

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

FULL COUNCIL – 28TH JUNE 2004

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Ward Working in Brent
Pilot Scheme

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been a long-held objective of this Administration to enhance the role of Councillors in their wards and bring the Council and its services even closer to the people that we serve.

- 1.1 One element of unfinished business of the new constitutional settlement, with the creation of Executive and Overview/Scrutiny has been the development of a more formal support mechanism and framework for Members in their Wards and to bring this together with a method of more effectively addressing the local aspirations and service needs of our many communities.
- 1.2 It is our view that the fundamental building block of democratic representation is at Ward level, that the Ward is the first focus of political and administration activity. Ward Councillors get elected to 'do' something for their communities and achieve improvements to the living conditions of their constituents which goes along side 'scrutinising' the Executive on the one hand or consulting with local people on the other. It is critical for Ward representatives is to be able to influence the activities of the Council's service provision for the benefit of people at local level. It can be argued that this is what Councillors do as a matter of course and indeed they are successful in this. Ward Councillors act as a real bridge between the community and the services the Council delivers. However, this success has limits and there exists no framework where Ward Councillors can actually 'make things happen' on a regular and transparent basis. It is clear that Members desire a straightforward and direct relationship with the paid side of the organization and we do not propose an over bureaucratized system.
- 1.3 Ward Working, if we get it right, should allow us to more effectively address personal and community aspirations and at the same time deliver services in a more rational and efficient manner. It cannot be about listening to the loudest voices but rather developing our evidence and monitoring capacity to ensure that what we deliver locally is both necessary, sufficient and equitable.

- 1.4 Ward Working presents us with an opportunity to apply a model which rests on the legitimacy of local elected Councillors and allows us to deliver services without forcing local people to turn out for endless joint boards and committees. It is about local government proving that it is still a vital element in the fabric of society and can adapt itself to changing circumstances.
- 1.5 Our end state therefore is one where the universal services and the services of our partners are delivered in a manner which is more responsive to local issues. Taking in the priorities of local communities and local Councillors more effectively, where the Council is making a clear contribution to the quality of local life. Our end position is where we have good evidence and good monitoring of what is delivered in each of our 21 wards and we can make choices based upon fact rather than anecdote.
- 1.6 Members and officers have been looking into this issue very carefully, researching other approaches to a more local focus across the Country, the results of their investigations have borne fruit in the proposals set out below.
- 1.7 We therefore propose to pilot the concept in six of our wards, rapidly learning lessons from the pilots so that the system can be rolled out. The concept of the pilots is therefore not about whether we go with these proposals throughout the borough but in fact what is the best way of achieving our ends in all 21 wards. It is therefore our intention to further consider and then decide on the exact timing and phasing of any subsequent roll-out.

2. **THE FRAMEWORK**

- 2.1 Rather than construct now a rigid approach for the next few years the proposal below sets out a broad framework within which to pilot ward working and can be seen as the first stage on what will most likely be an evolutionary journey. The principle should stand that Council services need only be directly involved where appropriate, inevitably there will be services of core interest and core concern to local people and local Councillors on a ward basis and others that will be of interest on an 'as and when' basis. The basic tenets of this first stage are set down below.
- 2.2 *Charter for Ward Working*
Ward Working will need to be informed by a charter which sets out clearly for all what the purpose and what the framework will be. It must deal with the issues of expectation and a framework of what is included and what is not! Clearly ruled out, for example, will be the quasi-judicial functions of planning (in respect of determining applications) and Licensing as well as Housing Allocations and Personal Social Services and personal issues raised by constituents.

2.3 *Ward Budgets*

In order for the pilots to work, it is proposed that each ward be given £15k to spend on small projects that enhance quality of life – it is anticipated that most of this will be related to either environmental issues, in their broadest sense, or crime and community safety. This amount of money will have to be carefully managed to maximise local impact but not so prescribed as to frustrate action within the wards. Ward budgets are not about diverting or diluting the Executive's mainstream agenda nor about buying services that should already have been provided. It is envisaged that the budgets will be spent within the Council economy and it will not be a charter to 'reach for yellow pages'. It is also envisaged that the money will be spent under officer delegated authority as the ward meetings will not be committees and the local nature of decision making will be undermined if there has to be a constant stream of reports to the Executive.

2.4 *Consultation and Information*

Ward Working is an opportunity to help local Councillors take the lead and further maintain contact with their constituents. Communication will be absolutely vital if local people and Councillors are going to make the most out of the opportunity. However, with the plan based approach detailed below there will need to be a consultation framework for each ward and there will have to be some 'set piece' event which engages the public within the Ward. The Area Consultative Fora will not provide the requisite concentration of interest for this. For the pilot, it is proposed that there will be a 'one-off' public meeting at the beginning of the Ward planning cycle where members of the public are invited to put forward their views around what issues they would like to see addressed. This will be preceded by a flyer through every door advertising ward working, the public meeting and containing a tear off slip which allows residents to set out their top three priorities. Learning from the experience of others we are clear that there must also be a flow of information back to the residents about their ideas, what is happening and what the Council has done. It is therefore critical to the success of the pilot that good quality ward newsletters and the Ward Plan are sent to all households involved. These newsletters will be edited and produced by officers so as to avoid any misunderstandings of party political bias.

