

Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods – Green Paper Consultation Analysis

Background

Birmingham City Council wants to increase its partnership working with people in their local area to make services more responsive to local needs and to improve local neighbourhoods. The Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods Green Paper sets out proposals on how this can be achieved; it sets out a flexible approach which incorporates a range of options for greater neighbourhood involvement and governance.

Consultation on the Green Paper took place over summer 2018 via a Be Heard Survey, consultation events and Ward Forum meetings. The consultation on the Community Cohesion Strategy took place at the same time and each was cross referenced during the events that took place, reflecting the close links between the two policy areas.

Aims of the consultation

By its very nature, the policy must be developed in collaboration with communities and local neighbourhoods and reflect their opinions, knowledge and experience in the final white paper.

The key aims of the consultation were to:

- Raise awareness of the council's desire to work in partnership with local groups;
- Understand the level of support for the proposals, particularly on the creation of additional parish councils;
- Identify any areas that are interested in introducing a parish council or more developed partnership working;
- Gather suggestions for enhancing key areas of the proposals.

Who did we engage?

We received 95 individual responses to the Be Heard Survey and 33 additional responses via e mail. Many of the e mail responses were from groups and resulted from the various consultation events which took place over the summer.

There were two specific consultation events aimed at community groups in the north and south of the city; one at Alexander Stadium where 32 delegates attended, the other at Stirchley Baths where 20 delegates attended. These were organised so that delegates could then go on to discuss the consultation at their own community/organisation meetings. The consultation was also referred to during the launch of Birmingham Community Homes which was attended by approx. 35 delegates.

Be Heard Survey results

Q1: What do you think of our overall approach to working with neighbourhoods?

51 (53.7%) said that they supported the overall approach with many saying that the approach will improve representation and promote a greater focus on local issues. There was also agreement with the flexible approach proposed, with many commenting that a one size fits all approach would not work in Birmingham.

29 (30.5%) said they were against the approach outlined. There were a number of concerns given, including by some who said that they agreed in general with the approach. The most common concerns raised were:

- Representation/equality – acknowledgement that not every area will engage or participate to the same degree or even communities/groups within the same area. Comments included: local councils tend to be ‘dominated by certain types of people which unless managed well can mean less articulate and less confident voices are ignored’; they ‘very quickly stop being representative of the majority in favour of personal or pet projects of those on the committee’; that ‘more affluent areas with a greater community voice are able to argue for additional resources that less well-off and less vocal areas cannot’.
- Proposals are dependent on having the right levels of funding and support; this includes staff, training/peer support, use of council owned venues. Comments included: ‘I think there is too little people resource in the Council to really make this effective’; ‘I think that over my 30 years experience of participating in ‘Community’ & ‘My Local Neighbourhood’ there have been a number of excellent schemes set up by very energetic and inspired individuals and Local Groups..... I have witnessed many projects that sadly all came to an end. Why? Because of loss of funding or the support officer’s post had come to an end, leaving behind a lot of demoralised individuals and groups’; ‘Personally I see BCC as an enabler’; ‘training and coaching support from neutral bodies is needed to ensure compliance with a terms of reference, and to ensure correct spend of delegated financial authority and good advocacy for all people in their neighbourhood, not just the likeminded’.
- Reliant on having effective engagement with the local community and a good understanding of their needs. Comments included: ‘Concentrating on regular direct engagement with people and organisations, to debate and negotiate in what is best for the common interests’; ‘There needs to be better ‘working together’ with council departments locally, i.e, housing and highways and fleet and waste’; ‘Need to concentrate on way of working (values) with Neighbourhoods rather than always promoting more structures’.

Other concerns included: Parish Councils are not the best model for Birmingham, neighbourhood/community councils are more appropriate, it will introduce more red tape/bureaucracy, whether the council will be able to effectively execute the changes, whether it’s right to pass on responsibility for services to communities.

Q2: Are you in favour of having more parish, town or neighbourhood councils in Birmingham?

51 (53.7%) either agreed or strongly agreed, 25 (26.3%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Q3: Do you think having a parish, town or neighbourhood council would benefit your particular local area?

47 (49.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed, 33 (34.7%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Q4: Do you agree that there should be a consultative ballot as part of the process to set up a parish, town or neighbourhood council?

