



Safer Stronger Communities Select Committee

Report title: Update on Local Assemblies Programme

Date: 7th November 2023

Key decision: No.

Class: Part 1.

Ward(s) affected: All

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Outline and recommendations

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the way in which the Local Assembly programme has operated in recent years and to identify options for the way in which local Assemblies and democratic engagement will develop in the future.

Members of the Select Committee are asked to comment on the report and recommend further work on assemblies based on the report below and the views expressed by councillors in the survey.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

Resumption of Assemblies post-Covid – January 2021

Survey of councillors – October 2023

1. Summary

- 1.1 The report provides a review of the development of the Assembly Programme since 2007. It also highlights the work of Assemblies and how they have evolved over the past 16 years.
- 1.2 The report highlights the different ways in which the Assembly Programme has been delivered over a number of years and identifies its strengths and areas for development. It includes up to date feedback on the performance of Assemblies provided by councillors in a recent survey.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members of the Select Committee are asked to comment on the report and recommend further work on Assemblies based on the report below and the views expressed by councillors in the survey.

3. Policy Context

- 3.1 This report aligns with Lewisham's Corporate Priorities, as set out in the Council's [Corporate Strategy \(2022-2026\)](#):

- Cleaner and Greener
- A Strong Local Economy
- Quality Housing
- Children and Young People
- Safer Communities
- Open Lewisham
- Health and Wellbeing

In particular, this report is closely aligned to the Safer Communities and Open Lewisham priorities.

4. Background

- 4.1 How the Local Assemblies Programme has developed

Local Assemblies have developed and changed over the past 16 years, since the Mayor's Commission – Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods - in 2007. The role of Assemblies, as outlined in the Commission, was that they should be a "Vehicle for local empowerment, establishing a structured environment in each ward that will support an ongoing process for identifying and resourcing local concerns and implement local solutions".

Since then, the Assembly Programme has developed across the borough and became the Council's principal, standing, way of engaging with local residents on a wide range of subjects and issues.

The Local Democracy Review, which was launched in 2018 and reported in 2019 concluded that there was a need for increased empowerment and enablement of local people, and particularly a need to actively engage with

seldom-heard groups and individuals. The Review contained a number of recommendations in relation to Local Assemblies under three themes:

- Enhance their openness and transparency
- Further develop public involvement in Council decisions
- Promote effective decision-making

4.2 Review of the Assembly Programme

A key finding from consultation undertaken for the Democracy Review, published in 2019, was that Assemblies could be more inclusive, with a number of respondents stating that they still tended to attract people who were already democratically engaged and that more could be done to widen participation. With the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, further lessons were learnt about democratic engagement and the power of communities working together, alongside learning about need within communities. The pandemic also revealed the value, vibrancy and cost effectiveness of online communities, many of which developed rapidly and effectively in response to very specific local need in individual communities.

4.3 In 2021 and in light of the Covid 19 pandemic, an exercise in resident engagement called Voices of Lewisham was undertaken, incorporating consultation with residents about the Council's approach to working with residents in the following areas:

- Does the Council show visible, empathic leadership?
- Is the Council flexible and innovative?
- Is the Council agile or too focussed on boards, meetings and membership?
- Is the Council collaborative?
- What should the Council's approach to place-based working be?
- Where should the Council refocus delivery?

This was incorporated into planning of the post-pandemic Assembly Programme.

4.4 In March 2020, at the time of the initial Covid-19 lockdown, the Assembly Programme, like many other public engagement initiatives, had been suspended, resuming online ten months later in January 2021. Online meetings provided an alternative to the previous in-person events that had taken place from 2008, and an opportunity to hear from and connect with residents at a significant time and after a long break.

In June 2022, an initial Strengths and Challenges review of the Assembly Programme was undertaken by officers in consultation with the lead Cabinet member, considering possible models for the Assembly Programme, based on the learning from community engagement which had taken place during the Covid emergency and taking into account wider cost-related pressures facing all Council services. This considered four key areas :

- Strengths and challenges for residents
- Strengths and challenges for the Council and elected members
- Strengths and challenges relating to the delivery of funding

- Strengths and challenges relating to the development of good practice

4.5 The key strengths of the Assembly Programme identified included:

- Residents have a regular time and space to meet with their local councillors
- Co-ordinating groups (co-groups) give local people, businesses and those working or studying in the area the opportunity to steer the community's agenda
- Officers from the Council have a place to present ideas/consult with residents
- The Council can evidence regular engagement with communities in given areas
- The allocation of funds to local projects is overseen by those living or working in the area
- The links created through Assemblies generate ideas/applications for Section 106 monies or other external funds
- There is huge scope to develop more purposeful use of digital platforms including social media
- There is the opportunity to be proactive in seeking views that galvanise a wider range thoughts around issues locally
- Residents value regular time set aside to engage with them in a purposeful way

