

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

THE COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW
CONSULTATION MARCH 2015

FINAL REPORT

“Community Governance in Birmingham: The Next Decade”

23rd April 2015
CSK Strategies Ltd

Contents

Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction.....	10
1.1 <i>Why a Community Governance Review?</i>	10
1.2 <i>The Consultation Process</i>	12
1.3 <i>Highbury 4 and Earlier People’s Panel Focus Groups</i>	15
1.4 <i>Structure of Report</i>	17
2. Districts	18
3. Wards, Neighbourhoods and Community Leadership.....	23
4. A Sutton Coldfield Town Council?	29
5. Citywide and Boundary Commission Issues.....	34
6. Consultation and Other Issues.....	38
Appendix I: Be Heard Consultation Questions	39
Appendix II: Be Heard Demographic Breakdown.....	42

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Executive Summary

The Consultation Process

This report summarises the responses to the March 2015 consultation on community governance issues in Birmingham which ran from 25th February to 30th March 2015. Three Consultation Papers were published by Birmingham City Council which aimed to seek views on:-

- How residents, the Council and other local services can work better together as a local level and how local democratic governance arrangements can best support this.
- How partnership working between service providers, residents and businesses across the city can be encouraged and organised and the best way that Council decision making can help this process.
- The community leadership role of city councillors – their role in engaging the communities they represent to consider and act collectively to solve local problems and improve quality of life for local residents.
- The initial analysis of the proposal to create a town council for Sutton Coldfield.

The consultation was part of the Council's Community Governance Review process, launched in September 2014 and due for completion in September 2015. This consultation built upon the Highbury 4 Convention and three People's Panel focus groups held in October last year. (Summaries of these are contained in Section 1.) There will be further consultation and possibly a consultative ballot on the Sutton Coldfield Town Council issue in the summer of this year. Details of some of the District, Ward and neighbourhood proposals will be developed beyond this point and consultation will continue on these.

The March 2015 consultation process involved:

- A Partners' Round Table discussion which brought together 10 major city-wide partners with three Council staff.
- A Sutton Coldfield Specific Discussion Group of 16 residents drawn from the People's Panel, as representative of the District as possible, to deliberate on the Sutton Coldfield initial analysis.
- Four Area Briefings: Question and answer and discussion sessions targeted at local Councillors, local residents and local stakeholders in the public (including Council staff), private and third sectors. Overall attendance was 76 people (excluding the facilitators and note takers) and at individual Briefings: East - 21; South - 9; Central West - 9; and North - 37.
- A Be Heard Questionnaire on the Council's website based on consultation questions in Paper Two which received 155 responses.
- Submissions via letter or email, 231 in total including one from the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The overwhelming majority of these submissions (217) referred only to the issue of the petition for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council.
- Using Twitter: Views could also be sent in via Twitter using the hashtag #brumcgr15. (Note that all the Tweets using this hashtag were advertising the consultation rather than comments on the proposals.)

- Discussions organised by six Ward Committees, two neighbourhood forums and the Standing Up for Birmingham (SUB4) network of community organisations and active citizens.
- Subsequent to the closing of the consultation to begin to address the low numbers of young people involve, two meetings of approximately 45 young people in total were held in Alum Rock and Northfield. The views expressed are summarised in this report as well.

Additional engagement events with young people are being organised after Easter.

The initial presentation at the meetings was given by the Service Director for Localisation.

City-wide and Boundary Commission Issues

There was strong support at the Partners' Round Table for a **city-wide partnership** combined with a willingness to engage with co-ordination of local services on a Quadrant¹ basis and with as much more local engagement as resources allow. Similar support for a city-wide partnership was expressed a few times at Area Briefings although a couple of participants wondered how this partnership would be influenced by more local governance mechanisms. In addition, 85% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of a city-wide strategic partnership.

There was support for a **Community Board** when it was raised at Area Briefings and 62% of Be Heard respondents were also in favour, almost four times as many as those who were opposed. At one Area Briefing it was suggested that the Community Board proposal provided a model that should also be adopted at a District level.

There was a view in three of the Area Briefings that the **Kerslake proposals and the Boundary Commission** process and eventual conclusions were being imposed on Birmingham rather than being consulted fully upon, especially the proposals to reduce the number of Councillors. However, a majority of Be Heard respondents (63%) thought that there should be fewer than 120 Councillors in the city, perhaps partly reflecting the preponderance of Sutton Coldfield residents in favour of a Town Council amongst the respondents. On the other hand, when discussed at Area Briefings and Ward Committees, there was some concern that this would increase the number of residents per city Councillor, making their community leadership function more difficult.