64 (67.4%) either agreed or strongly agreed, 22 (23.2%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Q5: Do you think a minimum response rate or vote percentage should be set (and if so what should they be)?

58 (61.1%) agreed that there should be a minimum response rate to a consultative value, 19 (20%) disagreed.

There is no consensus of opinion on what this minimum response rate should be; responses vary from very low to very high figures.

Q6: What other options for greater local involvement would you like to see in the “Framework for Relationships”?

A wide variety of responses received to this question. Comments tended to focus more on the existing framework proposals rather than making additional suggestions. A higher number of comments focused on:

- Important to consider community led models as well as Parish Councils ‘look at other successful organisations working in neighbourhoods and improve the relationship and their connectivity with the Council’; ‘I think a grass roots approach where the community leads is better’; ‘too much emphasis on Parish Councils’.
- Must develop better partnership working improving transparency, honesty and communications. ‘I’d like to see greater trust between Council employees responsible for delivering particular services and local people’; ‘Proper, trusting relationships between community groups and the relevant parts of the local authority’; ‘Working more together in true partnership not just one sided’.
- Support requirements were raised again. ‘...need trained and professional local governance staff, to support community involvement and collaboration’; ‘.council to take a leadership/coordination role to bring communities and groups together’; ‘need more people on the ground paid and unpaid doing’; ‘The officer support and buy-in is

what is often lacking - this has to come from local officers in the neighbourhood';
'..need for any group to easily access the parts of the council that they needed support from for any given project'.

- Important to focus on joining up local organisations. '...good to see a structure which actually integrated local groups with council thinkers'; 'a real joining up of local organisations, third sector, community groups and large charities such as Age UK who can support specific sectors'; 'I believe a delivery partnership between urban parishes, business improvement districts and community enterprises best meets the localism agenda'.

Other points raised included: still some support for neighbourhood forum type arrangements; need identified for an 'effective policy in place to promote and improve the accessibility of local democracy and to instil a belief and trust in the system'; 'Better use of strategic relationships to open doors at a community level'; recognition and reward for good performance; Flexibility to include 'The framework should identify regular intervals at which performance of the neighbourhood organisation is assessed allowing it to move towards more/less devolution depending on performance and desire to do so'; more visibility of councillors.

Q7: Do you think that Charter Agreements are a good idea?

46 (48.4%) agreed that Charter Agreements are a good idea, 20 (21.1%) disagreed.

Q8: What other areas do you think Charter Agreements should cover?

Again a wide variety of answers to this question, a higher number of comments focused on:

- It must make clear responsibilities, standards of service required including a requirement for value for money and accountability. 'community should only be constrained by practical considerations such as value for money in relation to the services delivered and the ability to deliver the services either better or no worse than by BCC itself'; 'role and limitations would need to be clearly identified and communicated'; 'Accountability, Timescales and Escalation routes'; 'Setting out accepted levels of accountability and safeguards of probity, openness and due process in the protection of the public interest'.
- It must include a requirement for and the process of monitoring, review and evaluation. 'These Agreements should also have a refresh rate where they are re-examined and advanced. This will allow for forward development of the relationship between the groups and the council'; 'who is going to make sure the roles and responsibilities are carried out?'
- It must include a commitment towards resident consultation/community engagement. 'Charter agreements should cover community engagement in all Council decision making processes that affect the area.....'; 'any new such body should be required to give commitments on this point' (community engagement).

Other points raised included: access to community assets and meeting rooms; escalation routes; flexibility again – they must fit the location; must make working with the council simpler and reduce bureaucracy.

Lots of suggestions here for the services they would like to see devolved. These include:

- Health and wellbeing promotion
- Safety and tackling crime including tackling anti-social behaviour.
- Planning permission
- Brown fill sites and derelict buildings
- Social care
- libraries
- Highways, parking
- Noise pollution
- Licensing
- Parks and open spaces
- cohesion

Q9: What do you think about Local Devolution Deals?

52 (54.7%) said that they either supported or strongly supported Local Devolution Deals, 19 (20%) said that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with them.

Q10: Do you think the paper sets out the right principles for Local Devolution Deals? If not please add comments below.

35 (36.8%) answered yes to this question, 24 (25.3%) answered no.

Q11: What other steps should be included in this process for Local Devolution Deals?

