

Report of the Residents' & Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee 2014/15

Diversifying the Street Champions Initiative



Members of the Committee

Cllr Michael White (Chairman)
Cllr David Yarrow (Vice Chairman)
Cllr Lynne Allen
Cllr Teji Barnes
Cllr Mohinder Birah
Cllr Peter Davis
Cllr Patricia Jackson
Cllr Kuldeep Lakhmana
Cllr Carol Melvin

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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

It is often the case that, when this Committee undertakes a review, it will investigate an area of the Council's services in which we consider there to be significant room for improvement. Recent reviews into cemetery regulations, water efficiencies and telecommunications, for instance, have sought to make quite substantial changes to existing service areas. However, this major review into diversifying the Street Champions initiative was very different. The Committee was keenly aware that it was dealing with an extremely successful and thriving scheme that could very well continue without our intervention for years to come. It was important from the outset, then, that the review did nothing to jeopardise the existing Street Champion model and, instead, sought to supplement and enhance it for a new, digitally aware generation of volunteers.

Consequently, the review left to one side the wider questions about the make-up of the scheme and focused on specific areas in which modernisations and efficiencies could be made. Members were aware that, since the scheme began in 2006, there have been monumental developments in digital technologies and methods of communication that could be used to enhance the Council's support of Street Champions and better reflect the current needs and preferences of volunteers. The backbone of the review, therefore, explored how this might be achieved and sought to put forward practical ways in which technology could be used to make the scheme easier, more efficient and more joined up.

Considering evidence on technology and communication also led us toward recommendations on how the reports and information provided by Street Champions might be better shared between volunteers and other active members of the community such as Ward Councillors and Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinators. Our opinion was that the development of a stronger sense of community and shared experiences amongst these groups would encourage issues to be resolved and information disseminated much quicker and more efficiently.

To explore these areas the Committee heard from a wide range of witnesses both internal and external. The Council's officers provided valuable insights into the current support offered to the scheme and some of the challenges being faced in communications, awareness raising and digital reporting. Members were also eager that this be a review that not only focused on the high level issues facing the scheme but on the day-to-day experiences of volunteers who use the systems and see the outcomes 'on the ground'. Consequently, we heard from six active Street Champions who provided us with insights into the scheme as well as practical ideas as to how it might be improved. These insights enabled us to produce a valuable and timely report that constitutes a forward step for the Street Champions initiative. For this, the Committee is enormously grateful.

Councillor Michael White

Chairman of the Residents' & Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following three witness sessions with representatives from various Council departments and from Street Champions themselves, the Residents' & Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee saw it fit to recommend:

- 1. That the Cabinet Member considers whether Street Champions be contacted to be thanked for their invaluable contribution to the Borough to date and asked to re-register for the Street Champions scheme.**

- 2. That, subject to recommendation 1, the Cabinet Member considers whether the process of re-registering Street Champions also be used to:**
 - a. Encourage and offer support for use of the Online Self-Service reporting facility;**
 - b. Ascertain whether those registering online would be willing for their contact details to be shared with their local Ward Councillors to encourage greater communication; and**
 - c. Promote the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme.**

- 3. In order to provide a greater awareness amongst residents of how to report issues online and to increase the understanding of the Council response, that the Cabinet Member considers the introduction of public information sessions and tours of the Contact Centre available to all current Street Champions.**

- 4. That the Cabinet Member asks officers to provide Ward Councillors with quarterly summaries of the key issues being reported by all residents in their Ward when making any contact with the Council..**

- 5. That, subject to the outcome of the Feel Proud of Your Neighbourhood pilot, the Cabinet Member asks officers to consider offering further celebration and community building events for Street Champions to ensure that they feel valued for the important contribution they make to the environment of the Borough.**

- 6. That, subject to the outcome of the Feel Proud of Your Neighbourhood pilot, the Cabinet Member asks officers to consider the diversification of the digital technologies used:**
 - a. To make Street Champions aware of the digital tools available for them to better engage with their neighbours in the reporting of local concerns; and**
 - b. How the Council could better communicate with volunteers to disseminate information relevant to their local areas.**

OVERVIEW

From the outset of this review, the Committee was keenly aware that the Street Champions initiative has been a highly effective model since it began in 2006. It has encouraged in excess of 4,400 residents to engage in actively improving the Borough's environment through the reporting of a vast range of issues including fly tips, street lighting, abandoned vehicles and litter. Despite the Committee's grave concerns about a significant lack of engagement from current volunteers, it is not inaccurate to describe the active volunteers as the 'eyes and ears' of the Council given the significant individual and collective impacts that they have had by bringing the issues affecting their local environments to the Authority's attention. The efficacy of the scheme was affirmed by the numerous Street Champions who provided evidence to the Committee, all of whom noted that the role had a visible impact upon the safety and appearance of their local areas.