4.6 Key challenges were identified as being similar across wards, and included:

- Assemblies as good democratic engagement tools, but not necessarily ideally suited to people with additional barriers
- Meetings can sometimes feel “top down” in approach
- Similar issues across multiple wards and priorities can lead to replication/duplication of effort

4.7 Following these reviews and in light of the need for cost savings across the Council, in April 2022 the Assembly Programme budget was reduced by £225,000 per year. The reduction affected staff posts and the funding of Assembly meetings, including premises, refreshments, and the printed and distribution costs of materials for in-person Assembly meetings.

These reductions were on top of the previous removal of the funds distributed via the Assemblies as set out below:

Financial Year	Fund Name	Value per ward	Annual Total	Notes
2007/08	Mayor's Fund	£25,000	£450,000	Unspent as assemblies being established
2008/09	Mayor's Fund	£50,000	£900,000	Includes £25,000 per ward rolled over from 07/08
2009/10	Mayor's Fund	£25,000	£450,000	
2010/11	Mayor's Fund	£25,000	£450,000	

2011/12-2013/14	Assemblies Fund	£18,750	£337,500	Includes £3,750 Discretionary Fund for local councillors
2014/15-2018/19	Assemblies Fund	£15,000	£270,000	Includes £2,500 Discretionary Fund for local councillors
2019/20	Discretionary Fund	£2,500	£45,000	
2020/21	Discretionary Fund		0	

In addition to the Mayor's Fund/Assemblies Fund, each ward had a devolved budget to cover costs of engagement and meeting production. This was £3,200 per ward, per annum (£57,600 per annum in total) and was expected to cover the costs of up to 4 meetings per year. In many wards, Assemblies would have a presence at a community event in lieu of one of these meetings. Costs included venue and equipment hire, catering and production and delivery of newsletters to all homes in the ward.

4.8 As a result of these ongoing and proposed reductions for 2022, the model for Assembly delivery was agreed to be a minimum of two online meetings a year organised by the ward's community development officer in conjunction with local councillors and the local co-ordinating group. Complementing these would be up to two community-led Assemblies per year, organised by local community organisations with the support of the community development officer.

4.9 NCIL Mitigation for Assembly meeting costs

At the time of the reduction in the Assembly budget, it was identified that the availability of NCIL ward-based funds could possibly mitigate some of the consequences of the reduced budget. Ward-based organisations and councillors were asked to consider submitting NCIL applications for community engagement activities which could support the work of local Assemblies. In the event, eight applications covering nine wards were successful in applying for ward-based NCIL funding. The list below provides details of the nine wards and the organisations receiving funding:

- Blackheath – Parkside Residents Association
- Forest Hill – SEE3 Limited
- Hither Green – Goldsmiths Community Centre
- Ladywell – Ladywell Assembly Organising Group
- Lee Green – Lee Green Lives
- Perry Vale – Sydenham Garden
- Rushey Green – Lewisham Local
- Sydenham – SEE3 Limited
- Telegraph Hill – Bold Vision

4.10 The projects were hosted by a wide variety of organisations, proposing a range of engagement activities, including Assemblies. In these wards, NCIL has enhanced the delivery of community-led Assemblies by providing funding to support in-person engagement.

5. Future development of Assemblies

5.1 Assemblies from April 2022 to date

Since April 2022, a programme of local Assembly meetings has been organised. These have consisted of a combination of online and in-person meetings. The in-person meetings have been dependent on local support from community organisations able to provide venue and refreshments for meetings. The meetings have been organised and supported by each ward's designated community development officer.

5.2 Between April 2022 and September 2023, 53 Assembly meetings have taken place. Of these, 19 have been community led. Please see table below for breakdown of meetings by ward.

