

## Community councils

**Community councils are a government attempt to bring local authorities closer to the residents they serve. Caroline White finds a success story in Waltham Forest.**

An alcohol-free zone, a new skateboarding ramp and the replanting of street trees are just some of the projects being funded by Waltham Forest's six Community Councils (CCs). These local forums, which are each given £10,000 of spendable funding by the council, are energising and involving residents in a way that most local authorities have apparently failed to do. Though the funding pot is small, meetings are popular; regularly attracting more than 100 people – more than most full council meetings will see in a year. And all this has been achieved in less than two years.

Ken Kennedy, chair of North Chingford Community Council, says: "We had 158 people at the last meeting, and we've had more than that before. The CC has created a lot of interest.

"Residents around here are very concerned about youth crime, so that's been one of the main areas we've tried to tackle. The feeling was that something had to be done and young people needed to be offered some positive activities to take part in. We spent most of our money on new skating ramps, sports sessions and summer schools for youngsters.

"North Chingford meetings are the best attended of all the CC's, but it's mainly by older, white people. It's partly to do with the type of area we are, but we could still do better.

"There are many good things we can do here – get local people more involved with their neighbours and in their community, help get things done and enable people to have much closer contact with their councillors. The CC also provides a platform for residents' groups and voluntary associations to tell the community what they are all about."

CCs are split into two parts, a community forum and a formal council meeting. The community forum is chaired by a local layperson – Mr Kennedy in North Chingford's case – while the formal meeting is chaired by a councillor. The layperson chair is responsible for representing residents' views to the formal council.

At local authority level, another member has the role of CC cabinet champion, raising issues with the council.

Councillor Liaquat Ali has taken on that role for Leyton and Whipps Cross and is also Waltham Forest's cabinet member for Community Engagement & Equalities. He says: "People are getting involved because they want to engage with their local communities, rather than just for the funding.

"Nearly 3,500 people have attended since they were first introduced. Compare that with the average of about 10 we get at full council meetings and you'll see what I mean."

Clyde Loakes, leader of Waltham Forest, has just completed a stint as cabinet champion for North Chingford.

"I was there to observe, to hear residents' priorities and to answer questions they had on behalf of the cabinet," he says. "It was important for me to be

accountable and to ensure that the residents 'hear things from the horse's mouth'."

Ken Kennedy adds: "He's a Labour man and North Chingford is a very Tory area, so you can imagine he got quite a hard time. But he took it all in good spirit – which I think is another indication of the progressive nature of CCs."

Jane Brueseke is layperson chair of Leytonstone CC, and has already been re-elected once. At 35 she's the youngest CC chair in Waltham Forest.

"It's been a real success story," she says. "We have a very diverse attendance in terms of ethnicity, which reflects the make up of the local population.

"We are trying to involve more young people, however, so we recently had a special meeting where we invited kids from the local secondary school to come in and talk about crime.

"It was interesting because when most people talk about crime, they often blame it on youngsters. One girl stood up and spoke, and said that young people are just as afraid of crime as older people – especially violence. The whole thing was a real success and now we are considering setting up a separate CC just for young people.

"We had a lot of problems on a local estate with a particular group of young people. The social landlord called a residents' meeting and a lot of the youngsters involved actually turned up and were very vocal. We'd like to get something like that going on a regular basis.

"Our first year's budget was spent on creating an alcohol-free zone around the tube station, because everyone agreed they felt threatened by the drinkers and drug takers who were congregating there. The money went on signs, leafleting, street cleaning, setting up ASBOs and also helping set up a 'wet centre' where people with substance misuse problems can get counselling.

"The local pubs got involved too, and put their own money into supporting the project. The whole thing has been a real success."

CCs also have the option to apply to the local authority for £100,000 of virement funding, where the money is passed from one budget to another – though none have tried as yet.

Ms Brueseke explains: "It's a really complicated process and I think that's put quite a lot of people off. Also, the money is existing funding that would be withdrawn from another community area if we were to use it.

"It's not like new money: it's money that has already been earmarked for something else. We would have to put up a strong argument to persuade the council to spend it on what we wanted instead."

Phil Herlihy, layperson chair of Walthamstow West CC, believes this is where the formal/informal split comes into its own. "We really wouldn't know how to apply for this money – it would be the job of the formal council to do that," he says. "If residents felt strongly enough about needing the extra money then we would put our feelings to the councillor chair, and it would be their job to represent us to the local authority."

He adds: "CCs seem to have created a space where people actually listen to each other – to their neighbours, and to their councillors, and vice versa. I think this is the first time that's actually happened."

## Community conclusions

Resident survey results after 18 months

- 84 per cent said CCs were effective at enabling local people to voice their concerns with the local authority
- 76 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the way issues raised at meetings were dealt with
- 88 per cent thought CCs were helping to improve their local area
- 66 per cent thought meetings were well run and that chair people were doing a good job

The Leadership Academy has development programmes for councillors covering neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion, community safety and community cohesion.

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