



# Are Ward Committees Fit for Purpose?



A report from Overview & Scrutiny







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# Preface

By Cllr Waseem Zaffar MBE, Chair Districts and Public Engagement  
O&S Committee



The findings of the Kerslake Review on Ward Committees make interesting reading and largely correlate with our findings. We welcome his comments around the need for “more powerful community engagement” and that Ward Committees should be an important mechanism for citizen engagement as that is what the Leader’s Policy Statement and the City Council’s constitution state. Kerslake comments:

“There is a lack of space in formal district and ward meetings for more general conversations so the council is not able to hear what people want and to be able to react.”

His recommendation is that:

“Formal ward committees should be changed to allow them to operate more like residents’ community forums, providing a space for residents to spontaneously raise issues and have general discussions.<sup>1</sup>”

We would be comfortable with this as a way forward as it is exactly what many of those giving evidence to us have also been stating. Ward Committees are not the only means of engagement; Councillors adopt a range of ways to engage, but they should be an integral part of local engagement.

Volunteers in the community who are members of residents’ groups need to be recognised for their role in giving local citizens a voice. We suggest that Ward Committee agendas need to have feedback from community groups and that there is a more formal linkage with District Committees.

It is important that citizens understand the purpose of the meetings and their rights within these. Whilst we acknowledge that many wards are engaging well, we thought it important to set out some minimum entitlements. We would also encourage Ward Committees to innovate and to share that innovation and good practice with the District Committee.

Birmingham is a hugely diverse city with many complex issues. A one size fits all solution is not appropriate and by no means is what is being suggested in this report.

Citizens and Councillors should have the right to determine what will work best in their area. Giving partners access to citizens via Ward Committees and promoting partnership arrangements should be a key

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<sup>1</sup> Kerslake Review see [www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-review-into-corporate-governance-at-birmingham-city-council](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-review-into-corporate-governance-at-birmingham-city-council)



aspect of Ward Committees and needs to be developed further. The City Council has been radical in its online engagement. We need to now go that extra mile and explore web-streaming of Ward Committees too, learning from the West Midlands Police who have been piloting live streaming and receiving questions on twitter at Neighbourhood Tasking Groups in south Birmingham. Technology should also be used to find a better way to update citizens and partners with real time updates of local priorities and actions.

However, offline engagement in Birmingham is paramount and will never be entirely replaced by online engagement. Thus, the responsibility to inform and educate citizens about the structures of the council and to promote Ward Committees better needs to lie in the hands of Councillors.

This report is only as good as the evidence it receives and I would like to thank those who provided evidence both at the Committee meeting and by twitter, the web chat and those who attended the Citizens UK and Chamberlain Forum events. Also, a record number of surveys were completed with 200 responses received and my thanks goes to the people who took the time to complete this. In addition I would like to thank all the Committee Members for their constructive dialogue and Amanda Simcox and Benita Wishart from the Scrutiny Office.



## Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	That all Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level, adopt the Citizen Entitlements set out in section 3.2.	Leader	December 2015
R02	That each Ward Committee, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level, considers the good practice set out in paragraphs 3.2.4 – 3.2.13 and reports back to the appropriate District Committee on innovations they will use and; that Districts and Public Engagement O&S Committee will consider any resulting innovative practice.	Leader in conjunction with Executive Members for Local Services and Ward Committee Chairs	December 2015
R03	That technology is harnessed to better support Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Any upgrading to the City Council's website enable the Wards and Ward Committee information to be easier to locate;</li> <li>b) That ward information on the website is more comprehensive and up-to-date (following the example of the Neighbourhood Tasking Group pages);</li> <li>c) That the Birmingham Newsroom tweet dates and links to ward committees;</li> <li>d) To develop an "app"<sup>2</sup> (a web application) which enables information relating to the ward to be easily accessible and meeting agendas and reports and action notes to be accessible.</li> </ol>	Deputy Leader	December 2015
R04	The Council's structures and resources should be used better to support Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Provide appropriate support to ensure that the meetings are set up and supported appropriately;</li> <li>b) Provide appropriate support to ensure that agendas and actions happens</li> </ol>	Leader	June 2015

<sup>2</sup> a self-contained program or piece of software designed to fulfil a particular purpose; an application, especially as downloaded by a user to a mobile device



	<p>following the meetings;</p> <p>c) Council Officers need to attend when requested (or to actively explain to the Ward Committee Chair why they cannot) but equally if they are expected to be held accountable over a topic this needs to be explained by the Chair;</p> <p>d) Publications such as the Council's Forward publication should promote the concept of Ward Committees.</p> <p>We request regular updates on Ward and District Champions: reviewing the role, who is in place and how well it is working.</p>		
<b>R05</b>	That the City Council's adult education service explores the potential for developing a course on active citizenship and democratic structures in the city.	Cabinet Member for Skills, Learning and Culture in conjunction with the Executive Members for Local Services	July 2015
<b>R06</b>	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee as an interim report in July 2015 with a final implementation report being presented in December 2015.	Leader	Interim progress report July 2015 Final implementation report December 2015



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Reasons for the Inquiry

1.1.1 The Leader's Policy Statement 2012 set out the aim of Ward Committees to:

“Improve accountability to residents and opportunities to influence services at the local level, with Ward Committees being the major means of local people engaging on issues affecting their area.”

1.1.2 The District and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee report of 2014 “Citizen Engagement” concluded that “Ward Committees are not currently fit for the purpose set out in the Leader's Policy Statement (2012) as the major means for citizens to engage on issues affecting their area.”

## 1.2 Kerslake and Governance Reviews

1.2.1 As the Inquiry has been underway two reviews have commenced: the Kerslake Review into the operation, culture and structure of corporate governance at the City Council<sup>3</sup> and the City Council's own Community Governance Review including, but not restricted to, the proposals for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council.<sup>4</sup>

1.2.2 The Kerslake Review ‘The way forward: an independent review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council’ was published on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2014 and stated:

“Formal ward committees should be changed to allow them to operate more like residents’ community forums, providing a space for residents to spontaneously raise issues and have general discussions.”<sup>5</sup>

1.2.3 We agree with this statement and this is discussed further in section 2.4. Therefore, the outcome of the proposed Boundary Commission review and the City Council's own Community Governance Review may lead to changes in governance structures in the future. We hope that this report influences these structures post 2017, but in the meantime it is important to focus on embedding the improvements we set out for the next two years.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-review-into-corporate-governance-at-birmingham-city-council](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-review-into-corporate-governance-at-birmingham-city-council)

<sup>4</sup> Agreed at City Council on the 16<sup>th</sup> September 2014

<sup>5</sup> No 51 page 64



## 1.3 The Remit of the Inquiry

1.3.1 It was not the remit of this Inquiry to dictate to Ward Committees on how they should run their meetings – Ward Committees are best placed to do this. The remit was to make recommendations and suggestions on improvements that can be made to make Ward Committees stronger in line with the Leader's Policy Statement (2012) and the City Council's constitution.

1.3.2 In undertaking this Inquiry the Committee explored the following themes:

- Is there clarity on the purpose of Ward Committees?
- Do they enable effective engagement, influence and contribution by citizens?
- How effective are the process and outcomes?
- How effective is the support available?
- What is their overall effectiveness?
- What should good Ward Committees look like?
- Are there alternative models that could be developed to meet the aims?

1.3.3 The Inquiry was undertaken by holding an evidence gathering session on the 2nd September 2014. This is available to view at [www.birmingham.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/145328](http://www.birmingham.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/145328). The witnesses who attended are set out in Appendix 1.

