Devolution and Localisation

A Report from Overview and Scrutiny

Contents

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Preface

by Cllr. Michael Wilkes,

Chair, Co-ordinating O&S Committee 2004-2006

In the past two years when I had the privilege of being in the chair, the Committee's reviews, building on previous work, focussed on three themes. How can public services in Birmingham be improved? Can we help the City Council use its resources more effectively? How can we give the people of Birmingham better representation not only in City Council decisions but also in those of other providers of public services?

All three come together in this wide-ranging inquiry into the City Council's Devolution and Localisation policy. Guided by decisions taken by local Members, that policy holds out the promise of public services better tailored to local conditions, more effectively co-ordinated and delivered, and coupled with closer partnership working between a variety of agencies operating in each district of the city. Given Birmingham's prominence, this review – and the Council's response to it – are seen as significant in a wider context.

The policy as originally conceived has been in operation now for two years. It is timely therefore to take a robust look at the benefits, costs and potential revealed thus far, and, in the light of our assessment, to point to changes and developments that could lead to devolution making more of a difference. That aim, I believe, has the support of Members across the City Council. Indeed, as the Leader of the Council was recently quoted as saying: "There are a number of challenges around devolution. We have got to try to make the system work."

That is entirely the approach we have taken in this scrutiny review. In coming to our conclusions we received contributions from a wide range of people including Cabinet Members and Strategic Directors; Chairmen of District Committees and of District Strategic Partnerships; District Directors; and frontline staff and members of the People's Panel who took part in some focus group work. I would like to thank them all for their contributions.

I am particularly grateful for the support given by the Scrutiny Office team – John Cade as Head, Nick Partridge as Lead Officer, Sian Williams and Gail Sadler for research and Rose Haarhoff for support. And I would also like to record my thanks to the Members of the Co-ordinating Committee at the time who devoted considerable energy, thought (and not a little patience!) to hearing and sifting a mass of evidence. The Committee's willingness and ability to engage in constructive and searching discussion has resulted in this report and recommendations which, I am convinced, will help to make Devolution and Localisation work and deliver its full potential in practice for the City Council and the citizens of Birmingham.

1   Summary

1.1   The Reasons for the Inquiry

1.1.1   This report is a major contribution to meeting priority 1.1 in the City Council's Performance Plan for 2005/6, which is to review progress on localisation and devolution, and in so doing to learn lessons from experience to date. We ask the Executive to draw up an Action Plan to meet our recommendations.

1.1.2   The City Council spent some years in debating whether a degree of localisation of service management and delivery, and of the devolution of political decisions, would be beneficial to service quality and to governance. Consultation and debate took place internally and with partner organisations. Particular attention was paid to the process of managing implementation, which took place in April 2004. The policy has attracted national attention, and the District Auditor undertook an audit in December 2004 and January 2005.

1.1.3   In our inquiry, we set out to obtain as much evidence as possible on costs, benefits, potential and hindrances. We sought clear examples of where Devolution and Localisation had made a difference to services and to the city, as well as an account of the costs involved in setting up and running the localised system.

1.1.4   As much evidence as possible was heard by the full Committee. All Members of the Committee took part in working groups to hear from District Chairmen, District Directors and selected Chairs of District Strategic Partnerships.   A small group met to consider detailed financial information.

1.1.5   Four Cabinet Members and many senior officers gave verbal evidence. Written evidence came from many members of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership. Focus Groups were used to test opinions amongst residents and front-line staff.

1.2   The Evidence

1.2.1   A first step was to remind ourselves of the original objectives of the Devolution and Localisation policy, by looking at reports from 2002 and 2003. Aims of localisation included:

- providing for the delivery of high quality, user focussed, responsive and cost effective services in areas of service of great importance to the public;
- providing integrated services to the local area, focussed on solving problems together rather than working in 'silos';
- establishing a culture where the workforce works for the communities and is empowered to make a difference.

1.2.2   For devolution, major aims included:

- delegating decision making from the Cabinet to all members of the City Council. This means the power collectively to determine local priorities and service delivery mechanisms for certain services, according to the needs of the local area, within cash limited budgets and subject to policy frameworks issued by the council as a whole and the Cabinet;

- enhancing local democracy by giving greater direct influence over service decisions to the local electoral process and providing for easier access to more directly accountable local politicians. This will provide the basis for the engagement of local councillors with other service deliverers and local communities and therefore to develop a stronger community leadership role.

1.2.3 Viewed as a whole, the officer organisation of the City Council was seen as consisting of:

- streamlined Strategic Directorates, fulfilling strategic policy, performance and strategic resource allocation roles;

- constituency offices directly supporting constituency committees and managing local service outlets and access points;

- Community Based Housing Organisations (CBHOs) which, whilst not strictly speaking Council bodies, would progressively take on key service delivery roles.

1.2.4 Initial functions to be devolved included a range of advice, leisure and street services, managed through District offices. District Committees of all local Members provided oversight and were to take political financial and service development decisions. Partnership arrangements came to be formalised within District Strategic Partnerships.

1.2.5 When we interviewed District Committee Chairmen and District Directors last November, the overall view was that devolution was working well and had had a good public reception. However there was also a feeling that not enough had been achieved, and that there had been a loss of momentum.

1.2.6 Whilst achievements varied from District to District, a range of service improvements were identified including a reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime, improvements to the street scene and to the environment. Witnesses also identified a number of institutional impediments to further improvements, foremost amongst which were the inflexibility in Service Level Agreements which govern many of the services which on the face of it are Districts' responsibility. District Committee Chairmen were particularly frustrated about this state of affairs, viewing it as giving them responsibility without any real control.

1.2.7 Discussion with Cabinet Members highlighted several issues, including the need for better working relationships between the centre and Districts; the lack of good, public performance information on services delivered through the Districts; and the need for stronger client functions in a range of services, both currently so that for example Districts could ascertain that SLA services were actually being delivered to specification, and that a future Highways Maintenance PFI arrangement should reflect Ward and District preferences.

1.2.8 We looked in some detail at the position regarding the Housing service, listening to representatives from all three Community Based Housing Organisations (CBHOs) as well as the Cabinet Member and the Director of Housing. All three CBHOs, to different degrees, wanted to assume more responsibility for the local housing service. The Cabinet Member and the Director emphasised the importance of improving the basic service across the city and completing the Options Appraisal work; whilst the latter was ongoing, there would be no further steps taken regarding CBHOs. The City Council should note that the Options Appraisal process was completed in May 2006.

1.2.9 It was also important to us to hear from staff on or near the front line, and we commissioned some focus group work. As with District Committee Chairmen and District Directors, localisation brought both positive and negative comments. Finance and budgets again featured strongly amongst the problem areas, together with questions over staff development and the lack of a clear career path.

1.2.10 Given these comments, we devoted considerable time to investigating financial issues. The original basis of the Devolution and Localisation proposals was that change should be "at worst" cost neutral. We considered it important to be able to balance the results of the policy against costs, whether one-off or recurring. We also wished to explore the true capacity of Districts to manage resources.

1.2.11 Cabinet provided £1.35m in total to cover transitional costs arising from introducing the new arrangements, and this sum was used. In addition, additional costs of nearly £0.3m per year have arisen from office accommodation for Districts. Around £650,000 annually has been provided within the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account to pay for the CBHOs and the increase in the number of housing management areas from seven to eleven, to match the Districts.

1.2.12 The conventional wisdom is that decentralised systems are inherently more costly than centralised ones, even though they may well bring benefits. We therefore asked officers to advise us on the costs of moving from the current District structure back to one which was more centralised. Somewhat to our surprise, the advice we received was that "it is more likely than not that a more centralised model would entail higher operating costs than the current devolved structure".

1.2.13 District Committees have formal control of sizeable revenue budgets which in 2005/6 ranged from £7.3m in Hodge Hill to £14.9m in Ladywood. We heard evidence that financial information provided to Districts was inadequate, unstable and not up to date. The basis of the allocation to each District on historical cost basis was questioned, with a desire for a more needs-based allocation. We certainly found as a matter of fact that the net District Revenue Budgets as reported to District Committees changed throughout the year. We also noted that the

provisional outturn figures for 2005/6 showed every District Committee as underspending, although it was not possible to investigate the reasons for this in the timescale of the review.

1.2.14 A further frustration for the District Committee Chairmen was that, in their view, there had been no constructive discussions between the Executive and themselves in the preparation of the overall budget for 2006/7.

1.2.15 One potentially important initiative following localisation is the requirement for each District to draw up Asset Management Plans. At the time of our review, these were to have all been completed by the end of April 2006.

1.2.16 We looked at the current system of allocating capital finance, and noted that the Executive intends to review financial delegation to districts, including the option of devolving some capital resource.

1.2.17 The original intentions for Devolution and Localisation put much weight on improving governance. District Committees were to provide political control over devolved services and budgets. District Strategic Partnerships would augment the Birmingham Strategic Partnership and form a basis for engagement with partners and the local community. We took evidence on this set of issues from District Committee Chairmen, District Directors, and selected city-wide and District strategic partners. We also looked at evidence of the public's reaction, including undertaking some focus groups.

1.2.18 On the whole, the decision-making powers of District Committees were appreciated. Ward Committees and Ward Advisory Boards were considered by many to be a more appropriate level for public involvement (and of course in Birmingham Wards themselves are a very populous unit). Whilst some tensions were apparent between District Committees and District Strategic Partnerships, generally it was felt that successful working relationships with partners had been developed. Some frustration was expressed over what was perceived by some as a limited contribution from DSPs so far; others took the view that these bodies were still in their infancy.

1.2.19 Overall, partners said that they saw clear benefits as a result of Devolution and Localisation in terms of partnership working and engagement with Districts. They also highlighted many areas of improvement.

1.2.20 A prime source of evidence of public perceptions was a questionnaire survey carried out by MORI in 2004. Overall it showed that, whatever else the Devolution and Localisation policy had achieved, it had not yet provided the vehicle through which people would be more aware of how the City Council works and through which those who wished to have more of a say could do so.

1.2.21 Our own focus group work confirmed a number of important messages. One is that people do think that wider public involvement would reinforce a sense of community. Another is the need for the Council to keep trying to identify and use a greater range of consultation methods. There was also a view that people's perception of the type of people who do attend community meetings actually deters a wider range of people from doing so.

1.2.22 Finally we looked at other authorities and national policy in this area. We found that examples of public engagement through the Districts bore good comparison with the Government's view of what is good practice nationally and noted their apparent interest in developing neighbourhood arrangements. Overall, the aims and direction of the City Council's policy on Devolution and Localisation accord well with the wider context.

1.3   Conclusions

1.3.1 The City Council, and other partners, has now made considerable investment in new management structures and political arrangements. National policy has continued to develop an emphasis on the neighbourhood dimension. Our overall impression is one of a devolved system that has shown some worthwhile accomplishments. While there is less evidence of radical improvements in service delivery there is undoubtedly the potential to realise these through fresh approaches without considerable increases in costs.

1.3.2 Our principal conclusion is that the City Council should maintain its policy of Devolution and Localisation , and move forwards in ways that will make the policy work more effectively. We wish to see the better services and the better use of resources that the policy should bring. What needs to be made clearer is how exactly this will come about.

1.3.3 Under the City Council's Performance Plan, the Executive is already bound to respond to this review by drawing up an Action Plan. Our recommendations set out the priorities which we consider this Action Plan should address.

1.3.4 To give the Devolution and Localisation policy fresh impetus and clarity, the Executive's Action Plan should address:

- building momentum and changing the culture;
- improving services;
- cutting strings to the centre and simplifying approval arrangements;
- exploiting the capacity of the Districts; and
- building capacity at Ward and neighbourhood level.

Our detailed recommendations follow.

Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	That, in the context of the established policy framework that the implementation of Devolution and Localisation should be cost neutral, fresh momentum be injected into the policy and clarity restored around costs, benefits, mechanisms and objectives by: (i) the drawing up of an Action Plan to address the recommendations made in this report for the short term, and (ii) the setting out of longer-term aims to be achieved over the next five years; this to be implemented by the Cabinet through the Cabinet Committee on Devolution.	Leader	i) October 2006 ii) January 2007
R2	That in order to give clarity to the whole Council and to partners and to remove resistance present in parts of the organisation, the Leader and the Chief Executive underline the permanence and importance of the policy of localisation and devolution. The Executive should also publicly state its determination to embed and develop these arrangements as a key element in developing customer-focused public services, enhancing representative democracy and citizen engagement.	Leader	September 2006

		Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R3		That the Cabinet Committee on Devolution become the major forum for communicating, discussing and settling issues between the Cabinet and District Committees, with a membership which includes as observer members at least one District Committee Chairman from each of the three Political Groups, but that should there be any unresolved divergences consideration be given to setting up a clearing mechanism.	Leader	September 2006
R4		That the Executive issue fresh and clear guidance on the division of responsibilities between Cabinet Members and District Committees, based on the principle that Cabinet's key interest is in seeing that the City Council's minimum acceptable service outcomes are achieved, but that how those outcomes are achieved is the business of the District Committees acting within the framework determined by the City Council.	Leader	January 2007
R5		That the District Committees use a common performance information system to report regularly to Cabinet Members (as well as the public) on service standards achieved in each District.	District Committee Chairmen	September 2007
R6		That in line with the developing practice of the City Council, greater investment be made in the development and career progression opportunities available to front line staff in the Districts.	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	January 2007
R7		That an Action Plan, with timescales, be drawn up identifying the minimum standards for all services to be provided in each District, with a costed menu of enhancements which Districts could commission within their available resources.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007 (for completion of Action Plan)

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R8	That, within extant budget constraints and without reducing service levels, the Executive set timescales for introducing revised means of allocating annual revenue budgets between Districts, so that allocations are related more clearly and equitably to need.	Leader	January 2007
R9	That, subject to contractual obligations and resources available, an Action Plan be drawn up to achieve unified ground cleaning services, with single teams cleaning an area regardless of which Directorate manages that land.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007
R10	That the Executive prepare a paper, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, on those services currently determined by Service Level Agreements clearly showing the time-lines for which they are in place, any break clauses and how local variations can be made.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R11	That the District Committees' apparent control of budgets for services delivered under Service Level Agreements be made meaningful by the service providers delivering detailed management information regarding budgets, activity costing and performance at Ward level.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	April 2007
R12	That a paper be presented to the Cabinet Committee on Devolution clarifying the future intention of the Council regarding Community Based Housing Organisations.	Cabinet Member for Housing	January 2007

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R13	That, in the interest of developing further the tenant-based housing landlord function, a paper be presented to the Cabinet Committee on Devolution, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, setting out how the Housing District Offices can work closer and better with the work of Districts, bearing in mind financial efficiency.	Cabinet Members for Housing and for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R14	That the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety promote the case for pilots where there is not an immediate and obvious case for diversity of service provision.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R15	That the Executive, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, examine the priorities and timescales for the Devolution and Localisation of further City Council services.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007
R16	That should the Cabinet revisit the structure of its portfolios this be carried out on the principle of the desirability of transferring further functions to District Committees, alongside the consideration of other principles designed to ensure effective management of Council services.	The Leader	May 2007
R17	That, within existing resource constraints and without impacting on service levels, improvements be made to the financial, policy and performance management capacity alongside strengthening the client function to enhance Districts' ability to monitor services delivered.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R18	That, whilst maintaining service delivery consistent with overall Council policy, a programme entitled "Cutting the Strings" be undertaken looking at those local decisions still currently requiring central approval with a view to a substantial reduction in their number and a simplification of processes in those that remain.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007
R19	That consideration be given to new and lighter touch reporting and monitoring arrangements for Districts.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R20	That in its response to the forthcoming Local Government White Paper, the City Council impress on the Government the need to recognise that, whilst area committees derive their powers from cabinet delegations, members of the public must see local councillors taking decisions and not just passing on information.	Leader	October 2006
R21	That all Directorates indicate in their service plans how they intend to work collaboratively with the District machinery, including District Committees and District Strategic Partnerships, to deliver better services and improve citizen engagement.	Deputy Leader	January 2007
R22	That the current Asset Management Planning process be accelerated and enhanced to enable full District participation in considering the future use of all public property.	Deputy Leader	January 2007
R23	That the Executive and District Committee Chairmen, in conjunction with major partners, review District Strategic Partnership machinery to identify good practice, reduce sub-groups and eliminate inefficiencies.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007

		Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R24		That fresh guidance be issued concerning the provision of support services to District Strategic Partnership machinery to ensure that equitable shares are in future borne by all partners.	Deputy Leader	January 2007
R25		That each District Committee refresh its policy on its own role and that of Wards as a focus for citizen engagement, recognising that Ward activity does not always require formal Ward Committee arrangements and substantial officer support.	District Committee Chairmen	January 2007
R26		That the Executive's Action Plan drawn up in response to this scrutiny review also set out intentions for action following consultation on the forthcoming Birmingham Neighbourhoods Green Paper which the City Council intends to publish in summer 2006.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R27		That the Action Plan give an early indication of how the City Council's Devolution and Localisation approach will develop in the light of the proposals in the expected Local Government White Paper.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R28		Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2007. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	February 2007

2 Terms of Reference

2.1 Reasons for the Review

2.1.1 Priority 1.1 in the City Council's Performance Plan for 2005/6 was:

"to review progress on localisation and devolution".

The target outcome was to learn lessons from the experience to date and to identify improvements and an Action Plan for the future.

2.1.2 Of course this was not the start of the matter. The City Council had spent some years in considering whether a degree of Devolution and Localisation would be beneficial in terms of service delivery and of governance. There had been substantial consultation not only internally with Members and officers but also with partner organisations across the city. Policy proposals were debated in the Council chamber and particular attention was paid to the process of managing implementation. The structural element of change took place in April 2004.

2.1.3 By the time we received the brief in the 2005 Performance Plan, therefore, Devolution and Localisation had been in operation for just over a year. The policy had attracted attention across the country, with both central government and other Local Authorities interested to learn what progress the City Council was making. The District Auditor undertook an audit of the localisation and devolution process during December 2004 and January 2005, with a report being published in July 2005.

2.1.4 So undertaking this scrutiny review also helps to take forward the issues raised by the District Auditor and to provide the national audience with an account of the progress Birmingham has made. But the key driving force for the review was the desire among Members themselves for some evaluation of the effectiveness of the policy and arrangements to date, so that an informed debate could take place as to the need for and nature of any necessary adjustments.

2.2 Terms of Reference

2.2.1 The key underlying question we set out to answer was:

- Does devolution make a difference and is it value for money?

This, in turn, prompts 3 further questions:

- What has actually happened and how did this experience compare with intentions?
- What impediments have come to light preventing the full realisation of potential and how could these obstructions be removed?

- What is the balance between actual/potential benefits and any incremental costs associated with devolution?

Within this framework of queries, it is important to have as much evidence as possible on both costs and benefits. We sought clear examples of where Devolution and Localisation had made a difference to services and to the city, as well as an account of the costs involved in setting up and running the localised system.

2.2.2 We therefore sought evidence on a very wide range of issues which addressed the following areas:

- service improvement and performance management
- finance and budgets
- partnership and public engagement
- engagement of Members
- managing and influencing models
- Districts, Wards and neighbourhoods
- District boundaries

2.2.3 The review was conducted by the Co-ordinating O&S Committee, the membership being:

- Cllr. Michael Wilkes (Chair)
- Cllr. Deirdre Alden
- Cllr. Steve Bedser
- Cllr. Len Clark
- Cllr. John Cotton
- Cllr. Frank Coyne
- Cllr. Alistair Dow
- Cllr. Kath Hartley
- Cllr. Ray Hassall
- Cllr. Mark Hill
- Cllr. Jon Hunt
- Cllr. James Hutchings
- Cllr. Timothy Huxtable
- Cllr. Peter Kane
- Cllr. Carl Rice
- Cllr. Anita Ward (until 7 February 2006)
- Cllr. Ian Ward

- Cllr. Mohammed Idrees (from 7 February 2006)

2.2.4 The officer team was led by John Cade, with Nick Partridge acting as Lead Review Officer and Lesley Poulton the expert adviser from the Local Services Directorate. Sian Williams and Gail Sadler from the Scrutiny Office provided research support. Phil Cooper was our Committee Manager.

2.3 Conduct of the Review

2.3.1 Because of the high priority accorded to this review by the City Council and its importance to Members, as much of the evidence as possible was taken in meetings of the full Committee.

2.3.2 Nevertheless, the volume of evidence to be heard was too great for the full Committee to be involved all the time. All Members of the Committee took part in working groups to hear from District Chairmen, District Directors and selected Chairs of District Strategic Partnerships. A small group of Members (Cllrs Wilkes, Hutchings and Ian Ward) also met to consider detailed information on financial matters.

2.3.3 Several Cabinet Members appeared before the Committee or its sub-groups to give evidence:
- the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety
- the Cabinet Member for Housing
- the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Culture
- the Cabinet Member for Transportation and Street Services

2.3.4 Senior officers who gave verbal evidence include, in addition to the District Directors:
- the former Chief Executive of the City Council, Lin Homer
- the then interim Head of Paid Service
- the Strategic Director of Local Services
- the Director of Corporate Finance
- the Head of Equality and Diversity
- the Director of Community Safety and Environmental Services.

2.3.5 The Committee also heard from the District Auditor.

2.3.6 Written evidence was provided by many of those members of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership who are not connected with the City Council.

2.3.7 Finally some opinion sampling was undertaken, using Focus Groups drawn from the People's Panel and also, in a separate exercise, from staff in the Local Services Directorate, both in the Districts and support staff.

3 Background – Policy and Arrangements

3.1 What the City Council Set Out to Do

3.1.1 The City Council certainly set itself a challenging agenda when it embarked on Devolution and Localisation. This was set within the context of improving the approach to the governance of the city.

3.1.2 According to the report of the Executive to the City Council of 5 November 2002, entitled "Localisation and Devolution":

"These proposals are intended to provide a framework for developing a new approach to the governance of Birmingham….An updated infrastructure of governance – democracy and public services – is important to the future success of the city, alongside economic investment and the renewal of the physical infrastructure. Such a city needs to be better at both:

- *strategic leadership; and*

- *delivering high quality local services which are responsive to the needs of the diverse neighbourhoods and communities of the city."*

3.1.3 Early on the convention was established that:

- localisation refers to service delivery, management and the activities of staff;

- devolution refers to the realm of executive decision making at political level and the wider roles that Members play.

We have maintained this convention throughout our review.

3.1.4 Thus, according to the report of November 2002, the aims of localisation were to:

- provide for the local delivery of high quality, user focussed, responsive and cost-effective services in areas of service of great importance to the public;

- support the democratic system by facilitating the greater involvement of the community in matters which affect their lives and providing greater support to the local work of councillors;

- provide a locally administered network of local service access points;

- provide integrated services to the local area, focussed on solving problems together rather than working in 'silos';

- facilitate closer partnership working, with other agencies operating locally, to provide joint solutions to local issues;

- establish a culture where the workforce works for the communities and is empowered to make a difference; and

- provide for a genuinely strategic approach to city-wide activities and better integrated, more efficient support services.

3.1.5 Alongside this management agenda, some political power was also to be devolved. Again according to the November 2002 report, the aims of devolution were to:

- delegate decision making from the Cabinet to all members of the City Council. This means the power collectively to determine local priorities and service delivery mechanisms for certain services, according to the needs of the local area, within cash limited budgets and subject to policy frameworks issued by the Council as a whole and the Cabinet.

- enhance local democracy by giving greater direct influence over service decisions to the local electoral process and providing for easier access to more directly accountable local politicians. This will provide the basis for the engagement of local councillors with other service deliverers and local communities and therefore develop a stronger community leadership role.

- provide the basis for the emergence of a degree of diversity in local governance arrangements across the city, according to the respective roles of Constituency and Ward Committees and the other bodies they may support or introduce.

3.1.6 The point concerning "the emergence of a degree of diversity" became stronger as detailed planning for Devolution and Localisation moved forward. The City Council considered a "Localisation and Devolution Project Plan" at its meeting on 1 April 2003. By then the emergence of diversity had become more of a founding principle:

"The overall development of a new pattern of city governance will not occur through a single blueprint or central plan. The governance of a city like Birmingham is a complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional process which brings together a great diversity of interests and objectives. This diversity, and the need to support contributions "from the bottom up", amongst council employees, local communities, voluntary organisations, other agencies and local councillors, means that change will occur in a non-linear way and according to a number of different drivers. Above all this must be seen as a process of cultural change, rather than one which is dominated by the planning of new structures of management and accountability".

3.1.7 The April 2003 report also emphasised the wider context, that the City Council was attempting to improve strategic functioning and its services on a grand scale while scarcely pausing for breath:

*"This report makes clear how this objective can be taken forward across **all** of the activities of the Council, through the development of an increasingly inter-dependent set of strategic directorates and an integrated approach to local services. Over time what the directorates have in common …. will become more important than the distinctions between the services and policies for which they are responsible. Managers and employees will increasingly work in networks which will cross the lines between the directorates and bring together local activities across organisational boundaries."*

3.1.8 At the same time, on the governance front the report states:

"A key aim of the process of devolution will be to support councillors in further developing a wider community leadership role and ensuring a truly accountable pattern of local governance."

3.1.9 Within these principles the April 2003 report set out a conceptual framework for implementing the Devolution and Localisation approach.

3.2 Strategic Directorates and District Management

3.2.1 At that time, the future organisation of the City Council was seen as consisting of:

- five streamlined Strategic Directorates, fulfilling strategic policy roles, securing and allocating strategic resources, providing city-wide support services and supporting the continuous improvement of services through the setting of policy frameworks, targets and standards and the monitoring of performance;

- eleven constituency offices providing direct support to constituency committees and management of more local service outlets and access points;

- the Community Based Housing Organisations (CBHOs) which, whilst not strictly speaking Council bodies, would progressively take on some key service delivery roles.

3.2.2 In April 2003 the Strategic Directorates were identified as:

- Resources
- Local Services
- Development
- Learning and Culture
- Social Care and Health

3.2.3 It was also proposed at that stage to leave Housing as a discrete strategic function "in the first phase of the proposals".

3.2.4 It was proposed to develop shared management relationships between all the strategic directorates and the constituency directors, with the Local Services Directorate fulfilling key performance and support functions to enable localised constituencies to operate, in an enabling rather than managerial mode.

3.2.5 The November 2002 report set out an initial set of services to be localised. These were then tested and the April 2003 report set out the services to be localised alongside the form of management. As background to that process the latter report commented:

"..it is necessary for the Council to satisfy itself that these services can be localised in such a way that the potential for service improvement is maximised and the costs and disruption of the process are kept to a minimum. However from the above it will be clear that this is not an exclusive process which will decide once and for all which services are to be localised and which are not. In reality services will localise at different speeds and according to different models. This report addresses phase one of a long term process of change which will broaden as it proceeds.

The results of the process were that the following services were recommended for localisation:

Proposed Option	Services
Services managed centrally that will continue to be managed in this way	Trading Services Regulation Recycling (bottle and can banks) Museums Central Library City-wide Arts and Events City-wide Sports Development City-wide Parks Services Benefits Administration Waste Disposal Car Parking Regulation
Existing local outlets that will come under constituency management	Neighbourhood Offices Leisure and Swimming Pools Community Libraries Community Centres
Services managed centrally that will continue to be managed in this way with a central client, but with constituency budgets to allow for local influence and planning (and potentially local staff)	Public Conveniences Road Maintenance (capital and revenue) Street Lighting
Services to come under local management through service level agreements and fully localised budgets, but where physical operational structures (e.g. depots) might remain unchanged	Refuse Collection Street Cleaning Recycling (Doorstep) Parks Management Grounds Maintenance Playground Services Parks Wardens/Rangers
Services that will be fully localised – i.e. all staff, management and budgets moved to 11 constituency offices.	Domestic Pest Control Community Development and Play Local Car Parks Maintenance and Income Local Arts Development

Table 1 Services proposed for Localisation as at 1 April 2003

3.2.6   In April 2003 the core set of roles for Constituency offices was set out as follows:

- service access – neighbourhood offices management, customer care and complaints about local services

- consultation and engagement – including community development

- democratic support – to link Member support with community engagement work

- performance monitoring

- communications to residents

- an integrated, "intelligent" client function for services provided under service level agreements

- management and support for local outlets (e.g. leisure centres, community libraries)

- the management and support of Housing functions.

3.2.7   In terms of priorities the April 2003 report commented:

It is considered central to the whole purpose of Constituency working that a focus on customer care and community engagement should be developed…...A further key area will be the development of local partnerships and linkages to other service providers (including those council services not managed directly by the Constituency), and the development of neighbourhood renewal and neighbourhood management policies. This will be particularly important in the light of the development of Housing policies at neighbourhood level.

3.2.8   It is to the original proposals for the Housing Service that we now turn.

3.2.9   These were framed within the City Council's response to the Independent Housing Commission ("the Power Commission") which was considered and approved on 14 January 2003. The Commission's proposal was to develop neighbourhood management and tenant control of the landlord service through Community Based Housing Organisations (CBHOs). In the event, these were set up in two "pathfinder" areas of Northfield and Hodge Hill.

3.2.10 Alongside these, the Council's localisation proposals were to establish local housing teams at Constituency level with the following responsibilities:

- income management, including arrears casework

- management of the tenancy support service

- management of local teams delivering estate and tenancy services

- work on tenant re-housing programmes associated with the investment strategy

- development of tenant participation, including CBHOs

- management of delegated revenue budgets for the Housing landlord service, including staff and other resources, repairs and estate maintenance, and management of incremental delegation of budgets to local teams delivering estate and tenancy services

- participation in the preparation and review of local capital investment strategies

- performance review and promotion of best practice among local teams delivering estate and tenancy services and compliance with financial regulations and procedures.

3.2.11 The April 2003 report went on to say:

It is therefore envisaged, at this early stage, that a Local Housing Manager leading teams who deliver these services will report, in due course, to the Constituency director, based within the Constituency. The new Housing organisation will be designed, and …..early in the coming financial year…..with a view to completing the re-structuring on the basis of local housing service teams by March 2004.

3.2.12 This concludes the account of the City Council's original intentions for services. We now turn to governance arrangements.

3.3 Political and Partnership Arrangements

3.3.1 The basic building blocks of the governance arrangements can be extracted from the November 2002 report in the following way:

The Cabinet will retain executive responsibility for all services which remain on a city-wide basis, for the Council's overall strategy and for service policy frameworks to which local discretion will be subject. The Cabinet will also continue to have accountability for the management of the non-devolved elements of the Council's budget………..

Constituency Committees will have executive responsibility for the services to be devolved, subject to the service policy frameworks to be drawn up. They will also be accountable for the portion of the Cabinet's budget allocated to each constituency.

Ward Committees will continue as at present and may be granted additional delegated powers by the Constituency Committee, subject to the delegation framework to be drawn up.

3.3.2 As with the localisation strand, it was anticipated that local patterns of governance would vary across the city over time.

3.3.3 The concept of District Strategic Partnerships was not specified at this stage. The November 2002 report emphasised that one aim of the whole agenda was to improve working in partnership with local communities and with other public service providers. Whilst the legal requirement to work with a strategic partnership for the whole city had been met through the establishment of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership, a single partnership board could not be adequate for a city as large and diverse as Birmingham and it needed to be seen as part of a broader network of partnerships including more local partnership working:

Following the initiation of devolved arrangements ……….developing inter-agency work at constituency level can therefore form the basis for an enhanced local Community Planning process, led by local councillors and their communities.

3.3.4 By the time of the April 2003 report a Devolution Framework had been produced. The intention behind Constituency Committees was explained as:

Constituency Committees, consisting of all the councillors from the relevant Wards, will have a significant role within the overall framework of city governance. They will be taking on extensive decision making powers in relation to localised services and will play a leading role in the development of local community governance. They will want to consider further devolution of powers to Ward Committees or to other levels and the relationship between these bodies and other local mechanisms for community involvement and decision making. Overtime they will be able to develop a wider role in the planning of local public services delivered through a range of agencies and organisations.

3.3.5 The Framework (as now incorporated in the City Council's constitution) sets out the specific powers, functions and delegations of Constituency Committees, based on the principle that the Committees discharge executive functions of the City Council. They therefore need to transact their business within the approved corporate plans, policies, procedures, systems and processes. Not only did there need to be a clear set of delegations from the Executive to the Committees but also clear criteria setting out when the Executive could withdraw these delegations.

3.3.6 At this stage it is worth making a point about the statutory nature of the relationship between the Executive and the devolved Committees. The Government issued guidance on new council constitutions following the introduction of executive-style local government through the Local Government Act 2000. This guidance included the possibility of setting up "area committees" covering part of an Authority's area to take executive decisions, and the Government acknowledged that such committees could have an important role to play in bringing decision making closer to people. The guidance went on to highlight that, even with decision-making delegated to area committees:

The executive should remain, and be seen to remain, accountable for those functions as the clear, accountable, corporate leadership of the authority.

3.3.7 Appendix 2 to this report replicates the section on District and Ward Committees from the current constitution of the City Council.

3.3.8 The April 2003 report went on to stress the importance of local consultation and engagement:

Therefore duties were to be placed on constituencies, which would: The key objective of the localisation and devolution policy is to re-balance the council's work to focus more on local governance and less on professional and service boundaries and external or central standards. Consultation and engagement with local communities is central to this objective and it will be imperative that the Council puts in place mechanisms to ensure improvements in this area as the process of Devolution and Localisation proceeds. To be successful requires that attention is paid to the need to develop the capacity of local communities to engage in Local Government, particularly in more deprived areas of the city and amongst traditionally excluded groups. There is no single right or wrong way to pursue this objective and constituencies must have the freedom to develop the approach that suits their area best.

3.3.9   Therefore duties were to be placed on constituencies, which would:

- have a duty to promote consultation and engagement but be encouraged to develop their own approaches to suit local needs;

- produce an Annual Plan for Consultation and Engagement, setting out key consultation processes and community development plans;

- co-ordinate local consultation and ensure that it is incorporated in local decision making.

3.3.10 Similarly the report highlighted the need to give a more local focus to the statutory community planning process required of the Council as a whole:

In the future it will be necessary to develop more local partnership arrangements involving local communities and voluntary organisations as well as statutory providers and led by the councillors who make up the Constituency Committee. As part of the consideration given to such arrangements within each constituency, Councillors will therefore want to consider how such partnership arrangements can best be developed, how the existing Ward and neighbourhood plans in their area will link into this and what community profiling, capacity building and partnership development work will be required to support a genuine Community Planning process.

3.3.11 Following the City Council's acceptance of the April 2003 report, shadow bodies were set up for the 2003/4 municipal year, with the devolved and localised system and structures coming into full operation in 2004.

3.3.12 So there was a long period of planning the change, from before the November 2002 report until implementation in April 2004. This included the work of the Cabinet Committee on Devolution as well as senior management time. Nevertheless, as will be related later in this report, evidence from staff near the front line of service delivery shows that, in the opinion of some, the City Council rushed into localisation without proper and thorough preparation; there is thus a query about the adequacy of the planning which was undertaken.

3.3.13 It must also be noted that, in the event, not all the arrangements envisaged in 2002 and 2003 have transpired.

- The functions of museums, central library services and city-wide arts development became part of the Learning and Culture Strategic Directorate (now itself superseded).

- Pest control became a centrally-managed service governed by a Service Level Agreement rather than fully localised.

- Most noticeably, the agenda for the Housing service became one of a central drive to improve the service, with the proposals to develop CBHOs put on hold.