Only 31 responses to this question, with a wide range of suggestions amongst these. A higher number of responses focused on:

- Consultation and engagement requirements. 'Widest possible promotion of opportunities for local people from all communities to get involved in making their neighbourhood a better place'; 'Consultation and transparency'; 'Ensure that information is available where people are'.
- Must ensure that equality principles are promoted and adhered to. 'Needs to fairly represent all groups'; 'try and maintain a truly representative body'; 'Parish councils must be able to demonstrate a clear adherence to the principles of equality and should be secular without favour towards or discrimination against any part of the community which the parish council will cover'.
- Must put strong governance and accountability in place. 'Strong governance arrangements and clear division between officers and councillors'; 'How to make Parish and Town Councils accountable and methods for clawing back control of any services they fail to delivery properly'; 'safeguarding for mis-managed or failing groups to be supported or reabsorbed'.

Other points raised include: Local income generation; some tolerance for innovation and risk taking ‘...an acceptance of risk taking and allowing failure to happen, for the right reasons. We need to be as comfortable with well-intended failure as we are in succeeding’; provision of advice to interested parties including meetings with those community groups already with devolved powers.

Q12: What else would you like to see introduced or changed so that you have more influence over priority setting, decision making and service delivery in your local area?

More responses to this question (57), similar issues raised here to those put forward to earlier questions. These included:

- Better engagement, communication and transparency. ‘More discussion and consultation over local priorities’; ‘I think the community would benefit from input into the initial stages of any consultation so that the menu of options in that consultation is not drawn up by external consultants but by the community most impacted’; ‘...would like to see a regular (say every 4 months) house-to house distribution of essential community information’; ‘Councillors to be more visible, available and accountable’; ‘More listening and support from our local councillors into openly and fully discussing and developing these processes and a major effort by them to involve young people’; ‘the process for local engagement and capacity building must be transparent and inclusive’.
- Concerns about governance and accountability. ‘Safeguards from personal or any vested interests’; ‘...suggest that the Council come and see what is happening in Bournville..... examples of local accountability structures that have stood the test of time and lasted for over 100 years’; ‘On occasions local councillors try to select their favourite residents and groups thus excluding the important majority of residents’.
- Must lead to better joined-up working. ‘More effective joined up community type hubs that bring partners, citizens and local government together’; ‘..need a single point of contact with the community..... The workers within the hub have contact with, housing, councillors, parks, waste etc so they can raise any issues so they can dealt with quicker and easier and more local’; ‘I just want to see proper partnership working. That means regular meetings that all partners take part in’.

Other points raised include: Need to be clearer on how these new structure will better deliver priorities; need to introduce support re grant applications to attract resource to the local community; needs to be a commitment towards sustainability ‘an approach based on integration of resources to optimise their value but also to ensure services and projects are not just about expending available budgets or resources’; should introduce a small budget for local councillors; avoid red tape; introduce an appeals process to adjudicate on those occasions where the council has refused to devolve responsibilities.

See Appendix 1 for a geographical breakdown of responses to the quantitative questions included in the survey. Due to the small number of respondents that have provided their postcode we have used three categories for this breakdown – inner city, outer city and those that fall within the boundaries of Royal Sutton Coldfield Town Council.

Other e mail feedback

33 e mail responses received, 13 of these were group responses.

Lots of similar issues raised in the e mail responses to those raised by Be Heard respondents.

Q1: What do you think of our overall approach to working with neighbourhoods?

Points raised include:

- Concerns re under-representation of some groups or parts of communities.
- Essential that council improves its communication including to those currently less engaged. Must ensure that the proposed models are clearly understood.
- Must be a genuine commitment to working together – residents must feel they are being heard and have the opportunity to influence positive outcomes not just at a local level but on strategic issues; ‘.. people will need to see their ideas/ efforts being implemented/listen to’. Need to also bring public services together ‘to innovate answers’. ‘Fully endorses the identified need for more effective partnership working arrangements to be developed in order to make services more responsive to local needs and preferences and to improve local neighbourhoods’.
- One size does not fit all when it comes to local governance, important that different models are explored and given equal consideration. ‘Understands that the needs of local communities across the city will vary and that a one size fits all approach would not be appropriate’; ‘We welcome an approach that allows flexibility e.g. different models for different neighbourhoods – this is preferable to a ‘one size fits all’ approach’.
- Important to maintain a focus on the neighbourhood, taking account of local characteristics and specific community challenges.
- Any new arrangement must be sustainable – must be a long term commitment regardless of changes in the council. ‘We can only build sustainable initiatives for the long term if the supporting structures are also around for the long term’.