1.3.4 Evidence gathering for this Inquiry also included:

- A questionnaire/survey;
- A Chamberlain Forum's Community Conversation on Ward Committees event on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2014 (full report available at [www.fixingtheseal.wordpress.com](http://www.fixingtheseal.wordpress.com));
- A Citizens UK round table event on the 29<sup>th</sup> August 2014 attended by the Chair of this O&S Committee;
- A Web chat on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014;
- The use of twitter and the #wardcttees hashtag;
- Councillors of this O&S Committee attended other Ward Committees.

1.3.5 In addition the Social Cohesion and Community Safety O&S Committee undertook a Neighbourhood Tasking Inquiry in May 2014. This Inquiry incorporates the findings and outcomes from this:

- Location and timings of meetings need to both facilitate attendance by the public and partners and to avoid potential duplication wherever possible;



- Need for a more consistent relationship between Neighbourhood Tasking and Ward Committees;
- A communications strategy with sign up from partner agencies to encompass:
  - The development of a common understanding about Neighbourhood Tasking to include clarity about language used;
  - Feedback to be given to members of the public or Councillors who have raised issues through the Chair or lead contact within the relevant agency;
  - Local Delivery Groups (LDGs) taking responsibility for reporting on Neighbourhood Tasking to District Committees;
  - A link to the Police and Crime Board;
  - Sharing good practice and ideas;
  - A look at different ways of engaging with communities to make them aware of their local Neighbourhood Tasking Group (NTG – police-led engagement);
- Tasking groups to identify priorities and provide feedback to local communities on actions taken;
- Local businesses and others that are affected by issues in their locality are invited to the appropriate tasking meetings;

1.3.6 The evidence pack for this Inquiry with the above information can be found at: [www.birmingham.gov.uk/osreports](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/osreports).

## 1.4 Context

### City Council's Constitution

- 1.4.1 Article 10 of the **Constitution** describes the role of Ward Committees as being to “encourage and facilitate dialogue, between the Council and local people within their Ward”.
- a. “Ensuring that the needs of the Ward and key issues affecting local people are identified and assessed;
  - b. 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
  - c. 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.
  - d. 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.”

1.4.2 Article 13 of the Constitution states that Cabinet has delegated decisions on grants to Neighbourhood Forums and Community Chest to Ward Committees.

1.4.3 This is interpreted differently in different wards. Ward Committee meetings tend to be held every two months and address immediate liveability issues (such as parking, highways, refuse, anti-social behaviour and crime, local facilities and new developments). Importantly, citizens do not have an automatic right to speak or vote. Article 3 of the City Council’s Constitution states:

“Citizens may be granted the right, if invited to do so by the Chairman of the relevant Committee, to participate and contribute to the discussion, except where confidential or exempt information is likely to be disclosed, and the meeting is held in private.”

1.4.4 In practice this means that citizens are usually asked for their views and are able to ask questions at Committees. Some Chairs appear to ensure that all citizens have a chance to speak, whereas others are mindful of the need to finish a meeting within a reasonable time frame which can curtail discussion. We received mixed opinions on the length of Ward Committee meetings. Some thought it was most important to allow all citizens to have their say. Others thought that long meetings can be off putting to citizens.

## **Ward Committee Meetings**

1.4.5 The three Councillors for the Ward are appointed on the Ward Committee with the Committee agreeing the Chair for the municipal year. The Ward Committee also agrees on the dates, times and venues for its meetings. Many wards choose to rotate the venues across the ward area.

1.4.6 Research was undertaken as part of evidence gathering for the Citizen Engagement Inquiry<sup>6</sup>. Over a 16 month period (May 2012 – September 2013) the number of Ward Committee meetings ranged from five – eight per ward. The total number of public attendance for these ranged from 30 (Tyburn) to 311 (Longbridge) for that period.<sup>7</sup>

## **Cost of Ward Committee Meetings**

1.4.7 Costs provided by Committee Services for one Ward Committee meeting of an average length of two hours is approximately £345.00 per meeting. Printing costs are averaged over the city at £250 per ward (this includes printing of pre-agenda papers and other additional requested reports). The £345 cost only includes attendance of a Committee Services Clerk at the meeting and not the

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<sup>6</sup> Presented to City Council 4 February 2014

<sup>7</sup> These figures are the total attendances for each Ward Committee over that time period. Please note the figures are approximate and members of the public may have attended more than one Ward Committee meeting and so be counted more than once.



additional time they spend in preparation pre and post meeting. It also does not include other officers' time. Therefore, for one Ward Committee meeting in each of the 40 Wards the cost is approximately £13,800. The breakdown for the cost of a Ward Committee meeting is set out below:

**Table 1: Approximate Ward Committee Meeting Costs (not including pre & post meeting Committee Services costs)**

Description	£
Room Hire	£50.00
Printing Costs	£250.00
Committee Services Clerk	£45.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>£345.00</b>

1.4.8 On 21st October 2014 a report was discussed at Council Business Management Committee about modernising the Democratic Services function and finding further expenditure savings from the General Fund. No final decisions have been made on servicing Ward Committees at the time of writing.

### **Ward Structure and Framework**

1.4.9 It is worth noting that Ward Committees are part of a wider structure and not the only way the Council engages with the community. A broad example of other groups / meetings in the ward is set out in diagram 1, although not all exist in every ward.

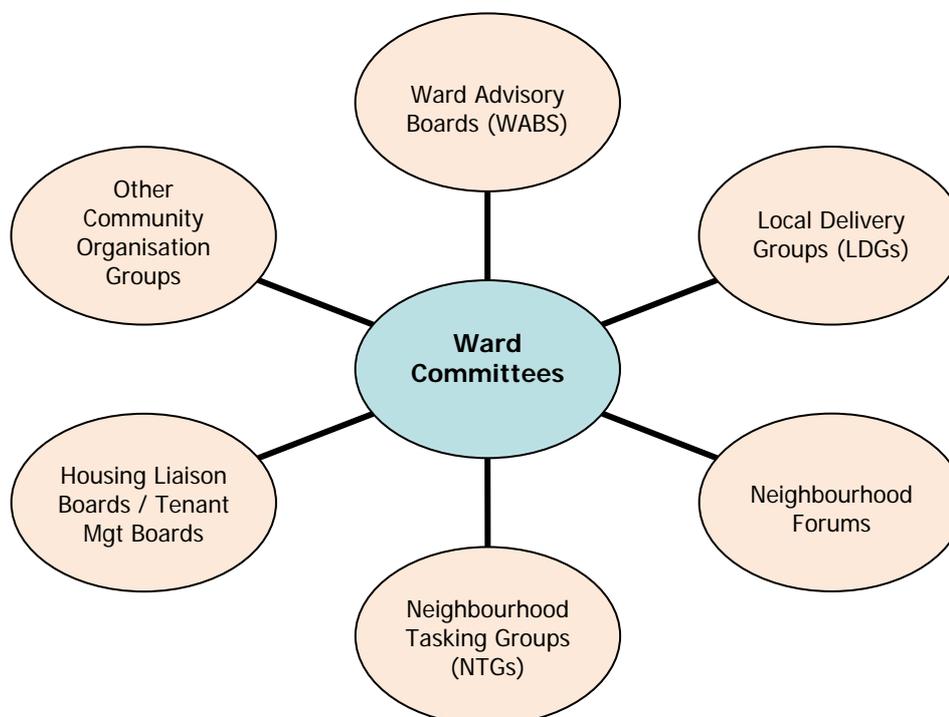
1.4.10 The Transforming Place: Working Together for Better Neighbourhoods Framework<sup>8</sup> also provides a context in which Ward Committees exist. This Framework sets out 41 neighbourhood action commitments. These action commitments include enabling communities to take ownership of their place through community led neighbourhood actions zones.