3.3.14 There was also a change in nomenclature, with the word "constituency" being replaced in general usage by "District". Edgbaston and Sutton Coldfield decided to maintain the title of Constituency Committees. For clarity, in this report "District" is used as a general term and "District Committees" should be read as including the two Constituency Committees.

3.4   The Position at the End of the First Year of Devolution and Localisation

3.4.1   Our review began formally in July 2005, just after the first year of the new arrangements had been completed.

3.4.2   The first evidence we heard came from the District Auditor who had just produced a first formal report on the progress made. The Auditor had concluded that the basic governance and finance arrangements were then in place, and that there had been no significant adverse impact on front-line service delivery during the transitional period. He was not, however, convinced that Devolution and Localisation was completely embedded on the organisation. His suggestion was that the focus of our Scrutiny review should be on whether Devolution and Localisation had or would make a difference.

3.4.3   Whilst aware that even after a year this programme was in its fairly early stages, we proceeded to seek evidence that it was making a difference.

4 Findings: Services

4.1 Themes for the Review

4.1.1 We have seen that the Devolution and Localisation programme had many aims from better governance to service improvement. We decided to begin with the latter.

4.1.2 The Local Services Directorate furnished written material on this, which we supplemented through discussions with all the District Committee Chairmen and the District Directors. The Cabinet Members for Leisure, Sport and Culture, for Housing and for Transportation and Street Services had useful perspectives to add. Because of the position concerning Housing in the original plans we also talked to representatives of the CBHOs.

4.1.3 Besides questions of service quality, these discussions raised issues about related infrastructure and support services.

4.2 Service Quality and Management

4.2.1 The overall view from District Committee Chairmen and from District Directors was that Devolution and Localisation had resulted in both positive and less positive experiences. While there was an acknowledgement of the momentum built so far, there was also a frustration at institutional impediments and what was seen as a lack of further progress.

4.2.2 A range of service improvements were identified including a reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime, improvements to the street scene and to the environment. It was recognised that these varied from District to District, with some Districts feeling particular improvements had resulted from devolution whilst others felt they were more difficult to quantify.

4.2.3 Both groups highlighted the problem of the lack of influence Districts have on Service Level Agreements, and the inflexibility in service choice this represents, was a strongly and widely held view. Reference was made to the "direct debit approach" of such agreements (i.e. money withdrawn without requiring approval at each transaction stage) and the use of local funds to combat the inflexibility of Service Level Agreements. District Committee Chairmen were particularly frustrated about this state of affairs, viewing it as giving them responsibility without any real control, giving it as an example of the centre retaining "strings" on local service provision.

4.2.4   Some specific examples of tangible improvements to the level, quality and overall co-ordination of services since Devolution and Localisation was introduced include:

❖   Increased use of Hodge Hill District Library by children in the district, possibly as a result of the devolved book fund enabling local community-tailored purchasing.

❖   Increased traffic warden activity in an area of local concern in Selly Oak which was identified by a Ward Advisory Board held in Stirchley indicates the ability to make changes informed by and reflecting local needs.

❖   Improvements in Kings Heath Library to enable it to open at those times most convenient to the local community.

❖   Increases in satisfaction ratings of Neighbourhood Offices reported in the Mori District Survey indicate improvements in the perceived quality of localised services.

❖   Increased take-up of benefits, perhaps as a result of greater communication with and involvement of local residents since Devolution and Localisation.

❖   The joint allocation of NRF funding to three wards for a holiday Youth Activity Programme indicating improved co-ordination of service delivery since services were localised to the district-level. Without such co-ordination, the likelihood of the event going ahead would have been doubtful.

❖   Work taking place between the neighbourhood offices and libraries in the Ladywood district to promote the reduction of fly-tipping, graffiti and placard removal, as well as each others services, is another example of enhanced localised service co-ordination.

❖   The Arts Division has worked with the Districts to develop a specific approach to arts provision in each District. Each District has been paired with a major city arts organisation to enable arts provision to be more evenly distributed throughout the city. An Arts officer has been allocated to each District to provide advice on how the district's local needs can best be met, and their priorities can best be delivered, through the arts. The District structure has allowed more accurate alignment with local needs.

Figure 1 Examples of service improvements in Districts

4.2.5   This last example shows that other Strategic Directorates can also take advantage of the local knowledge generated through the District machinery. This also applies to Overview and Scrutiny, as is shown by the following example.

The NHS has a statutory duty to consult with Health O&S Committees on substantial developments or service variations. There are 13 NHS organisations in the city and responding to NHS consultations is a key feature of the Birmingham Health O&S Committee. In responding to NHS consultations, the Health O&S Committee has 2 key aims: to assess the technical viability of the consultation process and to assess whether the proposals are in the interests of the local population. In examining both aspects, the Committee engages with Districts, either through the District Directors or their Chairmen. This happens alongside securing contributions from other Directorates and external and voluntary agencies. Examples of District contributions to consultation exercises or to the work of the Health O&S Committee include

- Development of a new Medium Secure Unit for men in Yardley Green
- Plans to build a new Child Development Centre at Allens Croft
- Reconfiguration of PCTs
- Towards 2010 Programme

Health O&S Committees were established as a way of ensuring greater public accountability and public involvement in the NHS. The Committee needs to be able to link in with local communities in order to discharge its functions effectively. District Committees are one of the routes by which we can get some local focus and engagement.

Figure 2 Health Scrutiny and Districts

4.2.6   On the whole, District Committee Chairmen believed devolution was working well and had a reasonably good public reception. This view was, however, not unanimous and it is fair to say that some Chairmen expressed considerable reservations about what Devolution and Localisation had actually achieved. At the time of our interviews (November 2005) there was the perception of loss of momentum. Several Chairmen were of the opinion that this had led to increased tension with the centre. However, it was felt that many frustrations cited could be overcome with a renewed commitment to Devolution and Localisation following this review.

4.2.7   Some Chairmen also expressed frustration that only relatively straightforward services had so far been devolved, with future devolution of other services including regeneration and Youth Services required. Housing was another candidate, although there was also a degree of recognition that devolution could aggravate some service delivery issues in the Housing Service.

4.2.8   District Directors, too, expressed the wish to have a real influence in their local area. They expressed this not as a wish to control all services, recognising that some functions must still be centrally provided, but being able to decide on key local services. To this end, those not involved in the Housing CBHO Pathfinder Pilots were keen to welcome housing devolution,

especially in aiding a reduction in anti-social behaviour. District Directors were also keen to exert a greater influence on Youth Services and Regeneration.

4.3 The View from Cabinet Members

4.3.1 In this phase of the review we interviewed, either through working groups or as a full Committee, all three Cabinet Members whose portfolios straddle services provided centrally and through Districts.

4.3.2 Evidence was taken from the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Culture, whose portfolio includes Community and Play, Sport and Leisure, Parks and Nature Conservation and Community Libraries.

4.3.3 The Cabinet Member has a monitoring role of services delivered from the District with the power to insist on minimum levels of service provision.

4.3.4 Overall, the Cabinet Member viewed devolution as not properly thought through and that a particularly bureaucratic means of implementation had been adopted. The key points discussed were:

- his difficulty in monitoring service delivery as Cabinet had set devolved budgets to Districts along with the responsibility for spending.

- Decisions relating to level of charge for leisure facilities devolved to Districts (although a maximum level had been set as corporate policy). Districts must report proposed charges over the agreed maximum to the Cabinet Member. However, monitoring procedures surrounding this were not robust.

- Providing that the devolved service met the required standard, it was the role of District Director and District Chair to organise services.

- Tensions with Districts produced by insufficient funds allocated to carry out repair work, although he thought that this may be a "bedding in" process.

- A lack of real incentive to declare assets surplus to requirement, as the capital receipt would be divided between the District, the Portfolio and corporate funds.

- He was not involved with appointments made within District offices, as District Directors have powers to recruit. Nor was the Cabinet Member concerned over District Directors making decisions without consulting him as this too was within their remit and he had no control over District revenue budgets.

4.3.5 The Cabinet Member stated that both further devolution and ending the programme altogether could produce adverse consequences. Instead he hoped that better working relationships between the Centre and the districts could be achieved following resolution of some of the points noted above.

4.3.6 We interviewed the Cabinet Member in November 2005. In May 2006 we received a memorandum from the Birmingham Libraries Management Team. This team, based in the Children, Young People and Families Directorate, has the strategic management accountability for the performance of the library service. Their view is that generally there have not been any major service improvements to library customers as a result of localisation.

4.3.7 Whilst the city shows low performance against a number of measures, because the strategic management team does not directly manage the community libraries service it has to work through influencing District Directors. This makes it difficult to deliver consistent improvements for potential customers. The Management Team also pointed to difficulties in developing and harnessing specialist skills in staff across Districts. A financial management issue concerned a sum of £250,000 which, whilst apparently intended to increase the libraries' opening hours, had in the Management Team's opinion been largely diverted by Districts to other uses.

4.3.8 Discussion with the Cabinet Member for Transportation and Street Services, supported by the Chief Highway Engineer, concentrated on two issues.

4.3.9 The first concerned the deployment of District Engineers, and illustrated one facet of the devolution/localisation debate – to what extent is it preferable for Districts to manage services directly, or can they get results through more indirect influence?

4.3.10 In essence, the structure contained one District Engineer post and one junior engineer post per District, a total of 22. However, 5 of the senior posts had not been filled. The posts were line-managed through District Directors although there was professional accountability to the Chief Highway Engineer. The proposal was more or less to reverse this situation – to amalgamate the teams so as to provide larger teams serving several Districts under the management of the Chief Highway Engineer but operating from District offices so that day-to-day links could be maintained. It was asserted that this new structure would operate at a lower cost.

4.3.11 We heard that Members' experience (and indeed the Chief Highways Engineer's) of the District Engineer service had been mixed. In one case staff appeared to have been acting as if the service had never been localised, with queries and cases being passed from the District to the centre and back before being dealt with.

4.3.12 The second issue was that of the proposed Highways Private Finance Initiative. We remain of the opinion that it is essential that this is framed in such a way as to allow District Committee Members the final say on the programme of works, including trees and the environment and the quality of the street scene in their localities. This makes absolutely essential the retention of a strong client function. We were pleased to hear the Cabinet Member's broad support for this.

4.4   Housing

4.4.1   The situation regarding housing services appeared at first sight to be more complicated than most. Some area housing functions are delivered by Housing Officers; others by District staff. There are CBHOs in 2 Districts. Clean and safe teams operate in housing areas but are managed through Regulatory and Waste Services.

4.4.2   We therefore took evidence from the CBHOs in Northfield and Hodge Hill, and also from the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Director.

4.4.3   The Community Based Housing Organisations were set up following the Independent Housing commission (chaired by Professor Ann Powers). The concept was that these would be local housing organisations tailor-made to suit the needs of the area and therefore unique (although similarities exist with Tenant Management Organisations, Community Gateways and Estate Management Boards). Each organisation was to be set up in consultation with tenants and they decide what would be best for them and their homes. Northfield and Hodge Hill were chosen as pathfinder CBHOs.

4.4.4   The Northfield CBHO meets monthly. Particular emphasis is placed on receiving up-to-date financial and performance monitoring information. The CBHO is a strategic body with links to the District structure, advising and influencing local services. There is an expectation that the District Committee would refer any relevant issues to the Board for recommendation.

4.4.5   The CBHO for Hodge Hill had developed (in response to the diverse area and the view of tenants) into two organisations – Hodge Hill CBHO and Shard End CBHO.

4.4.6   The key factor which emerged from the evidence giving was that the representatives of the three CBHOs displayed an impressive amount of passion and commitment to their work. This left little room for doubt that the CBHO's have brought about the rebuilding of trust between tenants and the Housing service in these areas, a key improvement following the vote against stock transfer.

4.4.7   However, whilst the Commission envisaged CBHOs becoming responsible for the full range of local housing management with their own budgets, it emerged that they were essentially advisory bodies.

- Northfield were, however, still able to refer to what it felt were some definite successes in reducing the re-let of voids to 19 days and achieving a letting period of 30.2 days (compared to the city-wide 48.7 days)

- A success in Hodge Hill is the introduction of a system of pre-choice lettings working to effectively market property, reducing the period for which properties were void.

- Hodge Hill CBHO also felt that their work and that of the other two CBHOs were instrumental in helping to secure the one star rating in Housing, with their innovative way of working and improved working relationships.

- Good working relationships enjoyed with the District Director and the District Committee.

- No evaluation of the three CBHOs has yet been undertaken, though, in the case of Northfield, it had been operating for 18 months.

4.4.8   All three CBHOs to differing degrees (Northfield being at the forefront) want to assume more responsibility for the local housing service, in particular repairs. They felt that they can make an important difference here. In general, whilst recognising a need for further training, CBHO members would welcome further devolution.

4.4.9   Northfield CBHO members felt it unfortunate that the Housing management devolution had now been halted in anticipation of the results of the Options Appraisal work. There is a wish to consider a move to a TMO model as a next step for Northfield, being that the CBHO had demonstrated an ability to work collaboratively and a motivation for greater empowerment and responsibility.

4.4.10 Hodge Hill CBHO members were more cautious and asserted the need to establish a sound foundation before progressing through small scale developments.

4.4.11 The Director of Housing put the CBHOs in their historical context, explaining how, following the tenants' vote against housing stock transfer, the Independent Housing Commission had suggested the creation of two CBHO pilots.

4.4.12 As important as CBHOs are, the Director was clear that her priority was to increase the standards of the Housing service overall and see improvements across the city as a whole.

4.4.13 The Cabinet Member focussed on wanting to have a tenant-led housing management service. He was clear that he did not want to see one officer structure in the Housing directorate simply replaced by another officer structure in the Local Services directorate.

4.4.14 Both the Cabinet Member and the Director explained the government requirement to complete the Options Appraisal, with the second round due for completion by July, 2006. Whilst this was ongoing, the Director of Housing recommended that there be no further steps taken with regard to CBHOs. (For information, the options appraisal was subsequently completed with a report to Cabinet on 22 May 2006.)

4.4.15 The Director of Housing made clear that CBHO is a generic term which could encompass a wide range of different housing management bodies, including TMOs (managing properties through agreement with the landlord) and ALMOs (with responsibility for the management and maintenance of housing stock).

4.4.16 Reference was made to Housing management costs being much higher than those in other Local Authorities. In order to help find the money necessary to improve the housing service, she needed to drive down this cost base.

4.4.17 It was admitted that staff had not been "lifted and shifted" into the pilot areas but extra staff had been taken on. We were very surprised to hear of this given the overall financial pressures on the housing service and the continuing high level of management costs. It was noted that more staff were involved in management now than when the Authority had 50% more properties.

4.5   Infrastructure and Support Services

4.5.1   Whilst our main purpose at this stage of the review was to hear about and assess service changes following Devolution and Localisation, issues about support services and infrastructure were necessarily raised.

4.5.2   One such issue concerns the issue of whether Districts are indeed the right base on which to manage services. The rationale for using Districts is quite clear – that there are many independent Local Authorities across England of similar sizes and providing a range of services. But was this rationale borne out in practice?

4.5.3   There is a stream of thought that a constituency basis is too small – that in operating at such a level economies of scale in service provision must be lost – but we were not furnished with specific examples. Ideally, the devolved units should be "real places" which local people identify with, and constituencies do not contain the full range of service assets. If evidential support could be evinced for the scale theory one possibility would be to use instead a population base of 200,000 – 250,000, similar to many Metropolitan District Councils across the country. However, the local dimension would be completely lost.

4.5.4   We did not hear much evidence that the size of Districts in itself is causing problems. District Directors gave examples of co-operation between 2, 3 or even 4 Districts, particularly in dealing with partners such as Primary Care Trusts.

4.5.5   Instead, the issue which came to feature prominently was that relating to the change in parliamentary constituency boundaries and the reduction in the number of constituencies from 11 to 10. Again this illustrated a view that constituencies were not an organisational base fixed in the very long term, as the number and size of them were outside the City Council's control. However, with a boundary review recently completed stability can be expected for the foreseeable future.

4.5.6 Nevertheless there was strong support from a number of witnesses for an early reduction in the number of Districts from 11 to 10 in line with the new boundaries. This came from District Committee Chairmen and Chairs of District Strategic Partnerships who saw advantages in terms of maintaining engagement with citizens who would in due course be affected by the change in any case. A counter argument, put by some District Directors, was that District boundaries do not need to relate automatically to parliamentary boundaries, and since the City Council had originally decided that 11 Districts were necessary then that position should be maintained. The Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Culture argued that an early change would be beneficial in terms of the reviews of asset management which the Districts were carrying out – a later change could mean that opportunities for rationalisation would be lost.

4.5.7 This strand of the review came to a conclusion when the Executive formally drew up a proposal for changing from 11 to 10 Districts, at officer, Committee and Strategic Partnership level, from the beginning of the 2006/7 municipal year. We considered the proposal and heard from both the Cabinet Member for Local Services, who was putting forward the proposal, and the District Chair for Sparkbrook who was strongly of the opinion that the change would be detrimental to his District. Our conclusion was that such a change, should the Executive be minded to make it, would not fundamentally affect the course of our review. Subsequently, the Executive decided to go ahead with the change.

4.5.8 Evidence was presented to us particularly by District Directors of perceived weaknesses in both performance and financial information available to the Districts at both management and political level.

4.5.9 Performance management was also one of the District Auditor's key issues in his report of June 2005. We sought information about the INFORM system which Local Services Directorate had developed to bring together various systems previously used by its constituent elements.

4.5.10 It currently covers HR information including sickness statistics (HRIS), financial information (GLAMIS), Fleet and Waste Management information (Panorama), Pest Control (Panorama), Neighbourhood Advice and Information System (NOSS) and Libraries (Galaxy).

4.5.11 We were advised that INFORM is helping to achieve service improvements by facilitating pro-active monitoring and by better equipping managers with information they require to make effective decisions. An example here is the Pest Control reports. These include traffic lighted dashboards, based on agreed performance thresholds, enabling District Managers to monitor more easily the performance of the Pest Control service within their District.

4.6 The View from Frontline Staff

4.6.1 We commissioned the City Council's retained consultants BMG to run a small number of focus groups to identify positive and negative perceptions among frontline staff and their Managers. BMG's full report can be found at Appendix 6, but here is a summary of the main points:

- the average resident has low awareness of and interest in localisation and devolution;
- budget issues formed a large part of the discussion, including questions about their adequacy and inflexibility;
- variations between Districts e.g. in investment or disinvestment in particular libraries are seen as the result of "pot luck" rather than well-reasoned, sensible and properly communicated decisions;
- Districts now operate in silos, unable to share resources;
- the resources are constantly squeezed, putting pressure on service delivery and staff, leading to cuts and low morale – too much streamlining has been carried out over the last 3 or 4 years;
- the use of casual or temporary staff seems to be increasing;
- there is no clear career path;
- some officers have been able to improve their work by making good contacts with people from other services as a direct result of localisation;
- communication has worsened since localisation;
- services haven't improved but also they haven't declined;
- some aspects of localisation were rushed, particularly the management of budgets.

4.6.2 Some of these issues were echoed by a statement received from staff at Erdington library, who voluntarily submitted evidence to the review. Staff approved of useful links which had been made with other services since localisation, along with increased awareness of different services and what they had to offer. Amongst their concerns, lack of staff development figured highly, as did a perception that frontline staff are now being asked to carry out more administrative tasks, diverting them from dealing with customers. Their service seemed to have a low profile and priority in their District. On balance they considered the library service should be maintained as an entity.

4.6.3 Focus groups help the identification of issues – they do not provide any indication of how widely particular opinions are shared or how strongly they are held. Also, contradictory strands of opinion are often thrown up, and this case is no exception.

4.6.4   Nevertheless there are some important messages here. It is particularly noticeable that finance and budgets featured strongly amongst the problem areas, echoing the views of District Committee Chairmen and Directors. The issue of finance formed a sizeable strand of our investigation and the evidence on this is reviewed in the following chapter.

5 Findings: Finance

5.1 The Issues

5.1.1 Conventional wisdom has it that devolved or localised systems are more expensive than centralised ones – though there may be compensating advantages around the delivery of services.

5.1.2 We considered it extremely important to be able to balance the results of the Devolution and Localisation policy against costs, whether these be those one-off costs incurred in setting up the structures and systems or recurring ones.

5.1.3 In addition we wished to explore the true capacity of Districts to manage resources. Do they have the necessary information to manage the revenue budgets? What is their access to capital expenditure? What incentives are there for them to rationalise or in other ways make better use of their property assets?

5.2 Policy Costs and Operational Costs

5.2.1 The November 2002 report said:

"The proposals have been developed on the basis that change must be at worst cost-neutral"

5.2.2 During the review we went to some considerable length to check whether this aim had been met in practice. The first point to note is that by the time the Executive reported the Localisation and Devolution Project Plan to the City Council on 1 April 2003, the financial implications were stated in these words:

"Whilst the intention is that Localisation should be at worst cost neutral, it is anticipated that there will be some set up and transition costs. A contingency sum of £1 million has been set aside as part of the Council's Revenue Budget for 2003-04, to meet these costs. All commitments to be made against this contingency will be approved and monitored by the Executive."

5.2.3 Subsequently, in August 2004, Cabinet approved a further £0.35m to cover further transition costs.

5.2.4 We took initial evidence on financial issues on 27 January 2006, when we received a paper from the Director of Corporate Finance. That paper stated:

"What can be said, though, is that the corporate budget strategy underlying the introduction of the current arrangements in 2003 was that they would be cost-neutral in the medium term"

5.2.5 Whilst it is understandable that organisational change on this scale involved some transitional expenditure, we have not been able to identify when the City Council's aim changed from "cost neutral" to "cost neutral in the medium term", nor a precise definition of the medium term.

5.2.6 The Director of Corporate Finance's paper also pointed out that:

> "The City Council does not, as a matter of course, collect information about the cost of Devolution and Localisation. Rather it maintains "management accounts" to ensure that budget holders can be properly held accountable for the monies they are responsible for spending/ collecting etc., under the Constitution, and to allow the, formal, statutory final accounts to be produced in the required format."

5.2.7 Essentially the Director was reminding us that the costs of Devolution and Localisation could not be equated to a simple comparison between the situation before and after 1 April 2004. After that time the City Council structures contained a Local Services Strategic Directorate, District Directorates, District and Ward Committees. But the previous structures had contained localised elements, particularly in the leisure and community services. Ward Committees had already had some local budget responsibilities. Certainly some costs under the old structures would not have been captured in the accounts, for instance the time devoted by many Senior Managers to their roles as Constituency and Ward Lead Officers.

5.2.8 Faced with this position, we decided to explore three lines of inquiry which, in different ways, could be expected to cast some light on the issue of the cost of Devolution and Localisation :

5.2.9 First, we looked at the transitional costs. These were incurred in introducing the new governance and service delivery models, and in maintaining services whilst significant changes were being made to the associated management structures. These costs can be summarised as:

	2003/4		2004/5	
	Budget (£)	Actual (£)	Budget (£)	Actual (£)
Employees		322,503		43,144
Premises		20,371		18,163
Transport		3,783		391
Supplies and Services		302,788		31,797
Total	593,000	649,445	322,511	93,495
Total 2003/4 and 2004/5			915,511	742,940

Table 2 Transitional Costs 2003/4 and 2004/5

5.2.10 In addition to this expenditure, temporary funding was provided for some District Senior Managers' posts while permanent budget transfers were being put in place. This produces the current picture of how the budgets to cover transitional costs have been used:

Total costs incurred 2003/4 and 2004/5	**£742,940**	
Temporary funding for Manager's posts	£257,057	
Carry forward allocation from 2004/5	£329,000	
Allocation to be utilised 2005/6	£ 21,003	
Total allocation utilised	**£1,350,000**	
Total transitional budget made available		**£1,350,000**

Table 3 Transitional budgets and costs

5.2.11 These figures account for the transitional funding made available by the Cabinet.

5.2.12 However, there are other expenditures related to the Devolution and Localisation policy. One relates to the housing service; another to office accommodation for Districts.

5.2.13 To support the creation of Districts, the Housing Service increased the number of Housing management areas from seven to eleven. We were given £400,000 as an estimate of the additional annual costs involved.

5.2.14 At the same time the City Council has been experimenting with Community Based Housing Organisations (CBHOs) in Hodge Hill and in Northfield. Although this initiative had its origins in the desire to improve the housing service specifically, it is clearly related to the general Devolution and Localisation agenda for the City Council as a whole. The annual additional costs accruing from supporting the development of CBHOs, we were told, is £250,000.

5.2.15 Both these sums have to be met from within the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account. They therefore have had to be met from reduced costs and efficiencies elsewhere within that Account. Members were surprised that the "lift and shift" approach seemed not to have been taken on board.

5.2.16 A further set of transitional costs has arisen. "Head offices" have now been created in each of the Districts. Compared with the pre-existing accommodation budgets, additional costs of nearly £0.3m per year are being incurred. However, released space at the centre should

enable compensating – or greater – savings given relative costs in the centre and the Districts. But we understand that any such savings have yet to be identified directly.

5.2.17 The Director of Corporate Finance informed us that the current shortfall is being met from corporate resources, though it is assumed that compensating savings will arise in 2007/8 and beyond as the Districts begin to rationalise their local assets.

5.2.18 One very visible source of costs within the localisation approach is that of senior management and administrative support. We therefore specifically asked for information on this. Again the Director of Corporate Finance provided evidence that costs had been managed within existing budgets, although sums had been transferred across the Council as well as there being some reallocation within the Local Services Directorate.

5.2.19 For example, the District structure in 2004 contained 24 Senior Manager posts (excluding District Directors and PA's). Of these, 16 post holders were "lifted and shifted", 4 from strategic leisure services and 12 from services already provided locally such as Community and Play. In addition, £1.7m for management and support was provided from across the Council. £1.1m came from deleted posts or administrative budgets of Departments significantly affected by the setting up of the new localised arrangements, including the previous Leisure and Environmental Services Departments which disappeared. The remainder came from similar sources elsewhere.

5.2.20 To summarise the position, then, this evidence showed that:

- the localisation programme had been introduced within the overall existing budget of the City Council; except that:
- the allocated transitional budgets of £1.35m had been used;
- extra property costs of £0.3m a year for at least 2 years had arisen;
- some of the sums transferred to Local Services from elsewhere in the City Council, which arose from, for example, deleting posts or bearing down on costs in the Housing Revenue Account, could theoretically have arisen anyway and taken as savings.

5.2.21 The second related line of enquiry came through the proposal to move immediately from 11 Districts to 10, in the light of changes to Parliamentary Constituencies. Clearly finance was not the only factor to be considered here. The Cabinet Member, many District Committee Chairmen and at least one District Strategic Partnership Chair that we spoke to were in favour of an early move on the grounds that delay would create damaging uncertainty amongst, staff, partner organisations, and the wider community. The Chair of the Sparkbrook District committee, Cllr Jerry Evans, took the opposite view.

5.2.22 As far as finance is concerned, then the evidence from the Director of Corporate Finance was that it would be reasonable to assume that the marginal reduction from 11 Districts to 10 would save about £250,000 per annum. (In the first year this would all be needed to pay for transitional costs). Given that the same public services are being delivered whether through 11

Districts or 10, this figure does provide some insight into the cost of having District machinery at all, although it would be simplistic to scale the figure up and assume that the cost of 10 Districts is £2.5m per year.

5.2.23 Our third line of enquiry was to pose a "thought experiment" – what would it cost to run the currently localised services through a centralised management structure? The difference between the two sums might again shed some light on the costs of the localised approach.

5.2.24 Our Finance Sub-group considered a note on this matter put together by the Strategic Director for Local Services and the Director of Corporate Finance (this note is included as Appendix 3 – Alternative Organisational Models). It outlined four schematic management models for the services. Essentially it concluded that the costs of managing the functions were broadly similar no matter which model were used. Savings only arose if functions were dropped – for example the support to the local governance arrangements at Ward and District level, including support for District Strategic Partnerships. We note that in the previous centralised model (i.e. before 2004), much of that work had been carried out by Senior Officers across the City Council in their roles as Ward and constituency lead officers. The cost of that work had never been separately identified.

5.2.25 We were surprised by the conclusion, which goes against the conventional wisdom that decentralised systems are intrinsically more costly. We would certainly not have been averse to a conclusion that operating the Birmingham localised system involved a small net additional cost. In trying to understand this conclusion and reconcile it with the generality of the overall costs of a decentralised approach, we could have entered an information maze in a search for particular economies and diseconomies of scale.

5.2.26 At this stage, we concluded that the information available to us was all that could be obtained without the exercise itself bringing about material extra costs and prolonging the review. Nevertheless many of our Committee felt this to be an unsatisfactory episode. It certainly raised serious doubts over the City Council's ability to identify the costs of specific activities.

5.3 Revenue Budgets

5.3.1 The District Committees have, at least in formal terms, control of sizeable revenue budgets.

5.3.2 As at month 10 of the last financial year, the budgets available to each District were:

District	Revenue Budget 2005/06 (£)
Edgbaston	8,084,757
Erdington	9,477,350
Hall Green	7,499,046
Hodge Hill	7,310,616
Ladywood	14,897,922
Northfield	8,827,951
Perry Barr	9,629,020
Sparkbrook	9,196,967
Selly Oak	8,175,377
Sutton Coldfield	9,727,452
Yardley	7,351,556

Table 4 District Revenue Budgets 2005/6

5.3.3 District Committee Chairmen and District Directors raised several serious concerns with us. Frustration was expressed over a perceived instability in the budgets, with many adjustments being made during any one financial year. These surprises, usually adverse, undermined the ability of Districts to plan and to prioritise. There was widespread agreement that the financial information available to Districts and District Committees was inadequate, unstable and not sufficiently up to date to make budget and service decisions. District management could spend most of a day planning on the basis of (recently) given financial information only to have the work rendered useless by new information the following day.

5.3.4 The basis of the budget allocation to each District was questioned, as was the ability of District Committees to control and direct the spending of those budgets for which they had nominal responsibility.

5.3.5 Finally, the District Committee Chairmen in particular voiced concern at a lack of involvement and discussion in the preparation of the budget for the following year. The Executive appeared to be setting the parameters centrally and not allowing for local priorities to vary from those. Concern was also raised at having to operate in an environment of centrally driven cuts which removed the opportunity for any genuine efficiencies that had been identified to be used for service improvements.

5.3.6 During our inquiry we looked at all these issues.

5.3.7 The distribution of budgets between Districts is fundamental. According to the Director of Corporate Finance, service budgets were allocated on the following basis:

Service	Allocation basis
Highways	SLA: Road length/no. of street lights
School Crossing	Actual hours per site
Car Parking	Historical direct costs/income
Libraries	Historical direct costs
Pest Control	SLA: 2004/5 number of referrals
Ward Support	Allocation of Ward Support Staff (net of NRF)
Community Development	Historical direct costs
Children's Play	Historical direct costs
Street Cleansing	SLA: Activity levels
Refuse Collection	SLA: Number of households
Sport and Leisure	Historical direct costs
Parks and Allotments	SLA: Historical expenditure
Neighbourhood Advice	Historical direct costs
Community Arts	Allocation per ward
Your City Your Birmingham	Allocation agreed in March 2004
Directorate and Administration	Agreed structures

Table 5 Basis of Districts' Budget Allocations

5.3.8 District Directors in particular spoke in favour of a more needs-based allocation. The Director of Environmental Services and Community Safety, in his evidence to us, spoke strongly of his opinion that the allocation was far too rough and ready – to a degree that the whole basis of the localisation experiment was flawed. In particular this related to the SLA services.

5.3.9 At this stage we would only note that in other similar examples, such as the distribution of revenue support grant to Local Authorities, allocation formulae rapidly become complicated and their results opaque.

5.3.10 We have already noted how controversial the SLA services are, in that neither District Directors nor District Committee Chairmen consider that, at the moment, they can influence, let alone direct, changes in the standard or method of local service delivery. Looking at the total budget of all the Districts, which sums to £101.4m in 2005/6, it can be seen that SLA services (highways, pest control, street cleansing, refuse collection and parks) account for £55.4m, or 54.5%.

5.3.11 The inference here is that, of the budgets nominally under their control, neither District Committee Members nor District officers can in practice influence or manage over half of the allocation. It was also pointed out to us that significant sums could be spent locally without being subject to District Committee approval, such as the great bulk of NRF spending.

5.3.12 Many Members of our Committee observed that, in their own experience, District Committees' budgets changed several times during the course of a year. To a degree this was expected during the first year of devolution, 2004/5. Its continuance into 2005/6 was not expected. We therefore enquired into whether District Committees' budgets are stable.

5.3.13 The Corporate Finance view was that, with District Committees' budgets being allocated as part of the overall budget process, those budgets are then set and therefore have to be met. From that perspective, therefore, the budgets are "stable". At a high enough level, we would expect this to be the case. However, this does not rule out centre/local adjustments that are perceived by the Districts as random financial shocks. While the absolute magnitude of these may not be great, as Mr Micawber found, sixpence can be a significant sum.

5.3.14 At the local level, the perspective is indeed somewhat different. In the event, financial decisions in one District – Perry Barr – became so controversial that we received the first ever request to call in a District Committee decision (specifically, this concerned the use of carry forward balances). We were therefore informed in some detail about the overall Perry Barr District Committee Revenue Budget.

5.3.15 Looking at the various budget and budget monitoring reports presented to the Perry Barr District Committee during 2005/6, we find the following:

Date	Net District Revenue Budget (£m)
Original budget	9.318
End of Month 3	9.603
End of Month 6	9.601
End of Month 9	9.627

Table 6 Perry Barr District Committee Revenue Budget 2005/6

5.3.16 It can be seen that during the course of the year the total net budget in this case *increased* by around £300,000 – around 3.3%. Whilst on the one hand such a change could be considered marginal, the fact that every financial report shows a different total budget available may affect the confidence of Members in the information being presented to them.

5.3.17 That this is a general problem, not isolated to one particular District, can be seen from the following two pieces of evidence. Cllr Nigel Dawkins, speaking to us in his capacity as Chairman of the Forum of District Committee Chairmen and after consultation with his colleagues, told us that there had been frequent and unco-ordinated in-year budget changes required of District Committees; it was considered that this was largely due to poor planning by the centre.

5.3.18 An officer perspective was provided by the District Director for Hall Green. Financial information is provided to Districts by a team at the centre of the Local Services Directorate. His experience

is that the information is often inaccurate, and the budgetary projections fluctuate significantly. In his opinion, placing finance officers in District teams would ensure more accurate profiling. It would also allow District Directors to make analytical comparisons between Districts aimed at identifying efficiencies or the sharing of running costs.

5.3.19 As a footnote to this strand of evidence, we must bring to the City Council's attention the District Committee's provisional financial outturn, as reported to the Cabinet on 22 May 2006. All Districts showed underspends, with the total net underspend £1.113m, or 1.1%.

5.3.20 Given the pressures which, we were told, were on all District Committee budgets, this is surprising and it calls into question again the timeliness of financial monitoring information. In parallel with the experience of many Members, responses from front-line staff (see Appendix 6) consistently expressed concern about budget cut-backs and the impacts on services.

5.3.21 Finally we received evidence on the involvement of Districts in the preparation of the following year's budget. The position, as summarised by Cllr Dawkins and reported in the minutes of our meeting of 3 March 2006, is:

Regrettably, and despite efforts made by the District Chairmen thereon, there had been no engagement in constructive discussions regarding future District budgets.

5.3.22 As a Committee of elected Members, we can acknowledge the difficulties in consulting on a cross-party basis on budget proposals which inevitably have a political dimension. However, if the City Council is to succeed in realising the full potential of devolution, this particular circle must be squared.

