

Agenda Item	
Report No	

**WARD BUSINESS MEETINGS AND WARD FORUMS**

**Report by Corporate Manager, Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch & Strathspey**

**SUMMARY**

This paper describes the role that Ward Business Meetings and Ward Forums can play in improving community engagement and local service delivery. The paper also outlines in detail suggested key functions and purposes of the Ward Forum.

**1. Background**

- 1.1 Prior to our recent restructuring, it was obvious that some of our former areas, for example, Nairn and Badenoch & Strathspey, already functioned to some extent as single multi-Member Wards. This left both areas well placed to work in the new Ward structures. In Nairn, Members got together with officers to discuss local issues on an informal basis every two weeks; whilst in Badenoch and Strathspey this occurred on a monthly basis.
- 1.2 This often resulted in more efficient and effective delivery of services, whilst keeping Members well briefed and informed. Having only four or five Members working together (as was the case for Nairn and Badenoch & Strathspey respectively), as opposed to the larger numbers in other areas, enabled these Members to put aside their differences and agree effective solutions for the greater good of their area. Officers attended these meetings as and when required, with the Area Manager acting as a conduit, negotiator or deliverer as required

**2 Ward Business Meeting**

- 2.1 It is now proposed that this method of informal meetings, successfully run in Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey, be rolled out across all 22 Wards. All Wards have three or four Elected Members and are served by a Ward Manager. In Inverness, where each Ward Manager covers two Wards, it may make good business sense for the seven or eight Members from the two Wards to get together with some regularity. This will of course depend on the nature of the business being discussed
- 2.2 It is proposed that these meetings be called Ward Business Meetings, meeting either on a weekly or fortnightly basis.
- 2.3 Much of the business discussed at these meetings will focus clearly on issues of service delivery.

**3. Ward Forum**

- 3.1 A recent study "*Community Participation: Who Benefits?*" examined whether promoting community participation in governance helps build social capital. The key findings were:

*The key factor influencing levels of participation in governance was the existing pattern of 'linking' social capital: those already well connected tend to get better connected.*

*Community participation tends to be dominated by a small group of insiders who are disproportionately involved in a large number of governance activities.*

*What social capital is created by opening up governance to community involvement tends to be concentrated in the hands of this small group. There is no guarantee that the wider community feels the benefit of this social capital, because formal governance structures are often not embedded in everyday community life.*

*A number of forces create 'barriers to entry' for those not involved in governance, and increase the likelihood that those already involved will become more so. This suggests that the way governance arrangements work, rather than bad practice by particular institutions, makes this problem worse.*

*Potential participants are often put off by the experience, or the perception, of feeling excluded by the way that community participation arrangements work.*

3.2 The researchers concluded that:

*Pushing harder on the existing approach is unlikely to ensure stronger links between community participation in governance and social capital. An alternative is to try to make more effective connections between formal participation by a small group of insiders and the more informal, everyday social networks in which a much bigger group of citizens spends a significant part of their lives.*

*Rather than expect everyone to participate in formal governance equally, we should try to make more people's everyday civic engagement count, by designing the formal structures of governance in a way that taps into the informal, routine spaces of community life, such as the school gate, places of worship or local post office.*

3.3 It is proposed that the new Ward Forums should endeavour to engage better at this local community level. It is essential that local people in communities are part of a democratic process that enables them to engage meaningfully with Highland Council (and indeed with other partners) and to be assured that their opinions are valued and will help make a difference.

3.4 It is important to emphasise that Ward Forums are not to be confused with Highland Council's former Area Committee structures. Ward Forums should not have decision-making powers, but they could have the following key purposes/ functions:

The ability to:

- i. Act as a forum for people within the Ward(s) to raise any issue of local significance. (There should be included on the agenda for each meeting a period of 20 minutes where the general public may ask questions relating to the provision of services)
- ii. Resolve these issues or refer them to the appropriate agency for resolution
- iii. Scrutinise local Council delivery and performance, including related budgetary information
- iv. Act as a consultative forum where issues are referred from Highland Council or other public bodies. (As such, the forum would have no power to vote on these issues or to make decisions, but would recommend appropriately)
- v. Engage with communities to help make choices about local service delivery, where appropriate
- vi. Promote and encourage all aspects of Community Safety in close collaboration with Northern Constabulary
- vii. Update and maintain information on the Profile of the Ward
- viii. Seek to rationalise the various community consultations taking place at Ward level
- ix. Enable Elected Members to reflect local concerns about service delivery and policy at strategic Council committees, of which they will be members.