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<sup>8</sup> Agreed by Cabinet on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2014 (previously known as the Neighbourhood Strategy)



**Diagram 1: A Broad Example of Ward Committees and other Local Groups**



1.4.11 The City Council also has a virtual consultation hub called 'Be Heard' [www.birminghambeheard.org.uk](http://www.birminghambeheard.org.uk). We heard at our meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> October 2014 that:

"The use of Be-heard both by officers to post consultations and by the public using the site continues to grow at a rapid rate. Year to date there are 50 more at this point in the year and approaching 250 are forecast by the year end. Responses are also growing at a similar rate with 74% more responses year to date and approaching 15,999 predicted by the end of the year".

1.4.12 On a quarterly basis District Committees' receive a Performance report on their District from the Place Directorate. This includes measures on local engagement. The quarter one (2014-15) city wide targets below have not been met.

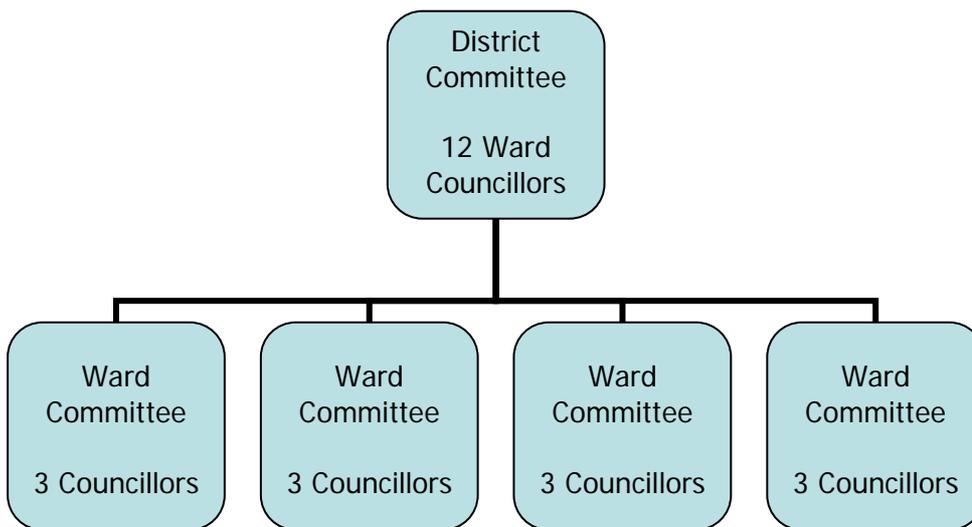


**Table 2: Key Performance Indicators Quarter 1 2014-15<sup>9</sup>**

Indicator	City-wide achievement	Target
Percentage satisfied with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making provided by local public services	45.5%	54.2%
Percentage that agree they can influence decisions that affect the local area	34.6%	36.8%
Percentage that agree they are involved in local decision making	15.2%	20.6%
Percentage satisfied with the range of different ways that you can get involved with influencing local decisions	42.0%	50.5%

1.4.13 Ward Committees also relate to a District Committee, as all three ward Councillors are represented at District level too.

**Diagram 2: District and Ward Committees**



<sup>9</sup> [www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/AgendaDetail.aspx?AgendaID%3d81469](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/AgendaDetail.aspx?AgendaID%3d81469)



## 2 Findings

### 2.1 Role of Ward Committees

- 2.1.1 As paragraph 1.1.2 states, this O&S Committee has previously concluded that Ward Committees are not fit for purpose as per the Leader's Policy Statement 2012.
- 2.1.2 The Constitution sets out aims for Ward Committees, including ensuring that needs and key issues of local people are identified and assessed; and then clearly expressed to, and considered by, the relevant person/public agency etc. However, the survey and evidence gathering indicated many issues such as a lack of clarity as to the purpose of those meetings and the difficulty in getting feedback from officers. Agendas and minutes from the Ward Committee meetings indicate that the attention is on street level liveability issues in the ward.
- 2.1.3 Therefore, we cannot say that they maximise the influence of local people over the way in which the functions of the Council (or other public agencies) are discharged within the Ward. We suggest ways in which this can be improved below.
- 2.1.4 There is a formal decision-making role that Ward Committees have. This is to approve expenditure and services from whatever budget may be allocated to their Ward. This is generally Community Chest money.
- 2.1.5 We recognise that 'one size does not fit all' and that what works in one ward may not work in another. We propose some minimum standards and set out some good practice. We were told that "Councils need new, flexible and imaginative approaches to engaging with local civil society – and they shouldn't be afraid to give radical ideas a try".<sup>10</sup>
- 2.1.6 However, during the evidence gathering very diverse views were expressed. This will, in part, be due to the different approaches taken across the city, but also because a Ward Committee cannot be all things to all people.

### 2.2 Clarity on the Purpose of Ward Committees

- 2.2.1 As noted in paragraph 1.1.1 the Leader's Policy Statement of 2012 was very clear that the purpose of Ward Committees is to improve accountability, to enable opportunities for citizens to influence services and to be the major means to engage citizens on issues affecting their area.
- 2.2.2 However, there appears to be a lack of clarity and consistency across the city. Ward Committees can mean different things to different people. Predominantly, respondents to the survey identified that Ward Committees are to discuss or address (usually local) issues, for example "to listen and

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<sup>10</sup> Chamberlain Forum (2014) Fixing the Seal



act for issues of concern raised by all local residents, not just the ones that shout loudest.” Fewer than one in ten thought they were about decision making or holding either Councillors or officers to account. The Shard End Ward Committee Chair described the purpose simply as “to get action for residents.”

2.2.3 The Chamberlain Forum held a roundtable meeting with active citizens and officers and produced a report following that. It states that Ward Committees have two purposes:

“To enable productive dialogue between civic and civil society and to process (a small and decreasing) set of decisions about local funding. Their membership and ways of working (style of meetings and decision-making) are dominated by the latter: process has been given pre-eminence over productive dialogue.”

2.2.4 Therefore, for the Chamberlain Forum, Ward Committees act as a bridge between civic and civil society. That is a helpful way to regard them.

2.2.5 They certainly appear to be places where citizens can seek to raise concerns about local matters, often relating to the immediate environment or safety. Members of new communities at the Citizens UK roundtable considered that they might be a place where any problems could be resolved. Possibly along with clarifying the role of Ward Committees the role and advertising of Councillors' surgeries could also be improved as Ward Committees should not focus on individual cases or even be formalised advice bureaux.

2.2.6 There are limitations of the Ward Committees and where the City Council is bound by certain legislation – for example a large number of people can attend a Ward Committee to object about a planning application, but the Planning Committee is bound by legislation. It is, therefore, key that citizens' expectations are managed so that they do not assume that attendance and objections lodged at Ward Committees have the capacity to ensure change at a Planning Committee.

2.2.7 It is not always transparent as to how other groups link into Ward Committees. The reality of local structures tends to be much more complicated than Diagram 1 indicates. As noted in paragraph 1.4.10 a Transforming Place Framework has been drawn up, but it is not clear how this influences Ward Committees to galvanise neighbourhood action to make changes on the ground and achieve practical results.

2.2.8 It is also not clear how Wards formally link to District Committees. In Northfield District, for example, each of the autumn 2014 Ward Committee agendas had reference to the District Committee. Whilst two Ward Committee agendas just stated the next District Committee dates, one suggested it was for items referred by the District. In contrast, none of the Hodge Hill Ward Committees made any reference to District Committees on their agendas.

2.2.9 Springfield Ward has a standing item for District Committee which says it is “an opportunity for Members and members of the public to raise issues for consideration of the District Committee.



Items should relate to two or more Wards or be of strategic significance.” However, Hall Green District Committee agendas do not reciprocate.