5.4   Asset Management

5.4.1 It is extremely important for the City Council that it makes better use of its land and property. This includes the use of sites for more than one purpose (e.g. library and neighbourhood office) and the disposal of surplus property and the use of receipts to improve other capital assets and hence services. Priority actions to this effect are contained in both the Council Plan 2005+ and that for 2006+.

5.4.2 Districts are playing their part in this by drawing District Asset Management Plans. Essentially these look at the extent and performance of the existing assets managed by Local Services and assesses the need for changes in the light of ambitions in the District Community and Service Plans and in the light of Members' local knowledge. At the time of our review, it was expected that all District Asset Management Plans would be completed by the end of April 2006.

5.4.3 When we heard from District Committee Chairmen in November 2005, they expressed frustration at the cumbersome procedures for, and distribution of, land and property disposals. They believed that the current practice of allowing Districts to retain only 25% of capital

receipts was a disincentive to property rationalisation, and that a more balanced split would encourage rationalisation. As a minimum, a figure of 40% has been suggested.

5.4.4 The District Auditor, in his report on Localisation and Devolution published in June 2005, commented:

> *"There are some good examples of local work being carried out in this area ……………However, there is a lack of clarity among members and officers over control over assets and the process for releasing them. In addition, not enough joint work has been done, both with internal non-localised service deliverers and with partners, to identify joint use and other ways of rationalising asset use. Uncertainty in this area can lead to opportunities for service development and improvement being missed."*

5.4.5 The City Council has made important changes to the way it manages its property portfolio over the last twelve months. Following the City Council's approval in July 2005 of the scrutiny review on operational property holdings, an advisory property board and a Property Cabinet Committee have been established. One specific Scrutiny recommendation was that the process for managing surplus property should be reviewed, including incentives to accelerate its disposal. Evidence to our Committee's Tracking Working Group, chaired by Cllr. John Cotton, showed that a review had taken place. A revised process has been established which requires directorates or alternate users of surplus property to develop a fully costed business case within 3 months of surplus declaration. A full review of the existing holdings in the surplus portfolio is being undertaken.

5.4.6 As far as the level of incentive is concerned, the Director of Corporate Finance informed us that:

> *Districts, like other services, have an 'incentive share' of 25% of the receipts generated from the sale of Council properties they manage (up to a maximum £875k per disposal). This policy is approved by the Council meeting in the annual budget. The Council has very little capital resource which it can freely allocate in accordance with its own corporate priorities (most capital funding is provided to the Council for specific projects). Any increase in the incentive share of capital receipts to Districts and other services would reduce the Council's ability to address its corporate priorities.*

5.4.7 So it is clear that the City Council is making some progress on the issues raised by the District Auditor. Tensions however remain and some witnesses were looking for greater and faster progress.

5.4.8 District Directors raised with us the potential benefits of taking a corporate view of all property assets in a locality, rather than keeping within separate silos of Strategic Directorates. Members, too, are dissatisfied when they see the future of surplus property being decided by the land-owning Directorate apparently disregarding local needs and opportunities – the case of a former school in Hodge Hill District was brought to our attention as an example.

5.4.9 The potential of a broader approach was perhaps best summed up by the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety:

"The asset planning process being led by Districts should be extended to include firstly all City Council property and facilities in a locality, and then ideally, all other public sector assets. There is broad support to this principle but barriers include a lack of basic information about land and property; and internal "rules" about asset disposal and the use of resources. If our aspirations for service improvement and better value for money are to be achieved there will need to be far more flexibility corporately, and between agencies, about the use of capital receipts, service contracts, etc."

5.5 Capital Finance

5.5.1 Revenue budgets have been devolved to District Committees, but this is not the case with capital. Several witnesses – notably the Cabinet Member for Local Services and District Directors – put the view that a system of more complete devolution would see Districts having control of capital resources as well.

In our view this would be desirable to an extent determined by capacity to manage and a balance with agreed central priorities. In addition we also wished to explore the scope for Districts to use prudential borrowing to fund capital projects.

5.5.2 The Director of Corporate Finance informed us that:

1. *A three year capital budget of £15.4m for District services was approved last year (i.e. covering 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08). The allocation of these resources has been managed by Local Services Directorate. The provision of this budget recognised that corporate processes may not always adequately recognise local needs, and a general allocation can be made to each District from within the £15.4m if this is desired and represents good value.*

2. *Districts have an equal opportunity with other services to bid for further capital resources in future capital budget processes. Districts participate in the corporate capital budget process at officer level through the Budget Analysis Group.*

3. *Districts, like other services, have an 'incentive share' of 25% of the receipts generated from the sale of Council properties they manage (up to a maximum £875k per disposal). This policy is approved by the Council meeting in the annual budget. The Council has very little capital resources which it can freely allocate in accordance with its own corporate priorities (most capital funding is provided to the Council for specific projects). Any increase in the incentive share of capital receipts to Districts and other services would reduce the Council's ability to address its corporate priorities.*

4. *Districts currently manage capital projects and budgets in the NRF programme. Other District-related capital projects are managed by Local Services Directorate in discussion with the relevant District.*

5. *Districts, like other services, can finance their capital priorities using prudential borrowing providing they can afford the revenue consequences.*

The Accounting Procedures Manual sections 7.7 and 7.16 set out arrangements whereby Council services can use prudential borrowing to fund their capital priorities, providing they can meet the revenue consequences, namely the running costs and the borrowing recharges (interest plus repayment charges).

The borrowing cost recharges are calculated to meet interest costs and repay the loan over the life of the asset being financed.

The service must, as for any expenditure proposal demonstrate that it is good value for money and that the revenue consequences are affordable within their existing budgets.

Application to Districts

The District will need to produce a business case report demonstrating that the proposal is good value and the extra revenue costs (including borrowing recharges) can be met from additional income or from savings generated by the proposal.

The business case report will need to be cleared with Local Services Directorate including the Designated Finance Officer in particular, and will need to be approved by the relevant decision-maker in accordance with the Council's constitution and 'Gateway' approval process.

5.5.3 This evidence of course reflects the current position over capital allocations, and does not provide a particularly strong justification for maintaining the status quo. It is clear that capital resources, as ever, are limited; that the Government expects that capital is used to meet its priorities, as well as there being City Council corporate priorities as well as service and local priorities; and that finding a way of balancing these various demands is not necessarily straight forward.

5.5.4 We note that according to Priority 1.4 of the Council Plan 2006+ "Give Districts more flexibility to improve service delivery to reflect local community needs" the Executive will "Review financial delegation to Districts, including the option of devolving some capital resources".

6   Findings: Governance

6.1   Themes for the Review

6.1.1 As we have already recounted, the City Council's original intentions for Devolution and Localisation put heavy weight on the need to improve governance in the city. To this end a range of initiatives were introduced. District Committees were intended to provide Members with political control over devolved budgets and services, whilst leaving the future of Ward Committees and Advisory Boards to local decision. District Strategic Partnerships, augmenting the Birmingham Strategic Partnership at city-wide level, formed a basis for engagement with partners and the community, and for the production of District Community Plans.

6.1.2 We therefore wished to ascertain how these were operating at this early stage. Evidence was received from all District Directors and District Committee Chairmen. We also heard from a selection of District Strategic Partnership Chairs, including some who are not Members of the City Council. Written evidence was also invited from non-council representatives on the Birmingham Strategic Partnership. Lastly we looked at available evidence on the public's reception of the changes.

6.2   District Committees in Practice

6.2.1 District Committee Chairmen, by and large, agreed that the District was the appropriate level for governance arrangements, enabling good relationships with partner organisations and local people. There had been greater involvement by non-Cabinet Members in local decision making through the District Committees.

6.2.2 However, the arrangements were far from perfect. Confusion still seems to exist between District Committee and Cabinet Member responsibilities, and reference was made to the tensions this produces. District Committee Chairmen thought it important to resolve this issue before developing the devolution agenda much further.

6.2.3 There was also frustration that District Committees did not seem to have been culturally accepted throughout the organisation. One example was the lack of consultation over the proposed budgets for the following year, which we have already referred to. District Committee Chairmen also gave examples where Committees had agreed to small variations in services – extra removal of graffiti, or the innovative use of park warden money to benefit young people specifically – which were then met by management resistance and inaction.

6.2.4 The format and formality of District Committee meetings tended to discourage public involvement in those forums.

6.2.5 District Directors supported these points, and also suggested that work is needed to distinguish and define governance arrangements of the different bodies, possibly involving simplification through a review of these governance structures.

6.2.6 Whilst the decision-making power of District Committees was appreciated (although as mentioned earlier in practice the ability to vary services governed by Service Level Agreements in particular is severely curtailed) Ward Committees and Ward Advisory Boards, we were told, were valued for their bottom-up input and were considered by many a more appropriate level for public involvement. For example, in Hall Green during 2004/5 the Ward Committees had not met and all decisions had been taken by the District Committee. That had not been found to be a satisfactory arrangement, and the use of Ward Committees was reinstated for 2005/6.

6.2.7 Finally, tensions with District Strategic Partnerships were apparent. The need for partnership forums was agreed, but concern was expressed over DSPs diminishing the role of local, democratically elected councillors. It was not surprising to find later that some Chairs of District Strategic Partnerships had the contrary perception. Issues surrounding the support arrangements for DSPs were also raised, with the City Council usually expected to pick up the work and its associated costs even when it did not provide the Chair.

6.3   Partnership and Public Engagement

6.3.1 District Strategic Partnership Chairs were enthusiastic about the opportunity to deliver local solutions to local problems; however, some differing opinions emerged over whether the DSP arrangement had actually achieved anything. Some considered that the lack of delivery at this stage was unimportant as the role of a DSP is more strategic and long-term. Strong foundations had been established which could now be built upon. Some of the key points from this session are:

- Many DSPs were keen to have more control over funding, to help deliver the District vision. There was some frustration over the perception that funding was not being brought to the table by some strategic partners.

- Opinions differed over whether NRF money should be controlled by DSPs, with concern expressed over whether cross-cutting issues such as worklessness could effectively be tackled at the current Ward level of NRF allocation.

- There was some evidence of active community representation, although this was not common across all Districts. One suggested method for engaging the wider community was to allow DSPs to make funding-related decisions, however, it was also recognised that this might only attract "single issue" people.

- It was suggested that due to the difficulties experienced with engaging members of the public in meetings, their engagement should instead be sought on a more strategic level.

- Difficulty in ensuring partner representation at DSP meetings was also acknowledged, though this differed from District to District.

- District Community Plans were discussed, with acknowledgement that the original plans had reflected national rather than specifically District-related priorities, as these take more time to establish.

- There was some confusion over the role of the DSP, and whether it was merely a community sounding board or whether it was a strategic partnership where people in control of public money come together to make decisions regarding service delivery.

- There was acknowledgement that the DSP could be conducted in a more effective style, but uncertainty regarding how best to do this.

- The benefits in re-aligning District Boundaries to the new Constituency boundaries were recognised, although stability was also valued.

6.3.2   Overall, the frustration over the perceived limited amount of DSP achievement so far was contrasted with a view that DSPs were still in their infancy, and being strategic bodies, any changes implemented will take some time to impact.

6.3.3   The lack of a cohesive approach to DSPs across Districts was acknowledged and enthusiasm for the sharing of good practice was expressed.

6.3.4   Some of this evidence chimed in with what we were told by District Committee Chairmen and District Directors.

6.3.5   Some Chairmen considered that the creation of formal District Strategic Partnerships could undermine the role of District Committees.   Frustration was also expressed regarding the attendance levels of some Partners. Chairmen were keen to identify ways to improve the effectiveness of the Partnerships. One such disappointment was that NRF money was the only fund used to deliver Community Development Plans, with District Committee Chairmen requiring (over time, as relationship developed) a greater contribution from partner organisations.

6.3.6   Amongst District Directors it was generally felt that successful working relationships had been developed with partners. However it had been noticed there was still a perception amongst some partners on DSPs that they are the "poor relation", as they do not regard their influence as equal to that of the City Council.

6.3.7   District Directors echoed the views of many of their Chairmen by noting that members of the public still see Wards as large geographical bodies, and that some would prefer more local, neighbourhood groupings.   The adequacy of public interaction at the District level is still uncertain, but District Directors did not feel this mattered, viewing the quality of service as the most important issue.   Districts were regarded as the appropriate bureaucratic division for devolved service delivery, with the ability to gain a strategic overview and negotiate effectively with partners, and to feed-in Ward and neighbourhood level input.

6.4 The Relationship between District and Birmingham Strategic Partnerships

6.4.1 One of the building blocks of the devolution policy was to add a layer of formal partnership working below that of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership, so that partnerships working too could be enriched by knowledge of more local needs and opportunities. We therefore invited written evidence from the Partners represented on the Birmingham Strategic Partnership Board.

6.4.2 This was solicited through a letter inviting evidence on three issues:

- Has it been useful for your organisation to have local District Strategic Partnership arrangements in terms of improving the service you are able to provide, gaining information regarding the local area and co-ordinating a joint approach to local problems and issues?
- Have the District Strategic Partnership arrangements and the drafting of the District Community Plans provided your organisation with a vehicle for more effective consultation and engagement with the local community and representative organisations?
- Have the District Community Plans helped your organisation identify priorities for local service delivery and provided a focus for sharing local resources?

6.4.3 More general comments on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the District Strategic Partnership arrangements and how they interrelate with the Birmingham Strategic Partnership were also invited.

6.4.4 The majority of respondents believed that overall the initiative had delivered, or had the potential to deliver, significant advantages for the organisations concerned and overall improvements in partnership working. Many of the respondents also noted areas that they felt required attention and adjustment, and some proposed suggestions for improvement.

6.4.5 We will briefly summarise and exemplify the response here. A fuller account is given at Appendix 4.

6.4.6 Positive impacts of the District Partnership structure cited by partners included:

- Enabling them to actually make significant achievements that would otherwise not have been possible.
- Enabling the development of closer working relationships and provided vital contacts and networks of organisations within Birmingham.
- Districts were also found to be important in co-ordinating the provision and sharing of information and knowledge.
- Many partner organisations had also found the ability to gain knowledge of local issues through the District structure and district-level contacts extremely beneficial.
- Knowledge of local priorities, provided through localised Strategic Partnership arrangements enables partner organisations to align activities and resources according to local needs.
- Very local issues are focussed upon and are prioritised within the local area.

- The District Structure and District Strategic Partnerships have been beneficial in improving community engagement.

6.4.7 Some partner organisations also suggested areas they believe require further development in order to be effective, and proposed suggestions for improvement.

6.4.8 Though some partners felt able to influence the District Community Planning process, a number of organisations identified the inaccessibility of the District Planning Processes and District Community Plans as a barrier.

6.4.9 Some partners believed that clarification of roles and responsibilities within the partnerships, along with clarification of partners' structures and processes would aid the fostering of shared understanding and joint-working.

6.4.10 Although some partner organisations believed that Devolution and Localisation had enabled them to develop closer working relationships than had been possible previously, effective communication and information sharing were also considered by some partners to be areas which still required some work.

6.4.11 Again, though good practice examples had been cited by a number of partners with regard to information sharing, respondents highlighted a need for improvements to the two-way information sharing process with partners both informing and being informed by each other.

6.4.12 Though some partners felt that the District Strategic Partnerships had helped improve community engagement, others are keen for further development to take place in relation to this.

6.4.13 Many partners highlighted the importance of resolving funding issues and clarifying or altering funding arrangements to improve how partners work together at the local level. Many partner organisations also noted the difficulty of resourcing partnership activity.

6.4.14 There is a recognition amongst partners that a lack of co-terminous boundaries can make joint-working more difficult.

6.4.15 There is also an identification of the need to demonstrate commitment to the initiative, possibly by further devolution.

6.4.16 Overall, the partners said that they saw clear benefits as a result of Devolution and Localisation in terms of partnership working and the ability of partner organisations to engage with the Districts. They also highlighted many areas for improvement. Often these are areas where significant achievements have already been made, but partners feel that more needs to be done.

6.5   Public Perceptions

6.5.1   A very important policy strand of the whole Devolution and Localisation approach is to bring political decisions, service management and consultation processes closer to the public. We therefore needed information on how successfully this aim had been achieved to date. We first looked at what information was already available and found that the MORI District Survey of 2005 contained some important information.

6.5.2   The key messages from the survey for our review are listed here. A more extensive report can be found at Appendix 5.

6.5.3   At the end of November 2005, the City Council published the results of the Birmingham District Survey, conducted by MORI. These results came from a questionnaire survey sent to 1,000 addresses selected at random in each of eleven Districts across Birmingham, with a 25% response rate.

6.5.4   Similar surveys had been carried out in the previous two years. Usefully for our purposes, in 2005, the topics covered included questions about the way the Council works; the quality of local services; and people's propensity for getting involved in local public affairs.

6.5.5   The MORI survey covered a range of services, of which the following summary table provides some examples. It shows the Districts where people are most likely and least likely to be satisfied with local services. For example, Sutton Coldfield residents are most positive about the Council and local services, Hodge Hill residents are most negative.

The Council and Services –District summary		
Source: MORI. All figures are percentages.		
Service/Issue	**Most Positive**	**Most Negative**
How council deals with… abandoned vehicles	Sutton Coldfield (+18 net) Selly Oak (+17 net) Edgbaston (+17 net)	Hodge Hill (+2 net) Erdington (+3 net) Ladywood (+5 net)
How council deals with… bulky waste disposal	Sutton Coldfield (+39 net) Edgbaston (+34 net) Northfield (+33 net)	Hodge Hill (+3 net) Erdington (+9 net) Ladywood (+10 net)
How council deals with…dog fouling	Sutton Coldfield (-13 net) Edgbaston (-13 net) Selly Oak / Perry Barr (-17 net)	Hodge Hill (-35 net) Yardley (-32 net) Hall Green (-31 net)

How council deals with...litter in residential areas	Sutton Coldfield (-1 net) Edgbaston (-6 net) Hall Green (-15 net)	Hodge Hill (-42 net) Perry Barr (-33 net) Northfield (-32 net)
Frequency of litter bins being emptied	Edgbaston (+37 net) Sutton Coldfield (+36 net) Yardley (+29 net)	Hodge Hill (+15 net) Selly Oak (+21 net) Ladywood (+22 net)
Standard of street cleaning in local area	Sutton Coldfield (+51 net) Hall Green (+28 net) Erdington (+20 net)	Hodge Hill (-4 net) Perry Barr (+4 net) Yardley (+5 net)
Household waste collection overall	Sutton Coldfield (+73 net) Hall Green (+67 net) Erdington (+66 net)	Hodge Hill (+44 net) Ladywood (+44 net) Northfield (+44 net)
Doorstep recycling overall	Yardley (+30 net) Sparkbrook (+30 net) Sutton Coldfield (+27 net)	Ladywood (-4 net) Selly Oak (+9 net) Northfield (+16 net)
Receiving value for money from Council	Edgbaston (+1 net) Selly Oak (-1 net) Erdington (-2 net)	Ladywood (-32 net) Hodge Hill (-18 net) Yardley (-18 net)
Overall satisfaction with how the Council is running the area	Edgbaston (+28 net) Selly Oak (+21 net) Sutton Coldfield (+14 net)	Hodge Hill (-12 net) Ladywood (-6 net)

Table 7 People's perceptions of service quality

6.5.6 A further important policy strand in Devolution and Localisation is to increase citizen involvement through taking more decisions locally.

6.5.7 MORI found that 34% of people would like to have more of a say in what the Council does. 51% by contrast like to know what the Council is doing but are happy to leave them to get on with the job.

6.5.8 Looking at the District figures, the proportion of people who would like more of a say varied from 23 % in Northfield to 40% in Sparkbrook.

6.5.9 However MORI reports that despite this high level of interest in Council activities, only one in five residents claim to be aware of how the Council makes decisions.

6.5.10 Only 18% judged that they knew much about this; 76% said they knew not very much or nothing at all. Again there was variation across the Districts, but within a narrower range. The lowest knowledgeable proportion was the 15 % recorded in Hall Green, with Hodge Hill the highest at only 22%.

6.5.11 MORI then went on to find that fewer people still say that they have been involved in local decision-making groups of various kinds:

In the last 12 months or so...have you done any of the things listed below?

	Yes, have done	No, have not done	Don't know/not stated
Base: All residents (2,904).	%	%	%
Attended meeting about...			
...making decisions on local health services	3	78	19
...to regenerate the local area	7	75	18
...tackle local crime problems	7	74	19
...as a member of a tenants' group decision making committee	5	76	20
...decision making group on local education services	2	77	20
...local services for young people	2	77	20
...services in the local community	6	75	19
Source: MORI			

Table 8 Involvement in Local Decision Making

6.5.12 Even so, it should be remembered that in Birmingham's case these small percentages still amount to thousands of people.

6.5.13 Finally, MORI also asked if people were aware of the Devolution and Localisation approach. Against a city-wide average of 19%, Sutton Coldfield recorded the highest figure of 27%, with neighbouring Perry Barr by contrast registering the lowest proportion of 13%.

6.5.14 It appears from this snapshot that, whatever else the Devolution and Localisation policy has achieved, it has not yet provided the vehicle through which people would be more aware of how the City Council works and through which those who wished to have more of a say could do so. The survey also shows that perceptions of service quality vary significantly across the city. It is also likely to be the case that significant variations exist within Districts. This cannot be identified with the current structure of the survey.

6.5.15 We decided to try to complement this information with some indicative focus group work of our own. 3 groups formed from the People's Panel and 2 groups of staff working for the Districts were convened by the City Council's retained consultants BMG to explore a range of topics connected with the present and future position on Devolution and Localisation.

6.5.16 The full report can be found at Appendix 7. Remembering (as with the exercise involving staff) that the purpose of focus groups is not to obtain a quantified sample of opinions but rather to identify issues, the results can be summarised as:

- attributes of good neighbourhoods include access to and convenience of a wide range of services, cleanliness and good community spirit;

- generally people were satisfied with their neighbourhoods;

- positive attributes included social services, rubbish collection, upkeep of green spaces;

- there was more dissatisfaction with local libraries; "unsophisticated" leisure provision and the degrading of roads and pavements;

- people see councillors as taking local important decisions and want to know what these decisions are, with the choice of joining in with the decision making when motivated to do so;

- local meetings need to be publicised through a range of media and be organised in a way which balances the formal with the informal;

- to encourage attendance, specific examples of how previous involvement has helped to shape or change policies or developments should be uppermost in any promotion;

- a range of consultation response channels should be used to ensure that people of different backgrounds and lifestyles get an opportunity to comment;

- there is a wide perception that the type of people who attend community meetings actually deters a wider range of people from attending.

6.5.17 There are a number of important messages here. One is that people do think that wider public involvement would reinforce people's sense of community. Another is the need for the Council to keep trying to identify and use a greater range of consultation methods, and this issue will be covered by the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee's forthcoming report on community engagement. Finally, the perception of the attendance at and involvement in community meetings contrasts with central government promotion of an increased role for such organisations in service delivery. That agenda and other national factors form the subject of the next chapter.

7   Findings: The National Picture

7.1   Themes for the Review

7.1.1   In every scrutiny review, and this one is no exception, time is devoted to seeing how other Authorities are tackling the issues, with the aim of learning from them.

7.1.2   In the case of Devolution and Localisation there have also been a number of research and policy papers issued by the Government on related issues varying from neighbourhood management to public engagement, many of which touch on the subject of this review.

7.1.3   It is also worth noting that national policy changes affect the City Council's partners too, including the formation of a regional police force; the reduction in the number of Strategic Health Authorities and changes to the number and roles of Primary Care Trusts; and the signing of the Birmingham Local Area Agreement.

7.1.4   Much of the evidence recounted in this chapter comes from examining papers and reports, and was thus carried out as background work in the Scrutiny Office rather than through questioning by our Committee.

7.2   Devolution and Localisation in other Authorities

7.2.1   Whilst many authorities have experimented with devolving or localising some functions, Birmingham's still seems to be the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt at Devolution and Localisation.

7.2.2   This is borne out by the New Local Government Network's report on three case studies: West Sussex, Wakefield and Birmingham. The three case studies exemplify different models of Devolution and Localisation.

7.2.3   West Sussex County Council's approach was to establish 14 county local committees – meeting formally 4 times a year. These also involve District and Parish Councillors as well as County Councillors and, because there are only 7 District Councils in West Sussex, these County Local Committees are in fact more local than the District councils. The County Local Committees will also be able to involve other partner organisations, but only County Councillors can vote on County Council issues.

7.2.4   The functions of the Committees are said to reflect the kind of issues which councillors and citizens want influence over at the local level. The services themselves are not being relocated from the corporate centre to area-based administrative centres, and are only required to respond to local demands expressed by the committees – they are not under the committees' direct control.

- ✦ express views on policy, strategy or other matters specifically referred to the committee by the County Council
- ✦ have an overview of the well-being of the area and make recommendations to the County Council with local needs in mind
- ✦ consider, monitor and advise county council on local community strategies
- ✦ pursue initiatives aimed at improving local engagement
- ✦ prepare local transport plans and monitor implementation
- ✦ advise cabinet, monitor and take action to implement locally relevant LPSA targets
- ✦ exercise decision making powers of the county council on highways issues such as footway maintenance and lighting; speed limits, parking schemes, pedestrian crossing, road safety
- ✦ award grants to town and parish councils via the Parish Initiatives Fund
- ✦ advise on countryside policies including Local Area Management Plan
- ✦ support local environmental projects
- ✦ explore library service issues including opening hours

Figure 3 Functions of West Sussex County Local committees June 2005

7.2.5 Compared with the City Council's approach, there is a strong feeling here of an "advisory Committee" although the provisions regarding highways and local transport plans are certainly interesting.

7.2.6 Wakefield MDC has developed 4 Local Area Partnerships reflecting the parliamentary constituencies, meeting bi-monthly. The core principles behind this move include creative engagement; a citizen focus; partnership-based service improvement; and maximising opportunities for elected Members to engage with and respond to the needs of the community. The Local Area Partnerships were seen from the start as the second stage of developing the borough-wide Local Strategic Partnership, and consist of councillors and the normal range of local partners.

7.2.7 The meetings are open to the public and said to be widely advertised. The partnerships are not constituted as council committees.

- ✦ providing a middle link between higher level strategic governance (the LSP) and more local needs and activity, enabling a two-way information and influencing process
- ✦ providing an area dimension to existing partnership arrangements, by ensuring area needs are reflected in service design and delivery across all services
- ✦ co-ordinating and carrying our local consultation and engagement, including holding Stakeholder Conferences to contribute to Area Plans and strategies
- ✦ promoting opportunities for citizens to influence decisions and prioritise actions in their own community
- ✦ co-ordinating the development of local activity to support the overarching challenges identified in the Community Plan
- ✦ joining up area-based initiatives
- ✦ overseeing delivery of more local Area Plans
- ✦ nominating an area-based community representative onto the Wakefield District Partnership
- ✦ providing a focus on area-based liveability issues, including green spaces, facilities for young people. the environment, access to health and community safety
- ✦ developing new Councillor roles

Figure 4 Role and Functions of Wakefield MDC's Local Area Partnerships

7.2.8 The New Local Government Network characterises this approach as the devolution of governance. It contrasts with the West Sussex approach of devolution of governance plus some service responsibilities; and Birmingham's approach of devolution of governance and significant services. As the Network's report states, Birmingham's devolution is the most radical and advanced of the three "*and indeed probably of any council in the country at the moment.*"

7.3   Public Engagement

7.3.1 Encouraging public engagement at a local level was integral to the aims of the City Council's Devolution and Localisation policy. It is also equally important to central government policy on local governance. Recently the Government published a report entitled "Promoting Effective citizenship and Community Empowerment", which they see as being used by local authorities in enhancing community engagement.

7.3.2 The guide emphasises the benefits of an informed, engaged citizenry which participates fully in the democratic process, and uses examples of what the Government considers to be good practice from other local authorities in enhancing engagement in local decision-making.

7.3.3 The following paragraphs match examples of national good practice with successful district-led initiatives in Birmingham.

Efforts to become "Community Based"

7.3.4 Blyth Valley achieved beacon status for "Getting Closer to Communities" in 2005. The aim was to provide services shaped by the needs of local people. This was found to have aided two-way links with the community and fostered investment in the voluntary and community sector, increasing the capacity of the community to resolve its own problems and draw in extra

resources. In Wiltshire community areas were established and following widespread consultation, a community strategy was written for each area. Croydon, Haringey, South Somerset, Tameside, Tower Hamlets and Wiltshire have all been recognised as Beacon Authorities in getting closer to communities.

7.3.5 *In Birmingham:*

One of the primary aims of the Devolution and Localisation agenda is to allow the City Council to get closer to the communities it serves and to shape services according to local need. The Assembly Convention in the Northfield District is a good example of this. Conventions are organised bi-annually to encourage wider engagement with local residents and voluntary and community groups, and allow consultation on the District Community Plan. A large proportion of attendees of the most recent convention were local residents. Another achievement has been with the two CBHO pathfinders in Hodge Hill where regular communication has contributed to getting closer to communities by engaging local people in decision making. This has resulted in improvements to services and active community engagement in identifying and shaping necessary improvements.

Local Influence Over Local Priorities

7.3.6 The "Make a Difference" team in Ipswich aimed to provide for local input into priority setting. The team concentrated their efforts on the priorities identified by local residents and as a result have generated increased confidence in the ability of local citizens to influence local decisions. This, in turn, has improved the local area by addressing such issues as lighting, play equipment and police presence. In Bradford it was recognised that the poorest communities were disconnected from official processes of engagement, and often needed to find a voice for themselves. Neighbourhood Renewal Funding enabled the Local Strategic Partnership to offer neighbourhoods, communities and front-line workers small amounts of money to address the priorities for their area, and tackle it in a way appropriate to them. By January 2005, there were 66 Action Plans in operation across Bradford. Neighbourhood Action Plans have also been developed in partnership with local residents in Croydon. These have led to the development of a number of new projects run by local residents.

7.3.7 *In Birmingham*:

This category echoes one of the key aims of the Devolution and Localisation agenda where devolving decision-making to a District level has allowed more scope for local decisions to be influenced by locally identified priorities. Examples of particularly good practice in providing for a local influence over priorities are evident in a number of Districts throughout Birmingham. Community Consultation events have been held in Perry Barr, Ladywood, and Northfield to allow wider engagement with local citizens and to inform and consult on issues for the District and on future priorities. Similarly, results from residents' surveys have informed the priorities within Ward and District development plans in Sutton Coldfield, Perry Barr, Sparkbrook and Edgbaston. In Erdington, a Neighbourhood Champions Scheme was developed to identify priorities and drive action planning. Monthly walkabouts have been scheduled in Selly Oak as a means of identifying and resolving local issues, and a Community Cohesion group has been formed to identify priorities specifically for Black and minority ethnic communities. More specific examples

come from Hall Green where District engineers are working closely with local residents and elected members in resolving traffic issues, and from Yardley where consultation with local traders and residents has informed the priorities for the "Radley's clean-up". A key area where there has been a strong local influence is the involvement of local people in the decision making process within the CBHOs in Hodge Hill and Northfield. Tenants have been involved in identifying and shaping improvements. Similarly to the Bradford example above, Birmingham's current practice of devolving the allocation of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding to the Ward level ensures that local communities can see their immediate and local priorities addressed in a timely manner.

Engaging the Community

7.3.8 In Rochdale, the importance of bringing together, local Black and Minority Ethnic networks, tenants groups, voluntary sector groups etc in single events rather than engaging them separately has been recognised in formulating the community strategy – an approach that has been commended by the ODPM. Also in Camden, multi-faith events have been found to widen participation amongst the community, ensuring a focus on local issues rather than religious differences. Gravesham held a "Big Day Out" event comprising a variety of music, entertainment acts and food stalls to represent the diversity of local communities. Within the event a customer contact centre was set up and the opportunity was given for citizens to register for the authority's "People Bank" consultation forum.

7.3.9 *In Birmingham*:

The Community Consultation events held in Perry Barr, Ladywood, and Northfield to allow wider engagement with local citizens and to inform and consult on issues for the District and on future priorities are also a good example of engaging different groups within the community at one event. Also, in Sparkbrook, Faith/Community Cohesion events have taken place to promote community cohesion. In Yardley a Children and Young People Festival was held in 2005.

Efforts to Engage Those Not Previously Involved

7.3.10 Bradford's approach to community engagement for a community safety project has been recognised by the ODPM as helping to include many people who had not taken part in such activities before. As well as talking to established residents and tenants groups, the organisers knocked on doors and used surveys, workshops and focus groups to reach those not previously involved.

7.3.11 *In Birmingham*:

The inclusion of MORI and other resident survey findings in many District development plans has enabled the opinions of those not usually involved in consultation exercises to be included and to inform service planning. Also the approach in Hall Green's traffic management consultation where elected members, District Engineers and local residents (particularly under-represented groups) have all worked together to influence traffic management schemes has enabled different groups of people to be involved. Hall Green also notes that more generally new groups and individuals are beginning to be identified and consulted in the District Planning process.

Initiatives to educate young children in active citizenship

7.3.12 The ODPM state that Arts projects can be an effective means for reaching the very young. The "R U Listening" initiative in Lincolnshire has been recognised by the ODPM as an effective use of drama groups, workshops, art and letter writing to educate children about decision making.

7.3.13 *In Birmingham*:

Edgbaston, Hall Green and Ladywood Districts have set up youth forum events to encourage the involvement of young people. Sutton Coldfield is soon to follow. Initiatives such as these will help both in educating young people about citizenship and decision making, and also in enabling young people's services to be more closely tailored to their needs.

Involving Young People in Community Projects

7.3.14 In Gravesham, a young people's club created to encourage young people to get involved in community projects has been recognised as good practice.

7.3.15 *In Birmingham*:

District Youth Forums have been created in Edgbaston, Ladywood, Hall Green and Sutton Coldfield to ensure that young people are involved in the design and delivery of services. In Hall Green, Youth Forum Events are set up to encourage young people's involvement. They are not fixed member groups and use events to encourage socially excluded young people. A skateboard park in Selly Oak was built with a significant lead by young people, and it is hoped that such schemes will be made easier by the appointment of an "Activities Officer – Children and Young People" in the Selly Oak District.

Aligning Corporate and Service Strategies to Community Development Goals

7.3.16 In becoming "community-based" Blyth Valley felt it important to align Corporate and Service strategies to community development goals. This was recognised as good practice by the ODPM.

7.3.17 *In Birmingham*:

Both Perry Barr's and Sutton Coldfield's Community Development Plans 2006/10 have been structured around the four themes of the LAA to ensure the cohesion of corporate plans and community development goals. In Ladywood, effort is put into ensuring that ward/neighbourhood priorities feed into wider, District and strategic-level decision making. These efforts are similar to the good practice recognised in Blyth Valley.

Ward Profiles Feeding Into Plans

7.3.18 Using Ward profiles to inform community plans has also been recognised as good practice. In Lincoln Ward profiles were updated and input into local neighbourhood renewal plans. They were used to assess each Ward's capacity for community action.

7.3.19 *In Birmingham*:

Sutton Coldfield input floor target and profiling data into Ward Development plans and the Neighbourhood Renewal Priority Statement in a similar manner to Lincoln's Local Strategic

Partnership above. In Erdington, Ward-based floor target priorities are used as a basis for action planning. Similarly, in Selly Oak, neighbourhood renewal floor target data and customer satisfaction levels informed the four key priorities for the District.