2.5 *Ward meetings*

The basic tenet of ward working will be closer and more frequent contact between ward members and officers. For this to work, there will need to be quarterly ward meetings which should be business-type meetings between Councillors and officers only to ensure focus.

2.6 *Ward Plan*

The work in the ward should be firmly plan based. We believe that the production of a locally based document which sets out short, medium and

long term priorities is essential. In the longer term the ward plan should become an integral part of our Budget and Service Planning framework so that influence can be brought to bear on the main programmes. The ward plan will also be key to the spending of the individual ward budget. Each ward will have a profile with essential information about the ward, including service provision, and that marks the beginning of ward planning and a sustained drive towards building our evidence base around wards.

- 2.7 The issues raised by residents, the views of Ward Councillors (perhaps informed by a Ward walkabout) service information and corporate priorities will be pulled together into the Ward plan which will set out how the ward budget will be spent and what wider budgetary issues it seeks to influence.

2.8 *Officer Support*

For the pilots to work and realise the desired results, they must operate as an integral part of the Council's operations. It is proposed therefore that there be a Ward Co-ordinator for each Ward, drawn from across the Council's services whose role will be to pull the ward plan together, liaise with Councillors and officers, oversee the consultation strategy and the delivery of the plan. The positions will be voluntary, in addition to normal duties and will offer valuable career progression experience and a small remuneration in recognition of the extra time commitment. Ward co-ordinators will need to be supported by support officers who, for the purpose of the pilots, will be drawn from the Policy & Regeneration Unit.

- 2.9 As regards the officers/services who will support the ward meetings, we are conscious of the fact that some issues/services will inevitably be most suited to a ward-based approach and will feature consistently in public interest. It is therefore proposed that a core group of officers support the quarterly meetings from Environment (StreetCare and Transportation), Housing and Community Safety/Police. For the pilots representatives from these areas should constitute a core group of officers who attend the meetings and help draw up the Ward Plan. The other Council services should be drawn in more gradually 'when appropriate' this will be particularly relevant for Education and the rest of Environmental Services though over time it is to be hoped that the links with schools particularly will be strengthened. Given the individual nature of Social Service provision it would seem very unlikely that these would be appropriate areas for Ward Working. There maybe times when Social Service's issues do come to the fore, particularly perhaps with facilities within Wards, but for the most part Social Services involvement is expected to be very light.

2.10 *Financial Implications*

The proposals in this report to run the pilot scheme in 2004/2005 will cost up to £200k in 2004/2005. A report to Executive on 14th June 2004 identified £230k which could be made available for this initiative.

There are a number of options for expanding the scheme into 2005/2006. If the pilot is extended to all wards it is estimated to cost up to £1,600k in a full financial year. This may be subject to amendment following consideration of the pilot. Any subsequent variations to the proposals in this paper involving an expansion of the scheme could incur costs in 2004/2005, for which funding will need to be found.

2.11 *Executive Sub-Group*

Given the importance of this initiative it is proposed that a sub-group of the Executive be formed, chaired by the Leader of the Council to oversee the pilot and any future implementation.

2.12 *Pilot wards*

It is proposed to run a ward working pilot between July 2004 and March 2005, covering six wards. The wards proposed for the pilot are the following:

- Alperton
- Dollis Hill
- Fryent
- Mapesbury
- Northwick Park
- Welsh Harp

2.13 The proposed wards have been put forward based upon the following criteria:

- At least one ward represented by each of the three political groups on the Council
- At least one politically 'mixed' ward
- The majority of Members to be from the non-executive
- Not wards already the focus neighbourhood or regeneration activity
- At least two to share common boundaries
- All three Parliamentary constituencies to be covered.

3. **CONCLUSION**

3.1 Ward Working is a concept whose time has come. It is the best candidate to answer the great hanging question of the last few years, 'what is the role of the non-executive Councillor?' It also re-connects individual Ward Councillors to the operation of the whole Council and gives them a stake in the corporate health of the organisation. A move to Ward Working would reconnect Ward Councillors with their local populations, to the corporate entity of the Council and to officers.

3.2 What is set out in my paper is essentially a beginning point for launching Ward Working which will inevitably adapt and change over time. In the longer term, if it is successful, we may have to look at some realignment of

services and our consultation arrangements. There will also be issues of officer resources. What we are therefore proposing is a partial answer to the questions that will be asked both about end-state and practicalities. The real answers will only be forthcoming once we begin to operate it.

4. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

I therefore recommend to the Council that

- 4.1 We agree the pilot arrangements as set out in Section 2 and
- 4.2 We agree the virements to provide the pilot resources as set out in paragraph 2.10 and in paragraph 6.3.5 of the Director of Finance's report to the Executive at its meeting on 14th June 2004 which was agreed.

Ann M John
Leader of the Council