- 2.2.10 The Council is poor at explaining its structures. A criticism from the Chamberlain Forum needs to be addressed as they point out that there is no leaflet or web page that explains how a citizen can be involved.<sup>11</sup> During the course of this inquiry it appears some improvements may have been made if one can find the right page on the website (i.e. there is no link through from the Democracy page). In testing this out we found that if a citizen wants to have a say, but has never heard of “Ward Committees” it is extremely difficult to find out information on the City Council’s website.
- 2.2.11 Given the different views held about the purpose of a Ward Committee we suggest that each Committee agree its focus, in line with the Constitution’s expectations. In addition, it would be good practice to draw up a framework of the main priorities for improving the local quality of life in the Ward for the year about what Councillors and citizens agree they want to try to achieve. This would help citizens have a clear picture of how to make wards a better place to live.
- 2.2.12 As noted above the formal part of the Ward Committee agenda is the agreement of Community Chest funds. One witness suggested that organisations that receive this should attend a Ward Committee meeting to explain how the money was spent and the outcomes.
- 2.2.13 To conclude, we feel that engagement and securing outcomes are the whole point of Ward Committees. In our view the precise structure is secondary to the act of creating a dialogue between citizens, Councillors and other local partners, and ensuring practical local actions are taken as a result of the issues raised. Whilst wards may wish to stick to the format as is, it would be good to give others with the desire to innovate, a sense that they can be creative and flexible if they want to be.

## 2.3 Barriers to Attendance at Ward Committee Meetings

### Attendance

- 2.3.1 The numbers attending are small as paragraph 1.4.6 indicates. Many contributors to this Inquiry reminded us that numbers are not everything and that good engagement can be occurring if there is positive discussion with those citizens in attendance.

### Information

- 2.3.2 One barrier is that most citizens appear not to know about the existence of Ward Committees, or if they do they do not always know when they will be meeting. The survey indicated that word of

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<sup>11</sup> There is a web page which explains the constitutional aim of Ward Committees, but without promoting the idea or enabling easy access to further information: [www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/Index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/Index.aspx). Phone numbers, but not emails are provided for further information.



mouth and email is the most common way citizens find out, but a fifth said they did not know about Ward Committees.

- 2.3.3 We are aware that improvements are being made to the Council's website. However, currently the web presence of Ward Committees is not good enough with some information being out of date, hard to find or absent.
- 2.3.4 It can take five or six clicks through a labyrinth to find out about a meeting on the Council's website. The Democracy in Birmingham webpages are difficult to use unless you are used to it. You can alternatively access a web link to the democracy web page from the Council's Birmingham Newsroom website ([www.birminghamnewsroom.com](http://www.birminghamnewsroom.com)), however citizens may not be aware of this.
- 2.3.5 The meetings for that week are listed and can be accessed from the democracy web page [www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/Index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/democracy/Pages/Index.aspx), but there is no calendar for the year available. Some respondents said they did not know when meetings were happening, or by the time they find out they are already committed.
- 2.3.6 One of the weaknesses with reliance on the Democracy in Birmingham web pages is that there is inconsistent practice, but generally future dates of Ward Committees are not put on (this could be because they have not been agreed). This could mean that only if a citizen checks regularly would they find out about the next date, once papers are published five working days before a meeting. In addition, we were told that the Democracy in Birmingham webpage is not always updated if a meeting is cancelled or a venue is changed.
- 2.3.7 **Each Ward therefore needs their web page easily accessible on the Council's website updated with the purpose of the Committee, meeting dates and times and venues and the latest action plan.**
- 2.3.8 We were told that the current "absence of any funding to advertise a ward meeting means that only those who are in the "loop" are aware of the meetings". Traditional approaches could be used such as the Council's Forward publication, or the Birmingham Mail or fliers, but some respondents felt that Councillors themselves should do more to promote this. A simple approach would be that each Councillor puts details of the Ward Committees and an invitation in the signature of their emails. A further idea, executed in some areas, is to leaflet the households near to the venue being used.
- 2.3.9 Some respondents to the survey thought it was important that all citizens have the chance to be added to the list of people who are sent regular updates and citizens need to know how they would go about this. This could happen at meetings whereby citizens give their e-mail address or by a request being made via the Council's website or Councillor.
- 2.3.10 We heard that people do not always understand the structure of the Council and this needs to be explained. There is further work that could be developed by Councillors themselves and education providers. It was suggested that there is a need for some outreach work to teach citizens about the city's democratic structures and how they can get involved. Particular mention was made of



young people and new communities. We would request that the City Council's adult education service explores the potential for developing a course on active citizenship and democratic structures in the city.

- 2.3.11 In addition to the Council's website being improved, online and offline advertising that includes the purpose of the meeting, dates and times, etc. need to be improved. This can be part of a Ward Committee's communication strategy.
- 2.3.12 The role of Neighbourhood Tasking Groups (NTGs) has been mentioned already and it was suggested that if there was better co-ordination, communication and joint hosting of meetings then the Community Police Support Officers who actively promote NTGs would be able to promote Ward Committees too.

### **Practicalities**

- 2.3.13 A second set of barriers are around the practicalities – such as when and where they are held. Here there are very different views held. To hold them in different parts of the ward, or always in the same venue? There are pluses and minuses for rotating meetings around the ward. For instance by rotating meetings you are trying to make them more local to more people, but this can mean that people from different areas may not go to all the Ward Committee meetings and may miss out. Other suggestions made were to use faith buildings, however, some felt that these could appear to exclude. It is, therefore, clear that careful judgements have to be made at a local level on where to hold the meetings.
- 2.3.14 The NTG Inquiry also recommends that the location and timings of meetings need to both facilitate attendance by the public and partners and to avoid potential duplication wherever possible. This also goes for Ward Committee meetings.

### **Culture and Setup**

- 2.3.15 A third set of barriers are about the setup of a meeting. The officer culture of the City Council was felt to be a barrier to good engagement by some witnesses in the 2013 Citizen Engagement Inquiry. This time long-winded officer reports were felt to be a barrier to effectiveness. Also Ward Committees, some suggested, are too legalistic, prescriptive and formal given the very few actual decisions taken.
- 2.3.16 In addition the "top table" of Councillors and officers, some respondents suggested, creates a "them and us" scenario. A respondent was not alone in suggesting that:
- "Some think these are public meetings, whereas, the public is, in effect, spectators at a committee of three councillors."
- 2.3.17 The introduction to the Chamberlain Forum report Fixing the Seal<sup>12</sup> is revealing:

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<sup>12</sup> Fixing the Seal – see evidence pack



“At the end of each ward committee meeting it is resolved that the Chair is authorised to act until the next meeting and that the Council’s Legal Officer is authorised to ‘affix the corporate seal’ to any documents needed to give effect to executive decisions made. Regardless of whether any such decisions are, or will be made. It’s an example of how ward committees appear to be set up to prioritise ‘process over purpose’ and it explains the title of [their publication.]”

- 2.3.18 Moreover, they assert that the boundaries of wards themselves, which often do not reflect natural neighbourhoods, make Ward Committees inflexible and unable to respond to the needs of communities of geography.
- 2.3.19 A final barrier to attendance was a view that they are not effective. 81% of respondents that had never attended a Ward Committee meeting felt they did not work, did not make a difference or had no idea if they did work or not.