Some opposition:

- Means of council passing on responsibility;
- Limited capacity in communities;
- Adding an unnecessary tier of government/bureaucracy (parish councils).

Q2: Are you in favour of having more parish, town or neighbourhood councils in Birmingham?

Those that agreed refer to:

- The greater focus on and improvement in smaller areas of the city that local councils will create.

- Improving local decision making based on what the residents want to be improved or need. 'Neighbourhood working should revitalise neighbourhoods and encourage local people to tackle the issues that matter to them. It should improve outcomes for local people on local issues provided there is sufficient support'.
- Potential to raise additional revenue to fund local services.
- The necessity for peer support from other 'parish/town/neighbourhood councils in the city in order to learn from each other's methods'. A few suggestions for the introduction of a BANF type organisation.
- Provides good framework to bring together partnership activity, 'to give coherence and maximise resources more effectively'.

Issues raised that will need to be addressed:

- Lack of trust and commitment within partnerships.
- Need to engage those who are doing good things but independently.
- Mitigate against loss of economies of scale.
- Need to work up to a Parish Council, will first need groups such as Neighbourhood Forums and these will need support to progress onwards.
- Need to also safeguard against them being 'hijacked by some groups at the exclusion of others'.

Q6: What other options for greater local involvement would you like to see in the "Framework for Relationships"?

Points raised include:

- Organised residents groups need to be able to influence appropriate contracts and monitor front-line services to make them a better fit to local need.
- 'For this to work effectively BCC will need to provide baseline information on service specifications and costs in a prompt and intelligible way'.
- Must avoid any question of double taxation.
- 'Mechanisms for accountability and openness should be more explicit in the proposed framework'.

Q7: Do you think that Charter Agreements are a good idea?

Those that agreed referred to:

- Charter is essential for successful co-operation between City Council and a local council.
- It will help to protect against any abuse of power.

- Charter must be compiled as a 'collaborative between all stakeholders and partners and, fundamentally, ownership and review mechanisms are set in place at the outset'.

Q8: What other areas do you think Charter Agreements should cover?

- Performance monitoring – having targets against which performance can be measured and to encourage forward motion; 'mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing performance and promptly addressing service failures'.
- Exit plan which describes how quality, safety and finances will be protected in case of failure.
- Necessity to demonstrate value for money.
- Promotion of equality and respecting diversity in neighbourhoods.
- Requirement to engage with the community – must be strong arrangements in place.
- 'Standards of conduct expected and the arrangements for investigating any alleged breaches in standards'.

Q9: What do you think about Local Devolution Deals?

- Inextricably linked to Charter Agreements – can't have one without the other.

Q10: Do you think the paper sets out the right principles for Local Devolution Deals?

- Some of the suggested principles for local devolution deals thought to be 'more open to interpretation and could unduly prejudice the agreement of a deal'. Need to ensure wording and applicability reflects the intended bottom up nature of the process rather than 'being perceived as a list of rules which are imposed by the principal authority'.
- One suggestion that parishes should have been in existence and functioning for more than a year before devolution of services is considered – three years thought to be more appropriate since there should be a more meaningful 'track record' by this point.

Q11: What other steps should be included in this process for Local Devolution Deals?

- Again want to see some safeguards re equality to ensure that the community as a whole benefits and not just particular areas.
- Local councils will need baseline information on service specification, maintenance costs etc.
- 'Clear articulation of any financial and/or legal risk posed, and mitigating actions'. Must be an appropriate balance of risk taking/sharing and 'clarity on how risk will be managed if decision making and accountability are to rest with different bodies'.

Q12: What else would you like to see introduced or changed so that you have more influence over priority setting, decision making and service delivery in your local area?