Encouraging The Discussion of Topics and Issues amongst Community Groups

7.3.20 In South Yorkshire community groups are able to approach the Workers Educational Association for help with addressing and resolving topics and issues through workshops, visits and discussion groups.

7.3.21 *In Birmingham*:

The monthly walkabouts with members and the community in Selly Oak aim to provide a similarly ad-hoc forum for resolving community issues as that identified as good practice above. In Erdington, excellent community engagement with the District Strategic Partnership has been identified, with 50% of the DSP being community or voluntary sector-based.

Provision of Support to Community and Partnership Networks

7.3.22 Rotherham's Community Empowerment Network demonstrated good practice in supporting local representatives on the LSP with ICT resources and training. In West Cornwall, a mentoring programme and handbook were introduced to support new LSP members, especially those from the voluntary and community sector. South Somerset supports local projects with the District community development staff network and has been successful in drawing in funding for community involvement projects.

7.3.23 *In Birmingham*:

Similarly in Ladywood, money has been allocated to developing roles within the District to support the information requirements of the DSP.

Community Governance and Citizen Focussed Services

7.3.24 In Stoke, ten Community Forums were created, to promote more citizen-focused services and to develop a wider set of community leaders with their roots in local needs. Thurrock used its area committee structure to set up area forums and to increase the capacity of local citizens and groups to get involved in local democracy. They found that local democracy was made more relevant to residents as a result and noticed an increase in turn out at local elections of 10%. Also in Rochdale four Township Committees were created in 1992 to reflect the distinct geographical communities within the borough. These have extensive delegated, regulatory and financial powers. These committees create an array of opportunities for the public to raise concerns and participate "on their own territory" and are deemed to underpin Rochdale's current strong performance in contemporary citizenship agendas. The openness of Rochdale's agenda-setting process has also been commended in that instead of meetings being dominated by councillors with an agreed agenda, they are led by an Open Forum where anybody can speak.

7.3.25 *In Birmingham*:

> *These approaches echo the devolution initiative in Birmingham City Council, with local Districts providing local leadership and services focussed on the needs of local citizens. Edgbaston District have held open development sessions on the District Community Plan priorities in a similar manner to Rochdale's open forum sessions above, and have followed this with the District Committee meeting in an attempt to encourage members of the public to stay for this session where the priorities identified will be discussed. It would be useful to share such pockets of good practice between Districts.*

7.3.26 As an all-party Committee of Members, not all of us may agree with the government over what constitutes good practice. However it is noticeable how many of the examples cited can be matched by the activities of the Districts of the City Council. Indeed, these also go further than the national examples, because they recognise that such efforts not only enhance citizen engagement, but also have the potential to improve services through the input and feedback from users and potential users. In doing so, the examples from Birmingham could be said to represent achievements of the Devolution and Localisation policy and identification of prospects for the future.

7.4 The Neighbourhood Agenda

7.4.1 The issue of promoting a finer base to Devolution and Localisation – to a neighbourhood level rather than a Ward or Constituency – is under active consideration across the country. The report of the Birmingham Democracy Commission in 2000, which is often cited as the origin of the City Council's current policy, dealt with the city's many forums and associations at a sub-Ward level and considered the benefits of formal urban parish councils.

7.4.2 Over the last decade, central government has taken a number of initiatives to promote a neighbourhood approach. The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, with its emphasis on improving living conditions in the most deprived localities across the country, is one such example.

7.4.3 Neighbourhood management is another initiative, where 35 Pathfinder (or pilot) neighbourhood projects are in operation across the country. The neighbourhoods in which these Pathfinders are located differ significantly in nature. They are located in all regions of England. Some are in residential estates in the inner city, others are estates on the edge of towns, some are in previous colliery areas and others are in coastal towns or in rural areas.

7.4.4 The population of the areas varies significantly as well. The largest in these terms is Gospel Oak in Camden (London) with a population in 2003 of 20,570 and the smallest is Pan Neighbourhood Management on the Isle of Wight with a population of just 2,770. None of the pathfinder areas was in Birmingham.

7.4.5 The research report identifies the benefits of this approach in practice as:

- the identification and crystallisation of local problems into specific challenges, as seen from a 'customer/resident' viewpoint, together with the ability to raise them with service providers and prompt a faster response. In particular, this provides a drive for coherent solutions to 'joined up problems' as this is how residents experience them;

- promoting networking, relationships and joint working between service providers at a local level, to bring about more holistic responses to local challenges;

- improving the accessibility of services, particularly by promoting local/outreach delivery in the neighbourhood;

- providing an environment in which innovation and pilot projects by service providers are encouraged and can be better delivered, with new working practices developed as a result;

- bringing residents and service providers together to improve the sensitivity and responsiveness of local services to local needs; and

- helping to strengthen the local community and voluntary sector.

7.4.6   A related initiative has been that of "Guide Neighbourhoods", a Home Office programme which has identified fourteen "strong, successful resident-led neighbourhood organisations" and enables them to share their knowledge and experience with other neighbourhoods trying to tackle similar problems.

7.4.7   Three of these Guide Neighbourhoods are in Birmingham.

7.4.8   *Balsall Heath Forum* was created 14 years ago and has since provided street stewards to give information and welcome new residents to the area and co-ordinated resident groups and service providers to combine their efforts on, for example the delivery of safety, youth inclusion and environmental services initiatives.

7.4.9   *Castle Vale Community Housing Association* has been working for 12 years to manage its 2,700 properties and run other projects including community safety and youth offending initiatives. Through a large degree of resident involvement, the housing association has transformed the estate and is now held as an example to other neighbourhoods.

7.4.10 *Witton Lodge Community Association* was formed 12 years ago to manage the redevelopment of the Perry Common estate. Successful regeneration has been achieved through community ownership and neighbourhood management. The association provides community development, youth activities and events, and through its housing management has transformed the local area.

7.4.11 It was not part of our remit to investigate the neighbourhood machinery in Birmingham. However, in discussion with the Scrutiny Office, representatives of the Guide Neighbourhoods each reported excellent relationships with the City Council's District staff and that they are able to make their views heard effectively at this level, and in some cases to influence service

delivery. Particular reference was made to the excellent working relationships between Witton Lodge Community Association and the Erdington District.

7.4.12 All three Guide Neighbourhoods in Birmingham stated that before Devolution and Localisation they found the City Council less accessible and more difficult to communicate and share information with. Each Guide Neighbourhood felt that their relationship with the City Council, and their ability to make a difference had been significantly enhanced by the District structure.

7.4.13 However, one concern to emerge from these discussions with representatives from the Guide Neighbourhoods was a perception that the City Council has been selective over its use of government guidance. There was a feeling that the Government issues guidance and recommendations as to how local authorities should interact with neighbourhood associations, but that this is heavily adapted to suit the City Council's own needs.

7.5   Emerging Government Policy

7.5.1   The Government is preparing a Local Government White Paper which was originally planned to be published in June or July. The neighbourhood aspect is expected to feature strongly.

7.5.2   Also underway at the moment is Sir Michael Lyons' inquiry into what local government should do and how it should be funded. At the beginning of May Sir Michael published a paper "National Prosperity, Local Choice and Civic Engagement" which discusses the issues in the light of Sir Michael's interim conclusion that central government needs to give councils more flexibility to make real choices for their local communities, and new powers in areas that really affect local people's lives.

7.5.3   Some of what Sir Michael has to say can be taken in the context of the City Council's own approach to Devolution and Localisation , although of course his focus is different. Writing in the Birmingham Post on 11th May 2006, Sir Michael pointed out:

> "These are difficult things to say in a country that often seems fixated on 'postcode lotteries' and receiving the same services everywhere. However, different areas have different needs and views about what they want. It therefore seems obvious to say that many of the decisions in those areas should also be different, and that they should be made by local people who understand them best."

7.5.4   So a fair summary of the national evidence would be that, no matter what conclusion we come to about the performance of the City Council Devolution and Localisation policy in practice, the aims and direction are well in line with the national context.

7.5.5   What is needed now is to come to a firm and clear view to harness those local objectives, whilst appreciating the national context. It is to our conclusions and recommendations for change that we now turn.

8   Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1   The Direction and Pace of Change

8.1.1   It has often been remarked how ambitious the City Council's programme of Devolution and Localisation is. The original objectives were summarised as:

- improving services of most immediate importance to people in their localities;
- developing partnership working across public and other services;
- providing democratic focus and responsibility at a more local level.

8.1.2   Considerable investment has now been made in both new management structures and political arrangements. Meanwhile, national policy has continued to develop an emphasis on a neighbourhood dimension.

8.1.3   As, however, is to be expected from a localised structure, the detailed situation varies from one locality to another. Achievements, opportunities, needs and relationships all differ. At times it has been hard to discern any pattern across the city; at others our review seems to have acted as a governance magnet, attracting difficult cases and strong differences of opinion over courses of action, which have tended to obscure the fundamental clarity we were seeking.

8.1.4   Clearly, all that aside, our overall impression is one of a devolved system that has shown, frequently against the odds, worthwhile accomplishments. While there is less evidence of radical improvements in service delivery there is undoubtedly the potential to realise these improvements through fresh approaches to working without considerable increases in costs. This potential, however, can only be realised in the right cultural and managerial environment with fewer strings and a greater spread of positive attitudes throughout the organisation.

8.1.5   Whilst we were not able to clarify the question of costs to our complete satisfaction, we can bring forward no evidence of big increases in revenue or capital costs as a result of devolution. We acknowledge that there is no precise "before and after" budget for localisation to identify the full marginal costs of devolution.

8.1.6   As the Director of Corporate Finance acknowledged, the City Council does not, as a matter of course, collect information about the cost of Devolution and Localisation. Rather it maintains "management accounts" to ensure that budget holders can be properly held accountable for the monies they are responsible for spending/ collecting etc., under the Constitution, and to allow the formal, statutory final accounts to be produced in the required format.

8.1.7   There is therefore a general issue here, going beyond any one policy area. Financial information, in the end, comes in the form of these management accounts rather than relating to costs. This concerns us. The quality of financial information must improve. There is a clear

and urgent need for more work in this area and indeed potential benefits cannot be realised without more stable and finely grained information on costs.

8.1.8 Our principal conclusion therefore is that the City Council should maintain its policy of Devolution and Localisation , and in the light of this review move forward in ways that will make the policy work more effectively.

8.1.9 Many witnesses spoke of Devolution and Localisation as a process of long-term change. Some thought it too soon to make any evaluation. The Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety was not alone in referring to the process as a journey that Birmingham has embarked upon, rather than a destination that the City Council, partners and citizens have reached.

8.1.10 We understand the rationale for such a view. But we are keen to see the better services and the more coherent, flexible and imaginative use of resources that Devolution and Localisation ought to be able to bring. The destination needs to be made clearer, together with a route for, and expected time of, arrival.

8.1.11 Several witnesses, notably the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety and the District Directors for Hall Green and for Hodge Hill, put forward well-argued packages of proposals for the future. We are grateful to them for taking the time to do so, even though we have not agreed with everything they have said. In some instances we prefer an alternative approach, which we think would be more effective; other cases, such as giving more publicity to District actions, we have no objection to but consider can already be put in place without being endorsed by an O&S Committee.

8.1.12 Under the current Performance Plan, the Executive will respond to our review by drawing up an Action Plan. Our recommendations, therefore, set out the priorities which we consider the Action Plan should address. How it addresses them, and which other issues it covers, is for the Executive to decide.

8.1.13 We also notice that according to priority 1.4 of the Council Plan 2006+ the Executive will be reviewing the financial delegation to Districts, including the option of devolving some capital resources. Since this Plan has already been agreed by the City Council, we do not revisit the action in our recommendations.

8.1.14 We have already stated our firm conclusion that the Devolution and Localisation policy should not only be maintained but given fresh impetus and clarity. This should be done through the Executive's Action Plan which should address:

- building momentum and changing the culture;
- improving services;
- cutting strings to the centre and simplifying approval arrangements;

- exploiting the capacity of Districts; and

- building capacity at Ward and neighbourhood level.

8.2 Building Momentum and Changing the Culture

8.2.1 One of the District Auditor's findings in June 2005 was that the Devolution and Localisation approach was not embedded in the culture and operations of the City Council.

8.2.2 The evidence we have heard confirmed this. "Frustration" was possibly the word we most commonly heard from witnesses in pointing to resistance in various parts of the organisation. To this was added the view that the agenda had run out of steam and even that the policy was on the verge of being reversed.

8.2.3 A further aspect is illustrated by a widespread lack of understanding about roles. For example, where is the boundary between the roles of Cabinet Members and those of District Committees? Who sets service delivery standards in practice, particularly for services delivered through Service Level Agreements? Is it the Districts and the District Committees? Or is it the managers of the service providers? The original intentions did not provide this clarity and there is an evident need to do so now.

8.2.4 It is also important though to be clear about the basis of Devolution and Localisation . Whilst we would wish to see Districts possessing and utilising real power to vary services to meet the needs of their communities, there can be no question but that they are part of a single organisation – the City Council – and need to abide by policies and practices accordingly. But at the same time it is important that Districts have a hand in the formation of those policies, drawing on their local and cross-service knowledge so that the resulting policies will have the maximum beneficial impact on devolved services.

8.2.5 We see the need for a strong clear signal from the Executive that, now that a thorough review has been undertaken, devolution is a lasting feature of our landscape and that its full potential benefits will be exploited in the interests of the citizens of Birmingham. The direction of change should be towards more local influence and discretion, not less; and there should be clarity over the position to be reached in the medium term.

8.2.6 The key to change here lies in there being no doubt within the organisation as to the commitment to Devolution and Localisation. This should start at the very top with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive underlining the clear message of its permanence and importance.

8.2.7 This firm political leadership must then be followed and echoed by the City Council's own officer corps, under the Chief Executive, and by partners across the city who would also benefit from increased certainty.

8.2.8 To this end, the Executive's Action Plan to respond to this review should have both a shorter-term, more detailed and prescriptive element and also a more indicative element setting out the destination of the policy in, say, five year's time.

8.2.9 The Action Plan also needs to put in place a mechanism capable of sorting differences quickly so that the implementation of the Devolution and Localisation policy is no longer held up by unresolved issues, whether managerial or otherwise.

8.2.10 Undoubtedly there needs to be a clear settlement over the responsibilities and accountabilities of District Committees and the Cabinet. When Devolution and Localisation was first implemented, the intention was that the service specifications laid down at that time would provide clarity and a basis for monitoring. In practice this does not seem to have been the case.

8.2.11 For Cabinet Members, who legally bear ultimate accountability for the standard of the City Council's services, information on Districts' actions and performance is patchy at best and too often non-existent. Changing this seems to us to hold the key to improving the relationship here.

8.2.12 Improving this relationship will also require more, better structured communication between the Cabinet and the Districts, covering issues such as performance, minimum service standards and flexibilities, and future budget settlements. It must be acknowledged that discussing and resolving issues through a group of ten independent District Committee Chairmen may at times be an unwieldy mechanism. One suggestion put to us was that this could be eased by giving the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety the responsibility and accountability for all functions delegated to District Committees but that proposal we considered to be flawed. We also deliberated on whether improved arrangements would be facilitated if one of the District Committee Chairmen could by open and common consent act as the first among equals. That proposal, too, was seen to have some serious drawbacks in practice.

8.2.13 The key seems to us to lie in the future of the Cabinet Committee on Devolution. In a letter of 22 March 2006 to a Member, the Leader of the Council set out his expectation that the Committee would meet soon to formulate the Executive's response to this scrutiny review. That Committee should become the major forum for discussion and communication, with its membership including at least one District Committee Chairman from each of the three political Groups. It would need to be supplemented by continuing meetings of all District Committee Chairmen with the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety and, when necessary, the Deputy Leader. These roles in service specification, performance and budget formulation are extremely important and we anticipate District Committee Chairmen devoting increasing amounts of time to them.

8.2.14 The messages given by staff near the frontline of service delivery must also be attended to. To echo the views of the Cabinet Member for Housing, there is no intention of replacing one set of silos based on centralised functions with other silos based on Districts. Yet there is some evidence from staff that whilst Districts have brought together certain staff groups who have never previously worked closely, others have been separated, such as the divide between community libraries and the strategic central library function.

8.2.15 There is therefore a serious task for management to do in ensuring good communications not only within and between Districts but also across the City council as a whole.

8.2.16 Better communication should also promote learning between Districts so that in a range of activities the poorer performers can learn quickly form the best – activities such as addressing service difficulties, improving staff morale, and developing good relationships and information flows between the officer organisations and the District Committees and their Chairmen.

8.2.17 Staff also raised issues about funding and budgets – indeed the report of the staff focus groups (Appendix 6) shows that all participants spoke of difficulties related to staff shortages and budget cuts. These issues raised by staff about funding and budgets reinforces the concerns we have heard elsewhere about the need for the locality to have increased possibilities and opportunity to raise money for investing in and improving local facilities and services. We deal with this specifically in the next section.

8.2.18 Staff also highlighted a perceived lack of real personal and professional development opportunities and plausible career paths within Districts. This is not the only part of the City Council where staff have similar concerns, and we are aware of the intention of the Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources to improve the situation quite radically. However it would be particularly unfortunate if the District operations, brought in specifically to break the silo mentality and pioneer new ways of working, were to be unable to provide staff with good, clear and robust career development.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	That, in the context of the established policy framework that the implementation of Devolution and Localisation should be cost neutral, fresh momentum be injected into the policy and clarity restored around costs, benefits, mechanisms and objectives by: (i) the drawing up of an Action Plan to address the recommendations made in this report for the short term, and (ii) the setting out of longer-term aims to be achieved over the next five years; this to be implemented by the Cabinet through the Cabinet Committee on Devolution.	Leader	i) October 2006 ii) January 2007
R2	That in order to give clarity to the whole Council and to partners and to remove resistance present in parts of the organisation, the Leader and the Chief Executive underline the permanence and importance of the policy of localisation and devolution. Cabinet should also publicly state its determination to embed and develop these arrangements as a key element in developing customer-focused public services, enhancing representative democracy and citizen engagement.	Leader	September 2006
R3	That the Cabinet Committee on Devolution become the major forum for communicating, discussing and settling issues between the Cabinet and District Committees, with a membership which includes as observer members at least one District Committee Chairman from each of the three Political Groups, but that should there be any unresolved divergences consideration be given to setting up a clearing mechanism.	Leader	September 2006

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R4	That the Executive issue fresh and clear guidance on the division of responsibilities between Cabinet Members and District Committees, based on the principle that Cabinet's key interest is in seeing that the City Council's minimum acceptable service outcomes are achieved, but that how those outcomes are achieved is the business of the District Committees acting within the framework determined by the City Council.	Leader	January 2007
R5	That the District Committees use a common performance information system to report regularly to Cabinet Members (as well as the public) on service standards achieved in each District.	District Committee Chairmen	September 2007
R6	That in line with the developing practice of the City Council, greater investment be made in the development and career progression opportunities available to front line staff in the Districts.	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	January 2007

8.3   Improving Services

8.3.1   Under the present arrangements we noted a clear lack of service variation and improvement, and the evidence to us has highlighted many difficulties in making variations. It is also clear that, under the structures and arrangements they inherited, District Committees do not (and indeed, cannot) exercise in practice many of the decision-making powers they theoretically hold. These two points go hand-in-hand; one cannot rectify the one without also tackling the other.

8.3.2   Changing this position is essential but is unlikely to be achievable in one fell swoop. Our recommendations need to be read in this light.

8.3.3   Firstly, Districts need more and better quality information about both the possibilities for service variations and the associated costs and a real ability to vire resources both within and between service areas.

8.3.4   Alongside this, to ensure that Districts can use this flexibility in practice, attention needs to be given to the weight of evidence that the current allocation of annual revenue budgets between

Districts is now time-expired. Consideration needs to be given to an allocation more clearly and equitably related to need. We appreciate that this will not be a simple matter.

8.3.5 Next, the basis of the services delivered under Service Level Agreements needs to be changed so that they are opened up to District, rather than provider, influence and control. There are contractual impediments to this, again implying a gradual process. In the case of street cleaning in particular we were very struck by the evidence of the Director of Environmental Services and Community Safety about the piece-meal approach the City Council takes to cleaning services, under which the responsibility for cleaning varies according to which part of the City Council owns the site. If there was ever a case for using localisation to break down the silo mentality of the City Council, this must be it.

8.3.6 Members of our Committee are aware from previous experience that the fact that the cleansing of housing land is paid for from the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account has always been an obstacle for this. This cannot be such a difficult obstacle that imaginative ways in which to overcome it cannot be found. Indeed we see that Selly Oak District is operating a pilot study on the Three Estates area for a cleansing service operating irrespective of land ownership.

8.3.7 There was also a telling example drawn to our attention by a District which wished simply to increase the amount of chewing gum cleared up, with one offsetting reduction in spend in another aspect of cleansing seen to have minimal impact in this particular District. The fact that there was resistance to this minor, customer focussed change is revealing. There is a long way to go in embedding the culture of localisation and customer focus in some parts of the organisation and the structures and agreements.

8.3.8 The cracking of the SLA nut is fundamental to this. Originally SLAs were put forward as a means by which a locality could influence and indeed vary centrally driven services. They are now, however, seen as controlling agreements for providing pre-determined, rigid and monolithic services.

8.3.9 SLAs have not assisted the development of locality sensitive service provision. The initial process of budget allocation to Districts was too approximate, did not accurately reflect reality and was not subsequently improved by any change in the structure of the originating budgets.

8.3.10 We are assured that steps are now being taken to obtain more realistic and detailed budget apportionments but this will take some time to be constructed, deployed and tested.

8.3.11 Meantime, there needs to be an Executive paper on those services, currently determined by SLAs, clearly showing the time lines for which they are in place, any break clauses, how local variations can be made and what are the costs of the various components of services. All this is essential if Districts are to make decisions rather than receive reports. This could take the form of, given a basic city-wide standard, selection of enhancements from costed menus.

Ideally, part of each District's resources would, within the given overall level, be an unallocated lump sum the use of which would make virement within, between and beyond current services and providers a realistic possibility for the first time.

8.3.12 Furthermore, we heard plenty of ideas from the Districts about new ways of working and delivery services to an equal or better standard with greater genuine efficiency. For these opportunities to be taken, actual power must reside in the Districts rather than with service providers.

8.3.13 There should also be a willingness to introduce pilot arrangements if there is a call for a major variation in service provision in a locality which does not initially seem to have wider City resonance. It is only by such experimentation that we will be able to identify whether such variation really will make a difference and also what the actual costs are.

8.3.14 We do think that there is a case for considering the devolution of further services. The Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety suggested the Youth Service, Area-based Regeneration, and Housing Management. We have not specifically investigated the first two, and therefore recommend the principle, not specific examples.

8.3.15 Any such move would of course involve changes in the delegations from Cabinet portfolios to District Committees, and in the end the form of these changes is essentially a matter for the Executive. Similarly, the Executive could at some stage decide, in the interests of efficiency, effectiveness and transparency, to review the portfolio structures. It would be regrettable if such a move were, unwittingly, to hinder rather than to promote devolution.

8.3.16 Through other scrutiny work, though, it has been accepted that it can be more important to join local teams from different Directorates through working together in an area, rather than through transferring line management responsibility. This was the outcome, for example, from the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee's recent review of Environmental Wardens.

8.3.17 Aspects of housing management were considered for initial inclusion in localisation. At that time the City Council decided upon a policy of developing Community Based Housing Organisations. Since then there has been the central drive to improve the housing service across the city and the options appraisal exercise has been completed. The issue of what the City Council's policy and practice will now be must be clarified. Whatever the future for CBHOs, however, there is a case for developing stronger links between District-based housing officers and functions and the other staff and work operating at District level. Our emphasis is on joint working and securing better outcomes for residents. We are confident this can be done without, in the words of the Cabinet Member for Housing, "replacing one officer structure in the Housing Department with another in the Local Services Directorate". The Committee formed the view

that there is an ample sufficiency of staff within the housing area and that any changes in the devolution of housing management would certainly not justify an increase in staffing.

8.3.18 At the same time, the experience of Members and officers alike is that Districts require a little more capacity in terms of financial and performance management and policy development and this needs to be addressed at the same time as the push is on to improve service delivery. An increase in costs need not be implied as officers could be shared between Districts and shifted from the centre.

8.3.19 Similarly, Districts' client function needs strengthening to ensure that District Committees are provided with appropriate information on which to agree that sums have in practice been spent on the activities to which they are reportedly devoted. At the moment Members have too little of such independent assurance. Such information could be obtained in several ways: through officers, through service users generally, or through lay assessors. This could be a matter for local determination. In any event, the Executive should not finance this action through the top-slicing of District Committee budgets.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R7	That an Action Plan, with timescales, be drawn up identifying the minimum standards for all services to be provided in each District, with a costed menu of enhancements which Districts could commission within their available resources	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007 (for completion of Action Plan)
R8	That, within extant budget constraints and without reducing service levels, the Executive set timescales for introducing revised means of allocating annual revenue budgets between Districts, so that allocations are related more clearly and equitably to need.	Leader	January 2007
R9	That, subject to contractual obligations and resources available, an Action Plan be drawn up to achieve unified ground cleaning services, with single teams cleaning an area regardless of which Directorate manages that land.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007

		Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R10		That the Executive prepare a paper, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, on those services currently determined by Service Level Agreements clearly showing the time-lines for which they are in place, any break clauses and how local variations can be made.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R11		That the District Committees' apparent control of budgets for services delivered under Service Level Agreements be made meaningful by the service providers delivering detailed management information regarding budgets, activity costing and performance at Ward level	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	April 2007
R12		That a paper be presented to Cabinet clarifying the future intention of the Council regarding Community Based Housing Organisations.	Cabinet Member for Housing	January 2007
R13		That, in the interest of developing further the tenant-based housing landlord function, a paper be presented to the Cabinet Committee on Devolution, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, setting out how the Housing District Offices can work closer and better with the work of Districts, bearing in mind financial efficiency.	Cabinet Members for Housing and for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R14		That the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety promote the case for pilots where there is not an immediate and obvious case for diversity of service provision.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R15		That the Executive, taking account of the views of Overview and Scrutiny, examine the priorities and timescales for the Devolution and Localisation of further City Council services.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R16	That should the Cabinet revisit the structure of its portfolios this be carried out on the principle of the desirability of transferring further functions to District Committees, alongside the consideration of other principles designed to ensure effective management of Council services.	The Leader	May 2007
R17	That, within existing resource constraints and without impacting on service levels, improvements be made to the financial, policy and performance management capacity alongside strengthening the client function to enhance Districts' ability to monitor services delivered.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007

8.4   Cutting the Strings and Simplifying Approval Arrangements

8.4.1   Phrases like "the centre needs to let go" or "the centre needs to trust the Districts more" were regularly heard in evidence giving sessions. They were invariably used by Members and Local Managers frustrated at the strings which they considered the centre still held replicating the repeated experiences of delay in NRF and community chest expenditures.

8.4.2   We recognise a dilemma here. Whilst Cabinet Members retain ultimate responsibility for all decisions taken concerning their portfolio, there is an instinctive reluctance to transfer direct control. However, unless local decisions are taken locally then genuine devolution will not only be an illusion, but a costly one too.

8.4.3   That is why a programme entitled "Cutting the Strings" needs to be initiated. Looking at each service in turn, the actual decision making process needs to be examined to see not just who apparently takes the decision but whether it is subject to confirmation elsewhere. This then ties in with the associated paperwork. What is the paper chain involved before a decision can be taken?

8.4.4   A possible broad framework for 'lighter touch' arrangements could be an annual District Plan at the start of the year, an annual report to the centre at the end of it and quarterly update and financial assessment meetings within the year.

8.4.5 One of the principal reasons the government gave for bringing in the Local Government Act 2000 and introducing the Cabinet system of governance was that under the old previous committee system members of the public were not clear as to who was taking decisions. The new Cabinet arrangements it was asserted would sort this. Government has also subsequently confirmed that even with the introduction of area committees it is the Cabinet member who is ultimately responsible for decisions within his/her portfolio. The impending White Paper has to recognise that if Devolution and Localisation is to be meaningful then local members need to be genuinely engaged in and accountable for certain local decisions.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R18	That, whilst maintaining service delivery consistent with overall Council policy, a programme entitled "Cutting the Strings" be undertaken looking at those local decisions still currently requiring central approval with a view to a substantial reduction in their number and a simplification of processes in those that remain.	Cabinet Committee on Devolution	January 2007
R19	That consideration be given to new and lighter touch reporting and monitoring arrangements for Districts.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R20	That in its response to the forthcoming Local Government White Paper, the City Council impress on the Government the need to recognise that, whilst area committees derive their powers from cabinet delegations, members of the public must see local councillors taking decisions and not just passing on information.	Leader	October 2006

8.5   Exploiting the Capacity of the Districts

8.5.1 We now shift the perspective slightly. The previous sections dealt with ways in which Districts, particularly District Committees, could have significantly increased influence and control over service delivery in their areas.

8.5.2   The focus here is on how the remainder of the City Council can make more use of the District machinery – Committees, officers, and partnership arrangements – to achieve their own aims and objectives.

8.5.3   The rationale is that the Districts have made progress in terms of developing partnership working, knowledge about local needs, and getting closer to local service users and citizens. Therefore it is in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness that it be used as much as possible by the rest of the Council's services.

8.5.4   A clear example of this is the work of the new Adult and Community Services Directorate which needs to commission locally-specific and locally-delivered services to maintain independent living for adults. It, and its partners in the Health Service, will need access to local information and contacts which can be obtained through Districts and District Strategic Partnerships – a much better approach than the Directorate setting up its own mechanisms.

8.5.5   A different type of example is to accelerate and develop further the Asset Management Planning approach to make better use of Council (and, in due course, other public sector) land and property.

8.5.6   It is likely that there are other efficiencies to be made. One aspect of the localisation policy is that different approaches can be taken in different parts of the city, and after a time lessons learnt about best – including the most efficient – practice. This is an opportune time to work particularly with major partners to identify best practice as regards District Strategic Partnerships. For example, we understand that Northfield District has a specific agreement amongst partners setting out how the support to the District Strategic Partnership will be shared out.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R21	That all Directorates indicate in their service plans how they intend to work collaboratively with the District machinery, including District Committees and District Strategic Partnerships, to deliver better services and improve citizen engagement	Deputy Leader	January 2007
R22	That the current Asset Management Planning process be accelerated and enhanced to enable full District participation in considering the future use of all public property	Deputy Leader	January 2007

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R23	That the Executive and District Committee Chairmen, in conjunction with major partners, review District Strategic Partnership machinery to identify good practice, reduce sub-groups and eliminate inefficiencies.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R24	That fresh guidance be issued concerning the provision of support services to District Strategic Partnership machinery to ensure that equitable shares are in future borne by all partners.	Deputy Leader	January 2007

8.6   Building Capacity at Ward and Neighbourhood Level

8.6.1 There is evidence of the activity and success achieved by Districts in terms of consultation and engagement. However it is clear that Members themselves do not find the constituency level always to be the most appropriate for this; many have commented that public interest and action are greater when Ward and neighbourhood issues are involved.

8.6.2 This too is an opportunity to be grasped. District Committees should have a look at their own arrangements to see how Ward and neighbourhood engagement can be fostered. At the same time the City Council is working on a neighbourhoods policy which will entail the publication during the summer of a Green Paper. Alongside this may well sit the Government's White Paper on Local Government with a further set of policy proposals affecting neighbourhoods.

8.6.3 With the proper consideration, the City Council should be in a strong position to provide more responsive public services in neighbourhoods, coupled with an active local democracy.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R25	That each District Committee refresh its policy on its own role and that of Wards as a focus for citizen engagement, recognising that Ward activity does not always require formal Ward Committee arrangements and substantial officer support.	District Committee Chairmen	January 2007
R26	That the Executive's Action Plan drawn up in response to this scrutiny review also set out intentions for action following consultation on the forthcoming Birmingham Neighbourhoods Green Paper which the City Council intends to publish in summer 2006.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R27	That the Action Plan give an early indication of how the City Council's Devolution and Localisation approach will develop in the light of the proposals in the expected Local Government White Paper.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	January 2007
R28	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2007. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	February 2007

Appendix 1 – Background Documents

1. Birmingham City Council, "Localisation and Devolution", Report of the Executive to the City Council, 5 November 2002

2. Birmingham City Council, "Localisation and Devolution Project Plan", report of the Executive to the City Council, 1 April 2003

3. The Local Government Act 2000: New Council Constitutions – Guidance Pack, DETR, October 2000

4. Audit Commission, "Localisation and Devolution – Birmingham City Council", June 2005

5. Letter from Cllr Michael Wilkes to non-City Council members of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership Board, 8 February 2006

6. New Local Government Network, "Councils embracing localism: lessons from Birmingham, Wakefield and West Sussex", June 2005

7. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, "Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment", January 2006

8. Birmingham Democracy Commission, "Local Voices, Local Democracy", 2000

9. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, "Neighbourhood Management – at the Turning Point?", March 2006

10. Rt. Hon. David Miliband MP, 'Empowerment And The Deal For Devolution' – speech to the New Local Government Network Annual Conference, January 2006

11. Rt. Hon. David Miliband MP, 'Local Government as Place Maker' – speech to the LGA Delivering Sustainable Communities Conference, February 2006.

12. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, "All Our Futures: The challenges for local governance in 2015", April 2006

13. The Lyons Inquiry, 'National Prosperity, Local Choice and Civic Engagement', May 2006

14. Sir Michael Lyons, 'I am here and I am listening to you', Birmingham Post, Thursday May 11 2006

15. Cllr Mike Whitby, letter of 22 March 2006 to Cllr Zoe Hopkins, contained in the papers for the Annual Council Meeting 23 May 2006

16. Birmingham City Council, "Corporate Revenue Budget Monitoring 2005/06 – Provisional Outturn (up to 28 February 2006)", report of the Interim Head of the Paid Service and the Director of Corporate Finance to the Cabinet, 22 May 2006

Appendix 2 – Constitutional Provisions regarding District and Ward Committees

A.　MEMBERSHIP OF DISTRICT COMMITTEES

1.　Ten District Committees have been established by the Council and the relevant Ward Members have been appointed to serve on the same:-

District Committee:	Relevant Members from the following Wards:
1.　Edgbaston	Bartley Green, Edgbaston, Harborne and Quinton,
2.　Erdington	Erdington, Kingstanding, Stockland Green and Tyburn
3.　Hall Green	Hall Green, Moseley & Kings Heath, Sparkbrook and Springfield
4.　Hodge Hill	Bordesley Green, Hodge Hill, Shard End and Washwood Heath
5.　Ladywood	Aston, Ladywood, Nechells and Soho
6.　Northfield	Kings Norton, Longbridge, Northfield and Weoley
7.　Perry Barr	Handsworth Wood, Lozells & East Handsworth, Oscott and Perry Barr
8.　Selly Oak	Billesley, Bournville, Brandwood and Selly Oak
9.　Sutton Coldfield	Sutton Four Oaks, Sutton New Hall, Sutton Trinity and Sutton Vesey
10.　Yardley	Acocks Green, Sheldon, Stechford & Yardley North and South Yardley

The fact that a District Committee wishes to be known as a Constituency Committee has no impact on the Constitution, as the functions, powers, duties and terms of reference of the same are identical to District Committees.