- 3.5 Ward Forums, as a minimum, should be attended by the Ward Manager, all Elected Members, community representation (must include Community Councils) and Northern Constabulary. Other Community Planning partners, in particular, from the youth, business and voluntary sector, should also be invited. There should also be an open invitation to the local press and to the public
- 3.6 There should be a minimum of 6 meetings per year with each meeting commencing at a time agreed by the Ward Forum and normally lasting no more than two hours. The venue for the Forum should be moved around the Ward, if that is the wish of the Forum.
- 3.7 It is also worth reflecting that the type of community engagement suggested by the researchers as good practice at 3.2 is already linked to work being carried out by Highland Council. Some examples of this would include teachers engaging with parents; Home Carers engaging with various client groups and individuals; and Community Works Officers engaging with Community Councils. What is lacking is the ability to consistently capture what is being said by these groups and use this information to improve services across the board.

#### **4. Links with Community Planning**

- 4.1 Community Planning is a statutory process, facilitated by Local Authorities, which helps public agencies to work together with the community. This should enable better planning and, critically, better delivery of services that make a real difference to peoples' lives.
- 4.2 Community Planning Partnerships exist across Highland mainly associated with the former area structures of the Council. The Ward Business Meetings and Ward Forums have clear links with Community Planning.
- 4.3 The Ward Business Meeting, whilst predominantly dealing with issues relative to Highland Council's service delivery, will on occasion need to deal with issues that cut across agency boundaries.
- 4.4 Ward Forums will certainly raise issues that can only be resolved by clear collaborative, cross-agency working. Whilst these issues of necessity do not need to be referred to existing Community Planning Partnerships; where such Partnerships exist and are currently working well, they will help with a solution.
- 4.5 A review of the Wellbeing Alliance is currently underway and the opportunity now exists to also reflect on and review local Community Planning arrangements to ensure their best fit with the new arrangements at Ward level.

#### **5. The Role of the Ward Manager**

- 5.1 This is predominantly an integration role. The Ward Manager does not need to know detailed business solutions but he/ she does need to know enough about these business lines to suggest a possible solution and align the right people to affect that solution. Highland Council of course already employs many of the 'right' people in Services and, as a consequence, the Ward Manager will either direct the issue to the appropriate Service or broker a solution cross-service/ agency, perhaps through the use of the Ward discretionary budget.
- 5.2 The Ward Manager must have a credible presence and must be able to pull together a solution from all sectors. The Ward Forum is much about local solutions that cut across service/ agency boundaries and as such the Ward Manager has a critical role to play.
- 5.3 Ward Forums have already been held in Ward 12 (Caol and Mallaig) and Ward 22 (Fort William and Ardnamurchan). These meetings were held in the evening, ending with a

public question and answer session. Although the agenda was quite open and reflected the early status of the meetings, there was a strong turn out from both community representatives and the public. Representatives attended from TECS and ECS and partners from the NHS Highland and Northern Constabulary were also present.

Community representatives are keen to ensure that these meetings do not duplicate the agendas of, for example, Community Councils, but inevitably there may be some overlap. The key outcome must relate to getting things done effectively and efficiently. Initial suggestions for items at future Forums include – the Local Plan; health; transport; youth issues; and community safety (which will become a standing item).

The question and answer sessions raised several issues, none of which were particularly contentious. Questions which cannot be answered immediately will either be dealt with directly by services or may form future agenda items.

Both Ward Forums have now established forward dates for the next 12 months with differing locations throughout the wards.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended Members agree:

1. the establishment of a Ward Business Meeting in each Ward or group of Wards, as circumstances dictate
2. that new Ward Forums be established in each Ward or group of Wards, as circumstances dictate
3. the purposes/ functions of Ward Forums as outlined in 3.4
4. that the minimum attendance at Ward Forums should include all Ward Elected Members; Ward Manager; representatives from Services, as required; community representatives (should include Community Council representation); and Northern Constabulary. Other partner agencies should also be invited to attend as required
5. that Ward Forums occur at least 6 times per year
6. that venues should move around the Ward, if that is the wish of the Ward Forum

Signature:

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Date: 4 June 2007

Background Papers: “*Community Participation: Who Benefits?*” published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in November 2006 by a team from Demos