## 2.4 Ward Committees in Action

### Numbers versus Quality and Impact

- 2.4.1 As mentioned in paragraph 1.4.6 the analysis of Ward Committees showed that between May 2012 and September 2013 there was a considerable variation in attendance. Over that whole time period total attendance for an individual Ward Committee varied from 30 to 311.<sup>13</sup>
- 2.4.2 There was discussion about the importance of getting people to attend compared to the benefits of good dialogue on issues that could have an impact. One witness suggested that it is not a number game – it is about interested people who want to take part. Another witness also suggested that it is about the quality of the discussion and not about the quantity of people who attended; and that Councillors want views and opinions from people that care. However, how can Ward Committees enable effective engagement if people do not know about them and do not engage?
- 2.4.3 Evidence from the Chamberlain Forum was:
- “Large public turnouts at meetings are, in any case, not necessarily a sign of healthy dialogue but of contentious and topical business on the agenda. Good decisions are not always made in front of large ‘audiences’ of vocal and partisan groups. There is no sign that such meetings lead to sustained increases in regular engagement”.

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<sup>13</sup> Note – some of these figures are approximate, some Committees met more often and some citizens will be double counted or more as they may have attended more than one Committee meeting.



2.4.4 A number of respondents to the Survey thought that Ward Committees were generally not wholly representative of the community, with few young people attending for example. Also the Chamberlain Forum stated:

“We did not think that attendance at ward committees generally reflects the diversity of residents: young people in particular and sometimes women and minority groups are more than averagely excluded. In some places, we agreed, active neighbourhood forums play a useful part in both: increasing the extent and diversity of resident attendance at ward committees; and extending their ‘reach’ to include people who don’t go to committee meetings, but do attend, or otherwise keep in touch with, their neighbourhood forum. In other places, forums themselves are poorly attended and networked and need better support.”

2.4.5 West Midlands Police also suggested that broadening attendance and making the meetings more representative of the ward has to be a priority. Their piloting of live streaming neighbourhood tasking meetings in Selly Oak and facilitating an online discussion with citizens demonstrates one way to achieve this.

2.4.6 Also having strong links with groups such as neighbourhood forums as shown in diagram 1 should assist in achieving wider engagement with citizens.

2.4.7 There also need to be minimum citizen entitlement standards and these are discussed in section 3.

### **Citizens Ability to Influence Discussion**

2.4.8 Some citizens have raised concerns about the structure and name of Ward Committees. At the Citizens UK roundtable it was stated:

“It’s a democratic issue. You’re asking people to come along to a meeting where they have no power or decision-making. Councillors make the decisions. If it had a different name it might be a pull.”

2.4.9 A name such as Ward Engagement Committee may be more appropriate to help citizens, Councillors and other partners in attendance to understand the purpose of these meetings. This is discussed further in paragraph 3.2.5.

2.4.10 A third of the respondents to the survey who had attended a Ward Committee meeting felt they could always influence the discussion and a third felt they sometimes could. One suggestion was that a Ward Committee has clear procedures to enable citizens to put items on the agenda, circulate papers and introduce items at meetings. It was suggested, even, that agendas should be set by residents and they should allow email suggestions.

2.4.11 A few Ward Committees seem to address the citizens’ ability to influence the agenda differently. For instance, some Ward Committee agendas have a standing item of matters of local concern and



a couple of Ward Committees use a “soapbox approach” or an open forum where a wide variety of issues are raised.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, some have matters of urgent business. One witness suggested that the Any Other Business (AOB) item on the agenda is one of the most important items and that anyone should be able to raise an issue.

- 2.4.12 Some Ward Committees do have items for future agendas which invite citizens to suggest items for a future meeting. The wording of the descriptor for this item differs and we would suggest that the second one of these is more inclusive, but remains very formal:

“To consider suggested items for future agendas.”

“Non-urgent items which members of the public wish to be considered at a future meeting to be received and subject to the agreement of the ward committee, referred to the appropriate Chief Officer for report.”

- 2.4.13 Without a clear way of enabling citizens to get a topic on the agenda and properly considered can there be confidence that Ward Committees do give consideration to the issues local citizens feel are important? We also recognise that a balance needs to be struck and that a clarity of purpose for the Ward Committee needs to be stated. As previously mentioned Ward Committees should not be seen as formalised advice bureaux as referred to in paragraph 2.2.5.

### **Ability to Make an Impact**

- 2.4.14 The survey respondents were sceptical about the impact of Ward Committees with six out of 10 saying they did not make a difference or they did not know if they made a difference. This may reflect reality, but it may just show that there is not enough feedback: “You said. We did.”

- 2.4.15 One person who joined in the web chat said:

“At present all too often huge wadges of council stuff is delivered at us – read out– with stern warnings that we have to put up with it.... Leaving people feeling dumb struck and powerless – it can feel as though we are there to rubber stamp some process: ‘Tick box: Read out at Ward Meeting.’”<sup>15</sup>

- 2.4.16 This could be improved by shorter more user friendly reports being discussed at the Ward Committee meetings. Also, the need for the City Council to inform citizens could be strengthened by officers recognising and incorporating into the way they work that Ward Committees are a part of a bigger structure and sit alongside other engagement approaches such as NTGs. An isolated approach may mean that opportunities for improving an area may be lost.

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<sup>14</sup> Handsworth Wood

<sup>15</sup> Julia Larden



- 2.4.17 There is also scope, for example, to have recognised neighbourhood forums or other community groups as an agenda item, although this is rarely used. Why not, once a year enable local school councils to contribute about young people's aspirations and priorities?
- 2.4.18 Clearly there may be times when things the citizens have requested through a Ward Committee cannot be delivered. For example, Planning Committee may make decisions that do not accord with citizens' demands as there are other statutory issues to take into account.
- 2.4.19 Equally, at times of budget cuts it may not be possible to deliver a service in a particular way or keep a building, or some citizens may want something that differs from what the city-wide strategy has decided. For instance, in Erdington, we were told residents wanted £600k spent to restore a leisure centre and not have a new build – as was decided by the Executive.
- 2.4.20 One witness wanted to ensure that community recommendations carry weight when decisions are made. However, we acknowledge how difficult this may be as those attending the Ward Committee meetings may not be representative of the whole community or there may be different views expressed. As stated in the Citizen Engagement Inquiry:

“We recognise that engagement would be easier if there is only one view coming from communities. As noted, a challenge with engagement is listening to all voices, small as well as loud and well connected. The Council needs to make sure that it gives weight to quieter voices”.<sup>16</sup>

### **City Council Officers Accountable for Services**

- 2.4.21 One barrier referred to in the survey was that officers do not always turn up when requested and we agree that this is an issue. One of the witnesses went further in saying that some officers do not treat Ward Committees seriously. He gave the example of asking for someone to provide a progress report in 2010 and even in 2014 they could not get someone to come back and give the answers of the consultation, but were reliant on an e-mail.
- 2.4.22 We understand that the Council's workforce is reducing significantly. However, if there is a need for an officer to attend then we feel there should be a way of dealing with departments that continuously fail to turn up for Ward Committee meetings when requested. Increasing the profile of Ward Committees by streaming them and appropriate marketing will help accountability of such individuals.

### **Support Available: Clerking**

- 2.4.23 Committee Services provides support with many different tasks including:

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<sup>16</sup> Page 34



- Chasing actions, drawing up agendas with the Chair, booking meeting rooms and checking access arrangements, chasing officers for reports, inviting officers and partners to attend for specific items;
- Ensuring papers are published at least five clear days before a meeting, sending papers to the Ward Councillors, sending agenda and suggestions about timings to officers / partners attending. Agenda papers are also sent to the local MP, Fire Service/West Midlands Police and Neighbourhood Forum chairmen/secretary and emailed to other interested parties – including individual residents;
- Compiling A4 posters that have meeting details and often agenda items and sending to key institutions and interested parties requesting circulation;
- Preparing a Chair's briefing note for each meeting with details of officers attending, a short summary of the agenda items and the action required by Ward Councillors for each item – i.e. noting or approval;
- Recording apologies, taking spare papers to the meeting, collecting email addresses of citizens to add them to the mailing list, taking minutes and advising the Ward Councillors in the meeting;
- Following the meeting, publishing the meeting decisions and minutes on the Democracy in Birmingham website; communicating with officers advising of Ward Councillors' concerns to matters raised at the meeting (normally to Planning).