B.   MEMBERSHIP OF WARD COMMITTEES

2.   Where these have been established by the AGM, the membership of Ward Committees shall consist of those Members elected to serve that Ward. Once Ward Committees have been established, only the City Council - or by operation of the law (i.e. disqualification of members) - can dissolve the same. The MP for the relevant Ward should be invited to attend any relevant Ward Committee as an observer with the right to speak and there will be no co-opted members of the Ward Committee. Where a Ward Committee does not exist, the functions, powers, duties and terms of reference rest with the relevant District Committee.

C.   EXECUTIVE POWERS DEVOLVED TO DISTRICT COMMITTEES

3.   Subject to the Rules of Governance for District Committees and other relevant parts of the Constitutional Arrangements approved by the City Council in April and June 2003, the Cabinet delegated the following operational powers and duties of the Executive, in December 2003, to the relevant District Committees:-

(i)   **Operational Housing Services**

Where relevant housing services and budgets have been devolved to a relevant District Committee, it will exercise all the operational Executive powers and duties of the Council as a Housing Authority under the Housing Acts and other relevant legislation conferring powers and duties relating to housing upon the Council – save for those strategic and operational Executive powers and duties of the Council that have been reserved to the relevant Cabinet Member;

(ii)   **Operational Leisure, Sport and Cultural Services**

Where relevant leisure, sport and cultural services and budgets have been devolved to a relevant District Committee, it will exercise all the operational Executive powers and duties of the Council with regard to such matters under relevant legislation conferring powers and duties relating to the same upon the Council - save for those strategic and operational Executive powers and duties of the Council that have been reserved to the relevant Cabinet Member;

(iii)   **Operational Local Services and Community Safety Matters**

Where relevant local services and community safety matters and budgets have been devolved to a relevant District Committee, it will exercise all the operational Executive powers and duties of the Council with regard to such matters under relevant legislation conferring powers and duties relating to the same upon the Council - save for those strategic and operational Executive powers and duties of the Council that have been reserved to the relevant Cabinet Member - and, in particular, be responsible for community development within the area of the District Committee; and

(iv)   **Operational Transportation and Street Services**

Where relevant transportation and street services and budgets have been devolved to a relevant District Committee, it will exercise all the operational Executive powers and duties of the Council with regard to such matters under relevant legislation conferring powers and duties relating to the same upon the Council - save for those strategic and operational Executive powers and duties of the Council that have been reserved to the relevant Cabinet Member.

4.   Without prejudice to paragraph 3, exercise the relevant operational management powers and duties of the Council in accordance with any enactments listed under the relevant Cabinet Member Portfolio(s).

5.   In undertaking any of the Executive powers and duties delegated by the Cabinet to any District Committee, it will:-

(i)   comply with any relevant laws on the subject including the Rules of Governance established for District Committees and other relevant parts of the Constitutional Arrangements approved by the City Council in April and June 2003;

(ii)   work in collaboration with the relevant Cabinet Member(s) and other relevant Members and Officers so as to ensure the successful delivery of the Council's Devolution and Localisation of Services Agenda; and

(iii)   ensure, within the relevant devolved budgets for the same, the continuous improvement of services devolved to District Committees.

D.   RULES OF GOVERNANCE AND TERMS OF REFERENCE OF DISTRICT COMMITTEES

6.   **Membership**

(i)   Membership of the District Committees is restricted to City Councillors representative of the Wards within each respective District.

(ii)   The relevant Member(s) of Parliament relating to each District should be invited to each meeting of a District Committee as an observer with the right to speak.

(iii)   There will be no Co-opted Members on the District Committees at this stage.

7.   **Meetings**

(i)   In accordance with Standing Order 25 of the Council, each District Committee shall meet at the start of each Municipal Year, and, thereafter, as and when required.   Ward Committees currently have a 6-meetings per year limit with provisions for extra meetings if required.

(ii)   The District Committee must produce an Annual District Service Plan, which would be submitted to the Cabinet for approval, by no later than November of each year.

(iii)   The Chairman of a District Committee would be permitted to call a special meeting of the District Committee, as and when the need arises.

(iv)   District Committee meetings should be subject to the same limit on duration subject to there being the discretion to extend the duration, if the District Committee, by a simple majority decision, agreed to extend.

8.   **Agenda**

(i)   The agenda for the District Committee must be made available to members of the District Committees and to such other persons as the Committee shall decide.   The agenda shall comprise the title plus a brief description of the items to be discussed.

(ii)   Supporting reports must be circulated to members of the District Committee and individual copies of supporting reports are to be made available on request and at the meeting to members of the public, so far as they do not relate to an item on the private agenda.

(iii)   For the avoidance of doubt, the Cabinet, Cabinet Members, Head of Paid Services, Monitoring Officer and the Chief Financial Officer would all have the 'right to know' in respect of any private agenda report(s) being considered by the District Committees or any sub-committees that may be established by them.

(iv)   District Committees may meet in private, so long as the relevant Access to Information Rules are complied with.

9.   **Quorum**

(i)   The Quorum for a District Committee consisting of 3 Wards shall be 5 Elected Members for that District and for a District Committee of 4 Wards it shall be 6 Elected Members for that District.

(ii)   The Quorum for a Ward Committee (where established) shall be 2 members.

10.   **Sub-delegation**

(i)   In accordance with Standing Order 24, every Committee of the Council may, subject to the approval of the Council, appoint one or more sub-committees for purposes specified by the committee.

(ii)   Save for existing Ward Committees becoming sub-committees of the District Committee and the District Committees being able to delegate its Executive functions to any Ward Committee within its area, no further sub-delegation will be allowed, during the first phase of Devolution.

(iii)   If a District Committee wished to set up a special Sub-Committee that was not a Ward Committee, it must, first, inform the Monitoring Officer who will, after considering all the corporate, financial and legal implications, refer the matter to the Cabinet for a decision on the matter.

11.   **Code of Conduct for Members**

(i)   Birmingham City Council's Code of Conduct for Members was adopted by the City Council on 8 January 2002. The ethical standards framework contains the guiding principle that Members must be open, fair and transparent in the conduct of their official duties. They must respect others in the conduct of their public lives and must ensure due probity of any decision making on behalf of the City Council.

(ii) By the very nature of the District Committees, members will be making decisions in relation to their own Ward and District and the guiding principle will become paramount in the way in which business is dealt with by the District Committees.

(iii) It is important, therefore, that members are aware not only of the way in which they conduct their own and Council business, but also aware of the way in which they are seen to conduct such business.

(iv) Accordingly, Birmingham's Code of Conduct for Members, as a matter of law, applies to District Committees, Ward Committees and any other Sub-Committees approved by the Cabinet pursuant to paragraph 10 above.

12. **Compliance issues and Corporate Documents**

(i) "Compliance issues", for the purpose of this section, covers constitutional, legal, financial, ethical, probity and propriety issues.

(ii) Compliance issues are inherently linked to the principles of open, effective and efficient, transparent and accountable local government. The City Council has discharged its Executive functions, since December 2001, through a Cabinet and Council Leader Model - with some powers/functions delegated to Cabinet Members. As part of the devolution process, therefore, some of the Executive's powers/functions are delegated further from the Cabinet to the District and/or Ward Committees.

(iii) As a matter of law, the Council/Cabinet can, of course, limit or withdraw those further delegations as and when it thinks it appropriate to do so. In any devolved system, it is important that the Cabinet, as part of the need to maintain a strong City/Corporate governance structure, should not totally abdicate accountability and responsibility to the District or Ward levels. The Cabinet does, therefore, make clear the limitations or the circumstances under which the withdrawal of delegations might occur.

(iv) The Council has established:-

(a) A clear set of criteria by which the Cabinet may limit or withdraw powers/functions to or from the District and/or Ward Committees - see paragraph (v) below;

(b) A range of powers available to the Cabinet in order to address any shortcomings of any District and/or Ward Committees with regard to improving, maintaining or enhancing the reputation of Birmingham, service delivery to the citizens of Birmingham and encouraging greater open and transparent local governance – see paragraph (vi) below; and

(c)   <u>A reserve power available to the Cabinet</u> in order to reward innovation and creativity in local government, improve/enhance service delivery to the citizens of Birmingham and increase electoral turnouts at local elections – see paragraph (vii) below.

(v)   **The main criteria** approved by the Council, **for paragraph 12 (iv)(a)**, are set out in **Appendix A below. Appendix A** cannot be totally exhaustive, as the effect of an exhaustive list, could fetter the discretion of the Cabinet/Council - which will not be lawful. Furthermore, in terms of making a decision under the main criteria set out in **Appendix A**, the Cabinet must act in accordance with the law and take action that is reasonable, appropriate and proportionate to the circumstances. It must also have due regard to the interests of the Council, <u>as a whole</u>, and the public interest of the citizens of Birmingham.

(vi)   **The full range of powers** available to the Cabinet and approved by the Council, **for paragraph 12(iv)(b)**, are set out in **Appendix B below**.

(vii)   **The reserve power - mentioned under paragraph 12(iv)(c)** and approved by the Council - can be used by the Cabinet to give greater or additional delegations of powers/functions, budgets and services/activities.

(viii)   For the avoidance of doubt, District Committees will be discharging the Executive Functions of the City Council - as delegated to the Cabinet, Cabinet Members and Chief Officers. Accordingly, it is imperative that the District Committees transact their business within the corporate policies, annual plans, procedures, systems and processes approved by the full City Council - hereinafter referred to as **'the Corporate Documents'** - and any other guidance or direction issued, from time to time, by the Cabinet to a specific District Committee or District Committees. A failure to do so will trigger one of the actions set above.

(ix)   In keeping, therefore, with the general principle of transparency, the list of Corporate Documents within which the District Committees must operate (i.e. non-negotiable), is set out in **Appendix C below**.

E.   **TERMS OF REFERENCE OF DISTRICT COMMITTEES**

13.   Each District Committee shall exercise all the Executive powers and duties of the Council with regard to matters relating to the area of the District, as determined by the Cabinet, and, in particular, shall:-

(i)   Prepare an Annual District Service Plan and submit a draft copy of the same to the Cabinet for approval by the end of November of each year and finalise the Plan by the end of March in each year, after the Council has approved the Cabinet and Corporate Plan and the Annual Budget for the relevant year;

(ii) In accordance with any guidance issued by the Chief Financial Officer, shape budget priorities and expenditure within the District and provide to the Cabinet, on an annual basis with the Draft Annual District Service Plan, a financial plan for the current and future financial years;

(iii) Once the Draft Annual District Service Plan, budget priorities and financial plan have been approved by the Cabinet, the District Committee will be held accountable and responsible to the Cabinet for its delivery, in the geographical area of the District Committee, to the set budget and any on-going performance management, monitoring, reviewing, development and auditing of the same, so as to ensure improving services to the citizens of Birmingham;

(iv) Identify the need for and establish any new or improved partnership arrangements and resources within and, possibly, outside the District and to refer the same to the Cabinet for consideration. If the Cabinet and/or the City Council agree to any such new or improved partnership arrangements and/or resources, the District Committee will ensure the same are effectively and efficiently implemented within the District;

(v)   Identify to the Cabinet further opportunities for devolution and neighbourhood management arrangements and keep under review local governance arrangements within the District (including the production and review of a District Governance Framework, a longer term Community Plan for the District and a Consultation and Engagement Plan);

(vi) Make recommendations to the Cabinet, from time to time, in order to influence and inform the strategic and policy direction of the City Council;

(vii) Identify opportunities to improve the economic, social or environmental well being of the citizens of Birmingham and, in particular, those who live in the District and to take action within any function/powers delegated to it or to refer the matter to the Cabinet for consideration;

(viii) Ensure the appropriate communication of policies and priorities of the City Council at a District and/or Ward levels;

(ix) Consult with District residents and/or local interest groups on those matters contained within these Terms of Reference;

(x)   In accordance with any best practice guidance issued by the Head of Paid Service, from time to time on performance management / review / reporting, prepare reports on and implement approved service improvements approved by the Cabinet;

(xi)   In accordance with any best practice guidance issued by the Monitoring Officer, from time to time on constitutional, legal, probity or propriety issues, implement the same at the District and/or Ward levels;

(xii) In accordance with any best practice guidance issued by the Chief Financial Officer, from time to time on financial / budgetary / personnel / property / IT matters, prepare and submit to the Chief Financial Officer regular budget monitoring reports and annual out-turn reports;

(xiii) Following a recommendation of the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Financial Officer, undertake any other Terms of Reference as the Cabinet may, from time to time, agree; and

(xiv) For the avoidance of doubt, where no Ward Committees have been established by the City Council, any business that would have been transacted pursuant to the Terms of Reference of such Ward Committees shall be transacted by the relevant District Committees.

For further information on the Devolution and Localisation of Services, please consult the relevant City Council Report (and Appendices) of 1st April 2003.

F.   **TERMS OF REFERENCE OF WARD COMMITTEES (where appointed)**

14.1   To encourage and facilitate dialogue, between the Council and local people within their Ward with a view to:

(i)   ensuring that the needs of the Ward and key issues affecting local people are identified and assessed;

(ii)   ensuring that such needs and issues are clearly expressed to, and considered by, the relevant Cabinet Member/Committees/Departments of the Council (or, where relevant, other public agencies); and

(iii) generally, maximising the influence of local people over the way in which the functions of the Council (or other public agencies) are discharged within the Ward.

14.2 To encourage and facilitate the development of constructive and effective partnerships between local people and the Council in regard to any matters relevant to their Ward.

14.3 To make recommendations to any Cabinet Member/Committee/Department of the Council on any matters relevant to their Ward.

14.4 To approve expenditure and services from whatever Budget may be allocated to their Ward, and in this regard to have all the necessary powers of the Council relevant to such approvals, provided that in exercising this delegation, the Ward Committee shall comply with all relevant procedures and requirements of the City Council.

14.5 To be responsible for approving the expenditure of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund monies allocated to the Ward by the Executive and to ensure that all required procedures are adhered to.

14.6 To approve the establishment of Neighbourhood Forums and to make grants, from the Budget approved for this purpose, to Neighbourhood Forums.

14.7 As determined by the relevant Cabinet Member/Committee:-

(i)   to appoint representatives to serve on management committees of Council managed Youth and/or Community Centres and Community Service Advisory Committees;

(ii)   to nominate via the Council Business Management Committee, persons to serve on the management committees of voluntary organisations in receipt of grant aid from the Council;

except where such Centres, Committees or organisations have been agreed by the relevant Cabinet Member as servicing an area wider than a local community.

14.8 For the avoidance of doubt, where no Ward Committees have been established by the City Council, any business that would have been transacted pursuant to the Terms of Reference of such Ward Committees shall be transacted by the relevant District Committees.

For further information on the Devolution and Localisation of Services, please consult the relevant City Council Report (and Appendices) of 1st April 2003

"Main Criteria approved for the Cabinet under paragraph 12(iv)(a)"

That there is (or there is likely to be) evidence of:-

(a)   the Council's Constitutional arrangements (including the Policy and Budgetary framework) have been (or are likely to be) breached, as judged by the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Financial Officer of the City Council;

(b)   the relevant District Committee and/or Ward Committee has/have acted outside its/their approved Terms of Reference and/or powers/functions delegated to it/them, as judged by the Monitoring Officer of the City Council;

(c)   the Ethical Standards and/or the Code of Conduct for Members has/have been (or are likely to be) breached, as judged by the Monitoring Officer of the City Council;

(d)   legal and/or financial impropriety at the relevant District and/or Ward Committee levels, as detailed in an audit or other report (including action or proposed action by the Monitoring Officer and/or the Chief Financial Officer of the City Council);

(e)   poor operational management or ineffective service delivery at the relevant District and or Ward Committee levels, as detailed in an audit or other report (including action or proposed action by the Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and/or the Chief Financial Officer of the City Council);

(f)   any other relevant and material matter, as judged by the Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer and/or the Chief Financial Officer of the City Council, which warrants the Cabinet taking appropriate action to address any shortcomings that may bring the Council into disrepute or otherwise negatively affect or impact upon the reputation and standing of the Council.

APPENDIX B

"Full range of powers available to the Cabinet under paragraph 12(iv)(b)"

To include:-

(a)   The total or partial withdrawal or limitation, for a limited or unlimited period of time, of the delegation of particular power(s)/function(s) of the relevant District Committee and/or Ward Committee;

(b)   In the event of the paragraph (a) power being exercised by the Cabinet, the Cabinet would then assume, on a date determined by it, all or some of the power(s)/function(s) of the relevant District Committee and/or Ward Committee for the relevant period of time;

(c)   Some or all of the District Committees and/or Ward Committees may be dissolved in the event that the Council, on a recommendation of the Cabinet, resolved that it was no longer cost effective, efficient, necessary or desirable to maintain or continue the localisation of services and/or the devolution arrangements in some or all of the District Committees and/or Ward Committees.

"Corporate Documents" (i.e. non – negotiable) under paragraph 12(ix)

In carrying out their Terms of Reference, the District Committees shall deliver

and comply with the following Corporate Documents:-

1.   Any Cabinet and Corporate Plan, Statutory and non-Statutory Annual Plans (or equivalent documents) that have been approved by the City Council, including the City Council's Constitution, Policy and Budgetary Framework;

2.   Birmingham City Council's Code of Conduct for Members and related documents, including:-

(i)   The Member/ Officer Relations Protocol;
(ii)   The Monitoring Officer Protocol; and
(iii)   Any other guidance or direction issued by the Standards Committee of the City Council or the Standards Board for England.

3.   Equal Opportunities Policy (or equivalent document);

4.   Health and Safety at Work Policy (or equivalent document);

5.   All employment policies reflecting statutory requirements and/or set minimum corporate standards, as one employer, on employment matters;

6.   Financial Regulations and Accounting Manual (or equivalent document);

7.   Standing Orders of the Council (or equivalent document);

8.   Corporate Identity guidance (or equivalent document);

9.   Information technology manual (or equivalent document);

10. E-Business Policy (or equivalent document);

11. Electronic Mail Usage Policy (or equivalent document);

12. Security Policy (or equivalent document);

13. Following a recommendation of the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Financial Officer, any other policies, plans, procedures and systems as the Cabinet may, from time to time, agree.

Appendix 3 – Alternative Organisational Models

Co-ordinating Overview & Scrutiny Review: Localisation & Devolution

Alternative Organisational Models

Report of the Strategic Director Local Services and the Director of Corporate Finance

1.   **Background**

As an integral part of its review into localisation and devolution, the Committee has sought to establish the costs of the current organisational arrangements, with a view to reaching conclusions about the efficiency of these arrangements and the extent to which they provide value for money. This paper attempts to summarise the information provided to the sub-group charged with looking at this aspect in detail.

The key message is that the current structure evolved in the context of a political commitment to contain expenditure within existing budgets, and was implemented largely by the "lift and shift" of managers and staff from the (ex) departments of Leisure & Culture and Environmental Services, and the reconfiguration of supervisory and management roles in Libraries and Neighbourhood Offices. The commitment to contain expenditure has been delivered, albeit with some planned transitional costs, but what has been put in place is not necessarily what would have been done, given a "clean sheet". For example, Elected Members will be aware that some structural gaps have become apparent in relation to support services available to District Committees.

Any retrospective analysis is further complicated by the fact that the localisation of services was inextricably linked with a major corporate restructuring – moving from a system of departments to

larger strategic directorates, a process which resulted in the deletion of a number of chief officer and senior management posts, and the rationalisation of "strategic" and central support functions.   The area and functional responsibilities that were absorbed into the new structure include those of former Chief Officers and Assistant Directors (e.g. Environmental Services and Leisure & Culture); area based management and supervisory roles (e.g. neighbourhood office constituency managers, community and play area managers); and the ward and constituency lead officer roles.

2.   Costs of Existing Devolved Arrangements

The Local Services Directorate is responsible for the following functional areas:

- Trading Services inc Markets, Cemeteries & Crematoria, Civic Catering etc
- Support Services
- Benefits Administration; Strategic Community Services; and Organisational Resilience
- Parks, Sports & Events and Strategic Leisure Management
- Fleet & Waste Management
- Community Safety
- District Services
- Neighbourhood Offices
- Community & Play Development
- Community Libraries
- Community Sport & Leisure Facilities
- Devolved Highways Services
- Local Car Parks
- School Crossing Patrols
- Ward Support Officers
- Housing Management (in two Districts with CBHO's)
- Local Governance – Ward Committees/Advisory Boards, District Committees
- Local Partnerships - District Strategic Partnerships & Local Delivery Groups
- SLA Services (Client Role)

For the purposes of comparative analysis, the Trading Services and the Community Safety Divisions have been excluded from the models, as they are stand alone functions which would not be directly affected by any of the options discussed below.

The Support Services division was formed by merging teams previously organised in separate directorates/departments. Each department previously had its own HR, finance, IT, and performance support arrangements and significant savings have been generated through rationalisation since

localisation. It is assumed that an integrated function would remain in all the models discussed below and therefore this function has also been excluded from all the analyses, as has the post of strategic director for similar reasons.

It is also assumed that there would be no change to the two Housing CBHOs and the associated two Senior Neighbourhood Manager posts are included in all the analyses.

The cost of the existing devolved management structure, based on average salaries (i.e. not including on-costs) and taking into account the above caveats, totals around **£2.6m**. This structure includes assistant directors and senior staff for the three main strategic service areas (Community Services, Leisure Services, and Environmental Services); and, as at May 2006, ten District Management Teams (District Directors and Senior Managers).

3.   **Costs of a Centralised Model**

It is assumed that a centralised structure would be based around the sort of functional departmental "silos" that existed prior to localisation. It is clear that if the multi-functional localised management arrangements were to be replaced, some or all of the functional roles that existed before would need to be re-instated. However, no attempt has been made to re-create the exact structures that existed before, for example, it is assumed that the functions would remain within one strategic directorate and benefit from integrated support services.

Instead, estimates have been made of the sort of numbers and seniority of functional managers that would be needed for the range of services under discussion. It is assumed there would be three divisional heads around chief officer level (not strategic director) with management teams comprising posts grouped into broad categories of "heads of service" and "functional managers". Although there would be fewer management posts in total, it is considered that salaries would be proportionately higher to reflect the wider range of responsibilities that would come from re-centralising District management roles. The costs of this model range from around **£2.3m** to **£2.8m** (compared with £2.6m for the existing devolved arrangements).

The main difference between the two figures in the range is whether or not support for local "governance" and partnership work is factored in. Members will be aware that, in addition to absorbing operational management responsibilities, District Management Teams have taken the lead

role in supporting District governance and partnership work, and community engagement. If the District structures no longer existed, dedicated support could be provided through District Partnership Managers (a scaled version of the City-wide BSP Manager role) and might include the management and administrative support currently given through District offices to Members in ward committees and advisory boards, District Committees and sub groups; and to District Strategic Partnerships and local delivery groups.

What would not be allowed for in either model is the senior management resource required to respond directly at a local level to Members' issues and concerns; drive District based service and strategic planning processes; and lead initiatives such as neighbourhood management, neighbourhood renewal, and the development and delivery of the Birmingham LAA.

Some elements of the "local governance" role were previously undertaken by ward and constituency lead officers – clearly, this would have had a significant cost to the organisation in terms of senior management resources but figures were never compiled and the cost of building this support back in through this route has not been included in this model.

4.   Costs of Matrix Model

As an alternative to either the devolved or centralised models described above, some organisations have adopted matrix structures where managers have responsibility for both services and geographic "patches". This differs from the devolved model as there would be no local decision making or management arrangements – rather senior staff would act as "champions" and first point of contact for an area, but would be implementing corporate policy and centrally determined operational decisions.

For the purpose of this analysis the proposed model includes directors, each looking after areas roughly the size of two constituencies and also carrying responsibility for defined divisions of service e.g. parks, sports and events; supported by both deputy/assistant directors and functional managers. As with the centralised model the option exists to factor back in support for local governance and partnership support at additional cost. The estimated costs of a structure like this range from **£2.7m** to **£3.2m**.

This model is more expensive because it provides the sort of senior management support to geographic areas (albeit twice the size of the current Districts) previously offered in part by lead constituency/ward officers, and currently provided in a more structured and comprehensive manner by District Management Teams.

5.   **Summary**

The broad conclusion is that all the organisational models examined come out at roughly a similar cost. The more complicated model (the matrix structure) would cost the most, and would not offer the benefits of local decision making. The centralised model costs marginally more than the devolved model because functional management structures would be duplicated, and because service directors tend to attract higher salaries than the level at which District Directors have been graded.

Some costs associated with supporting the localised governance and partnership arrangements below the City-wide level can be isolated, but these are not significant for the size of the organisation and are not a direct "add-on" because of devolution – as noted above, the costs of management support to wards and constituencies were not explicitly accounted for prior to localisation; and a number of responsibilities have since been picked up at District level that did not previously exist (in some cases meeting statutory requirements).   In any event, the option of moving to one monolithic decision making structure, with nothing below City level, is unlikely to prove popular or cost effective when all evidence suggests that Members, partners and local communities found the previous arrangements too centralised and too unresponsive to local needs and priorities.

For these reasons, in our view it is more likely than not that a more centralised model would entail higher operating costs than the current devolved structure.

David Maxted   **Brendan Arnold**

Strategic Director Local Services   **Director of Corporate Finance**

Devolved Model Current Model (May 2006)

```
        3 Assistant Directors s @ £75k +
        10 District Directors @ £70k              £0.925m        (44)
        8 Heads of Service @ 60k                  £0.480m
        23 District Service Managers @ £50k       £1.150m
                                                  ======
                                                  £2.555m
```

Centralised Models

Option 1 - Functional Area Structure with Area Governance and District Strategic Partnerships

```
        3 Directors* @ £100k                      £0.300m        (46)
        10 Heads of Service @ £80k                £0.800m
        23 Function Managers @ £50k               £1.150m
        10 Partnership Managers/Governance @ £50k £0.500m
                                                  ======
                                                  £2.750m
```

*(Leisure and Culture; Environmental Services; Benefits)

Option 2 - As Option 1 but: No Area Governance and No District Strategic Partnerships

```
        3 Directors @ £100k                       £0.300m        (36)
        10 Heads of Service @ £80k                £0.800m
        23 Function Managers @ £50k               £1.150m
                                                  ======
                                                  £2.250m
```

Option 3 - Area/Functional Structure but: No Area Governance and No District Strategic Partnerships

```
        5 Directors @ £100k (Area + Functional Leads)   £0.350m*   (43)
        5 Area Managers @ £70k                          £0.350m
        10 Heads of Service @ £80k                      £0.800m
        23 Function Managers @ £50k                     £1.150m
                                                        ======
                                                        £2.650m
```

* reconfiguring 2 existing Assistant Director posts

Option 4 - As Option 3 but with: Area Governance and District Strategic Partnerships

```
        5 Directors @ £100k (Area + Functional Leads)   £0.350m*   (55)
        5 Area Managers @ 70k                           £0.350m
        10 Heads of Service @ £80k                      £0.800m
        23 Function Managers @ £50k                     £1.150m
        10 Partnership Managers/Governance @ £50k       £0.500m
                                                        ======
                                                        £3.150m
```

* reconfiguring 2 existing Assistant Director posts

Appendix 4 – Birmingham Strategic Partner Responses

1.   Introduction

1.1   Members of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership were written to and asked to submit their comments on partnership working in relation to Devolution and Localisation.

1.2   Responses were invited from those organisations that had members serving on a District Strategic Partnership regarding whether it has proved useful to the organisation to have local District Strategic Partnership arrangements in place in terms of improving the service provided, gaining information regarding the local area and co-ordinating a joint approach to local problems; whether drafting the District Community Plan has provided a vehicle for more effective consultation and community engagement; and whether the Plan itself has helped identify priorities for local service delivery and a focus for resource allocation.

1.3   Comments were also welcomed from those organisations with Strategic Partnership links at the City-wide level only, specifically asking whether the Devolution and Localisation agenda, knowledge of the District structure and awareness of District-specific needs and priorities had informed service delivery and aided service improvement.

1.4   More general comments on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the District Strategic Partnership arrangements and how they interrelate with the Birmingham Strategic Partnership were also invited.

1.5   Responses received highlighted a number of benefits and achievements through having a District Structure in place. The majority of respondents believed that overall the initiative had delivered, or had the potential to deliver, significant advantages for the organisations concerned and overall improvements in partnership working. Many of the respondents also noted areas that they felt required attention and adjustment, and some proposed suggestions for improvement.

1.6   The purpose of this note is to summarise the partners' responses for members of the Committee.

2.   Positive Impacts of Devolution and Localisation

2.1   Some partners stated that the District Structure and District Strategic Partnerships had enabled them to actually make significant achievements that would otherwise not have been possible.

- The West Midlands Fire Service believe that the District Strategic Partnerships have enabled them to achieve much more than they would have achieved alone and believe that they too have made strong contributions to helping other partner organisations to achieve their objectives.

- The University of Birmingham also states that there has been some benefit to the University as a result of Devolution and Localisation in terms of improving services to the University community, staff, students and contractors.

2.2 Many of the partners considered that Devolution and Localisation had enabled the development of closer working relationships and provided vital contacts and networks of organisations within Birmingham.

- West Midlands Police recognised that some Districts are establishing effective and active partnerships. WMP have found the ability to engage with partners and foster close working relationships at the District level most beneficial.

- JobCentre Plus remarked that closer working links had been forged as a result of District and City Strategic Partnership arrangements and that these were enabling "strategic targeting of resources".

- The Learning and Skills Council believed that close contact and regular meetings with District Directors enabled parties to communicate their aims and operations. Close contact with Districts has resulted in some Districts using existing LSC mechanisms and structures to drive improvements in education, training and employment.

- The University of Birmingham recognised the strengthening of communication channels with a number of key service providers as an achievement of Devolution and Localisation.

- Birmingham Race Action Partnership commented that their experience of working within the devolved governance structures had been relatively positive, and stated that they were impressed with the level of integrity and energy displayed by others engaged in the process.

2.3 Districts were also found to be important in co-ordinating the provision and sharing of information and knowledge.

- West Midlands Police were grateful for the opportunity presented to them in the drafting of the District Community Plans to influence the work of the Districts and supply the Districts with relevant information in relation to this.

- The West Midlands Fire Service have found the District Strategic Partnerships to be a useful vehicle for communicating information regarding fire reduction and fire safety.

2.4 As well as having the opportunity to provide information and aid the District Planning process in this way, many partner organisations had also found the ability to gain knowledge of local issues through the District structure and District -level contacts extremely beneficial.

- JobCentre Plus stated that the Districts can provide a good deal of information to help partners to plan and deliver services, and that District Strategic Partnerships are useful in gaining access to information from other partners including data on shared client groups. They believe the Partnerships offer a real local focus and the opportunity to concentrate on the needs of a particular area.

- The Learning and Skills Council also value the ability to interact at the local level to understand issues and local needs in greater depth and contribute to better service delivery.

- The University of Birmingham cited the drafting of the District Community Plan in Selly Oak as beneficial in accessing information to assist the student community.

2.5 Knowledge of local priorities, provided through localised Strategic Partnership arrangements enables partner organisations to align activities and resources according to local needs.

- As well as highlighting benefits as regards the more general strategic targeting of resources, the JobCentre Plus stated that the District Community Plans are essential in aligning resources under the LAA arrangements. JobCentre Plus believe this will avoid duplication and lead to improved services.

- The West Midlands Police cited the District Community Plans as beneficial in raising awareness of other organisations' aims and objectives and concentrating on how benefits and improvements can collectively be achieved.

- The West Midlands Fire Service is fully engaged with the localised structures and has restructured itself to align with the City's Districts.

2.6   Another benefit cited was that very local issues are focussed upon and are prioritised within the local area.

- The West Midlands Fire Service acknowledge that an approach to fire safety may not be a prominent issue, but state that the District Community Plans have helped strengthen the justification for interventions within the District as they group together fire safety with a range of other issues.

2.7   The District Structure and District Strategic Partnerships have been beneficial in improving community engagement.

- JobCentre Plus believe that the District Strategic Partnership arrangements and Community Plans have aided effective consultation and engagement with the local community and with representative organisations. They also believe the District Strategic Partnerships provide a forum for better engagement between partners.

3.   Areas for development

3.1   Some partner organisations also suggested areas they believe require further development in order to be effective, and proposed suggestions for improvement.

3.2   Though some partners felt able to influence the District Community Planning process, a number of organisations identified the inaccessibility of the District Planning Processes and District Community Plans as a barrier.

- The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry commented that businesses feel they do not have an opportunity to influence District planning. They believe this may be due to a combination of Districts not regarding the views of this sector as a priority; District Planning processes being hard for businesses to understand; and businesses not being fully engaged and understanding the importance of having a voice at this level.

- JobCentre Plus also believe that District Community Plans could be made more accessible to partners, and state that they sometimes must strive to be heard within the District structure.

- The Learning and Skills Council highlighted the confusion that can occur when Districts create their own structures and projects, rather than integrating with existing structures and initiatives. They cite the lack of District Strategic Partnership engagement with local Access to Employment Groups (AEGs), with the DSPs instead preferring to establish their own structures, as an example of this.

3.3   Some partners believed that clarification of roles and responsibilities within the partnerships, along with clarification of partners' structures and processes would aid the fostering of shared understanding and joint-working.

- The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry consider further joint meetings between District directors and partner organisations to clarify roles and promote shared understanding of planning processes would be beneficial.

- The Birmingham Community Empowerment Network (B:CEN) believe the way the Devolution and Localisation agenda has been implemented and the BSPs relationship to it seems muddled. They discuss how the use of the word "District" is often ambiguous and leads to uncertainty as to whether the District Committees or District Strategic Partnerships are being referred to.

- The lack of engagement with existing structures and projects mentioned by the Learning and Skills Council might also be aided by further clarification of respective roles, organisational priorities and information sharing regarding existing structures and networks and projects already underway.

- The University of Birmingham state that a lack of partnership members' empowerment leads to duplication and gaps in service provision and improvement initiatives.

- Specific concerns were cited by the West Midlands Police with regard to Sparkbrook District. The West Midlands Police have withdrawn from the District Strategic Partnership structure as they consider it is unfit for purpose and threatens the relationship between the DSP and the Birmingham Strategic Partnership. Clarification of ground-rules is proposed to reconcile difficulties between partners at the District level.

3.4   Although some partner organisations believed that Devolution and Localisation had enabled them to develop closer working relationships than had been possible previously, effective communication and information sharing were also considered by some partners to be areas which still required some work.

- B:CEN highlighted problems of poor links between District Strategic Partnerships in general and the BSP Board.

- JobCentre Plus stated that partners have struggled to have their voices heard when communicating on a District basis.

- B:RAP felt that whilst some partners have welcomed their input, others have not seen their involvement as particularly helpful.

- The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce commented that the need for greater and more consistent communication between District s and partner organisations was vital.

- The Learning and Skills Council also thought the liaison arrangements of District Strategic Partnerships needed to be considered thoroughly to be as effective as possible. The LSC pointed to lost opportunities in identifying joint-priorities between partner organisations which could have led to aligned activities.

3.5   Again, though good practice examples had been cited by a number of partners with regards to information sharing, respondents highlighted a need for improvements to the two-way information sharing process with partners both informing and being informed by each other.

- JobCentre Plus stated that there needs to be a two-way process whereby the District Community Plans both inform and are informed by others. They also pointed towards a tendency for Districts to work alone rather than engaging in information sharing.

- CENTRO also highlighted the benefits of information sharing and felt it would be useful for the District Strategic Partnerships to be able to feed in information not only into District Community Plans, but also into City-wide Community Plans. This would ensure effective bottom-up input to the City planning processes.

- B:CEN state that the production of the first set of District Community Plans was to a timetable imposed upon them and that they fail to prioritise the workload or quantify outcomes and necessary resources according to local need.