There was less support for **one Member Wards** amongst Be Heard respondents with only a quarter being in favour of this option. 47% thought that this would not improve local democracy and services (against 29% who thought it would) and 34% thought it would make it harder to contact your Councillor compared with 28% who thought it would be easier. At the Area Briefings and Ward Committees, fears were expressed that this could mean some areas would not be represented at times because of illness, resignations etc. However, half of the Be Heard respondents thought that smaller Wards would improve local democracy while a third thought that it would not. Note many contributors to the debate were in favour of smaller Wards but not single Member Wards.

Districts

Support for maintaining structures at the level of the 10 Districts was expressed at the Highbury 4 Convention, some of the Area Briefings and through Be Heard. 70% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of Districts holding local services to account.

¹ Local services being co-ordinated through four local service hubs, each servicing approximately a quarter of Birmingham.

But there were fears at three of the Area Briefings that Districts will not have the power or legitimacy to hold non-Council local service providers to account by summoning them to District meetings for reports particularly because of budget cut pressures on all public services. At the Partners' Round Table, partners expressed a willingness to be involved in local structures particularly the four service hubs even where the geographical division did not match theirs.

There was also a view expressed at two Area Briefings and in many submissions that the planned moves to the Quadrant model for service delivery with Districts no longer in control of local service budgets, together with the reduction in the number of central Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committees would mean more centralisation and a weakening of local accountability.

This view was echoed in the submission from the Districts and Public Engagement O&S Committee which argued for a 'locality commissioning' model that avoided the problems of the previous Service Level Agreements operated by Districts. Districts needed to have '*levers with teeth*' to be able to influence local services. Discussions at Ward Committees also wanted to see local matters dealt with locally and a degree of control over centrally negotiated contracts, including contracted-out services.

There was significant support for greater partnership involvement in Districts, in particular a greater involvement of residents, when discussed at Area Briefings and Ward Committees. In addition, 55% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of Districts becoming partnerships against 20% for remaining as Committees. One detailed paper submitted argued for moving closer to the Leeds model and for other 'citizens' representatives' to be elected to District governance structures to improve the interaction between elective and participative democracy. This view was supported by others at an Area Briefing and was reflected in a number of Be Heard responses to open questions that called for local residents to be elected onto District Partnerships.

A number of comments through Be Heard stressed the importance of good, well-communicated information and skilled officers for effective performance of Districts. These were linked to contributions on the role of social media and internet-based communication methods such as the Council's website and live streaming. Some said that an over-reliance on such communication methods would exclude those without access to the internet; others felt that these methods would widen engagement especially of young people, a point endorsed by many of the young people consulted in the subsequent meetings.

The issue of whether Districts being based on constituency boundaries reflected people's identification with an area and real communities was raised in some depth at one Area Briefing. Often Wards in different Districts have more in common with each other than Wards in the same District.

A wide range of ideas were put forward by Be Heard respondents for the use of the proposed Local Initiative Fund. Most frequently suggested were ideas for promoting community action and collaboration between service providers and local residents, followed by environmental improvements (street cleaning etc.) and transport. Many also emphasised the importance of engaging local people in deciding how the Fund would be spent.

A Sutton Coldfield Town Council?

There were overwhelming numbers in favour of a Sutton Coldfield Town Council in the consultation submissions (203 in favour, 14 against) and at the North Area Briefing (which covered Sutton Coldfield). The reasons given included: identity of and with the Town, greater control of local services, greater ability to control development and the quality of the Town, and greater accountability of local Councillors.

Most supporters dismissed the costs of Town Council being a barrier with a £25 precept being the most frequently suggested amount. Many said that a Town Council would save money as fewer City Councillors would be needed.

Though few in number, those against were often equally passionate citing there being no need for an 'extra layer of bureaucracy' that would cost money with little in the way of new services.

Support for a Town Council at the Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group was more muted though still evident. Key concerns were cost, the limited additional services that could be provided and the extent it would improve people's identification with local authority structures and processes.

It was also clear that many in favour actually wanted a Town Council with the powers of a District Council and some wanted a return to the pre-1974 borders. Some participants in the North Area Briefing argued that a Town Council would be a stepping stone to a Council more akin to a District Council.

There was a great deal of suspicion at the North Area Briefing and in some submissions that the views of those who wanted a Town Council would be ignored in any decision taken by the City Council. There was also concern for information provided to local residents on the issue to be accurate and unbiased. The proposal for a consultative ballot independently monitored was supported at the Area Briefing with a postal ballot being the preferred method.