Ward	No. of meetings April 22 – Sept 23	Online	In-person	Council-led	Community-led	NCIL funded	Total attendance
Bellingham	3	1	2	2	1	N	182
Blackheath	2	1	1	2	0	N	85
Brockley	3	1	2	3	0	N	30
Catford South	2	0	2	1	1	N	131
Crofton Park	2	1	1	2	0	N	79
Deptford	2	1	1	1	1	N	40
Downham	2	0	2	0	2	N	73
Evelyn	2	0	2	2	0	N	36
Forest Hill	3	1	2	2	1	Y	67
Grove Park	4	1	3	2	2	N	75
Hither Green	3	0	3	0	3	Y	74
Ladywell	3	0	3	1	2	Y	85
Lee Green	5	1	4	1	4	Y	153
Lewisham Central	3	0	3	0	3	N	74
New Cross Gate	2	1	1	2	0	N	51
Perry Vale	3	1	2	1	2	Y	65
Rushey Green	3	1	2	3	0	Y	63
Sydenham	5	0	5	5	0	Y	212
Telegraph Hill	2	1	1	1	0	Y	14
Sub-total	54	12	42	31	23		
Total	54		54		54		1,589

5.3 After an initial slow start in confirming meeting dates and venues, the programme of Assembly meetings has improved over the last 18 months. Attendance at meetings was initially low but has begun to increase, with a

significant number of people stating that they had not attended an Assembly meeting previously. To start with, identifying venues was a challenge but this has improved significantly in the last 6 months as more community organisations have become involved in Assembly meetings and better understood their purpose and impact.

- 5.4 Initially, community Assemblies represented a relatively small proportion of the total number of Assemblies held. However, numbers have increased in recent months. The majority of community Assemblies has been delivered in partnership with organisations receiving NCIL funds. However, non-funded organisations have also provided venues. The proportion of in-person Assemblies is higher than anticipated as, in many cases, local councillors have been keen to have face to face rather than online meetings, and development officers have endeavoured to help them achieve this wherever possible.
- 5.5 One of the reasons why community organisations were not initially involved in community-led Assemblies was because, in many cases they did not have the resources or capacity to lead on delivering Assembly meetings and, in some cases, did not see delivering Assemblies as being a principal part of their role.
- 5.6 At the meetings held, a number of key subject areas have been discussed. They have included discussion of policing matters led by Safer Neighbourhood Teams. Discussion of environmental issues has also been a feature in many wards, as has sustainable streets which appear to be a resident priority at the moment in a number of areas.
- 5.7 Discussion of NCIL funded projects has featured in all Assemblies where organisations have reported on their projects and have sought feedback from residents on the work they are delivering and consulted on the future direction of their NCIL activities. In many cases, they have sought the active involvement of residents and other community organisations.
- 5.8 Key considerations for the future role of Assemblies

From the reviews that have been undertaken, it is clear that Assemblies, which feature in the Council's constitution, provide a formally structured way to engage with residents. However, in order to be even more effective, as previous reviews have identified, they will need to be complemented by other forms of resident engagement, including people from groups that do not currently attend Assembly meetings, e.g. young people.

- 5.9 Decisions need to be made about the future number of meetings to support optimum engagement, recognising that focussed with currently non-participating groups will require a significant proportion of community development officer time.

Decisions also need to be made about issues including:

- Whether meetings should be themed
- Whether some meetings should take place on a multi-ward/borough-wide basis where issues impact across more than one ward

- What subject matter is best discussed within an Assembly meeting and across what geography (consider which have impact at hyper-local level)
- What guidance needs to be agreed to maximise the constructiveness of meetings

5.10 Further feedback was sought from councillors in October 2023 via an online survey. At the time of writing of this report, the analysis of key findings is still to be published and will be appended to this report in advance of the Safer Stronger Communities Select committee at which this report will be discussed.

5.11 The findings from this survey will be considered alongside much wider feedback received through the Lewisham 2030 programme to ensure that there is a consistent, and universally understood mechanism for community engagement across the Council.

6. Financial implications

6.1 There are no specific financial implications as a result of this report.

7. Legal implications

7.1 There are no legal implications contained in this report.

8. Equalities implications

8.1 There are no specific equalities implications in this report. However, it should be noted that the report highlights the need to engage with individuals and groups in the borough that are not currently participating in Assemblies.

9. Climate change and environmental implications

9.1 There are no specific climate change or environmental implications to this report.

10. Crime and disorder implications

10.1 There are no specific crime and disorder implications to this report.

11. Health and wellbeing implications

11.1 There are no specific health and wellbeing implications to this report although Assemblies do have the potential to increase resident engagement and social connectedness in their communities, all shown to have positive impact on wellbeing.

12. Background papers

12.1 Mayor's Commission – Empowering Neighbourhoods and Communities, 2007
Local Democracy Review report, 2019
Councillors' Survey, October 2023

13. Glossary

Term	Definition
Local Assemblies	Ward-based meetings which take place across Lewisham's 19 wards on a regular basis under the council's constitution

14. Report author(s) and contact

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15. Appendices

15.1 Appendix A - Councillors' survey – October 2023