- The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry noted that Businesses felt they had not yet had the opportunity to influence District planning.

3.6   Though some partners felt that the District Strategic Partnerships had helped improve community engagement, others are keen for further development to take place in relation to this.

- B:RAP caution that more consideration should be given to the form of engagement. They advise that "strategic guidance" be used, rather than "group representation" with people's opinions sought because of what they know or what they do, rather than because they are a particular colour or faith, so as to achieve the full benefits of information sharing and so as not to mistake their voice for that of the community. B:RAP also recommended more marketing and publicity of District arrangements and structures to strengthen community engagement and two-way information sharing. B:RAP also stated that consideration must be given at the District-level as to how community engagement might help reduce inequality.

3.7   Many partners highlighted the importance of resolving funding issues and clarifying or altering funding arrangements to improve how partners work together at the local level. Many partner organisations also noted the difficulty of resourcing partnership activity.

- The Learning and Skills Council commented that a more strategic approach to the use of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund is required to address issues surrounding education, training and employment. Such improvements are more difficult to deliver at the ward-level.

- However, the University of Birmingham recognises that the District level may still not be sufficiently strategic to deal with problems identified by the DSPs which are City-wide, and cite the example of traffic congestion.

- B:CEN agreed that District Strategic Partnership control of NRF resources would result in more positive engagement. B:CEN also stated that the issue of funding should be addressed directly without tokenistic devolution of the control of small and time-limited budgets to District Committees. B:CEN believe such funds should instead be used to stimulate and give shape to the partnership process at the local level.

- The Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry noted the need for continued resource support to business organisations at the local level.

- The Learning and Skills Council also pointed to insufficient numbers of staff to effectively engage to the desired degree. They suggested this could be addressed through more creative strategic links at the District level.

- The University of Birmingham stated that regardless of the high levels of commitment and effort demonstrated by District officers, without an increase in resources and in delegated control from the corporate centre, they lack the authority and the ability to make improvements to local services. The University argued that whilst the principle of devolution is good, the required resource is missing.

3.8 There is a recognition amongst partners that a lack of co-terminosity of boundaries can make joint-working more difficult.

- JobCentre Plus state that geographical boundaries can cause problems with Districts not always relating specifically to the area networks of partner organisations. This can make the agreement of shared priorities more difficult.

- The University of Birmingham spans two Districts, with its main campus in Edgbaston. This causes difficulties in partnership working with organisations within the Selly Oak District and results in duplication of work and missed opportunities.

3.9 There is also an identification of the need to demonstrate commitment to the initiative, possibly by further devolution.

- Comments from the West Midlands Police echo those heard from a number of witnesses so far during this Scrutiny Review. They suggest that whilst devolution and engaging in partnerships and joint-working at the District level has been a beneficial process, the process would be assisted by further devolution.

4. Conclusions:

4.1 Whilst some clear benefits as a result of Devolution and Localisation have been identified, in terms of partnership working and the ability of partner organisations to engage with the Districts, there are also many areas to focus on and improve according to partners on the Birmingham Strategic Partnership. Often these are areas where significant achievements have already been made, but partners feel that more needs to be done.

4.2 We should note the concerns of our strategic partners and ensure that our partnership working is as effective as it can be. This is not an easy task, and will require effective co-ordination of a number of different and sometimes competing priorities, as illustrated to some extent above, but the benefits of doing so are the achievement of more effective and joined-up working towards improving the City as a whole.

Appendix 5 – Devolution and Localisation Review – Public Opinion

Report of the Head of Scrutiny to the Co-ordinating O&S Committee, Friday 3 March 2006

1. Purpose of Report

1.1   To bring to Members' attention relevant findings from a public opinion survey conducted by the City Council and to consider whether further opinion sampling would be beneficial to the review.

2. Background

2.1   At the end of November 2005, the City Council published the results of the Birmingham District Survey, conducted by MORI. MORI selected 1,000 addresses at random in each of eleven District s across Birmingham. A questionnaire was mailed addressed to 'the occupier' of each address in June 2005. A reminder questionnaire was sent to non-respondents. A small booster survey was sent to residents in Sparkbrook, Ladywood, Hodge Hill and Perry Barr because of a relatively low response rate in these Districts.

2.2   Results are based upon 2,904 completed questionnaires returned between 20 June and 2 September 2005, representing a 25% response rate.

2.3   Similar surveys had been carried out in the previous two years. In 2005, the topics covered included:

       a)   Quality of Life

       b)   The Council

       c)   Local Services and Facilities

       d)   Getting Involved

       e)   Crime and Safety

2.4　　　The sample size for the survey was large enough to allow MORI to report statistically significant findings in each District for most questions. The report therefore demonstrates how perceptions and opinions vary across the city – part of the fundamental rationale for the policy of Devolution and Localisation is that Council services should be more responsive to this variation. However the sample was not so large that MORI could produce a valid analysis at Ward level.

2.5　　　MORI's Executive Summary is attached as Appendix 1 to this report. The full report is available on the City Council's web-site, or can be obtained through the Scrutiny Office.

3.　　Key Results for the Review

3.1　　　As already mentioned, a key assumption behind the City Council's approach to Devolution and Localisation is that services will be improved and will match local needs more closely if political and managerial decisions are taken more locally.

3.2　　　The MORI survey covered a range of services, of which the following summary table provides some examples. It shows the Districts where people are most likely and least likely to be satisfied with local services. For example, Sutton Coldfield residents are most positive about the Council and local services, Hodge Hill residents are most negative.

The Council and Services – District summary		
Source: MORI. All figures are percentages.		
Service/Issue	**Most Positive**	**Most Negative**
How council deals with… abandoned vehicles	Sutton Coldfield (+18 net) Selly Oak (+17 net) Edgbaston (+17 net)	Hodge Hill (+2 net) Erdington (+3 net) Ladywood (+5 net)
How council deals with… bulky waste disposal	Sutton Coldfield (+39 net) Edgbaston (+34 net) Northfield (+33 net)	Hodge Hill (+3 net) Erdington (+9 net) Ladywood (+10 net)
How council deals with…dog fouling	Sutton Coldfield (-13 net) Edgbaston (-13 net) Selly Oak / Perry Barr (-17 net)	Hodge Hill (-35 net) Yardley (-32 net) Hall Green (-31 net)
How council deals with…litter in residential areas	Sutton Coldfield (-1 net) Edgbaston (-6 net) Hall Green (-15 net)	Hodge Hill (-42 net) Perry Barr (-33 net) Northfield (-32 net)

Report to the City Council 11 July 2006

Frequency of litter bins being emptied	Edgbaston (+37 net) Sutton Coldfield (+36 net) Yardley (+29 net)	Hodge Hill (+15 net) Selly Oak (+21 net) Ladywood (+22 net)
Standard of street cleaning in local area	Sutton Coldfield (+51 net) Hall Green (+28 net) Erdington (+20 net)	Hodge Hill (-4 net) Perry Barr (+4 net) Yardley (+5 net)
Household waste collection overall	Sutton Coldfield (+73 net) Hall Green (+67 net) Erdington (+66 net)	Hodge Hill (+44 net) Ladywood (+44 net) Northfield (+44 net)
Doorstep recycling overall	Yardley (+30 net) Sparkbrook (+30 net) Sutton Coldfield (+27 net)	Ladywood (-4 net) Selly Oak (+9 net) Northfield (+16 net)
Receiving value for money from Council	Edgbaston (+1 net) Selly Oak (-1 net) Erdington (-2 net)	Ladywood (-32 net) Hodge Hill (-18 net) Yardley (-18 net)
Overall satisfaction with how the Council is running the area	Edgbaston (+28 net) Selly Oak (+21 net) Sutton Coldfield (+14 net)	Hodge Hill (-12 net) Ladywood (-6 net)

3.3 A further important policy strand in Devolution and Localisation is to increase citizen involvement through taking more decisions locally.

3.4 In terms of whether people wanted more involvement in City Council decisions, MORI found the following:

Which of these statements, if any, comes closest to your own attitudes towards Birmingham City Council?

Base: All residents (2,904). 2004 figures in (italics)	Like to have more of a say	Like to know what Council is doing but happy to let them get on with the job	Not interested in what the Council does, as long as they do their job
	%	%	%
Total			
All residents	34 (34)	51 (46)	11 (13)
District			
Edgbaston	31 (24)	57 (53)	9 (13)
Erdington	29 (35)	53 (43)	11 (11)
Hall Green	32 (38)	51 (45)	12 (9)
Hodge Hill	37 (33)	44 (42)	11 (19)
Ladywood	36 (33)	48 (49)	13 (7)
Northfield	23 (31)	59 (46)	12 (17)
Perry Barr	37 (36)	48 (40)	9 (14)
Selly Oak	34 (37)	55 (46)	13 (11)
Sparkbrook	40 (32)	44 (43)	8 (15)
Sutton Coldfield	32 (34)	53 (50)	13 (11)
Yardley	36 (38)	50 (46)	9 (10)

Source: MORI

3.5 There is thus a significant proportion of Birmingham people, averaging just over one third, who say they want more involvement in decision making.

3.6   However MORI reports that despite this high level of interest in Council activities, only one in five residents claim to be aware of how the Council makes decisions.

3.7   The survey shows that in 2005:

How much would you say you know about how Birmingham City Council currently makes decisions about its services and other local issues?

	A great deal/ a fair amount	Not very much or nothing at all
Base: All residents (2,904).	%	%
Total		
All residents	18	76
District		
Edgbaston	21	77
Erdington	16	74
Hall Green	15	82
Hodge Hill	22	70
Ladywood	17	77
Northfield	21	74
Perry Barr	15	80
Selly Oak	19	77
Sparkbrook	18	71
Sutton Coldfield	19	79
Yardley	16	77
		Source: MORI

3.8   MORI then went on to find that fewer people still say that they have been involved in local decision-making groups of various kinds:

In the last 12 months or so…have you done any of the things listed below?

	Yes, have done	No, have not done	Don't know/not stated
Base: All residents (2,904).	*%*	*%*	*%*
Attended meeting about…			
…making decisions on local health services	*3*	*78*	*19*
…to regenerate the local area	*7*	*75*	*18*
…tackle local crime problems	*7*	*74*	*19*
…as a member of a tenants' group decision making committee	*5*	*76*	*20*
…decision making group on local education services	*2*	*77*	*20*
…local services for young people	*2*	*77*	*20*
…services in the local community	*6*	*75*	*19*
			Source: MORI

3.9   Even so, it should be remembered that in Birmingham's case these small percentages still amount to thousands of people.

3.10   Finally, MORI also asked if people were aware of the Devolution and Localisation approach.

Before you received this questionnaire, had you heard of Birmingham City Council's work to move some decisions over services and spending to organisations in smaller areas of the city – known as "Going Local"?

	Yes, aware	No, not aware
Base: All residents (2,904).	*%*	*%*
Total		
All residents	19	79
District		
Edgbaston	22	77
Erdington	14	83
Hall Green	17	81
Hodge Hill	22	76
Ladywood	19	77
Northfield	20	78
Perry Barr	13	83
Selly Oak	23	75
Sparkbrook	19	79
Sutton Coldfield	27	72
Yardley	15	85

Source: MORI

4.   Conclusions and Recommendation

4.1   It appears from this snapshot that, whatever else the Devolution and Localisation policy has achieved, it has not yet provided the vehicle through which people would be more aware of how the City Council works and through which those who wished to have more of a say could do so. The survey also shows that perceptions of service quality vary significantly across the city.

4.2   Your Committee, after considering this report, could simply take a view as to which elements provide useful information to be used alongside all the other evidence when coming to conclusions in this review.

4.3   Another possibility would be to take the view that the information, whilst useful, is relatively crude (having been obtained through a postal survey) and could usefully be supplemented with some more qualitative testing of public opinion. If that is the Committee's view, then I would suggest exploring the possibility of using some focus groups drawn from the People's Panel, as was done with the Telecommunications and the Library of Birmingham reviews. The focus groups could be used, for example, to explore in more detail whether there are specific aspects of local services which are of particular concern, and whether more attractive ways could be found of offering public engagement and participation.

4.4   The Committee is recommended to consider the information contained in this report and:

a) identify any issues arising from the report which need to be taken forward in the course of the review;

b) ask officers to explore the feasibility of using focus groups to allow the further sampling of public opinion.

John Cade

Head of Scrutiny

Contact Officer: Nick Partridge, tel. 303-2099

Appendix 1   Birmingham District Survey 2005 Executive Summary

MORI's Executive Summary follows

Executive Summary

Quality of life

Reflecting residents' views in 2004, most people are satisfied with their local area as a place to live – just one in five are dissatisfied. As MORI has found throughout the country, there is a direct link between satisfaction with key indicators such as area and local authorities, and deprivation. In the most affluent district of Sutton Coldfield, most (87%) residents are satisfied with their area as a place to live – only one per cent of these residents are *'very'* dissatisfied. By comparison, only two in five (43%) Hodge Hill residents are satisfied with their area as a place to live, a third being dissatisfied – including one in six (18%) who are '*very'* dissatisfied. Just half of those who reside in Ladywood, Perry Barr and Erdington are satisfied. In terms of quality of life, residents are most positive about local **public transport, shopping facilities**, and **parks and open spaces**. More negatively, as MORI generally finds elsewhere, residents highlight **cleanliness of streets**, **crime levels**, **activities for teenagers**, and **road and pavement repairs** as aspects in most need of improvement locally. It is these so called 'liveability' issues which can have a grave impact on residents' perceptions of their local authority as well as of their local area. Certainly, the Council cannot tackle these issues on its own, but will require a close working relationship with strategic partners such as the police, as well as the private sector. Above all, residents will want to know how the Council and partners are addressing these issues in their local area – communications, such as via *Forward,* will therefore be key.

Local neighbourhoods

As in 2004, most residents agree that people get along well with each other (61% in 2005 and 59% in 2004). Similar numbers of residents in 2005 and in 2004 also agree that people from different backgrounds get along well together (44% and 45%) – just under three in ten residents in both years neither agree nor disagree, and one in six disagree (16% in 2005 and 15% in 2004 disagree).

The Council

New questions were asked in 2005 to cover perceptions of the Council and value for money. Positively, more residents are satisfied (39%) than dissatisfied (32%) about the way Birmingham City Council is running the area. But satisfaction ratings are correlated to an extent with deprivation. Edgbaston and Sutton Coldfield residents (50% and 41% satisfied respectively) are most positive about the way the Council is running their area. On the other hand, Hodge Hill and Ladywood residents are most negative (45% and 40% are dissatisfied respectively).

One in four residents (28%) believe that the Council gives residentsvalue for money, but two fifths (39%) disagree. Edgbaston residents are most positive (36% agree), while those residing in Ladywood (49% disagree), Hodge Hill (45% disagree) and Yardley (40% disagree) are more negative. It will be important for the Council to strive to continue telling residents about what it does and how it aims to provide value for money to all residents.

Local services and facilities

Residents continue to rate the City's education (among users) and library services positively. These are in line with previous findings in Birmingham where the City's education service is perceived as performing well. The survey shows that residents are most satisfied with:
• maintenance of street lighting;
• libraries;
• parks/open spaces;
• special collections of rubbish.
Reflecting residents' concerns about quality of life, they are least satisfied with:
• facilities for teenagers;
• maintenance of roads/pavements;
• local car parking.
These are areas where Birmingham's image has traditionally been weak – for instance, in previous Annual Opinion Surveys, street cleaning, as well as road and pavement maintenance, have been poorly perceived. Activities for teenagers are mentioned as an issue nationally and the lack of activities are often linked to lower levels of community safety.

Involvement in the decision-making process

Awareness of how the Council currently makes its decisions about services and local issues continues to be low – just one in five (18% in 2005 and 19% in 2004) residents claim to know how this is currently done. As recorded in 2004, one in three residents want to have more of a say in what the Council does and the services it provides (both 34%). More residents this time say they like to know what the Council is doing, but happy to let them get on with their job (51% up from 46% in
2004).

Crime, safety and anti-social behaviour

In terms of anti-social behaviour, less people think the following issues are a problem than they did in 2004:

• abandoned/burnt out vehicles (down ten percentage points)
• vandalism/graffiti (down four percentage points)
• rubbish and litter (down seven percentage points)

But more residents think that noisy neighbours/loud parties is a problem in 2005 (up five percentage points). Reflecting findings in 2004, most Birmingham residents feel safe at home, and in their own area during daylight hours. Around a third (35% in 2005 and 31% in 2004) feel safe walking alone in their own areas at night. As in 2004, Sutton Coldfield residents feel safest (58% safe), while those in Hall Green (64%) unsafe), Hodge Hill (62% unsafe), and Northfield (60% unsafe) feel least safe after dark.

The future

As in 2004, two in five residents (43% in 2005 and 42% in 2004) say they are likely to move away from the local area within the next five years. Sutton Coldfield residents are least likely to move away (26%), whereas those in Ladywood (51%), and Perry Barr (51%) are most likely to express a desire to move away. The main reasons as to why people might wish to move away from the local area are to:

• move to a better/more pleasant area (44%);
• move to an area with less crime/anti-social behaviour (38%);
• move to a cleaner area (31%)

Reflecting the nature and diversity of Birmingham's districts, Hodge Hill residents are most likely to want to move to a better/more pleasant area (62%). Sutton Coldfield residents would most like to want to move because of family/personal reasons (30%). An area with less crime and antisocial behaviour is a prominent issue for Edgbaston and Erdington residents.

The key survey findings are discussed within the body of this report, and where possible, compared against 2004 District Survey findings.

Appendix 6 – Staff Focus Group Results

The report produced by bmg research follows

BMG Research
Top line Report

Devolution and Localisation Scrutiny Review –
Staff Focus Groups

Prepared for Birmingham City Council

May 2006

Prepared for

Nick Partridge
Lead Officer, Scrutiny

Prepared by:

Anna Sansom
BMG Account Manager

bmg research

Because people matter.

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1   Executive Summary

Public Awareness

Staff commented that unless local residents are involved in local forums or groups, then generally the average person doesn't have a clue about Localisation and Devolution in Birmingham. Some group members though that local people do not need to know and that how the council structures itself are of no relevance to local people all they are interested in is the provision of services.

The feeling among the groups was that awareness and interest in local government and public services among the public is low, with residents taking a more active interest only when things aren't going well. Paradoxically, when services and local government are performing well, then the public tends not to notice and also tends not to acknowledge this. In many respects, delivering public services on the front line can be a thankless task.

Budget and Staff difficulties

Staff spoke of difficulties that have arisen since localisation. Comments focused on budgets and staff.

Experiences vary greatly across Districts and services. Where one library has been lucky and received much investment allowing the improvement and expansion of its service, another has suffered from lack of investment, 'It's a lottery'. Some staff [libraries] speak of 'hearing horror stories' about how things are in other Districts.

Some libraries appear to have done well out of localisation; others haven't. Inconsistencies exist and where your fortunes have fallen depend on which District you are in. Some Districts invested in, others haven't.

In terms of budgets officers felt more limited in what they can do. Rather than having a central pot they are limited to the money and resources within their District . Now they are unable to transfer resources within the service or go to a central budget and request funding.

Districts now operate in silos, unable to share resources. There is the feeling that localisation is mainly about cutting back on everything. Before localisation it used to be budget cuts of £10-20K, now people talk of figures in the region of £250K off the District budget, which has obvious knock on effects in terms of staff, range and quality of services.

Annual budgets were seemingly set on the first day of localisation and have not changed since. Officers feel that resources are constantly being squeezed and stretched, putting pressure on service delivery and staff. As a result there have been staff cuts/service cuts. Some report that staff morale is low.

Drastic streamlining has taken place over the last 3 or 4 years, and some feel it is too much too soon. This couldn't have been done under the previous structure. The expectation is that there will be even more streamlining and cuts across all services in the future.

Although the use of temp/casual staff is supposed to be for emergencies only, their use seems

to be increasing all the time and is a daily occurrence in some cases. Managers note that casual staff are often needed in order to keep the service open.

Due to regular staff shortages the requirement for a verification framework either doesn't get done or is rushed. Difficulties of balancing the needs of the service and audit or performance management requirements have increased since Devolution and Localisation.

There is the feeling that the only way to survive budget cuts is to have generic staff, lowering the skill level and moving them around to fill the gaps. This ultimately has a negative impact on the quality of service. The new smaller localised structure means they are less able to cope with shortages within Districts. There was a perception among those we spoke to that quality of service is bound to suffer in the declining budget situation.

Whilst streamlining and staff cuts have occurred there are grievances concerning massive pay rises that have been awarded to high-level management. Staff are not so annoyed at the actual pay rises (some people felt that in some instances they are deserved) but most respondents feel these huge pay rises are inappropriate given the cost cutting initiatives and streamlining going on. One individual also pointed out that these new scales have created a 'career trap' for middle management - jumping from PO3 to PO10 was seen to be near impossible.

Management

Staff feel it is very important to have a good District Manager who understands the services. Staff stress the need for District Managers to understand the business, services and the community. Where this is not the case difficulties can arise in terms of management where they are perceived to resort to the use of generic management techniques rather than service quality techniques, which makes communication difficult. Experiences differ between Districts; however some officers feel that some District Managers are out of their depth.

Middle managers sometimes feel frustrated by not being left to get on with their job, most appreciate being left to get on with it, which they feel is a more efficient way of working. Middle managers appear to want more decision-making responsibility and want to be trusted to do their job.

The perceived introduction of several tiers of strategic management is unhelpful. This hierarchy can make communication difficult. One focus group member talked of an element of 'empire building', where some individuals have benefited massively at the expense of the service.

Balancing Priorities

Difficulties exist in balancing priorities and understanding all the initiatives and plans, strategies and policies. Council priorities seem to be constantly changing. Those working in Districts feel they are being pulled in all directions, including national priorities, the Central strategic office pulling one way, Local District Office another, councillors another, MPs, the public and staff and stakeholders. Working within a very complicated structure, with demanding District and national priorities makes their job and service delivery more difficult.

Communication

Some officers noted that as a direct result of localisation they have been able to meet new people from other departments and establish good contacts that have helped them in their work. Teaming up with multi-skilled people, which wasn't the case before, is seen as a good thing, as is the sharing of resources e.g. co-location and sharing receptionists.

There have been examples of increased instances where partnership working has been necessitated by a need to rationalise and share resources, staff and expertise within Districts.

Generally people feel that communication has worsened since localisation. Officers put this down to the increase in volume of information in particular email (much of which is perceived to be unnecessary). Some say they feel frightened not to inform everyone of what you are doing.

Under the new structure there are so many more connections and information comes from all directions which can impinge on what other work you have to do.

Being able to make suggestions, put ideas forward and being listened to varies across Districts and often depends on your relationship with your District Manager. In some areas people do not feel they can comment or makes suggestions.

The Future

Some believe that things will improve and acknowledge that it is early days. However others feel that the Council rushed into it and perhaps should have piloted a couple of Districts, especially concerning management of budgets, which seem to have caused the most concerns and problems.

Some believe that there has been too much focus on the structure and performance management side of things rather than the delivery of front line services. However, individuals noted that although services do not appear to have improved they also haven't declined – localisation has yet to take full effect and this is only the first stage.

Group members thought that one big problem is the devolvement of power. There is the notion that those in power don't want to let go to the Districts. Top down commitment is needed if localisation and devolution is to be a success.

2   Background and Introduction

The Devolution and Localisation agenda combines devolved governance and localised services in order to deliver service improvement and enable services to more closely reflect local needs. The aim of the Devolution and Localisation Scrutiny Review is to improve future phases of Devolution and Localisation by learning lessons from phase one.

Birmingham City Council commissioned BMG Research to conduct two group discussions (or focus groups) exploring the views, opinions and perceptions of front line staff. The aim of consulting with front-line staff was to investigate what impact the Devolution and Localisation agenda has had on the ease and effectiveness of front-line service delivery. The findings of

this research will be used to help inform future phases of Localisation and Devolution.

The principal objectives of this consultation were to find out:

- Whether any differences have been observed following the changes under Localisation and Devolution

- Whether these changes make the provision of services easier or more difficult

- Do front line staff now feel in a better position to deliver improved services

- Whether staff believe services have benefited from a localised management structure

- Any impact Devolution and Localisation has had on communications and the flow of information

3   Methodology

The focus groups were held on Monday 8th May 2006, at the Council House, Birmingham. The groups started at 5.30 pm and 7.30 pm. Each group lasted for an hour and a half. The topic guide used during the groups can be found at the end of this report.

Birmingham City Council nominated staff to participate by in the groups and staff were selected to represent as many Districts as possible, as well as differing service areas and levels of responsibility. Participants were recruited by staff at BMG Research's in-house telephone call centre. Everyone who agreed to take part in a group received a confirmation letter thanking them for agreeing to take part in the research, explaining the purpose of the consultation and giving details of the group. Follow-up 'reminder' telephone calls were made on the day of each group, to encourage the respondents to attend. As a 'thank you' for their time and as a contribution towards expenses, each respondent was given £25 cash at their meeting.

Call centre staff endeavoured to ensure that a cross-section of staff was invited to each meeting. They recruited fifteen respondents to each focus group.

At the start of each discussion respondents were assured that any comments made would be anonymous and that verbatim quotations reported would be anonymised and would not be attributed to named individuals.

Focus groups run by BMG Research are audio-recorded (unless any of the participants objects to this) and may be transcribed. However:

-   The content of discussions is kept confidential

-   Recordings are stored securely at BMG

-   Recordings are not made available to anyone outside of BMG

Where verbatim comments are included in this report they are reported in italics.

4   Respondent Profile

Twenty-three members of staff attended the two focus groups. Fifteen members of staff, eight males and seven females, attended the first group. Eight staff, six males and two females attended the second group.

Participants worked in a range of service areas including Libraries, Leisure, Highways, Benefits, Neighbourhood Offices and central support services. The Districts of Edgbaston, Hodge Hill, Perry Barr, Northfield, Selly Oak, Yardley, Sparkbrook and Sutton Coldfield were all represented.

5   A Note on Qualitative Research

A focus group is a small, informal discussion group made up by members of the public or staff and led (moderated) by a professional researcher. A typical focus group is made up of around eight carefully recruited people (respondents) who are brought together for an hour and a half to discuss a particular subject nominated by the client. The group members' different views and experiences combine to create a unique and useful conversation.

Focus groups can provide understanding of what people think, need, want and care about – and can explore the reasons behind those views. The researcher guides the group through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative (survey) questionnaire.

Findings may emerge from focus groups that the researcher and client had not previously considered; these can be identified and explored. It is the moderator's job to ensure that all of the client's questions are answered and that every respondent has an opportunity to express his or her point of view.

It should be remembered that focus group participants might hold views that are based on incorrect information. It is the moderator's role to explore and report participants' perceptions – not necessarily to correct any misunderstanding or incorrect perceptions.

When interpreting the findings from focus groups, it is important to note that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence. The findings are based on a small sample, which is designed to cover a cross-section of residents, but this should not be confused with statistical representativeness.

It should be borne in mind that there is a tendency for group discussions to induce participants to express critical views. This report should be read with these notes of caution in mind.

6 Main findings

Public Awareness

Staff commented that unless local residents are involved in local forums or groups then generally the average person has very low awareness of Localisation and Devolution in Birmingham. Not only is awareness low but actual interest is also perceived to be low.

'People really aren't particularly interested. If people are active in the community for whatever reason then they will become aware of it as we are encouraging people to get involved in devolved structures. Other than that I don't think the average lay person probably doesn't even know what ward they are in.' F

'People are not interested unless it affects them personally.' M

'The public don't know what happened.' M

'People don't see things locally.' M

Some group members thought that local people do not need to know about Localisation and Devolution and that how the council structures itself is of no relevance to local people; all they are interested in is the provision of quality services. Respondents felt that the public tends to regard the council as a maternal body whose role is to care for and pick up the pieces when things go wrong. Interestingly, staff feel that the public tend only to have an interest in council workings and structures when services are not delivered to the expected standard. Essentially when things are going well, the public tends to be more laissez-faire.

'I don't think they actually need to know, they just want to know how good the services are and that they are delivered on time and fit for purpose. How we structure ourselves is a matter for ourselves and up to us to get right.' M

'I think a lot of people who are involved in the community and involved with the authority and housing would know, but other than that I don't think they have a clue.' M

'I think perhaps localising Environmental Services first may have had a bigger impact because that affects more local residents. The services that have been localised are quite specific.' M

'The council's been a matriarch, localisation has changed that, but they still expect us to be there to pick up the pieces when things go wrong'. M

Some group members thought that a lot of local people don't know how to access services or how to contact departments which is perceived to be as a result of poor communication and information provision.

'A lot of local people still don't know how to access services. The actual service they need might exist but they don't know how to go about identifying or contacting that department.' F

'Lack of information acts as a barrier to local people'. [to accessing services]. F

'The city has just not embraced communication, it's too big. But you don't need localisation in order to improve this.' M

One group member pointed out that they think there is a certain lack of internal knowledge amongst front line staff, but also acknowledge that it would be very difficult to know everything that the council does.

'Even staff to a certain extent. Lack of knowledge on behalf of the staff does not help.' F

Impact of 'Going Local'

Districts are now perceived to work in 'silos' in terms of service delivery, budgets, staffing and resources. This is not something staff and in particular managers like, mainly as it is constraining and very different to how they were used to working before Localisation and Devolution.

'We work in silos now, we didn't before.' M

'Silos are worse now, absolutely.' M

'There is no sharing of resources between Districts and this is what we are all suffering from now.' M

'Underlying all this is a very worrying concept that we are becoming so insular, and competitive. The underlying knock on effects is that there is low staff morale and we are not sharing best practice. Because everyone is just keeping our heads down just trying to get the service point open. It's a real big issue that might not show at the moment but I can see it creeping in already'. F

'It's enhanced silo thinking.' M

'Silos are much more hostile now than they were under the departmental system. We could co-operate quite happily with other departments, talk together, sit together and not feel in anyway threatened. But now if you start to do anything that might benefit another District it is regarded as awful.' M

Previously the 43-Neighbourhood Office structure was thought to be very strong and enabled consistent service delivery across Districts and Wards. One individual feels that breaking the service up into Districts has weakened service delivery.

'Under 43 offices the service delivery was very strong and consistent. It's divide and conquer basically, they are breaking the service up completely and each District will make its own strategic plan as to how they will deliver their services and now its down to a strategic management plan in the District – which doesn't work.' M

Drastic streamlining over 3 or 4 years is thought to be too much too soon and it is noted that this could never have been done under the previous structure. Staff feel that in the future every service will experience cuts and streamlining as a result of localisation and devolution.

'I think we rushed into it a bit. We should have spent a bit more time. We should have done one or two District s, piloted it. Rather rushed and all been thrown into a melting pot especially with the budgets.' M

'It is early days but the streamlining in that period is drastic, it's too much too soon. Every service will find that there will be streamlining and cuts.' M

'The concept of Localisation and Devolution is about cutting back. On everything. Year on year, month on month, there is always something, someone is cutting down. In the old days it used to be £10k or £20k off a department, now it's massive – you're talking £250k off a District. It's a lot of money to find from somewhere and consequently it will have knock on effects – staff cuts service losses, it will all come.' M

'This overwhelming fundamental that you must keep cutting back.' M

Balancing Priorities

Decentralising services has meant that there are different priorities across the city and undoubtedly decisions have to be made about where priorities lie. There is some concern that going local will lead to an unequal playing field in terms of the quality and how local services are delivered. Respondents felt strongly that standards of service should not vary across the city for political reasons.

'Before a service that came under one roof the priority for the organisation that ran that service was the running of that service. When you decentralise that service or go local with that service, decisions have to be made about priorities.' M

'In terms of localising management of libraries. We have the responsibility to deliver against the national standards and when you localise potentially you have even more people to respond to within in that so in theory managing libraries in 2 districts, I have my district management structure and also my strategic responsibility towards the integrated library services as a whole as it is assessed nationally. That creates more problems for me as I have more tiers of management and different priorities I have to respond to within that structure but still have targets to achieve. M

'Neighbourhood offices, we have exactly the same thing. District and strategic pressures to which they have to respond as well. It's trying to get a balance between both.' M

'It's too complicated – too many strategies and priorities.' M

'The priorities keep on changing.' M

Sport and Leisure had previously set charter mark standards. Before restructure the department had been totally customer focused, it is now perceived as being focused on the council and the demands for raising its own revenues and meeting agreed targets.

'What you have to ask yourself is are we about the customer or the council. There are advantages to localisation but I don't think it covers all services'. M

Previously things were freer and there is a sense that freedoms to make decisions have been lost since localisation.

'Sport and Leisure has had a major impact. Under localisation we have changed not to focus on the customer, but to focus on the council. The major difference is that we are there not providing the service directly for the customer but we're there as a council service at the requirement of the council. We used to have much more free [way of working], less ties to the council strings, we could tap into a much faster access and the benefits to this were directly to the customer.' M

There are advantages to localisation, but staff don't think they cover all services. One major disadvantage, which was highlighted within Sport and Leisure and Libraries, is that they can no longer transfer staff and equipment between areas.

'In sports and leisure services you used to be able to transfer staff and equipment between areas or districts, under localisation you can't.' M

'Can't now re-distribute old equipment to other sports centres. 'M

Also in Sports and Leisure it was felt that they used to have an excellent customer focused complaints system in place. Now the new system takes too long and therefore takes longer to put things right ultimately impacting on the customer.

'The complaints system we used to have was very customer focused and we would jump on any complaints right away. Now the new complaints system is all round the Wrekin. It's not focussed on the customer.' M

Libraries feel that some have done well out of localisation and others haven't. Inconsistencies are seen to exist and seem to depend on which district you are in or teamed with. Some districts have been invested in others haven't.

'It's a little bit of a lottery as to which district you have fallen in and where your fortunes have fallen. You hear such very different stories and we [library] have been lucky as we have been invested in, but other places are living a horror story, it's very hard.' F

'We are getting to very serious situations now. This lady has been fortunate in that she is getting lots of funding to develop services I am getting nothing. Sometimes I can't even open my service point unless I get in supply staff who don't have the expertise. I mean what kind of message is this giving to customers, going into a service point and never see the same face twice. It's very, very serious. It's rock bottom budgets.' F

Investment has allowed some libraries to develop and expand services others have not. Other districts have not been so lucky.

'Going back to this lottery scenario. I got the long straw so I have been able to invest in our service and provide a much wider range of services than before. But I can see as the districts have invested in me this extra range of services we provide, we don't offer that

out to other areas – its not shared city wide. You have to come to [library] to access the service. I have been lucky. Then you hear of the possibility of losing some service points soon.' F

Some good things have occurred as a result of localisation. In particular one respondent speaks of being able to meet new people and make valuable contacts which have been helpful in his work.

'I work as a Ward Support Officer and there are two other colleagues within my district. We worked in different buildings before localisation and now we all work in the same office, which allows us to bounce ideas off one another which works really well in terms of information sharing. But also I have been able to meet other people from other departments I had not met before and I have made some great contacts. In my area things are moving in the right direction, other districts may say differently. Things are not perfect. Overall I think it is a good thing and going the right way.' M

Working more closely with people through co-location has been a positive of Localisation and Devolution, allowing efficiency gains through the sharing of receptionists, buildings etc. It has also allowed more joined up working than has been possible previously. However there are drawbacks.