In the context of the scheme's success, the Committee was eager not to 'reinvent the wheel' in this review. The basic function and structure of the scheme itself was, therefore, not addressed and a focus instead was placed on ensuring that the Council's support of volunteers was relevant, up to date and reflective of the needs of current and future Street Champions. Consequently, many of the themes that arose throughout the witness sessions centred on the various forms of communication that take place between the scheme's major stakeholders; namely, the Council, Street Champions themselves and Ward Councillors. Consideration was given to the ways in which issues were reported, how progress / resolution was communicated and how residents were made aware of the opportunity to become involved in the scheme. Given the prevalence of digital technologies in daily life, this aspect of the review focused particularly on the use of both internal and external online systems.

The issue of awareness raising also became a theme more generally throughout the review as the Committee was eager that the Council took steps to ensure that it had a comprehensive understanding of who Street Champions were and, once this was known, that this information be shared with Ward Councillors. A better awareness of which Street Champions were still active and the fostering of stronger links with other active members of the community was seen as a significant step in diversifying and improving the initiative.

Finally, it should be stressed that the terms of reference (Appendix A) agreed at the beginning of the review identified the development of better links between Street Champions and local Neighbourhood Watches as a key area of enquiry. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, the Committee was able only to hear evidence from Neighbourhood Watch volunteers working at the local (street) level rather than from those who co-ordinated the scheme across the Borough. As will be seen from the body of this report, this meant that the area has not formed as integral a part of the review as Members would have liked. However, where possible, the feedback from Neighbourhood Watch volunteers has been used to suggest how the two schemes might work more productively together in the future.

Given the above themes identified in the findings of the review, the report has been structured to reflect the Committee's two main areas of concern:

1. Raising awareness and improving intelligence
2. Diversifying communication and reporting methods

Further information on the witnesses that presented evidence to the Committee and the agreed terms of reference of the review can be found at Appendix A.

RAISING AWARENESS AND IMPROVING INTELLIGENCE

Throughout the witness sessions it became apparent that the data that the Council held on Street Champions needed to be better understood and updated and that there was scope for using the process of gathering better intelligence to make a raft of other improvements to the wider scheme. However, prior to going into detail on what these improvements might be, it is important to be clear on the state of the information that the Council currently holds, where the Committee considered there to be deficiencies in that data and how it could be better used in the future.

To avoid confusion it should be noted that the Council does have a wealth of information on Street Champions and can easily produce reports through the online system (Onyx) that set out the number of current volunteers, the number and types of reports that are being submitted, the breakdown of reports by Ward, and numerous other areas. Furthermore, it is possible to identify the exact reports that have been submitted by each volunteer and, with very little labour, to itemize each report against the resolution time of an issue. In this sense, then, the Council's records are up to date and dynamic and, as will be seen from the following section on communications, the Committee was impressed by the versatility of the current online system.

However, when Members were given the opportunity to interrogate this data, it was clear that there was a vast disparity within the number of reports that individual volunteers were submitting. Some were reporting on an almost weekly basis whereas others had not reported for several years. Officers advised that, at 2 December 2014, there was deemed to be 137 active Street Champions and that the remaining 4,000+ volunteers were not reporting at a high level for what could be a broad range of reasons.¹ It was thought that some volunteers might have forgotten that they were Street Champions, others may have moved from the Borough and still others may no longer be interested in being involved in the role.

Although the Committee was certainly not eager to discourage residents from remaining Street Champions based on the number of reports that they submitted, Members were keen that data be consolidated to ensure that it reflected the actual level of engagement with the scheme. This up-to-date information would allow for a clearer picture of the initiative as it stood, encourage 'dormant' volunteers to re-engage in the scheme and thank those who have been involved for their contribution to date. Consequently, the Committee recommended:

1

That the Cabinet Member considers whether Street Champions be contacted to be thanked for their invaluable contribution to the Borough to date and asked to re-register for the Street Champions scheme.

