on any agenda. Items to be prioritised in the order they are received. Any not placed on the agenda will have priority for the next agenda, subject always to the maximum of two such referrals per agenda. Only one referral may be made by any ward assembly to the Mayor and Cabinet in any twelve month period, unless the Mayor agrees to the contrary.**

7. **Legal implications**

The Council is under a statutory requirement to produce and maintain a constitution under the provisions of Section 37 of the Local Government Act (2000), which must be available for public inspection. Changes to the constitution are a matter reserved for decision by the

full Council. The Constitution Working Party was established to advise the Council on the operation of the constitution and when the Constitution Working Party has considered the proposals within this report its recommendations will be reported to Council for decision.

8. Crime and disorder implications

There are no specific crime and disorder implications arising from this report. However the approach proposed is intended to be consistent with, and build on, existing community safety work, including Safer Neighbourhood Teams.

9. Equalities implications

There are no specific equalities implications arising from this report. However, the approach proposed is intended to promote opportunities for improved engagement with all Lewisham's communities.

10. Financial implications

The costs of implementing ward assemblies are estimated as follows:

STAFFING	
1XPO7 Ward Assemblies and Localities Manager	£55,000
1XPO5 Neighbourhood Development Manager	£50,000
6XPO2 Ward Co-ordinators	£240,000
OTHER	
Locality Fund	£180,000
Support costs (including those for meetings and IT)	£50,000
TOTAL	£575,000

These costs can be met within the budget that has been set aside by the Mayor for Neighbourhoods and Localities within Community Services Directorate.

11. Environmental implications

There are no specific environmental implications arising from this report. However the approach proposed is intended to increase capacity at the local level for responding to environmental issues, allowing citizens to identify and prioritise environmental improvements.

12. Conclusions and next steps

12.1 Ward assemblies will establish a more focussed basis for increasing citizen engagement and participation. They also represent an opportunity to enhance the community leadership role of local councillors, providing a

new means of connecting with and responding to their constituents and their local area.

- 12.2 The ward assembly model is intended to create flexible arrangements that will link with, and build on, existing structures. The proposals have been designed to ensure they are cost-effective and can be implemented quickly without the need for wide ranging constitutional changes. There will be opportunities over time to assess the impact of these arrangements and consider expanding the range of activity and responsibilities delegated to this level of working.
- 12.3 When the Constitution Working Party has considered the proposals within this report its recommendations will be reported to Council for decision.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None reported