'We are now working more closely with people who have different skills and we are at the point where we can think about joining up better than historically to deliver services. But when we were one department you had to maintain efficient levels and you could spread that. Now under localised budgets you can't do that. We are probably running at 40% use of casual staff all the time, which has a knock on effect in terms of what you can do in outreach and hitting our performance targets.' M

Staffing and Budget issues

Everyone in both groups spoke of many problems related to staff shortages and the difficulties associated with budget cuts and the ability to continue to deliver quality services. Margins have become tighter and there is a tension between staffing costs and maintaining levels of service.

'It's a budget war.' M

'There are winners and losers in terms of budgets. Depending on how you put your case or your reports you might gain.' M

'We have created an internal market where one is bidding against another and I am concerned about this.' M

'Next year a certain amount of people in the offices are entitled to a pay increment, £800 each lets say. There is absolutely no provision whatsoever built into the budget for increased increments. You get your money and you will be told sorry the only way to find that is to lose a post, half a post, cut people's hours or reduce hours. There is no actual way to increase your budget to make that work so you have to cut back. If a member of staff leaves you don't replace them.' M

Staffing issues and the quality of staff to deliver services was of prime concern to respondents in both groups. Localised budgets are limiting in terms of spreading resources and staff. Many services speak of running their service on casual staff and temps, however it is pointed out that this may not be a direct result of Localisation and Devolution.

There is a worry that levels of staff competence and specialisation are being eroded and replaced by more generic and less skilled staff. Sometimes there are not enough people in the building to do the training and operate the service.

'It's [casual staff] only supposed to be in an emergency situation, but it's an every day occurrence now. It takes a long time to train people up. Experienced staff are fine, but if you bring them in on the cheap then you'll see the service take a dive.' M

'I've got 5 staff including me. One has been off long-term sick and one on maternity leave, so the 3 left has been a temp, me and an advisor. So summer holidays no one can take leave. One day my boyfriend came up to help out just so we could open.' F

'It's less efficient in terms of staffing.' F

'Training is another thing. If you haven't got enough staff in the building to operate the service you can't do the training to improve the skills and the service.' M

'Problems with staffing may not be a result of localisation, it might have been made more difficult, complicated or enhanced it. Whether it is a function of Localisation...I'm not convinced.' M

'We're on a bone, so we just don't have any extra provision in the budget for extra staff...If you have a staff member leave then you don't replace them because that money needs to be put into front line services' M

As a result respondents feel that budget restraints will inevitably have a growing negative impact on the quality of service. The worry is that the quality of service within the districts is bound to suffer in the declining budget situation.

'The quality of service is important to people.' M

'The only way to survive budget cuts is to have generic staff, lower the skill level and move them around in order to fill in the gaps. This is far from ideal.' M

Respondents also struggled with what they see as the tightrope act between pragmatism and politics in terms of budgets. There is a sense that budget allocations are politically driven, that is, when CPA ratings require it, then there is a political drive and thus a financial will to invest in particular services within specific districts.

'Libraries get more money because they need a certain star in our CPA rating.' M

Management

There are grievances about the need for staff and budget cuts when managers have had pay rises and they are trying to make cost savings.

'And now all these Senior Managers have had a massive pay rise. I'm not saying it's worth it or not. It's how it is perceived what has happened. If they deserve the pay rise perhaps others do too. Where is all this money coming from? We are here trying to make all these savings and suddenly someone has got a big rise. I'm not knocking localisation, we have had many successes. As we go down the road it may improve more.'

'The most annoying thing is that I have just lost another member of staff to stay in budget this year and all of the District Managers have had a re-grade and my boss has just had a £10K pay rise back dated! Who is going to pay for that this year? I'm sorry but it's just wrong, wrong.'

'The districts have different priorities and staff are having the opportunity to develop and get involved in areas of work they are keen to get involved with, which is brilliant. However, I'm losing staff because the districts are moving my budget to pay for admin staff or to pay for something else. I lost a member of staff last year and this year. You are constantly being asked to deliver more with less. Good for the staff in getting involved in new things, but I'm left with nobody.' M

Some feel there are too many tiers of strategic management and that this is unhelpful in terms of service delivery and communication. Middle management is seen to be becoming more and more strategic, however some speak of a 'void' between policy makers at the centre and the practitioners on the front line.

In addition some refer to the disparity between middle management and higher managers. There is a feeling of being 'career stuck' and that there is an element of 'empire building' where some individuals have benefited massively.

'I think there are too many tiers now. There is three times the amount of management.' M

'In our department there are a lot of masters'. M

'I think there is a void between the policy makers at the centre and the practitioners or the officer in the districts. We have to work within the remit of the policies at the centre. But sometimes there is a void to how the two marry up.' F

'As middle managers we are getting lots of strategic stuff being passed down.' M

'Localisation has created a very top heavy management structure. I'm not saying its good or bad that's just what we have got.' M

Those working in neighbourhood offices feel problems exist where District Managers do not understand the service being provided and they need to get to grips with the business, services and the community. A district orientated focus is not favoured.

'Following localisation I think the districts are made up of people who possibly have come from outside, not knowing about the services offered or how neighbourhood offices work they and have made no effort to find how they work or our needs. They have taken away our admin support against our will. Staff morale is very low. They know they are not valued in neighbourhood offices. We can't afford to appoint advisors but then you see the districts advertising posts. In my opinion they are using the budget to their advantage to

reduce the workload for them, never mind those on the frontline. And that's why morale is very low.' F

'Its very much district orientated and not front line service orientated.' F

'The strategic has been separated from the management which is not a very good way of running a service. The management side doesn't understand or seems not to want to make the effort to understand what the strategic is trying to do or what the service philosophy is behind it - the equality issues and all that. They are supposed to be more effective due to localisation but the big thinking seems to have gone. You get the situation where the localised management structure attempts to ignore the strategic at almost every opportunity.' M

'I agree, that is absolutely spot on.' M

Some feel that when District Managers do not fully understand the service they resort using generic management techniques rather than service quality techniques. This varies and appears to depend on the District Manager.

'My manager has no community development background whatsoever.' F

'If they [District Managers] know what they are talking about you are likely to get better communication.' M

'Some [District Managers] really seem to understand the service cause that is their background and are really supportive. There are some managers who are in a difficult situation as they are trying to be generic.' M

'You can't rely on general knowledge to understand the service.' M

Staff feel that there is a need for sustained top down commitment to Localisation and Devolution. Furthermore the devolvement of power is thought to be crucial for localisation to really work.

'It is unclear whether politically it's acceptable. Unless the city, top to bottom, embraces something like this it will never work.' M

'The big problem is the devolvement of power which still remains in the city and they do not want to give that up to the districts.' M

Respondents feel there has been too much concentration on the structure and performance management rather than the delivery of front line services. They are also worried that measuring performance using a private sector model was inappropriate.

'We have to some extent forgotten about the people. There has been a concentration on the structure and getting people into the right positions then what they have got to deliver. We are now told that performance is more important that service delivery. We have performance management drilled into us, which yes is partly from the government but there needs to be a halfway house as we have to deliver to the public.' M

'We're not a bank and we can't be measured in terms of performance like one' M

Communication

Localisation has led to multiplication of various communication channels. For example: Sending emails and copying in a huge number of people. There is a sense of information overload among managers of front line services, which is put down to the many more connections that now exist. Information coming from 'everywhere' appears in some cases to impinge on other work. Having to trawl through tons of emails is a daily task for many.

'There is too much information, we are absolutely blasted with it from everywhere.' M

'Every morning I put that computer on, sit down and my first priority is to go through all my emails and work out which ones I need to read.' M

'When you send an email how many people do you have to copy in sometimes?' M

'Because of the way localisation has gone you are frightened not to inform everyone of what you are doing. I think it is hindering work.' M

Most participants perceived communication to be worse than before the restructure.

'It's [communication] worse than before.' M

'There are emails I should have had that I didn't get.' M

The increased complexity of the management structure puts added pressures on communication and meeting everyone's demands and priorities. Staff feel there are too many chiefs, from the central strategic office, the local district office, councillors, MPs the public and staff and stakeholders which makes service delivery and communication more difficult.

It is clear that staff are somewhat confused by all the policies and strategies that exist. Staff find it overly complicated. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is not a direct result of Localisation and Devolution, the large number of strategies, plans, priorities and policies certainly confuse staff and many feel this confusion has increased since the restructure.

'I can't understand all the initials and strategic priorities'. M'

I feel confused'. 'M

'There is the Council Plan, the district plan, the Service Plan, there's three and there are others it just gets tighter and tighter.' M

Appendix 7 – Residents' Focus Groups Results

The report produced by bmg research follows

BMG Research
Top line Report

Devolution and Localisation Scrutiny Review –
Residents Focus Groups

Birmingham City Council
May 2006

Prepared for:

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Lead Officer, Scrutiny

Prepared by:

David Loveridge
Qualitative Researcher

bmg
research

Because people matter.

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1   Executive Summary

Residents' priorities

The question of what local services are most significant to these residents is a very expansive one. Fortunately however, the answer is slightly more straightforward: the two broad service areas respondents from across the consultation consider important are: Public Safety (Policing, C.C.T.V. street lighting, roads and pavements) and Social Services (Doctors, Hospitals, Housing, Employment).

The two broad service areas are considered significant to respondents because they are deemed to affect both people's quality of life and community spirit. It is felt that when these services are delivered to a satisfactory standard, a neighbourhood is considered to be good and vice versa.

Respondents from group three (**Selly Oak, Harborne, Quinton, Edgbaston, Weoley Wards**) are particularly satisfied with the following council services.

- Refuse (perceived as largely reliable if not particularly conscientious)

- Neighbourhood Advice (seen as friendly, helpful and reliable)

- Cultural services / facilities (plenty of arts events)

- Parks (more facilities; cleaner)

However, they believe more needs to be done to tackle the following:

- Antisocial behaviour (more needs to be done to tackle groups of youths that loiter)

- Improved street lighting (they want the council to employ white, rather than orange lamps)

Respondents from group two **(Stockland Green, Tyburn, Aston, Nechells, Perry Barr Wards)** are pleased with the following service areas:

- Refuse (seen as reliable if not particularly conscientious)

- Street hygiene (streets now seen as cleaner, more free of graffiti etc)

- Parks (more benches, more green spaces, more regular grass cutting, improved appearance)

- Town Planning (removal of dangerous subways, more pedestrian crossings now)

However, the same respondents are dissatisfied with the following:

- Schooling (schools in the area seen as under performing, too much ill discipline; no after school provision; not enough nursery places)

- Leisure provision (unsophisticated, not enough subsidised leisure opportunities for families with children)

- Unemployment (not enough local people employed; respondents would like to see more job creation / welfare / enterprise initiatives to tackle higher than average levels of unemployment)

- Healthcare (more doctors needed)

- Transport (more bus services)

Respondents from group one (**Sutton Vesey, Kingstanding, Oscott Wards**) are particularly satisfied with the following:

- Social services (seen as very responsive)

- Refuse (reliable)

- Devolution and Localisation (some respondents are beginning to see wider public consultation occurring)

Nevertheless, they are dissatisfied with:

- Town planning (too many public houses concentrated into areas, resulting in noise and litter pollution) (Excessive traffic caused by poorly designed roads. Respondents want the problems engineered / designed out)

- Roads / pavements –(poorly maintained, excessive employment of Tarmac considered unattractive / unsafe)

- Street lighting (more white lamps to replace orange lamps which are considered too dim and unsafe)

- Devolution / localisation (although beginning to take effect, council needs to promote it more)

Devolution and Localisation

Very few of the respondents had heard about the City Councils Devolution and Localisation agenda before the consultation. Consequently, they are not associating improvements and / or changes in their neighbourhoods to this initiative even though they all agree with its fundamental principles.

Although they were impressed by some aspects of service delivery (see above) they were mostly of the opinion that there is much room for improvement (also see above) particularly if

decision-making becomes more 'devolved and localised'.

Current levels of Involvement

None of the young people are presently connected to any kind of local decision making role, however some have attended public meetings in the past. Subject areas that have motivated them include globalisation / anti capitalism. It seems that they were encouraged to participate because these subject areas seemed relevant and worthwhile at that time.

Similarly, although none of the respondents from the 34 – 54 year olds group have ever attended a Ward or District Committee meeting, half have at one time or another participated in a public meeting of some kind. They explain that they felt particularly motivated to attend because a proposal was going to adversely affect their neighbourhoods.

Only two members from the over 55's group really know how decisions are made at this level and this is because they are part of a local community forum. Although they understand the decision making process, and are relatively more involved in decision making per se, like most of these respondents, they also cannot not be totally sure how some of the decisions are reached.

Perceptions of Ward / district committee meetings

Even though most people appear to be familiar with the names of their local councillors, they do not really appreciate what they stand for politically. In fact, it is fair to say that much of the decision-making processes employed at a Ward and District level is a bit of a mystery to most people.

However, some of these people, particularly the younger element, have the distinct impression that perhaps ward or district meetings are 'stuffy', yet organised affairs facilitated by an agenda of some sort. There is also wide agreement that these types of meetings are most likely populated by local councillors, influential business people, MP's and / or people that are already involved in the community / voluntary sector locally.

MP's and Local councillors are seen to be the ones who probably make the important decisions, reaching their conclusions by a range of methods – not all of them totally transparent. In terms of how these influential people make important decisions about budgets relating to local services and facilities, respondents were of the distinct impression that it was probably akin to how national government decides what their spending priorities are.

Respondents felt that a financial budget must obviously be set and subsequently spent according to national policy and / or along party political lines. Indeed, these respondents have the impression that local people's interests are perhaps sometimes relegated behind interests of the political parties their local councillors serve.

Indeed, some people were angry during the consultation because they had the impression that a lot of decisions may have already been taken before the councillors in fact agreed to talk to the people. Instead, councillors should be talking to them or the community forums before they make important decisions, respondents felt. In truth, there is a wide perception amongst respondents that decisions appear to be imposed on the local people - there appears to be too little consultation occurring, except around election time.

Consequently, when respondents were asked to what extent the council should involve people in local decision making: from the outset and through organised groups, was the response. Indeed, it is felt that the council needs to do more to facilitate the creation of organised groups or forums of local people if it is serious about promoting devolution.

Even though there are no issues of relevance at the present time that would stimulate them to become more involved in a local decision making body (indeed, there is a sense that young people in particular are really only interested in single issues such as the environment rather than politics per se which they appear indifferent towards) most respondents do not discount the possibility that in the future they may become involved in a particular cause or subject area, but for now, nothing is particularly motivating them to attend a committee meeting. They would just like to be reassured that suitable response mechanisms for registering their concern were clearly available if they needed them.

Promoting Involvement

Indeed, even though only two people from the consultation are presently involved in local decision making (they are part of a community forum) the majority of respondents would be encouraged to more seriously consider participation if the following set of factors were established:

- Effective communication

Communication of these types of meetings needs to be more effective. Many people do not contemplate attendance at district or Ward meetings because they often never hear about them. Greater involvement by local people should be advertised and communicated across a range of media channels. Many respondents felt that if ordinary people are given the information and are subsequently made more aware of the issues affecting them, they would be more inclined to do something.

- Integrity

Another factor influencing involvement is the perceived integrity of these types of meetings. Most people it seems need to be convinced that they will be listened to and that their presence will be welcomed. Bona fide evidence of local people's influence is seen as a great motivator and improved attendance could be encouraged if the advertising of the up and coming Ward or Committee meetings focussed on this.

Young people in particular have the perception that society in general does not really respect their views and opinions much. Indeed, these young people need to feel convinced that they will be listened to and also that their involvement will actually result in change.

- Tone of voice

Similarly, the manner in which groups are facilitated is also seen as very important in this regard. It would appear that these respondents are perhaps more responsive to informal and smaller, peer led discussion environments than ones run and populated by older people who can easily appear to be pompous and out of sympathy with younger people's concerns. They

especially need to feel that the issue or topic of the debate is also relevant to them.

- Apathy

Apathy is a major factor to consider in this regard. Respondents say that they would feel more positive about their own abilities to influence decisions if they could actually see that attendance would be a worthwhile investment of their time and energies.

- Community Leadership

Successful public involvement could be achieved if people were suitably enthused by the council. Indeed, many people from the group felt that it was the responsibility of the councillors themselves (or the instruments of change as they were referred to) to galvanise public interest and promote involvement. Local people need the council or whoever, to facilitate the development of such forums.

- A range of consultation methods

For example, opinions ranged across the groups in terms of how they would like to be consulted. Some would prefer face-to-face meetings, some appreciate consultation via questionnaires and some would prefer new technology such as Internet or online focus groups. Others would appreciate being consulted in their community language. For example, young people often do not have the time to commit to regular meetings and therefore consultation via the Internet may be more appropriate for them. Nevertheless, respondents felt that a range of consultation methods should be made available to suit people's lifestyles.

More detailed findings for each group / demographic can be found later in the text under main findings.

2   Background and Introduction

Having sought the opinions of City Council Members and officers during the Scrutiny Review, and having reviewed the findings of the MORI Birmingham District Survey, Birmingham City Council commissioned BMG Research to undertake more qualitative information from a citizens' perspective to feed into the Scrutiny Review.

Birmingham City Council were keen to use three focus groups to enable detailed discussion around the topics of local services and local governance and to supplement the evidence already gathered from other sources.

The aim of the Devolution and Localisation scrutiny review is to improve the future development of Devolution and Localisation by learning lessons from what has happened so far.

The Devolution and Localisation agenda combines devolved governance and localised services in order to deliver service improvement and enable services to more closely reflect local needs. A key strand of the Scrutiny Review has therefore been to investigate whether this has been achieved.

Another aim of the agenda was to enhance community engagement. The Scrutiny Review has attempted to discover whether this has been achieved.

The review has also looked at the findings in the Mori Birmingham District Survey 2005, which questioned respondents on topics such as "Local Services and Facilities" and "Getting Involved".

Initial Findings from Previous Research

Evidence taken has identified service improvements such as reductions in anti-social behaviour and crime, and improvements to the street scene and environment, although these have been found to vary from District to District.

The difficulty of engaging members of the public in Ward and District meetings has been noted, and the formality of District and Ward Committee meetings has been described as a deterrent to public involvement.   Differing opinions have been reported as to the most appropriate level for public involvement.

The Mori Birmingham District Survey 2005 reported low scores for how the council deals with dog fouling and litter in residential areas and whether the council provides value for money. Very positive scores were recorded for household waste collection overall.   The survey also showed that the policy has not in itself raised awareness of how the City Council works or provided a means through which those who wished to have more of a say could do so.

Aims and Objectives of consulting with the People's Panel

The People's Panel was consulted to check and add detail to the findings that have emerged from the review to date. It provided an opportunity for some in-depth discussion to take place around exactly what is important to residents and what changes would make a difference to

the local area.

- What local services provided by the City Council are most significant to you as a Birmingham resident?

- Using the example of street services, which aspects in particular matter to you most in your local area? (E.g. litter on the street, frequency of waste collection, chewing gum, dog-fouling). This should encourage detailed discussion around what is important about local services, why these aspects are so significant, and any reasons for dissatisfaction with these services.

- What changes would you suggest to make a significant difference in your local area?

The second area of investigation for the People's Panel was around governance. The study aimed to discover whether the principles of Devolution and Localisation (combining devolved governance and localised services to deliver service improvement and enable services to more closely reflect local needs) are welcomed.

- Do you agree with the general aims of Devolution and Localisation (i.e. to take decisions and manage services at a local level so as to more closely reflect local circumstances and needs)?

- We would also like to discuss the style of Ward and District meetings and to discover the public's opinion of formal meetings.

- Have you ever attended a Ward or District Committee meeting? If so, what were your impressions of the meeting style and the range of issues covered?

- Do you find formal meetings unappealing?

- Does the style of a meeting influence your inclination to attend?

- Do you have any suggestions for how the style of local decision-making meetings might be improved to encourage attendance?

This research provided the opportunity to explore how much the public would like to get involved in decisions made regarding their local area – whether some decisions are so important that the public would appreciate the opportunity for involvement, or whether they prefer to leave such issues to their local councillors.

- Do you believe that decision-making within the local area is a role that should be left to local councillors?

- Are there issues that you find so important that you would like to be involved in the decision-making process?

- Are you currently involved in a local decision-making body, such as a school board of governors?

- Would you be interested in devoting your time to being involved on the decision-making board of, e.g. the library service, leisure centre, decisions around street services? Or do you believe that such roles should be performed by local councillors?

3   Methodology

Date / Time	Venue / Address	Moderator	No. Booked	No. Attended
Monday 24th April 2006 16.00 – 17.30	Royal Hotel High Street Sutton Coldfield	David Loveridge	18	12
Tuesday 25th April 2006 18.30 – 20.00	BMG Research Offices Aston Science Park	David Loveridge	18	8
Wednesday 26th April 2006 18.30 – 20.00	Norfolk Hotel 267 Hagley Road Birmingham B16 9NA	David Loveridge	18	6

Participants were recruited via a free find (In-street) method. Staff at BMG Research's in-house telephone call centre and external field recruitment team recruited the respondents. Everyone who agreed to take part in a group received a confirmation letter thanking them for agreeing to take part in the research, explaining the purpose of the consultation and giving details of the group. Follow-up 'reminder' telephone calls were made on the day before each group, to encourage the respondents to attend. As a 'thank you' for their time and as a contribution towards expenses, each respondent was given £25 in cash at their meeting.

Call centre staff endeavoured to ensure that a cross-section of residents was invited to each meeting. They recruited eighteen respondents to each focus group and each group had a different profile pf respondent. Group one was over 55's; group two were 35 – 54 year olds; group three were young people aged between 16 – 34.

At the start of each discussion, respondents were assured that any comments made would be anonymous and that verbatim quotations reported would be anonymised and would not be attributed to named individuals.

Focus groups run by BMG Research are audio-recorded (unless any of the participants objects to this) and may be transcribed. However:

-   The content of discussions is kept confidential

-   Recordings are stored securely at BMG

-   Recordings are not made available to anyone outside of BMG

Where verbatim comments are included in this report they are reported in italics. Text in brackets indicates the group in which each comment was made. The symbol // between sentences indicates one participant responding to another. The moderator's words are indicated by uppercase type within square brackets.

4   A note on Qualitative Research

A focus group is a small, informal discussion group made up by members of the public and led (moderated) by a professional researcher. A typical focus group is made up of around eight carefully recruited people (respondents) who are brought together for an hour and a half to discuss a particular subject nominated by the client. The group members' different views and experiences combine to create a unique and useful conversation.

Focus groups can provide understanding of what people think, need, want and care about – and can explore the reasons behind those views. The researcher guides the group through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative (survey) questionnaire.

Findings may emerge from focus groups, which the researcher and client had not previously considered; these can be identified and explored. It is the moderator's job to ensure that all of the client's questions are answered and that every respondent has an opportunity to express his or her point of view.

It should be remembered that focus group participants may hold views that are based on incorrect information. It is the moderator's role to explore and report participants' perceptions – not necessarily to correct any misunderstanding or incorrect perceptions.

When interpreting the findings from focus groups, it is important to note that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence. The findings are based on a small sample, which is designed to cover a cross-section of residents, but this should not be confused with statistical representativeness.

It should be borne in mind that there is a tendency for group discussions to induce participants to express critical views. This report should be read with these notes of caution in mind.

5   Main Findings

18-34 year olds - (Selly Oak, Harborne, Quinton, Edgbaston, Weoley)

Residents' priorities

According to young residents aged 18 – 34, the kinds of lifestyle issues that are deemed to be important factors, in determining a good neighbourhood from a bad one, include the following:

- Access to amenities

Many of them believe that good local amenities including shops and leisure facilities are extremely important along with easy access to cultural and religious facilities also.

Local amenities, what's available like, you know, at your local facilities really like the community centre or like sports centres that sort of thing, and the parks and stuff, if you've got all those available to hand it all makes the community really. (Female)

- High proportion of home ownership

A high proportion of the population owning their own properties is believed to have a positive affect on an area because these people are more inclined to display respectful tendencies.

Well if you own your own property then it does matter because when you go to sell it on. Well they're more likely to look after their own property as well, they take better care of it (Female)

- Security

Respondents feel that a felt sense of security and safety is another important aspect of life that makes for a good, healthy neighbourhood environment.

Conversely, these respondents feel that high crime levels including antisocial behaviour, burglary, racism and vandalism, a lack of visible policing and excessive levels of litter and rubbish make for a poor neighbourhood.

Aspects of their own neighbourhoods these respondents would like to see changed include:

- Antisocial behaviour

Respondents would like to see the dispersal of gangs that loiter on street corners. These youths are widely acknowledged to be an intimidating presence and so the tackling of this problem in fact, is a particularly high priority for most.

We need more Police walking the streets. (Female)

Keeping the area nice to live in. (Female)

Well I've got a lot of young people in sections in my area where there's loads of young people just hanging on street corners sharing a bottle of cheapie cider, you know. (Female)

- Improved street lighting

Improved street lighting, particularly the replacement of orange with white lamps is also considered to be an important change. Respondents complain that of an evening, road and pavements are not particularly visible with the orange streetlights, and that subsequently can make them feel vulnerable, particularly to gangs of youths who roam the streets at this time.

Better street lighting, yes… You can't walk on the streets at nighttime. (Female)

In terms of the future, and how their needs might change, young people feel that health services, along with Housing and perhaps social services will probably become more important priorities for them as they start their own families and look to move into their own properties, away from sharing with friends and families.

Devolution and Localisation

Most young people from the consultation have some difficulty determining the services Birmingham City Council are actually responsible for delivering. They are confused with this issue because they are largely unsure whether certain services have in fact been privatised and / or are the responsibility of central government.

I get confused with this issue because of privatisation you don't know who's in charge if you like, you know, you can't say it's a Central Governing body because I'm just not sure. (Male)

Nevertheless, services, which are deemed to more closely reflect local circumstances and needs include:

- Refuse services

Refuse services are considered reliable if not particularly conscientious.

Refuse, good refuse. (Female)

Collect all the bulk refuse things and you don't have to pay for it. (Female)

- Advice Services

Staff employed here are seen to be particularly helpful and friendly

- Sports facilities

They are perceived by young people to be generally cheaper and more accessible (council gyms as opposed to private health clubs have more of a community feeling about them also, which respondents seem to prefer). The passport to leisure scheme particularly impresses

young people: it presented value for money and convenience, they say.

There are Council gymnasiums and things like that available that are generally cheaper than anywhere else and they're good because they're all around the city, so you can have a card and stuff, which is really good, especially as a student. (Male)

People aren't just interested in going and having a little workout and going home, they want to associate with one another, it's more of a community feel. (Male)

- Improved parks and recreational areas

In terms of the improvements they have noticed, respondents say that they have seen more visible police around albeit in community vans. They are pleased that Weoley Park pond has been cleaned and Weoley Park also now has a basketball court for young people.

They keep the parks and stuff kind of nice and clean. (Female)

However, it was difficult for these young people to determine exactly whether the council is suitably organised to deliver services locally. This is mainly because the council does not appear to have a strong enough profile. Consequently, most of them are left to assume that the council are probably doing a reasonable job with the resources they have.

I'd say in general yes, but they don't have a strong profile in terms of their, of the public or at least my awareness of what they're doing because I suppose that's because they haven't got as much money as other services if you see what I mean, So I'm assuming they do, do a reasonable job, but I wouldn't really know about it half the time. (Male)

Yes but I do think they do a good job particularly in the arts, that's something I seem to keep coming back to. (Male)

Nevertheless, they agree with the general aims of Devolution and Localisation (i.e. to take decisions and manage services at a local level so as to more closely reflect local circumstances and needs)

I think they should talk to the people, talk to the people and see what they need. (Female)

Ward and District Committee meetings

None of the young people are presently connected to any kind of local decision making role, however some have attended public meetings in the past. Subject areas that have motivated them include globalisation / anti capitalism. It seems that they were encouraged to participate because these subject areas seemed relevant and worthwhile at that time.

Yes well I have been involved, but it's again it's because of a particular issue, you know, like there was the Birmingham Northern relief road for example and so I suppose there's May Day and things like that going on and the Global Movements and things. (Male)

Even though they have never attended such meetings, these young people have the distinct impression opinion that perhaps Ward or district meetings are probably stuffy, but organised events. They are seen to be held in church or community halls and the types of people that

attend them are seen to be the elderly, people that are already active within the community and also vocal types.

> *And I think some of the people around the area get together and have a meeting, but I'm not sure what happens about that I don't really get told about it, we just see the notice in the shop window. (Female)*

> *Elderly? I'm not sure (Female)*

> *Yes I mean those people want to know what's going on, so probably the old people and the ones that do the Neighbourhood Watch. (Female)*

> *I think sometimes in my area I always think they might be aggressive or something, you know, when there's a certain issue. (Female)*

When specifically asked, what would encourage them and other young people to attend district / Ward meetings, respondents raised the following points.

-   Effective communication

Communication of these types of meetings needs to be more effective. Many young people do not contemplate attendance at district or Ward meetings because they often never hear about them, they say.

> *We don't know about them. (Female)*

Leafleting, door-to-door canvassing and the employment of Internet technologies are seen as the most suitable ways to communicate involvement to young people. The council could help to stimulate interest if they utilised their own website better, say respondents. (Birmingham City Council's own website is not considered to be particularly adept, as the webmasters employed there are seen as unresponsive to email enquiries; the website itself is considered unattractive and contains out of date information).

> *It is there but it just needs to be updated because sometimes it's not updated as much as it should be and, you know. (Female)*

> *I sent an e-mail but they didn't answer me. (Female)*

> *I think pamphlets are a good thing if used properly. Like I said before, the only time you ever get any leaflets through your door is at election time, and then it's just a load of putting the opposition down, which doesn't work anyway, because it doesn't really qualify what they're there for. So if they were to give me more information about what they're doing, maybe even annually, just annually and post it around the community, at least then I might be interested and I might think, oh I can get involved with that, because that might provide an opportunity for people then as well. (Male)*

More specifically, information about how to become involved in a debate and / or how to comment on a discussion forum about a specific interest area, needs to be provided on the council site and receive a far greater profile than other news stories perhaps.

*Raise the profile of the website for a start and have Forums on it so you can give your
views or you can download a service and find out what issues are going on, and what
meetings are taking place, what the results of those meetings were, just build it, you
know, we're becoming more and more web dependent, so you could really stimulate
interest from young people. (Male)*

In fact, young people comment that if the council are serious about getting more young people
involved they should consider designing a completely different set of pages for younger
people. Presently the site is widely viewed as a little mundane and not particularly attractive.
Although they do not relish seeing any so-called 'spin' these young people would like to see
pages become more stylised, dynamic interactive and hard hitting.

*I think it would be good if there was something separate for the younger people than to
the adults, so like the young people would feel more important I think, you know, if they
were to have their own thing going on and their own meetings, I think that would be good
and interesting as well. I'd be interested in it anyway. (Female)*

It could be technology based because they can use the Internet. (Female)

*Is the information already available to us, I mean not that I'm going to know, because like
I say the profile is really low anyway generally, but is there such a thing as a website with
things that are going on, because that would be really good because that profile then
needs to be raised. (Male)*

However, any communication from the council to young people, whether that is via email,
telephone, press or other media channels, needs to be relevant and representative of the
truth. They say that they completely despise dishonesty, media speak and empty political
rhetoric and would much prefer to be given honest, down to earth information. In this regard
they are absolutely media savvy and can interpret 'spin' quite easily. They would respect an
authority like the council if it gave them the truth.

*I think nowadays well for me anyway if someone talks to me in the wrong tone I'm not
going to listen to them, that's it I'm not interested. If you can't talk to me how you'd like
to be, do you know what I mean then I'm not going to listen to you, and I think that's
probably with everyone? If you're not spoken to in the right manner then you're not going
to listen really are you? (Female)*

*I think that touches on the heart of what's wrong with politics because the way people put
things across is not about content it's about the spin. It's about selling you something, it's
about selling you a line a story, and not necessarily giving you an honest appraisal of a
situation so you can trust what they're saying, or seeing if there's anything more
interesting in, do you know what I mean, spin. (Male)*

- Relevance

Another factor perceived to determine their attendance is relevance. Young people it seems
need to be convinced that they will be listened to and that their presence will be welcomed.
Similarly, the manner in which groups are facilitated is also seen as very important in this
regard. It would appear that these respondents are perhaps more responsive to informal and
smaller, peer led discussion environments than ones run and populated by older people who

appear pompous and unsympathetic. They especially need to feel that the issue or topic of the debate is also relevant to them.

Well sometimes the people organising it, it can be quite stuffy and then you want to get your opinion across, and if you're not quite that confident in getting your opinion across you're not getting the right words across really are you, because you're just sort of like shaking in your boots or whatever. (Female)

I suppose a lot of that comes down to having a good Chairperson doesn't it and giving people confidence. (Male)

Around where I live it is full of mainly elderly people, so generally I'd expect them lot to all go. If I went I'd stick out like a sore thumb. (Female)

- Integrity

Another factor influencing involvement is the perceived integrity of these types of meetings. These young people have the perception that society in general does not really respect their views and opinions much. The cause of this is seen to be the employment of sensationalist media stories and general negative media stereotyping. However, these young people need to feel convinced that they will be listened to and also that their involvement will actually result in change.

That we'd be listened to more. (Female)

Like relevant for you in your lifestyle. (Female)

If our views were definitely going to be listened to. (Female)

Young people aren't listened to most of the time and. (Female)

F It's like we should be seen and not heard. (Female)

- Timing and suitability of response mechanisms

Not all of these young people necessarily have the time to dedicate to face-to-face meetings and consequently they would probably be more compliant if they were allowed to respond by completing an online focus group instead of more traditional consultation tools.

Not having enough time. (Female)

- Leadership

Successful public involvement could be achieved if people were suitably enthused by the council. Indeed, the group felt that it was the responsibility of the councillors themselves (or the instruments of change as they were referred to) to galvanise public interest and promote these types of events. Respondents felt that if ordinary people are given the information and are subsequently made more aware of the issues affecting them and / or their communities, they would be more inclined to do something.

The thought of not being listened to…the thought of not quite fitting into the area, I don't know. (Female)

You know the instruments of change, i.e. like Councillors and whatever, the Council or however, stimulating interest I think as well. I mean that's going to be like something that just creates its own momentum in a way. By making people more aware, I don't know who said knowledge is power but, you know, if you're more aware of issues then you're going to be more keen to do something with them. (Male)

Involvement

Local councillors are seen to make important decisions, reaching their conclusions by surveying opinions probably. Most of these young people appear to be familiar with the names of their local councillors but do not really appreciate what they stand for politically. They mention that the only time they ever hear mention of their councillor is around local election time.

The only time you get any leaflets about Politicians is when it's election time, and then it's only to slag off the opposition and I get irritated with that. (Male)

The Local Councillors have meetings as well in the community centres. In fact I think ours have a weekly or fortnightly, quite regularly. (Female)

For similar reasons, they cannot be absolutely certain that these councillors do actually provide community leadership or fairly represent people's views and opinions. Young people are of the opinion that the profiles of these councillors, outside of election time, are simply too low key. For these reasons then, they do not think local decision-making should be left exclusively to local councillors.

Well they have a role in theory but I don't know what they do because their profile is so absent, they're absent. I mean unless they're on a local news feature or something but that's all, you know. (Male)

Although none of them are currently involved in a local decision making body, such as a school board of governors, some have used the opportunities given to them in the past to attend public meetings and demonstrations. However, it is fair to say that there are no issues of relevance at the present time that would stimulate them to become more involved in a local decision making body. Indeed, there is a sense that young people are really only interested in single issues such as the environment rather than politics per se which they appear indifferent towards. Nevertheless, they do not discount involvement in the future.