Clearly, if this course of action is pursued, it offers a rare and useful opportunity for the Council to engage more widely with Street Champions. The Committee was particularly keen that this contact be used both to influence how volunteers interact with the Council and to encourage a greater sense of community between them and other active members / groups within their local areas. As such, there were three additional areas that the Committee felt should also be taken forward as part of any re-registration process.

¹ Set out at Appendix B is further Street Champion activity data for the past 2 years.

As will be seen from the following section, the online registration of Street Champions is a shift that has significant cost and process benefits for the Council as well as often being more convenient for volunteers themselves. The Committee, therefore, felt that the re-registration process would provide the perfect opportunity to raise awareness amongst volunteers of how to access this tool and to promote the significant advantages that come along with it such as instant and 24 hour access.

Secondly, a theme that arose consistently throughout this review was that Councillors and Street Champions from the same wards were not aware of each other and had no method of communicating or working together. The most obvious and straightforward solution to this issue would, of course, be to share data between these two groups. However, although there was no issue with Street Champions being forwarded the contact details of their local Ward Councillors, officers advised that data protection meant that such data could currently not be passed the other way. This was due to the fact that the original registration process had not asked volunteers whether they agreed for their personal information to be shared in this way. Again, the re-registration process was seen to be an invaluable opportunity to address this issue.

Finally, the Street Champions who provided information to the Committee happened, in most cases, to be involved in Neighbourhood Watch and they almost unanimously agreed that the two roles could be undertaken together profitably without becoming too onerous. What also became clear was that Neighbourhood Watch in Hillingdon was currently struggling with a lack of resource and that little was being done to promote the scheme and increase the number of participants. Indeed, it appeared that the number of Neighbourhood Watches and the engagement with them was diminishing. Although the Council does not run the scheme and so must be careful not to interfere in its activities, Members saw that it did make an extremely valuable contribution to local communities and helped to make the Borough a safer place to live. It was considered that any way in which the Council could assist with the continuation of Neighbourhood Watch in the Borough should be taken up.

With these three points in mind, the Committee recommended:

2

That, subject to recommendation 1, the Cabinet Member considers whether the process of re-registering Street Champions also be used to:

- a) Encourage and offer support for use of the Online Self-Service reporting facility;**
- b) Ascertain whether those registering online would be willing for their contact details to be shared with their local Ward Councillors to encourage greater communication; and**
- c) Promote the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme.**

DIVERSIFYING COMMUNICATIONS AND REPORTING METHOD

Since the launch of the Street Champions initiative in 2006, there has been an explosion in the use / range of digital technologies and methods of communication available to residents. When the scheme began, volunteers were given cheque books on which they could write the details of an issue and send it in hard copy to the Council. This later shifted to issues being reported directly to the Contact Centre and has now diversified to include issues being reported online using the online reporting system. This ongoing development has laudably been motivated by the Council's aspiration to keep the Street Champions initiative relevant and up to date with residents' preferred methods of communication. The Committee was eager that such diversification of communication methods continue and that volunteers are kept informed on the options available to them.

An important caveat that must be stressed and one that was kept in mind throughout this review, is that Hillingdon is made up of a diverse range of residents who want to engage with the Council in a variety of ways. An increasing proportion of residents wish to communicate digitally but there remains a sizable minority who wish to continue using traditional reporting methods. As the Council already has an impressive infrastructure surrounding such traditional methods of communication, the Committee did not put forward any recommendations on this area as such. However, the review was undertaken with an understanding that traditional methods of communication would remain in place and Street Champions would continue to be supported should they wish to use them.

Nonetheless, it was clear from the evidence provided by both officers and the Street Champions themselves that the online system was often not used because residents were not confident or comfortable in doing so. A range of reasons for this were noted but witnesses emphasised that, in most cases, a reluctance to report online was related to inexperience of computers and other digital devices. Given the significant benefits to moving online (no time 'on hold', instant / 24 hour access, the storing of personal details, etc.), the Committee was of the opinion that anything that could be done to educate residents on how to make better use of this tool would be of value.

3

In order to provide a greater awareness amongst residents of how to report issues online and to increase the understanding of the Council response, that the Cabinet Member considers the introduction of public information sessions and tours of the Contact Centre available to all current Street Champions.