2.4.24 However, Councillors feel there is not a consistent approach across the city. One suggestion was that minutes should be shorter to record key points, decisions and outcomes. As one respondent said:

“No need for a near verbatim reproduction of what each contributor said ...  
Currently they are like a court transcript. ....The excessive length prevents quick searching.”

2.4.25 Currently minutes are not usually available until five working days before the next committee meeting and that can be quite a few months later, or until the Chairman has confirmed that he/she is satisfied that they are accurate. One witness suggested that the clerk's key role should be to summarise concerns (and actions) and put this onto the internet and into a local library as soon as possible after a meeting has happened.

2.4.26 To properly assess the benefit of Ward Committees there needs to be clear actions identified, transparent feedback and explanations of progress and barriers.

2.4.27 As mentioned in paragraph 1.4.8 there are discussions ongoing regarding modernising the Democratic Services function and finding further expenditure savings from the General Fund. Although no final decisions have been made on servicing Ward Committees at the time of writing we feel that support needs to be in place for Ward Committee meetings. This includes booking the



rooms etc. Clearly, the decisions made about support for Ward Committees may make a great difference to how Ward Committees currently function. The Kerslake Review has placed a fundamental emphasis on the need for the City Council to 'get the basics right' in terms of developing a stronger relationship between citizens and their Councillors at a local level. The implications of this recommendation will need to influence decisions on the prioritisation of the resources to allow this shift in focus to be achieved.

## **Ensuring Action and Building Relationships**

- 2.4.28 Previously each Ward had a Ward Support Officer for whom a key aim would be to administer the Community Chest. But in doing this and supporting local Councillors many also played a big role in maintaining contact with local groups and institutions. Both they, Democratic Services Officers and Councillors themselves play a role in ensuring that actions occur after meetings. As that support diminishes each Ward needs to develop a strategy about where responsibility will lie for each item.
- 2.4.29 Each ward has been allocated a Ward Champion. These are all reasonably high level managers from across the Council. When this Committee proposed this in 2012<sup>17</sup> the purpose was to help Wards to overcome blockages to finding solutions by taking issues back to the right level within directorates. The intent was to also ensure that every part of the Council (whether or not they provide a front-line service) better understood neighbourhoods and devolution in order to make devolution real.
- 2.4.30 As with much else in the Council we know that some Ward Champions have engaged much more than others. We have been told that Ward and District Champions are being reviewed. We request that we receive regular updates (reviewing the role, who is in place and how well it is working) in the light of decreasing resources for Wards and Districts.

## **Partnerships & West Midlands Police**

- 2.4.31 As noted in previous reports, such as Citizen Engagement, other statutory organisations (including police, fire and health) carry out engagement and we need to find better ways of using scarce resources by working together. As noted, too, in paragraph 1.3.5 the Social Cohesion and Community Safety O&S Committee carried out an inquiry into Neighbourhood Tasking Groups. We recommend a way forward in relation to NTGs below. However, further work needs to be done to move forward other relationships. There was commitment from West Midlands Police to support local engagement through Ward Committees although the concerns below were raised.
- 2.4.32 The Police noted a huge variation in the way in which Ward Committees are run and what Councillors expect. They accept that "one size doesn't fit all", but suggest there does need to be some consistency and clarity as to the purpose of Ward Committees.

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<sup>17</sup> Resourcing Devolution scrutiny report



- 2.4.33 They also noted that if policing matters are not even on the agenda then they question the value of their attendance. They felt that Ward Committees need to have a positive impact and they are an avenue to get to know the community to address local issues.
- 2.4.34 They did suggest that policing or neighbourhood tasking group reports be standard items. That would help ensure they can have a positive impact. For the first meeting of the municipal year 2014/15 half of the Ward Committee agendas had an item regarding policing matters. Six of those also had an item on fire issues (or combined these in a community safety agenda). The most inclusive way this is on an agenda is where the item is described as being “a chance for local residents to raise any policing issues”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Neighbourhood Tasking**

- 2.4.35 One respondent to the survey stated:

“Although we generally have a report back at our ward committee meeting from the police, we don't get any feedback about tasking which is just as important.”

- 2.4.36 There is a need for a more consistent relationship between Neighbourhood Tasking and Ward Committees. West Midlands Police told us they want to explore the relationship of Ward Committees to Neighbourhood Tasking and activity in addressing local issues. They have taken steps in Billesley and Brandwood wards to combine these activities and co-locate meetings. The feedback from this is that this improves attendance and accountability. Chief Inspector Simon Inglis has been working with colleagues to strengthen NTGs by using technology and has been piloting this in the four Selly Oak wards (including the two mentioned above). This has involved live streaming meetings (similar to Cabinet and Committee meetings within the Council). It also enables those who cannot or choose not to attend to join in the discussion as there are opportunities for questions to be posed by citizens through google hangout, twitter and email as well as by sitting in a meeting room.<sup>19</sup> To make this work someone at the meeting needs to facilitate this and feed this into the discussion. West Midlands Police are now intending to scale this up, but are, unfortunately, doing so in Dudley rather than Birmingham.

### **Livestreaming and Social Media**

- 2.4.37 To complement the NTG pilots the Ward Committees have been trying live streaming too. One of the Billesley Ward Councillors has invested in a camera and the meetings have been archived on You Tube. This is a huge step forward although, working together there needs to be further work to make video footage accessible and to draw on the experience of NTGs in getting live input and questions via the internet from citizens who cannot make a meeting. This requires facilitation and some training.

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<sup>18</sup> Billesley Ward

<sup>19</sup> The evidence pack includes a very interesting account by Chief Inspector Inglis of the pilots and the low costs.



- 2.4.38 The Committee had mixed views on how successful this would be with engaging local citizens and some Councillors felt there needed to be a protocol or safeguards to ensure that issues raised via the internet were from the citizens within the Ward.
- 2.4.39 It was also suggested, although not accepted by the whole O&S Committee, that one alternative approach to Ward Committees was having virtual meetings.
- 2.4.40 Section 2.3 sets out some of the barriers in relation to lack of information and some steps that need to be taken in relation to the City Council's website ([birmingham.gov.uk](http://birmingham.gov.uk)). In addition, there is some good use of social media (facebook / twitter/ hyperlocal blogs) to advertise Ward Committees, get citizens' feedback and to hold the council and partners to account for action. Each Ward needs to agree how to improve its internet presence.



## 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 3.1 Overall Effectiveness

- 3.1.1 The aim of this Inquiry was not to conclude as to whether or not Ward Committees should continue, but rather how to improve their effectiveness. From the beginning it was clear that this was a Marmite issue – some people love Ward Committees whilst others appear to hate them. What became very clear, too, during the Inquiry is that across the city many citizens are just unaware of their existence.
- 3.1.2 There are many examples of good practice and Ward Committees making a difference. We also heard frustrations that they often do not live up to expectations and that the resources put into them could achieve more if used in a different way. As the City Council's resources reduce further Ward Committees will need to change or may have to become optional. What is undeniable is (as the Committee's Citizen Engagement report set out) that the Council needs to ensure robust engagement with citizens occurs and that this influences priorities and how services are provided.