35-54 year olds (Stockland Green, Tyburn, Aston, Nechells, Perry Barr)

Residents' priorities

According to residents aged 35 – 54, the kinds of lifestyle issues that are deemed to be important factors in determining a good neighbourhood from a bad one, include the following:

- The people

In addition to other factors, it is the attitude and background of the people living in a neighbourhood that determines community cohesion.

The people that live there (Male)

- Access to local amenities

Many of them believe that good local amenities including a good standard of local schools, doctors, shops and leisure facilities are extremely important.

Amenities like schools - good schools (Male)

Facilities for young people (Male)

- Security

Respondents feel that a strong sense of safety / security that are the things that make for good, healthy community relations.

Safety (Female)

Conversely, poor local facilities such as under achieving schools, poor leisure and recreation facilities and few local employment opportunities make for bad neighbourhoods.

Most of these residents believe that their area suffers unduly from some of the things highlighted in the last paragraph. This is mainly because they feel that their areas suffer from so-called 'Postcode blight'. They do not feel that their neighbourhoods receive sufficient funding and support from their council tax. Instead, the residents have the perception that more affluent areas receive a superior financial arrangement because perhaps they are deemed a greater priority.

I think that it should be no different, you've got Solihull area and there you'll have Perry Barr or somewhere and there's a difference in the richness of the areas. I think we should not have anything like that, that all areas in Birmingham should be treated the same, an equal amount of money put in for each area and not just going to Solihull because the standard there. (Female)

Consequently, as well as improvements to the quality of local schools, more job creation and / or enterprise schemes and improved leisure provision; the greatest change perhaps they would like to see is for their areas to benefit from a 'fairer' distribution of funding and support.

I think more money should be put into certain areas, again it's always going to richer areas. (Female)

And for example when I said the richness of the areas, in Great Barr and Perry Barr and some of the areas around here we haven't got these wheelie bins and yet in better areas they've got wheelie bins, they took them to them first and, you know, things like that. (Female)

Yes it's like we're categorised, you know, like we're further down the ladder because of the

area that we live in, you know, we're not as important as them in Solihull. (Female)

I mean the facilities that are available suggest, you know, maybe things like housing and what not have employed people from other areas rather than the community itself. They should have employed people from within the area to cater for the people in the area because they may have been in the area living there for X number of years and they know most of the people there. (Male)

Devolution and Localisation

Again, many people from this particular group have some difficulty determining the services Birmingham City Council are actually responsible for delivering.

However, in terms of how well these residents think council services are targeted, there are some quite specific opinions. Indeed, services, which are deemed to more closely reflect local circumstances and needs include:

- Refuse collection

The few services these respondents were pleased with included refuse collection, although refuse contractors were not considered particularly conscientious, they were on the whole seen as very reliable.

> *Even the refuse collection, okay they come on time every week, but when they've actually been the street is littered. (Male)*

- Street cleaning

Streets around their own neighbourhoods are thought to be generally cleaner now than at anytime in the past two years. They are particularly impressed by the swift removal of graffiti also, as this seems to be discouraging other perpetrators.

> *Some of the graffiti has got cleaned. (Female)*

- Park services

Respondents were also delighted to see more street and park benches about their neighbourhoods. Indeed, respondents were generally pleased to see that the council were attempting – by the introduction of more trees, flowers and improved grass cutting etc – to improve the appearance of their neighbourhoods.

> *Well I've noticed there is more benches around for the older people or anybody in that respect. I think the appearance is improving. (Female)*

> *They are improving the appearance of some parts of the city (Female)*

- Town planning

Other services to have impressed respondents were the 'closing off' of subways; improved bus

routes; more pedestrian crossings – particularly along busy roads.

Subways are being closed off and the roads have been made better, bus routes and that have been made. (Female)

There's more traffic lights. (Female)

Services, which do not reflect local circumstances or needs as much as respondents would like include:

- Leisure provision

Apart from leisure provision at Nechells leisure centre – which was widely regarded as excellent - leisure provision elsewhere, particularly Aston Leisure centre, was not thought to be as expansive as it could be. Taking into consideration the demographics of the local population, these residents complain that the leisure centre does not provide much in the way of activities, especially for young people. Similarly, respondents generally also do not believe that leisure opportunities in their neighbourhoods are particularly well promoted.

We need an area where there's things to do for young people instead of them hanging around on street corners, some sort of youth, more clubs like there used to be. (Female)

No I'm not talking about Nechells, I'm talking about Aston, the one we've got, it's not, I think they could do so much within it but they're not doing it. Yes they're not doing enough things, and previously when it was running properly they had loads of activities there. (Male)

However, perhaps these residents' greatest concern is that providers of leisure facilities / services are not consulting local people about their leisure expectations. The few services that are made available to them seem to be imposed and are widely thought to be unsophisticated.

And also the activities they do set up I think it doesn't really fulfil the needs of the community, they don't really ask what the young people want for the facilities within that, they might be interested in playing football, basketball, cricket, but they might do something completely different or try and engage them in a different sort of sport. (Male)

In a similar vein, respondents also bemoaned inadequate library provision – particularly at local community libraries.

- School provision

Further, respondents were also critical of the quality of schooling locally; ill disciplined children de motivated and roaming the streets. Similarly they also highlight a lack of after-school and holiday provision for children and young people. They would certainly appreciate the introduction of more subsidised leisure type schemes that allow families with young children to participate in leisure activities.

It's not just good schools - it's different because where I live our school is, I would say isn't that good and that had a direct affect on the learning of our young people, if they wanted further education or whatever. If the schools aren't providing us with good

services for our young people then they will be hanging on streets, because they won't have any education behind them. (Male)

I think there's a lack of like entertainment for the kids when they're off school. There's just nothing there for them, you know. When we have school holidays there's so much you can do as a parent to keep them in the house because you don't really want them hanging on the street, but there's nothing out there for them (Female)

There's plenty out there but it costs you the earth to take them, do you know what I mean, if you're a single parent it's just impossible. You need something to meet, you know. (Female)

They would also appreciate more nurseries locally also – there just is not enough space where they live.

I think nurseries, open nurseries, I think for young women with young children there is a proper issue in our area, that there isn't enough space for them to go to nurseries.

- Facilities for women and recreational opportunities for younger children

Also even there are no facilities provided for women or younger children other than the sports centre and parks nearby, there are no immediate facilities for young children or women. (Male)

I think there should, rewards or something should be introduced to young people to do some voluntary work and some sort of initiatives and some sort of award system to improve the areas, instead of just people, you know, can you help us do this, you know, some sort of reward. (Female)

- Access to healthcare

Similarly, access to doctors is cited as a huge problem for all respondents and subsequently, they would like to see improvements in the number of doctors employed.

I think one of the things we talked about is our GP surgeries and they should be, we try to get an appointment and you can't it's a nightmare, it's a nightmare trying to get that appointment, and when you do get a chance to see the doctor he's only got 2 or 3 minutes. (Male)

- Improvements to bus services

Improvements to bus services provided by West Midlands Travel were again a very popular measure; provision here is particularly problematic, as timetables are deemed inadequate and largely unreliable.

The bus service, transport we've got 51, and 52, which goes to town, into Birmingham City Centre from the Walsall Road, the service, is not very good. (Female)

It's very slow and especially I personally think that they should put more buses on when the children are at school. (Female)

However, on the whole, this particular group felt that the council were probably doing a satisfactory job of running services and facilities in their areas given the limited budgets at their disposal. However they could not be certain.

I don't really know what's available I don't think they promote themselves enough to say like a leisure centre what do they do, do they advertise in the local paper all the different activities that they can offer. (Female)

Yes they promise and don't deliver but don't deliver rightly, because what they said was this will happen but when it does happen it's completely different. I don't think it's so much of a case of us being satisfied with what we're being provided with, it's a case of us putting up with it because we know there's nothing else coming our way. (Male)

Nevertheless, the group are convinced that the council could improve service delivery if they were to consult more with local people. These residents feel that the council – along with the local community – should facilitate the development of local community forums – so that all parties can work together to improve things. However, the only time they ever feel valued is around the period of the local elections.

It's like those people with the election things you don't see them all year around, but they'll knock on your door, we'll do this for you, we'll do that for you, you know, what about the other 11 months of the year. (Male)

It is because there's nothing you can do, you can make a complaint, but because you're a local resident and actually only people with influence within the community get things done. (Male)

Maybe they should set up a centre where these issues can be directed to and dealt with. There could be hotlines where people could phone in and things should be done straightaway. (Male)

For these reasons then, it would appear that they agree with the general aims of Devolution and Localisation (i.e. to take decisions and manage services at a local level so as to more closely reflect local circumstances and needs) but they would like to feel more engaged in the decision making processes.

I think going back to when you talked about things that have changed, you've got these district set ups, personally I didn't know nothing about it, who's running it and who's on there, and it's supposed to be local people. (Male)

Ward and District Committee meetings

Although none of the respondents from the 34 – 54 year olds group have ever attended a Ward or District Committee meeting, half have at one time or another participated in a public meeting of some kind. They explain that they felt particularly motivated to attend because a proposal was going to adversely affect their neighbourhoods in some way.

However, those that have never attended any such public meetings, explain that they have not given much thought to attending such get-togethers because they simply have not seen / heard or received much information about them in the first instance.

We haven't heard anything about any. (Female)

Also, some of these respondents simply lack the time, conviction and / or inclination to attend it seems. In a similar vein, many of them are not suitably convinced that participation in such gatherings would amount to much anyway.

I think the incentive that they're going to be doing something about it, you know, the issues we have they were going to carry them through and something is going to be done about it. There's no point going to a meeting and talking about it and then nothing happens. (Male)

In actual fact, most of these respondents feel that wider participation in Ward or District meetings is to large extent, related to their perceived legitimacy and authority. Respondents are yet to be convinced that real, tangible action will occur from their involvement. It is fair to say that they have an impression that many of these meetings entail listening to endless party political / council rhetoric and not much action subsequently results from them.

And I think the thing that gets up people's noses is they go to a consultation, how many times did we have that consultation, each time, 6 months, 12 months come back to another meeting and another meeting, but nothing really gets done. (Male)

Action as well, because we know what the issues are, we then tell the issues to the local community or Councillors or City Officers but nothing really gets done, and you have another kind of meeting. And the way the community looks at it is all you're having is meetings but nothing is being done. Nothing is done, just having these meetings and spending the money. (Male)

Indeed, these meetings are seen to be populated by local councillors, influential business people or people that are already involved in the community / voluntary sector locally.

Yes I think people, it depends on the issue, if the issue is really kind of hot within the local community, or for instance if they said that the money the Council received the people would have a chance to say that's where the money will be spent, then people will come out and then making sure that... (Male)

When specifically asked, how the style of local decision – making meetings might be improved to encourage attendance, the respondents came up with the following suggestions:

- Better communication

Further, respondents are of the opinion that wider public participation in local decision-making could be facilitated by improved communication of such events. It seems that most of these respondents (albeit not wholly representative of the wider communities) rarely see notices inviting public participation in consultation exercises.

We don't get the information. (Male)

In this regard, they feel that whoever is organising community discussions, needs to ensure that the entire process, from invite to facilitation, is totally inclusive of the local population.

- A range of consultation methods

For example, opinions ranged across the group in terms of how they would like to be consulted. Some would prefer face-to-face meetings, some appreciate consultation via questionnaires and some would prefer new technology such as Internet or online focus groups. Others would appreciate being consulted in their community language.

> *I think there's more than one way to get information from the local community, you've got questionnaires and things like that that you can get every household, to people that can't contact you because they're disabled or whatever. (Female)*

> *I think also looking at the different languages because maybe if you live in a community where English may not be the first language you may not be able to communicate what needs to be done. (Male)*

- Legitimacy

Apathy is a major factor to consider in this regard. Respondents say that they would feel more positive about their own abilities to influence decisions if they could actually see that attendance would be a worthwhile investment of their time and energies. Bona fide evidence of local people's influence is seen as a great motivator and improved attendance could be encouraged if the advertising of the up and coming Ward or Committee meetings concentrated on this.

> *It's not a question of the ideal time I think it's what the point, because they're not really going to do anything about it, it's just formality really, that's what I think. (Female)*

> *Seeing something done. If you know it's going to make a change to the community. (Male)*

> *Yes I mean if they had a meeting and people attended it and then they showed people this is what we've done from the last meeting, then I think that would encourage people to make time for them. (Male)*

Involvement

When the group are asked whom they believe makes the important decisions affecting their local areas, they were mostly of the opinion that it was MP's councillors and / or other people of influence.

> *The Councillors (Male)*

> *The local MP who's in charge, the Conservative or the Labour whoever's in power. (Male)*

> *Just coming back, when I say Councillors I would say people who have access to the Councillors, I don't think no ordinary person will approach a Councillor or MP and will have his say, for somebody if the Councillor or MP knows quite well, things will be done then. (Male)*

In terms of how these influential people make important decisions about local services and

facilities, respondents were of the distinct impression that it was probably similar to how national government decides what their priorities are.

It's like the major budget the way they, it's a similar thing on smaller scale, this much we're going to give to that. (Female)

Respondents felt that a financial budget must obviously be set and subsequently spent according to some mysterious criteria or according to national policy and / or along party political lines. These respondents have the distinct impression that local people's interests sometimes come second place to the interests of the political parties their local councillors represent.

I think it really goes down to what there's a national issue, and I think local Councillors or MPs are much more directed of doing that. (Male)

Most of the respondents give the impression that they know who their local councillor is and are to some extent familiar with a councillor's duties: to listen to local people, address local needs and above all – be accountable.

I think the role of the Local Councillor is to listen to the local issues. And then address them and then I think they need to be accountable if they're dealing with you or not (Male)

To carry out the work that they've promised to do. (Female)

However, the group are of the opinion that their local councillors often do not provide community leadership because they evidently are not seen to be addressing some local issues.

Because I think some of the issues that the local community put forward never get addressed. So if there were leadership qualities within them they'd be addressing that and they don't do it. Or at least telling us about it, we are actually doing something about it but it's going to take so long or whatever, there's no feedback. (Male)

Or when they've done something they should say that this is what we've done. (Female)

Indeed, they are accused of rarely providing information to residents or indeed soliciting feedback. The only time Councillors do appear to be interested in the local population is 'predictably' around election time. (In this regard, respondents felt that a regular newsletter needed to be produced which helps to enlighten local people about work currently being undertaken by their local councillor – but not a PR exercise).

But what we need is a Councillor that actually lives in the area that they're dealing with. You know, it's no good having a Councillor from Solihull talking to us about Nechells or Aston (Female)

I think they should show their faces more, like I don't know who mine is. (Female)

I would like there to be a regular publication sent out to everybody, like when they send out your rates bill just send you like what they do, supposed to do, but if it's regular and throughout the year and addressing the local issues and telling you what they have done

and what they're looking to do. (Female)

For these reasons then, respondents feel that local decision-making must definitely not be left entirely to local councillors. Instead, decision-making needs to be shared more with the local people. Respondents seem motivated to express such strong opinions on the matter because they do not think that their council tax is currently providing them with total value for money – at this time.

No, they should share it with the community; they should have their say. (Male)

We're paying our rates and they're like huge amounts that we're having to pay, every single household, you know, so we should get value for money shouldn't we. (Female)

Nevertheless, there are a few occasions where respondents would prefer the council to 'just get on with decision making'. These are seen to be crime and refuse – two public service areas that are not really perceived to be open to public influence.

Subsequently they do not feel as though there is much in the way of community leadership being shown; this is augmented by a sense that there are too few opportunities for them discuss matters of importance with councillors or other similar authorities.

I suppose we've got a part to play as well, I think perhaps we could make a bigger effort to contact them, and if they refuse to offer a certain service then I suppose, you know, they're to blame as well. But I think a lot of the times we just think that it's their duty to do everything. (Male)

Consequently, many of these residents doubt that local councillors really know what needs to be done locally because they are rarely seen or heard in the community. Many of these respondents simply have not been asked for their opinions much apart from this consultation exercise.

I mean they don't communicate with us, so they haven't, they just make their own decisions. (Female)

Although none of the group is presently engaged in any decision-making roles, there have been occasions where some of these respondents have felt particularly motivated to attend a decision making board. Some joined residents' groups in the hope that they could introduce a resident parking scheme permit near a major football ground. Other respondents set up a neighbourhood management committee, subsequently creating a constitution, which allowed them to bid for funding to pay for a local music group.

I got involved in this local group where they set up a Management Committee, and after the Management Committee they also put together a constitution and set a proper group up in our local area, and then they linked with Birmingham City Council where they tapped into certain funding to improve the area. Because I was told that there's millions of pounds available to improve different areas, but local groups wouldn't know about that. One of the funding that we applied for was a local music group, and there's an organisation called 'Awards For All' who were offering £5,000.00 to £10,000.00 for a community group in the area, so we actually tapped into that. (Male)

However, it is only to a limited extent, that respondents feel that individually, they can influence what is going on in the area where they live. They are of the impression that, if they should be particularly motivated to influence matters, they would align themselves with others as this represents the greatest chance that they have to influence matters. These respondents realise that on their own, they have very little authority.

Consequently, most respondents feel that more collective public involvement will bring about improvement to local areas. Quite simply, involvement will help local people feel part of the wider community; it will also show them that they are being listened to; it might also make them feel as though they are getting value for money form their council tax and perhaps more importantly – it will give people a sense of ownership, civic pride and also responsibility.

> *It really comes down to who it is collectively I think, I think individually, you know, nobody is going to listen to you. As a group or as a community we collectively can make a decision and obviously try and get somebody to follow it up and address it. (Male)*

However, at the present moment, respondents are unaware of any local issues that they would find important enough to warrant interest or devote time to. They do not discount the possibility that in the future they may become involved in a particular cause or subject area, but for now, nothing is particularly motivating them. On the other hand, they do not believe that such roles should be performed solely by local councillors.

Over 55's (Sutton Vesey, Kingstanding, Oscott)

Residents' priorities

According to residents aged 55 plus, the kinds of lifestyle issues that are deemed to be important factors in determining a good neighbourhood from a bad one, include the following:

- Low crime levels

Respondents from the over 55 group consider low crime levels, and a high visibility of deterrents including policing, CCTV and improved street lighting to be important in this regard.

> *Peaceful, relatively clean (Male)*

- Convenience / Access to good standard of public services / facilities

Convenient access to a good standard of local services including refuge collection, policing, doctors, hospitals and housing is considered to be extremely in deciding whether an area is a good place to reside. Because many of the over 55's are perhaps less mobile than they used to be, they appreciate being close to services and facilities and value also living in safe, well lit, well policed environments.

> *I think it is the state of the roads that we live in, the type of houses that are around us, our shopping areas, the state of our shopping areas. Litter, if litter is cleaned and if we get a proper service as regards collection of rubbish, things like that. I think the Council*

Services themselves, all of the Council Services make our place a decent place or not, this is why I'm glad to do this. (Male)

- Community spirit

The person living in these areas is also seen as an important factor too. Indeed, a good community spirit fostered in part by good local provision of shops and other services are perhaps the key ingredients to making up what is a good area.

Yes on our area I think it's the people who live there (Male)

These respondents really do seem to equate cleanliness, low crime levels and a good standard of public services and buildings to a good standard of living. These important requisites, they say, really do have an influence over the way local people feel about themselves, other residents and also their own areas.

Conversely, factors that these respondents feel determines a particularly bad neighbourhood include antisocial behaviour, excessive litter, poor street lighting and high crime levels.

Aspects of their own neighbourhoods these respondents feel they would like to see changed somewhat are as follows:

- Excessive traffic / poorly designed roads

Excessive traffic causes danger for pedestrians and also high levels of subsequent noise and litter pollution. Roads with a high volume of traffic can be problematic for the elderly to navigate. Poorly designed and busy roads only add to these problems say respondents (this is particularly important to over 55's as these roads can sometimes be difficult to cross in their relative old age).

Now what makes our road totally different is the fact the increasing traffic, heavy traffic, we suffer with a lot of dirt on the road, the pavements are - they're unsafe. (Male)

- Poorly maintained roads and pavements

For similar reasons, poorly maintained pavements are also a factor as again there is some acknowledgement in this group that eyesight and mobility are sometimes problematic. Respondents would also like to see the introduction of more greenery and green spaces per se – to hide the predominance of concrete in certain areas.

Better road maintenance (Male)

I think one of the things I'd add to those that you're talking about is possibly paving. Well it's easier to walk on if it's level. If you've got broken slabs and, you know, that's what happens… (Male)

- Poor levels of street lighting

Respondents feel that areas where orange street lighting is predominant (instead of white lamps) are less safe. Indeed, orange street lighting makes these respondents feel more

vulnerable because they do not illuminate the area around them enough.

The other problem is street lighting, it's not bright enough, people can hide very, very easily. I mean... streetlights and I can't even see the blooming kerb. (Male)

No it's orange sodium, they should be white sodium, because there's no shadows. (Male)

- Inadequate refuse collection

Further, inadequate refuse collection services are also seen to be factors indicating poorer areas, according to respondents. They mention that some refuse collection services often leave debris and rubbish after them which, when left, helps to detract from the look and feel of their neighbourhoods and indeed encourage others to litter the streets also.

I think an important one is refuse collection... you can always tell when the refuse people have been because they leave a line of litter. (Male)

Better street sweeping, get rid of this glass. (Male)

In a similar vein, litter and inadequate provision for the disposal and collection of litter is also seen to be a factor in whether a neighbourhood is a good / bad palace to live.

General rubbish. Glass specifically, everybody throws glass in the roads, all over the place and I get a little bit fed up of my dog getting cut. (Male)

It makes the place safer because if there's not a lot of litter or cans around it means that people are looking after the place and that there are not people who may not respect your property, are not going down there. (Male)

- Fewer public houses

Many of these respondents would also like to see fewer public houses as some areas appear to be over populated with them, which can cause excessive levels of rubbish, noise and other disturbances.

Get rid of the pubs...4 pubs and every day you can guarantee, Len will bear me out, I find pint pots on the grass verges. (Male)

Devolution and Localisation

When probed further to ascertain their particular satisfaction / dissatisfaction with council services, there were a range of opinions. When asked specifically if council services were being effectively targeted to reflect local circumstances, there were mixed opinions.

- Roads and pavements

Over 55 residents were of the opinion that service providers seem intent on downgrading the quality of roads and pavements by the continued employment of substandard building materials. Not only is tarmac considered unattractive, but it is also considered unsafe too. Pavements are being constructed and repaired using the same material as the roads (tarmac);

consequently it can be quite difficult at times to distinguish between the two, respondents say. This is an important point because the uncertainty could unwittingly confuse drivers, pedestrians and the elderly and / or disabled.

In our area they seem to want to downgrade the pavements… instead of having a paved pavement they seem to want to replace it with tarmac, basically so that us oldies can't trip over the stones and sue them, but it makes the pavements look nasty. It also makes it unsafe at night because it's very difficult to see the difference between the road and the pavement when you're driving your car. (Male)

- Devolution and Localisation

There was a genuine feeling that the council really only deliver a basic service when they could in fact, deliver so much more to residents, if only they listened to local people more. The over 55's tended to feel that the council are not very responsive to local people and that they take too long to change things. In particular, they are seen as poor at answering enquiries / concerns people raise over the phone or letter.

I think the main thing, I mean we're coming on to a bit now that we get involved in, the main thing is that we have 12 Sutton Councillors and we don't think they are accountable enough, we would like to see more Council Services come within the control of our Council, which of course is what devolution was supposed to be all about. But we don't believe that they've introduced enough of that. (Male)

They have the impression that this state of affairs is perhaps because the organisation is too centralised to really be effective at being responsive to local needs. Subsequently then, all of these respondents agree with the general aims of Devolution and Localisation (i.e. to take decisions and manage services at a local level so as to more closely reflect local circumstances) but comment that much work in this direction needs to occur.

I mean Birmingham is the largest Council in Europe and it is too top heavy, it needs to come down to the people. (Male)

Too bureaucratic. (Male)

Although these respondents have seen some beneficial improvements to council services, namely social services (which is seen to be particularly useful for people aged between 60 – 75 but interestingly less so for the over 75's) and rubbish collection (although bin men are not always seen as conscientious) there is still much work to do, especially in local accountability, decision making and involvement. Although some improvements to devolution has been made (and are widely acknowledged by respondents) again more needs to be done to build on the momentum.

Services they are good at…rubbish…Social Services up to a point…. Social Services up to the age of 75

I think, although I'm complaining there isn't enough devolution, I think local accountability has improved, because it was all central before and that has affected all the services you're talking about, so although we're complaining about them still…(Male)

Yes I think I can say that unfortunately a lot of the money isn't feeding through at the moment to devolution, although they've made the decision, you know, a lot of it isn't yet feeding through, but it's something particular, it's like 10 million of it's own control and when that feeds through I think you will start to see some of these smaller things improving. (Male)

You've probably seen an improvement but this gentleman, myself and that lady there, we've seen no improvement whatsoever to what it used to be. (Male)

Ward and District Committee meetings

Most of these respondents cannot be totally sure how some of the decisions are actually made. It is fair to say much of the whole decision making process at a Ward and District level is a bit of a mystery to most of them.

I know how I'd like it to be made but I'm afraid it depends which way the wind's blowing they'll move. (Male)

In terms of their own level of influence, the majority do not think that they can influence matters because they do not really know how local decisions are made in the first instance. Nevertheless, most appear to know who their councillor is but they do not really know what their role is or indeed what their policies are.

Only two members from the over 55's group really know how decisions are made at this level and this is because they are part of a local community forum. Although they understand the decision making process, and are relatively more involved in decision making per se, they too were of the opinion that more could be done to make decision making and involvement more transparent, easier to understand and inclusive. They feel decisions are being made before the councillors agree to talk to them about local issues; they feel that this is untenable. Councillors should be talking to them before they make important decisions, they say.

Coming back to your question, who makes the local decisions, depends on who's in power in Birmingham. Now at the moment we've got a Conservative Council so our 12 Sutton Councillors are all Conservative and making decisions for Sutton. (Male)

The manner in which decisions seem to be made appear more to do with national politics and decision making on party political grounds.

I find everything's imposed on you (Male)

I think they do the basic because they don't really appreciate, or they don't get informed of what is really needed, you know, or get through to the people that…(Male)

In terms of involvement, respondents from the over 55 group feel that people with community spirit and the energy and time to commit to attending meetings about local decision making are probably the kinds of people who would get involved to solve community problems; and they should be consulted from the outset.

Concept, from the outset. Through organised groups. (Male)

> *Usually people that have got, that wants to, that have got a community spirit and want to go around and organise something.*

Further, these types of people are seen to get involved by either channelling their energies through involvement in community forums or simply through registering their interests / anger / concerns in public meetings and / or via petitions made on the doorstep.

> *In my case I've always had a view on local politics and I complained about it, so I joined the Forum and we do what we do now to try to do something about it, I think that's the way it works. (Male)*

All the same, those that have attended public meetings in order to influence decisions, did so because they were concerned that certain proposals / developments would affect their quality of life.

> *Well I think, we started principally because Tescos set up at the top of the road and wanted to do some various things, Ken here decided he was going to do something about it. I happened to meet him and he said I'm doing a survey around this street, do you want to help so I said yes. So we then went round all roads around there putting things through doors, getting a response back, collating it and from there we turned ourselves into a Forum. (Male)*

Those that have not felt inclined to attend public meetings remained at home out of apathy mostly. They did not feel as though they could influence things and they were not convinced that something would be done because of their attendance. Some had tried in the past and failed.

> *Well I used to be in a group of people and like these gentlemen we used to get our noses smashed in by the Council to get anything done. So everybody said well what's the point. (Male)*

Interestingly, there was a range of quite specific opinions and perceptions regarding what people thought of such Ward and District Committee meetings.

Those that have not attended such meetings recently, have the perception that there is too much debate and irrelevance spoken. In fact a common perception by all respondents is that there appears to be too little action taken as a result of these debates and therefore many of these meetings can involve much irrelevance. Such perceptions can leave people thinking that they have wasted their time by attending.

> *Yes, my perception is it's probably the same as here, yes you get the mooching, a lot of talking but you try to implement the action and they're chopped off in their prime. A load of waffle. (Male)*

Conversely, those that are part of neighbourhood forums say that the meetings they have convened, are attended by a cross section of residents and are facilitated by a clear and relevant agenda.

> *Don't forget the sorts of people who come to our meetings are exactly the same people as you've got sitting around this table. (Male)*

When specifically asked, what would encourage greater public involvement; there were a range of suggestions:

- Encouragement

Local people need the council or whoever, to facilitate the development of a forum of some kind. Individuals need to form themselves into a group but they need the encouragement and expertise to help them to do it in the first instance. This is where perhaps the council could play a greater role.

> *That's a problem, they have to form themselves into a group, or they really need a group amongst themselves to discuss it because very often individuals, I mean I as an individual, I couldn't give every answer to everything, it's only when you go to meetings and discuss it that you find you come out at a reasonable level. (Male)*

- Effective Communication

For similar reasons to the previous groups it seems, more public involvement at meetings such as Ward or district meetings depends very much on good communication of the details of such events: i.e. time, date, place and agenda are all seen as important aspects which need to be communicated to local people.

> *Well if you get some information in the first place it wouldn't hurt (Male)*

> *It would be nice if the Council had a spot on the television, because you get the local news before the main news on ITV and usually the local news is them complaining about somebody doing something, which they thought the Council shouldn't do. It would be nice if the Council had a slot that said we are going to do and we invite you to reply to this. (Male)*

- A range of response / communication mechanisms

Further, greater involvement by local people should be advertised and communicated across a range of media channels. Also, a variety of ways to register opinion and interest must also be made more available. For example, young people often do not have the time to commit to regular meetings and therefore consultation via the Internet may be more appropriate for them. Nevertheless, respondents felt that a range of consultation methods should be made available to suit people's lifestyles.

> *Let everybody know what they're going to do, then if there's any opposition people can voice their opinions. (Male)*

> *Well I don't particularly want people knocking on the door, but filling in questionnaires wouldn't be a bad thing to do. (Male)*

- Inclusiveness

Suitable venues for such meetings are seen as informal community spaces such as community centres and / or church halls. It is important that attendees are made to feel part of the process and that the meeting is not dominated by one person or a group of individuals with

their own agendas. In this regard, respondents also said that it would be extremely beneficial if experienced moderators (used to encouraging different people to speak up) facilitated the meetings.

People would want to feel as though they are involved. That's the biggest problem, because if people don't feel as though they're involved they won't get involved. (Male)

- Informality

Respondents would prefer it if the meetings were informal affairs, but not to the point where agendas gets lost. It would also be beneficial if people are encouraged to bring a close friend or neighbourhood for morale support perhaps.

More of a social emphasis I think rather than a straight meeting. Yes I think most people would because you'd get an ambience atmosphere. (Male)

- Authority

Particularly in terms of being able to force popular change and affect proposals, local people it seems, really need to see evidence that there coming together in such meetings carries the authority to actually make a difference to policy.

I think if people can see that they are having an effect, then that would encourage them to get more involved. If people feel as though they're wanted they'll do it, if they feel as though they're not wanted they'll forget it and that's the long and short of it. (Male)

Consequently, one of the keys to getting more local people involved is to advertise and promote the capabilities of ordinary people working together.

The resulting benefits of wider public involvement in decision making is that more public pressure can be exerted on authorities so that they have to take notice of local people's concerns.

We know that, we know that. If you really get people behind the proper subject then they have to take notice. (Male)

They'll ignore one person, they won't ignore 1,500 people. (Male)

Involvement

Overall, the majority of respondents from the over 55 group have the opinion that officers and elected members are the types of people that probably make important decisions about the local area.

Oh it's the Council, it comes from the top. (Male)

The employed people in the Council and then they're accepted by the Councillors. (Male)

It's the same in Government, the Civil Servants make the decisions not the MPs, bless them. (Male)

The majority of people appeared to know who their local councillor was and some have even met them personally to discuss matters. Although they are described as polite, affable people, these respondents were of the impression that councillors did not really deliver on their promises because they are tied down by political priorities.

> We're finding that the very word you used there, community leadership, we're finding that, that is only just creeping in and the Councillors all they, I'm not being, I'm not talking about particular Councillors, throughout the country, Politicians have got themselves, their party and then their electors come third. And if they have to do any leading and it cuts across their own priorities and their party priorities then you don't get led. (Male)

Indeed, these respondents have the impression that 'getting things done' through a councillor was a long-winded process and offered no guarantee of success. They seemed particularly disappointed by the lack of explanations given and subsequently did not feel as though councillors represented their needs and concerns as much as they would like.

> Not very good, to be fair to them we go to their Ward meetings and you can get them either during or after the meeting, they come to our Forum meetings but when you talk about wanting something done the feed through to it being done is immense, it takes years. (Male)

Although some councillors have their residents' best interest at heart, they are concerned that they are not totally accountable public servants as they ere elected to serve a minimum five year term – there is little recourse available to ordinary people during this time if they are in any way dissatisfied with the service they are getting from their councillors.

> They should represent our requirements and needs in their own constituency; unfortunately they're too busy poking their nose in somebody else's. (Male)

Asked if they thought councillors provided community leadership, respondents again felt as though councillors sometimes put their respective political parties ahead of the needs of local people – so no. It is for such reasons then that respondents feel that local decision-making should not be left entirely to local councillors.

> Let's be honest about it, all Politicians, the first thing they ever do is they tow the party line, they could come to us now, a complete area and ask for votes on something and we would say we want this, because it cuts across party politics they won't do it. (Male)

Consequently, when respondents were asked to what extent the council should involve people in local decision making: from the outset and through organised groups, the council should involve local people, the respondents thought. It is felt that the council needs to do more to facilitate the creation of organised groups or forums of local people.

> The very things you've just mentioned, we would have priorities that we would want to introduce, that they would be… and we would like Forums, we've got 10 Forums in Sutton, all people who are quite able to state things and know what's going on around them, and we would like those 10 Forums and the same would apply to Birmingham, for them to be more closely involved at an earlier stage of decision-making. (Male)

However, when asked, when they would prefer the council to 'just get on with decision making' there were a number of similar opinions.

Some said, when the council proves that it is effective at delivering services locally, they can be trusted to make the decisions. However others felt that the council can only really, effectively deliver services, when they can devolve decision making to local areas. Others felt that they could only be trusted to let the council get on with decision making if local councillors are made more accountable.

> *A localised response and a more rapid response (Male)*

> *When they can prove to me that they're capable of doing the job they're employed to do. (Male)*

There are a number of respondents who consider certain issues so important to them that they are already part of a decision making process. Several respondents formed a neighbourhood forum to block the proposed development of a large supermarket. They petitioned local people but their efforts subsequently failed to stop the development.

Nevertheless, they continue to facilitate the forum because they feel that to a greater extent, they can influence decisions in their areas, whereas those that are not involved in any decision making process, do not actually believe that they can.

> *I think the big one that's coming up in Sutton over the next few years is the redevelopment of the town centre. Now all of the 10 Forums, we've all got our own Committees and we're all organising to make sure that we have a strong input to what happens in the centre of Sutton, so that is a huge move forward to what we had in the past.*

Only a handful from this group (apart from those linked to community forums) would be interested in devoting more time to a decision-making role. The rest explain that they are either too old, too apathetic or there is no particular issue worth devoting much time to at this present moment in time.

Those that are suitably interested in devoting more time to a decision making board are awaiting further feedback on the options available to them. However, they were approached by the two respondents from the community forum and seemed somewhat interested in this route.