Comments submitted and raised at meetings suggest that there should be clarity in any further information provided on the potential services that could be provided by Town Council and its costs and how they would be funded. The information should also be clear on how the Town Council's powers and service provision could develop within the existing legal framework.

Wards and Neighbourhoods

There were mixed views on the role of **Ward Committees** when discussed at Area Briefings. They were seen as very important and successful by some and less effective by others. But the majority of those consulted appear to place some importance on them as part of the complex of community governance mechanisms; for example 44% of Be Heard respondents saw them as improving local democracy and services against 22% who did not. The variety of views underlines, perhaps, the need, as suggested in the Consultation Papers, for local community governance mechanisms to be shaped by localities or Districts rather than imposed in an inflexible framework from above.

Consultees felt that attendance at Ward Committees tend to be higher when there is opposition to a proposal, particularly planning, when other service providers are involved, and when local Councillors, as part of their community leadership role, actively promote the meetings.

There was also a call at one Area Briefing and through one submission for partners and local citizens to be represented on Ward Committees and for local residents having the ability to set their agendas. Other consultees, including at Ward Committees, wanted to see greater resident involvement.

Strong support for **Neighbourhood Forums** was visible through all consultation routes. Their positive role was brought up at every Area Briefing and at the Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group. In addition, 62% of Be Heard respondents thought they improved local democracy and services compared with 17% who did not.

There was some discussion on how their role could be extended such as by raising funds for projects and being given funds to improve their area. Some felt that better publicity was needed for their meetings with support from the Council; the £500 annual grant was not sufficient for the production of leaflets advertising meetings. There were also recommendations for the Forums and other community groups to be provided with more support from Council staff and other service providers.

At three of the Area Briefings there was much praise for **neighbourhood/place managers** and their role as a single point of contact and as people who 'bang heads together' to bring about local solutions to local problems. A couple of consultees suggested that some caution was needed to avoid neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood/ place managers being narrowly focussed on just a few people and families in an area. Accessibility and transparency are essential for both.

There was a great deal of interest in the idea of **neighbourhood or parish councils**. At one Area Briefing it was suggested that these could be a countervailing force to the move away from Districts having control of budgets for local Council services. 71% of Be Heard respondents said they would like such a Council in their area. This result is not just a reflection of the high proportion of Sutton Coldfield residents responding as two-thirds of respondents from other Districts were in favour. The majority of respondents also wanted the Council to play a pro-active role here with 33% wanting to see encouragement and 40% wanting a full parishing exercise and only 15% wanting the passive status quo.

The SU4B discussion concluded that 'one size fits all' devolution would be wrong, implying that the suggestion in Consultation Paper 2 that there be a flexible framework for local arrangements was correct.

Communities and Community Leadership

The importance of the Council providing support and training to the community activists who sustained local governance and engagement processes was stressed at a couple of the Area Briefings.

There was general support for Councillors playing a more active community leadership role, that is, getting out more to talk to local residents, encouraging local dialogue to solve local problems and encouraging action by local communities in collaboration with local service providers to improve their neighbourhood. At the same time, it was recognised that Councillors would have some city-wide functions too. Several examples of exemplary work by local Councillors were given and some consultees suggested that Councillors should be paid more to do this work.

The role that civil society² is currently playing in sustaining community support was raised at the Partners' Round Table and at Area Briefings. It was argued that all had a role in ensuring that this role was supported and strengthened in the coming years.

Comments on the Consultation Process

At Partners' Round Table and at Area Briefings it was suggested that more meaningful consultation would have been possible if the Consultation Papers had been clearer on what services were proposed at each geographical level and with agreement on the outcomes desired from service provision and community governance mechanisms. This view was reinforced by some evidence from the consultation that views on the issue of establishing a

² For example, independent voluntary and community organisations, faith organisations residents who volunteer and good neighbours.

Town Council (and other neighbourhood/parish councils) were dependent upon the services involved.

There was also a view that there was a need for more information on how the Council could do more to support and interact with civil society. The SUB4 discussion stressed the link between a strong civil society (active citizens and community organisations), extensive and effective public participation in decision making on local services (Council and non-Council) and the quality and cost of local services.

Other points made on the consultation were:

- There should be less jargon in the consultation material.
- There was a huge need more youth engagement. (Young Be Heard respondent numbers were very low as were the numbers of BME respondents.)
- Far more time was needed for the consultation. (It was explained that this particular component was driven by the need for some decisions to be taken at the Council's AGM after the local elections in the wake of the Kerlake Review, and that consultation on most of the issues would continue.)
- The Be Heard questionnaire was too long and needed the ability for respondents to move quickly to the sections they were most interested in.