- Important to have broad representation on local councils including business and community representatives.
- Ward Plans need greater emphasis as these are ‘the essential starting point’. However they must become more practical, action-based Delivery Plans that ‘set out what is actually going to be done, by whom and by when’.
- There needs to be support for unblocking problems, co-ordinating action involving several services or partners where appropriate. Needs to be clear points of contact within the council ‘welcome better working relationships with the city council, many groups cited the difficulties in working with several different departments to get to the right officers to resolve issues’. Council needs to adopt a more positive can-do approach, ‘We’d like the Council to have more ‘action / can-do people and attitude’
- Practical support for community groups will be needed including skills, training, funding generally, access to and transfer of public assets within the ward, help with accessing external funding.
- Wards or local councillors to have a small fund to deal with small matters of local concern.
- Communities need to be able to influence strategic decisions as often these impact on localities – need a mechanism through which concerns and proposals can be fed upwards. ‘At present the flow of strategic policy-making is one-way, downwards from Cabinet to wards. That downward flow needs to be complemented by upwards flows of ideas and proposals from citizens to the centre’.
- Must ensure residents are fully informed of activity in their area including new projects and service delivery standards.

Other points raised:

- Suggestion for pilots of various elements of the proposals including a proposal for a ‘Pioneer Wards Group’ who want to move at pace and test and evaluate the new approach.
- Measures of success should be agreed. These should include:
 - Services being different, better suited to the area and more efficient;
 - Officers working for the locality first and working together more;
 - Local councillors having more influence on the services that are delivered;
 - Residents believing they are more in control of their services and their local area.

Appendix 1

Geographical break down of Be Heard Survey responses

Q1: What do you think of our overall approach to working with neighbourhoods?

	Agree	Disagree
Inner City	83.3%	16.7%
Outer City	64.3%	35.7%
Sutton Coldfield	62.5%	37.5%
No Post Code	30.8%	69.2%
Total responses	53.75%	30.5%

Q2: Are you in favour of having more parish, town or neighbourhood councils in Birmingham?

	Agree + Strongly Agree	Disagree + Strongly Disagree
Inner City	63.6%	22.7%
Outer City	53.3%	26.7%
Sutton Coldfield	77.8%	0.0%
No Post Code	33.3%	44.4%
Total responses	53.7%	26.3%

Q3: Do you think having a parish, town or neighbourhood council would benefit your particular local area?

	Yes	No
Inner City	54.5%	31.8%
Outer City	53.3%	33.3%
Sutton Coldfield	66.7%	0.0%
No Post Code	27.8%	61.1%
Total responses	49.5%	34.7%

Q4: Do you agree that there should be a consultative ballot as part of the process to set up a parish, town or neighbourhood council?

	Yes	No
Inner City	57.1%	33.3%
Outer City	75.0%	18.2%
Sutton Coldfield	100.0%	0.0%
No Post Code	55.6%	38.9%
Total responses	67.4%	23.2%

Q5: Do you think there should be a minimum response rate or vote percentage?

	Yes	No
Inner City	71.4%	19.0%
Outer City	62.8%	14.0%
Sutton Coldfield	100.0%	0.0%
No Post Code	61.1%	33.3%
Total responses	61.1%	20%

Q7: Do you think that Charter Agreements are a good idea?

	Yes	No
Inner City	47.6%	19.0%
Outer City	51.2%	20.9%
Sutton Coldfield	88.9%	11.1%
No Post Code	33.3%	33.3%
Total responses	48.4%	21.1%

Q9: What do you think about Local Devolution Deals?

	Support + Strongly Support	Disagree + Strongly Disagree
Inner City	54.5%	18.2%
Outer City	51.2%	18.6%
Sutton Coldfield	88.9%	0.0%
No Post Code	55.6%	38.9%
Total responses	54.7%	20%

Q10: Do you think the paper sets out the right principles for Local Devolution Deals?

	Yes	No
Inner City	33.3%	28.6%
Outer City	34.9%	32.6%
Sutton Coldfield	77.8%	0.0%
No Post Code	35.3%	23.5%
Total responses	36.8%	25.3%

Trends & Conclusions

- Differences between inner city and outer city areas on all but two questions were within 10% of each other, with sample sizes of just over 20 for the inner city area ion however it is unlikely there is any meaningful trend here.
- The only large percentage difference between inner and outer cities was for Q1 and Q4. Inner city respondents were much more supportive of the overall approach (Q1) but there was still a strong majority in favour of the approach amongst outer city respondents. Outer city respondents were more likely to support a consultative ballot (Q4) as part of the process.
- With the exception of Q1, where their response was similar to that of outer city respondents, Sutton Coldfield had consistently different responses than the other areas. On the whole they were 20-40% more positive about community governance, local devolution deals and charter agreements. However, this data relied on just 9 respondents.