It should be noted for completeness that the benefits to online reporting are not limited to volunteers. The Council also sees cost and process efficiencies as the system requires significantly less staffing to maintain than the Contact Centre would in order to deal with the same volume of reports. Furthermore, reports are distributed directly to relevant Council departments through the online system and can be progressed quicker and more efficiently a result. Providing education and encouragement to use these systems was, therefore, considered to be a practical and cost-saving intervention for both residents and the Authority.

A walk-through of the functionality of the system and how easy it was to submit a report directly to a department was provided to the Committee. Members were extremely impressed with how accessible the system was and how it managed to get the right level of information so that an issue could be resolved whilst not being onerous. The fact that the system could be accessed from computers, tablets and phones and was easy to use in

each these formats, was also commended and reassured Members that the development of an 'app' might not be necessary. Furthermore, the changes already being developed by ICT that would see the introduction of real-time updates on the progress of reported issues were commended and supported wholeheartedly by the Committee. Members felt that this would adequately address some of the issues raised by Street Champions regarding the lack of feedback which they believed to be a contributing factor to volunteers becoming disengaged.

Despite these positives concerning the online system, there was one major area that the Committee felt could be improved and have significant benefits for the efficacy of the wider scheme. As noted elsewhere in this report, there was a strong belief that steps should be taken to link the various volunteers throughout the Borough and make sure that they had opportunities to communicate and begin to foster a greater sense of community. Specifically, this centred on Street Champions and Ward Councillors working closer together and being more aware of how their distinct roles could complement one another. However, the Committee felt that it should also entail Ward Councillors being aware of the exact issues that were being reported within their own wards. Reports were currently filtered to Council departments and were progressed from there without any oversight from Ward Councillors.

Having had an opportunity to review the full list of recent reports submitted by Street Champions set against the resolution time for each issue, there was no doubt that the system generally worked well at receiving and resolving reports in an efficient manner. However, there was a proportion of reports that took a significant period of time to resolve and there were also themes evident in the data suggesting that the same problems were arising persistently in particular localized areas. Members felt that this presented an interesting opportunity for better links to be fostered between volunteers and Ward Councillors. If the latter were kept up to date on the issues in their wards, they would be in a position both to gain a more comprehensive understanding of residents' concerns and, where necessary, to add their voice in order to bring matters to a speedier resolution.

The simple way to achieve this was seen to be the provision of a quarterly overview report tailored to each ward that shows the top 10 issues reported by Street Champions within each ward for that quarter. This information would be summarised as the top 5 environmental issues and the top 5 other service issues. This would ensure that the reports received directly from volunteers could be placed in a wider context, thus providing Members with an overarching view of the issues that were prevalent in their Ward. The Committee recommended:

4

That the Cabinet Member asks officers to provide Ward Councillors with quarterly summaries of the key issues being reported by all residents in their Ward when making any contact with the Council.

Another important theme that arose under the umbrella of communication was just how integral 'feeling valued' by the Council was to Street Champions. Every one of the volunteers that came to speak to the Committee confirmed that one of the major motivations for them continuing to undertake the role was receiving acknowledgement that what they were doing was worthwhile and appreciated. Historically, the Council has expressed this appreciation by providing celebration events and further local meetings between Street Champions. These had temporarily been stopped whilst a Feel Proud of

Your Neighbourhood Pilot was underway and the intention was that they would be brought back in one form or another in 2015.

Although the events were set to make an imminent return, officers did note that they were considering what form meetings would take and whether it might be appropriate to replace them, in part, with a digital equivalent. Members sought not to predetermine the outcome of the research being undertaken for the pilot project but, based on the unanimous feedback that they received from volunteers, they did wish to place on record their strong preference for regular events to be organized with a view to celebrating important work of the Council and Street Champions. With this in mind, the Committee recommended:

5

That, subject to the outcome of the Feel Proud of Your Neighbourhood pilot, the Cabinet Member asks officers to consider offering further celebration and community building events for Street Champions to ensure that they feel valued for the important contribution they make to the environment of the Borough.

As can be seen from the agreed terms of reference to this review, the original intention was for the Committee to put forward a series of recommendations on better utilising new forms of digital media to support the scheme. The Committee did hear evidence on this theme and considered the implementation / utilisation of bespoke Facebook pages and Twitter as well as external websites such as fixmystreet.com. However, what became apparent through the witness sessions was that there was currently insufficient intelligence about the make-up of Street Champions and their preferred methods of communication.