Points made by the young people consulted at the two meetings held following the closing of the official consultation period included:

- More young people would be engaged through the use of social media and apps.
- Young people would be better engaged if the Council were to visit schools and youth clubs and hold events targeted at young people to hear their views, and explain what the Council does, how it works and how you can influence what it does.
- A suggestion was made for mock elections in schools while one participant suggested lowering the voting age to 16.
- However, to sustain engagement, many stressed that young people needed to be listened to as well when they turned up at events.
- Many of the young people involved said that Councillors should also visit schools and youth clubs, providing regular updates on what was happening. A suggestion was made that Councillors should also support young people when they raised concerns at meetings.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why a Community Governance Review?

Birmingham City Council agreed in September 2014 to undertake a community governance review³ which would be overseen by a cross party review group which would need to report to full Council by September 2015. This review was triggered by a petition for the establishment of a Town Council in Sutton Coldfield in the boundaries of the current District Committee. However, as changes in Sutton Coldfield would have an impact on the rest of Birmingham, the Council decided that the review should examine community governance at District and Ward level across the city as well as potential arrangements for a Town Council in Sutton Coldfield.

A further reason for holding this Community Governance Review was that there had been no major changes in the Council's governance arrangements since the establishment of District Committees ten years ago. During this period the context in which the Council operated had seen huge shifts including:

- Massive reductions in funding of all public services;
- New technology opportunities for the delivery of services and for governance and engagement of local citizens;
- Citizens' and communities' growing aspirations for more control over their lives;
- A reshape public services with pooling of resources, integrating services, and a desire for more early intervention and prevention,
- The passing of enabling legislation such as the Localism Act 2011 which included the right of local communities to challenge for a right to manage local services.

The two key policy objectives of the Review are to:

- (1) Improve community engagement and create better local democracy, and
- (2) Create more effective and convenient delivery of local services.

The Review was formally launched at the Launched at the Highbury 4 Convention in October 2014. This brought together people from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors to discuss how Birmingham's governance could be improved at three key levels – the region, the city and the neighbourhood, described as Birmingham's triple devolution model. The conclusions of this Convention are summarised further ahead in this Section.

In the same month, three focus groups were brought together by BMG Research, recruiting people from Birmingham's People Panel to explore some of the issues involved and to provide additional information to help the cross party review group formulate proposals for consultation. Views expressed during these three group discussions are summarised following the Highbury 4 summary.

The Kerslake Review

Additional impetus and context was added to the review process by the Kerslake Review which reported in December 2014. Sir Bob Kerslake, former Permanent Secretary in the

³ The Local Government and Public Health Act 2007 devolved to principal councils (such as unitary authorities like Birmingham City Council) the legal power to carry out community governance reviews and "put in place or make changes to local community governance arrangements".

Department for Communities and Local Government was asked by the Leader of Birmingham City Council and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to conduct an independent review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council with a view to making a series of recommendations for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the City Council.

The key recommendations made by Kerslake in relation to devolution in Birmingham were:

- [The Council should] *“focus on getting basic services right...devolution arrangements in the city are not financially viable and need to be organised in the way that is most efficient for that service, ... draw on the quadrant model”* [i.e. local Council services should be managed by through four geographical divisions of the city rather than ten District Committees].
- ***“the 10 District Committees should not be responsible for delivering services ... [but] refocused on shaping and leading their local areas through influence, representation and independent challenge of all public services located in the District”***
- *“the Districts should be provided with a **modest commissioning budget** to purchase additional services that help meet local priorities.”*
- *“the number of city-wide Scrutiny Committees should be reviewed in the light of this and potentially reduced to no more than 3”*
- *“councillors should concentrate on regular, direct engagement with the people and organisations in their wards and role as community leaders.”*

The March 2015 Consultation

Consequently, the Council launched the recent consultation on 25th February 2015, running to 30th March, with the Publication of three Consultation Papers:

- **Paper one** – *Introduction and Background* : Setting the overall context
- **Paper two** – *The Future of Community Governance in Birmingham*: Looking at local democratic structures
- **Paper three** – *Sutton Coldfield Town Council: Initial Analysis*. (There are a summary and a full version of this Paper.)