#### **Do Ward Committees Enable Effective Engagement, Influence and Contribution by Citizens?**

- 3.1.3 The West Midlands Police view is that Ward Committees are most effective when there is a specific local issue that enables momentum to be built through partners and there is clear accountability. Some believe that the purpose of Ward Committees should be to shift the balance of power towards citizens.
- 3.1.4 Overall it was agreed that the focus of Ward Committees should be genuine public engagement to make a difference locally. For instance reports should be concise and in plain English and jargon and acronyms should not be used by Councillors or officers. In the past, some people felt there has been too much emphasis on process, and not enough emphasis on outcomes.
- 3.1.5 Previous work on engagement (the support services service review and the Committee's Citizen Engagement report) concluded that engagement for the Council should happen through Ward Committees. The service review concluded that specific topic based theme groups be abolished so citizens could engage with the institution of the council as a whole person, rather than as a resident of a neighbourhood, an older or disabled person and a user of specific services. It is clear that Ward Committees in their current format do not enable this aspiration to be met.

#### **Are there Alternatives to Ward Committees?**

- 3.1.6 The survey asked if there were better models to achieve engagement. Many respondents felt Ward Committees were the best way, although some felt that improvements needed to be made to Ward Committees. Of those that thought there were alternatives to Ward Committees the responses were broadly:



- Deal direct with Councillors, letters/e-mails to Council's Chief Executive, press or officers and petitions directly to full council;
- Use social media, vote online, have 'virtual' meetings;
- Community Development Trust;
- Use questionnaires;
- Need to go more local than Wards;
- Have Ward Committee Members participating in working groups made up of residents, community groups, traders etc.;
- For District Committees to hold periodic public meetings instead about recent and forthcoming issues, including, for example, budget cuts and broader issues such as health and the police precept.

3.1.7 One respondent felt that:

“Police tasking meetings are better, they're more reliable and action concerns.”

3.1.8 A number of people proposed more radical changes to Ward Committees. One witness, for example, suggested that they be chaired by a citizen, not a councillor and that each committee has a board of equal numbers of Councillors and citizens which sets the agenda. Others suggested that Councillors should be allowed instead to set up forums on a more flexible basis. These should be more action focused. On balance, however, our view is that Councillors have democratic legitimacy and should, therefore, remain as chairs.

3.1.9 However, as we have noted, there are many suggestions about improving Ward Committees to make them fit for purpose. It is clear too that, they are only one tool to local engagement and there could be in the future, other ways to achieve this.

### **Are Ward Committees Fit for Purpose?**

3.1.10 To answer this there needs to be greater clarity on what the purpose of Ward Committees are. Overall, the Inquiry confirmed the view that Ward Committees are not fit for purpose if their purpose is as set down in the Constitution and 2012 Leader's Policy Statement. As we were finalising this report the Kerlake Review additionally stated formal ward committees should be changed to allow them to operate more like residents' community forums (see section 1.2).



**Table 3: Leader’s Policy Statement (LPS) and Constitution and Committee’s Conclusions**

Objective set out in LPS or Constitution	Our Conclusions
To improve accountability to residents and opportunities to influence services at the local level.	This is not consistent e.g. there can be lack of feedback, and only a limited number of council functions are items on the agendas.
To be the major means of local people engaging on issues affecting their area.	Limited attendance means they cannot be the “major means”. This could be strengthened by formalising links to other local groups.
To ensure that the needs of the Ward and key issues affecting local people are identified and assessed.	Not all Ward Committees enable citizens to put items on the agenda, and a limited number of issues are considered.
To ensure 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)	The current low profile of Ward Committees can make it difficult to hold key decision-makers to account. In addition, there are currently limited ways for citizens to know how the Committees have made a difference.
To maximise the influence of local people over the way in which the functions of the Council (or other public agencies) are discharged within the Ward.	It is currently difficult to evidence due to inconsistent feedback and a lack of a “you said, we did” approach.
To approve expenditure and services from whatever Budget may be allocated to their Ward.	Ward Committees do discharge this function, but a lack of formal feedback from recipients means that Ward Councillors and citizens may not know how effective this has been. <sup>20</sup> It is suggested that this formal duty creates meetings and processes that are too formal and too unequal (between Councillors and citizens) to enable great citizen engagement.

- 3.1.11 If Ward Committees are not meeting their constitutional aims something needs to change – the constitution or the approach of Ward Committees. If the aim is “the major means” of citizen engagement for an area then some transformation is needed.
- 3.1.12 We feel that there are some structural and procedural issues with Ward Committees as they exist at the moment. Nonetheless it is important to state that we heard about many great examples of engagement at a local level on issues of huge concern to local citizens and with tangible actions that follow on. There is much great practice that can be spread across the city.
- 3.1.13 However, we consider that some Councillors do not understand the role Ward Committees need to play. Not all Councillors use Ward Committees to their full potential as vital tools of communication. Ward Councillors need to explain and demonstrate why citizens should attend. They also need to hold officers and partners to account. We were asked about the existence or suitability of Councillor training in how to energise Ward Committees. There may be scope to share good practice, build on the best and to consider new ways of working in the light of this inquiry.

<sup>20</sup> When this Committee was asked to do some work about how effective Community Chest was Members decided it was impossible due to a lack of clear objectives set out or any systematic gathering of outcomes.



## 3.2 Recommendations

### Citizen Entitlement Standards

3.2.1 This section sets out a number of standards that we consider Ward Committees should adopt so all citizens shall have an entitlement to a democratic civic right to access and engage with the City Council locally. Such engagement enables influence of their local services.

3.2.2 The citizen entitlement standards are:

#### a) Purpose

There is clarity on the remit of the Ward Committee – each should set out its focus - local purpose and offer, in addition to the standard constitutional objectives.

This should be about addressing and resolving problems facing the locality (engagement for action) as well as building engagement. This requires having an open two-way dialogue with citizens, allowing citizens to influence and express views on local plans and to work in partnership with their local Councillors and officers. Additionally, it should enable citizens to scrutinise and monitor that local services are being managed and delivered wherever possible in line with public aspirations and preferences.

There is clarity on the ways citizens can contribute to the aims of the Ward Committee, both through attending meetings but also enabling this contribution to be made through other channels (written, online, social media or phone) if they prefer.

#### b) Action Focused

The agreed focus is action orientated and is about the practical steps needed to improve the local area and local services. It could include 'participatory budgeting' where citizens can consider alternative ways that existing local resources might be spent. Changing from formal minutes to action notes and ensuring these are made available as soon as possible after a meeting (not five clear working days before the next) and that actions are tracked and feedback given should assist with this.

#### c) Citizen Influence

There is clarity as to how citizens can get items onto the agenda and that they have a right to speak on matters relating to local issues, and to express preferences on local choice through indicative tests of opinion in the meetings – within codes of conduct and reasonable timescales, and that they can submit their own issues and subjects to be considered to an impartial Council officer / contact even if they cannot attend. There should be a right to see that issues have been followed through. This should not extend to individual complaints or issues.



#### **d) Broadening Engagement**

Ward Committees shall take steps to broaden their reach to make all local citizens welcome whatever their age or personal circumstances.

Timings of meetings and venues are fit for purpose (to include location, access, layout and heating etc.) and locally agreed.

That Councillors can demonstrate they are taking responsibility for promoting why local citizens should attend and how they can have an influence during and surrounding the meetings.

#### **e) Robust Local Linkages**

There are strong links with other local community groups (e.g. Neighbourhood Forums and Neighbourhood Tasking Groups etc.) and a process for getting issues of concern discussed there. That the results and action points arising from Ward Committee engagement is fed back to such local community organisations.

Ward Committees shall develop mechanisms for integrating their work alongside other local services, with particular priority to neighbourhood police tasking and local health and care services, and important local voluntary and community based agencies, housing associations and land owners.

#### **f) Access to Information**

Information is easily available so citizens can find out about a Ward Committee. Officers and Councillors need to advertise the Ward Committee meetings, giving information relevant to citizens in the invitation, using a range of appropriate methods (such as posters in local public buildings, leaflets through doors and the Council's Forward publication), and emailing in a welcoming way that sets out the topics to be covered and links to the right pages on the Birmingham.gov.uk website.