It did not seem wise, therefore, to put forward recommendations on how digital technologies might be better used as any such proposals would be speculative and unevicenced. However, the Committee was informed that officers were gathering intelligence on what technologies and forms of communications Street Champions would most value as part of the pilots mentioned above. In the light of this work, it seemed that the most expedient course of action would be to await the findings of the pilot prior to making any potentially costly decisions on the matter. This led the Committee to recommend:

6

That, subject to the outcome of the Feel Proud of Your Neighbourhood pilot, the Cabinet Member asks officers to consider the diversification of the digital technologies used:

- a) **To make Street Champions aware of the digital tools available for them to better engage with their neighbours in the reporting of local concerns; and**
- b) **How the Council could better communicate with volunteers to disseminate information relevant to their local areas.**

APPENDIX A – TERMS OF REFERENCE AND WITNESSES

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Setting the context

1. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current Street Champions initiative to include:
 - a. The current level of uptake across different areas of the Borough;
 - b. The volume and nature of the issues raised;
 - c. The remit and accountability of the role; and
 - d. The barriers to involvement and reporting issues.
2. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme to include:
 - a. The findings of the pilot project into linking the Street Champions Initiative and the Borough's Neighbourhood Watch Scheme;
 - b. The current level of uptake across different areas of the Borough;
 - c. A clear idea as to where schemes are located in the Borough; and
 - d. The barriers to involvement.

Better Access and Reporting

1. To explore ways in which the Council could better use its current resources (e.g. its website) to increase the ease with which volunteers are able to report issues;
2. To assess the viability of using new forms of digital media in order to make reporting issues more accessible; and
3. To explore ways in which those volunteers who do not wish to use digital medias can better report issues.

Street Champions and Neighbourhood Watch

1. To put forward recommendations on how the Street Champions initiative could be linked with Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in the Borough;
2. To explore ways in which Street Champions could be encouraged to engage more generally in the community safety agenda; and
3. To explore how these initiatives might be linked through the use of the technologies highlighted above.

WITNESSES

SESSION 1 – 25 SEPTEMBER 2014
Street Champion – Eastcote and East Ruislip Ward Street Champion – Pinkwell Ward Ed Shaylor – ASB and Investigations Team Louise Forster – Access Channel Manager
SESSION 2 – 16 OCTOBER 2014
Street Champion – Uxbridge South Ward Street Champion – Townfield Ward Street Champion – Pinkwell Ward Charlotte Stamper – Communications Manager Helena Webster - Community Engagement & Town Centres Team Leader
SESSION 3 – 20 NOVEMBER 2014
Street Champion – Cavendish Ward Charlotte Stamper – Communications Manager Helena Webster - Community Engagement & Town Centres Team Leader

APPENDIX B – STREET CHAMPIONS ACTIVITY DATA

- No. of Street Champions currently registered (as at 03/12/2014): **4,459**
- Report run for 2 years from 01/12/12 - 30/11/14 for Street Champion activity; out of the 4,459 registered Street Champions, only 1,267 have reported once or more in the last 2 years, broken down as follows:
 - 0 reports in last 2 years: 3,192 Street Champions
 - 1 report in last 2 years: 521 Street Champions
 - 2-10 reports in the last 2 years: 609 Street Champions
 - 11-100 reports in the last 2 years: 127 Street Champions
 - 100-250 reports in the last 2 years: 9 Street Champions
 - 1 Street Champion has reported more than 250 in the last 2 years (786 reports in total)
- Therefore, officers deem that the Council has 10 highly active Street Champions and 127 moderately active Street Champions.
- Number of reports by Street Champions over the last 2 years broken down by Ward:

Ward	Incident Count
Brunel	1076
Pinkwell	798
West Drayton	540
Yeading	496
Uxbridge South	464
Eastcote	437
Botwell	431
Cavendish	400
Heathrow Villages	392
Uxbridge North	386
Townfield	384

Ward	Incident Count
Barnhill	337
Harefield	290
Northwood Hills	284
South Ruislip	251
Ickenham	221
Yiewsley	216
Manor	195
Charville	187
Hillingdon East	173
West Ruislip	129
Northwood	112