#### **g) Clear Communication**

That citizens can understand the information presented to Ward Committees. Officer reports must be concise and in plain English, and verbal reports delivered with the communication skills necessary for the average citizen to understand what is being said and what it means to them as citizens and local services users.

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R01</b>	That all Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level, adopt the Citizen Entitlements set out in section 3.2.	Leader	December 2015

3.2.3 A way to measure these could be to require a short report from the Ward Committees themselves on what they have achieved to District Committees or our Committee.



## Good Practice

- 3.2.4 **Clarity of Purpose:** at the beginning of each meeting the Chair should clarify the purpose of the meeting and what issues can / cannot be raised.
- 3.2.5 **Name Change:** we do not feel that the current name reflects the purpose of Ward Committees and a name such as Ward Engagement Committee could be more appropriate (see paragraph 2.4.9). Reflecting the Kerslake Review the name "Committee" could also be removed or changed in the title so that the emphasis is less on formal decision-making and more on engagement. We suggest that at a local level Councillors and citizens may want to adopt a name they use locally. For example, Moseley and Kings Heath Ward Committee is being referred to locally as the Moseley and Kings Heath Community Partnership.
- 3.2.6 **Each Ward Committee should Develop a Communication Strategy:** Whenever possible Ward Councillors or an appropriate officer should use social media (such as twitter or facebook) to promote Ward Committees.
- 3.2.7 **Work with West Midlands Police:** Working with partners such as West Midlands Police to co-ordinate local engagement can have many advantages. If Neighbourhood Tasking Groups (NTGs) and Ward Committees follow on from each other or are combined then active citizens and key partners are already available. Also West Midlands Police would be able to promote the Ward Committee too and vice versa. Ward Councillors should take steps to formalise the relationship between Ward Committees and NTGs.
- 3.2.8 **Live Streaming:** Although there have been concerns that live streaming of District Committees has led to reduced engagement, there have been large numbers of people who have logged in and are more aware of the decisions made. The live streaming of Ward Committees in Selly Oak District has been positive. The lessons from the NTG pilot live streams with facilitated discussions with those not in the room should be developed too.
- 3.2.9 **No Ward Committee is an Island:** Agenda items can reflect linkages to neighbourhoods and districts more. There should be regular agenda items that enable local groups such as Neighbourhood Forums, Housing Liaison Boards or Friends of Parks to raise issues of concern or suggest new ways of doing things.
- 3.2.10 Given that many decisions pertinent to a Ward are actually made at a District Committee there should be regular agenda items to enable issues to be fed into Districts and to feed back from them. Agenda items can also link to current consultations which may be on-going or planned on Be Heard, the City Council's online consultation portal. Finally, there should be clarity about the role of Councillors' surgeries compared to Ward Committees and appropriate referrals each way.
- 3.2.11 **Enable flexibility:** It needs to be easier to organise a Ward Committee meeting for specific issues. At the moment, when there is a major issue of concern, communities look to resident groups and neighbourhood forums to organise public meetings rather than the Ward Committee. Councillors should be able to call an ad hoc non-decision-making Ward Committee meeting without



the complex issues of publishing reports in advance or getting it on to the democracy section of the City Council's website.

3.2.12 As citizens do not live their lives in single wards the City Council should also welcome Joint Ward Committees on issues. For example, if there is an issue relating to Soho Road which borders three wards, or Kings Heath which straddles four, Councillors should be able to call a meeting specific for Soho Road or Kings Heath centre, with Councillors and stakeholders from all three wards present. This could be called a "Joint Ward Committee". Erdington has held a number of successful cross border meetings – e.g. on speeding.

3.2.13 **Standing up for Birmingham (#SU4B)**: A three way discussion at Ward Committees (between citizens, officers and Councillors) could enable problems to be solved and new ways of working to be considered. They could also help embed the principles of Standing Up for Birmingham (encouraging and supporting individuals, community groups and voluntary organisations to play a bigger role in delivering services)<sup>21</sup>. By involving Neighbourhood Forums as set out above this would also help develop them in taking some local responsibility themselves for neighbourhood management and contributing to outcomes.

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R02</b>	That each Ward Committee, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level, considers the good practice set out in paragraphs 3.2.4 – 3.2.13 and reports back to the appropriate District Committee on innovations they will use and; that Districts and Public Engagement O&S Committee will consider any resulting innovative practice.	Leader in conjunction with Executive Members for Local Services and Ward Committee Chairs	December 2015

## Technology

3.2.14 As more people access information digitally the City Council needs to make sure that technology enables citizens to better connect with Ward Committees and be able to identify the actions arising from Ward Committees.

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R03</b>	That technology is harnessed to better support Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Any upgrading to the City Council's website enable the Wards and Ward Committee information to be easier to locate;</li> </ul>	Deputy Leader	December 2015

<sup>21</sup> [www.standingupforbirmingham.wordpress.com/about-standing-up-for-birmingham/](http://www.standingupforbirmingham.wordpress.com/about-standing-up-for-birmingham/)



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b) That ward information on the website is more comprehensive and up-to-date (following the example of the Neighbourhood Tasking Group pages);</li> <li>c) That the Birmingham Newsroom tweet dates and links to ward committees;</li> <li>d) To develop an “app”<sup>22</sup> (a web application) which enables information relating to the ward to be easily accessible and meeting agendas and reports and action notes to be accessible.</li> </ul>		
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## Council Support for Ward Committees

3.2.15 The express purpose of Ward Committees is to maximise the influence of local people over the way in which the functions of the Council (or other public agencies) are discharged within the Ward. Given the fact that there has been a view expressed<sup>23</sup> that Ward Committees act as a major part of the consultation processes – that they should be where all consultation can be taken. To work they require better support.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
<b>R04</b>	<p>The Council's structures and resources should be used better to support Ward Committees, or any successor arrangement for governance at this level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Provide appropriate support to ensure that the meetings are set up and supported appropriately;</li> <li>b) Provide appropriate support to ensure that agendas and actions happens following the meetings;</li> <li>c) Council Officers need to attend when requested (or to actively explain to the Ward Committee Chair why they cannot) but equally if they are expected to be held accountable over a topic this needs to be explained by the Chair;</li> <li>d) Publications such as the Council's Forward publication should promote the concept of Ward Committees.</li> </ul>	Leader	June 2015

<sup>22</sup> a self-contained program or piece of software designed to fulfil a particular purpose; an application, especially as downloaded by a user to a mobile device

<sup>23</sup> Support Service Review and Citizen Engagement Inquiry



	We request regular updates on Ward and District Champions: reviewing the role, who is in place and how well it is working.		
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3.2.16 As noted in paragraph 2.3.10 many citizens across the city do not understand the structures of the City Council and how they can have a voice.

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R05</b>	That the City Council's adult education service explores the potential for developing a course on active citizenship and democratic structures in the city.	Cabinet Member for Skills, Learning and Culture in conjunction with the Executive Members for Local Services	July 2015

3.2.17 The Districts and Public Engagement O&S Committee will set up a programme of calling District Committees and Ward Committees to account.

	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
<b>R06</b>	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee as an interim report in July 2015 with a final implementation report being presented in December 2015.	Leader	Interim progress report July 2015 Final implementation report December 2015



## Appendix 1: Witnesses

- Councillor Robert Alden;
- Chief Superintendent Emma Barnett, West Midlands Police;
- Steve Gove-Humphries;
- Saeed Haque, Citizens UK;
- Richard Hatcher;
- Councillor Jon Hunt;
- Councillor Keith Linnecor;
- Councillor Gareth Moore;
- Councillor Gary Sambrook;
- Paul Slatter, Chamberlain Forum.