Through these papers, the Council aimed to seek views on:-

- How residents, the Council and other local services can **work better together as a local level** and how **local democratic governance arrangements can best support this**.
- How **partnership working** between service providers, residents and businesses across the city can be encouraged and organised and the **best way that Council decision making can help this process**.
- The **community leadership role of city councillors** – their role in **engaging the communities** they represent to **consider and act collectively to solve local problems and improve quality of life** for local residents.
- The initial analysis of the **proposal to create a town council** for Sutton Coldfield.

This report summarises the views expressed through this consultation process.

This consultation is part of the continuing review process and further consultation will take place in the summer following the publication of three more Consultation papers:

- **Paper four** – *Sutton Coldfield Town Council: Final Analysis*
- **Paper five** – *A new Partnership between Civic and Civil Democracy*
- **Paper six** – *The Future of Local Services in Birmingham*

1.2 The Consultation Process

The consultation process involved:

- **A Partner Breakfast Round Table on Future Governance** – bringing together major city-wide partners to deliberate and help shape the proposals particularly on partner engagement in city-wide and more local community governance. Hosted by the Chamber at 7:30am to 8:30am on Tuesday, 3rd March, 2015 and was attended by 10 City Council partners, 3 City Council staff and the independent facilitator and rapporteur.
- **Sutton Coldfield Specific Discussion Group** – A community focus group drawn from the People's Panel, as representative of the District as possible, to deliberate on the Sutton Coldfield initial analysis. Held in Sutton Coldfield between 6-8pm on 3rd March 2015, it was attended by 16 people from all four of Sutton Coldfield's Wards.
- **Four Area Briefings** – Question and answer and discussion sessions targeted at local Councillors, local residents and local stakeholders in the public (including Council staff), private and third sectors. These were held between 6 and 8pm in the week beginning 16th March with an overall attendance of 76 people (excluding the facilitators and note takers). Attendance at individual Briefings were: East - 21; South - 9; Central West - 9; and North - 37. These included a mix of local Councillors, members of local community organisations, other local residents and Council staff (some of whom were also local residents). The Area Briefing approach sought to encourage a dialogue between local Councillors, residents, staff from the Council and other public services, and other local stakeholders, rather than separate consultations.
- **Be Heard Questionnaire:** A stand-alone questionnaire through the online Be Heard facility on the Council's website and based on consultation questions in Paper Two. The questionnaire was open between 25th February and 30th March 2015. There were 155 responses through this route with all questions answered by the majority of respondents.
- **Submissions via letter or email:** Submissions were also encouraged via email or letter between 25th February and 30th March 2015. There were 231 submissions through this route including one from the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The overwhelming majority of these submissions (217) referred only to the issue of the petition for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council.
- **Using Twitter:** Views could also be sent in via Twitter using the hashtag #brumcgr15. (Note that almost all the Tweets using this hashtag were advertising the consultation rather than comments on the proposals.)
- **Discussions organised by Ward Committees, neighbourhood forums and the Standing Up for Birmingham (SUB4) network of community organisations and active citizens:** These organisations were encouraged to hold their own discussions and submit summaries of the views expressed. Six Ward Committees and two Neighbourhood Forums submitted an outline report of their discussions.

- Subsequent to the closing of the consultation to begin to address the low numbers of young people involve, **two meetings of approximately 45 young people** in total were held in Alum Rock and Northfield. The views expressed are summarised in this report as well.

The initial presentation at the Partners' Round Table, the Sutton Coldfield Specific Discussion Group, the four Area Briefings and the two neighbourhood Forums was given by the Service Director for Localisation, who is the Council officer responsible for the Community Governance Review and who also answered questions that were raised during the discussion. This was necessary because the issues involved in the consultation and the current legal framework can be complex. The first stage of any robust consultation process has to be good information communication.

There is some duplication in the submissions, Be Heard respondents and attendees at meetings which means that adding the responses via all methods would give an exaggerated picture of the number of responses.

To encourage participation in the consultation, emails and letters were sent out to 840 community organisations, partner organisations, businesses and local service providers. This was followed up with a similar email reminder during the last two weeks of the consultation period. Council staff in District Officers and local Councillors were also asked to circulate information and encourage participation. The consultation processes was advertised on the home page of the Council's website with links to the Consultation papers, the Be Heard survey and the email and postal addresses for submissions.

There were 28 questions in Paper 2 and in the Be Heard survey, including those relating specifically to the Sutton Coldfield Town Council proposal. (These are listed in Appendix I.) At the Area Briefings, these questions were summarised into four broad questions:

1. What ways work well at a neighbourhood or Ward level to improve local democracy, engage residents, and encourage joint planning and service delivery and new initiatives?
2. What will help and what will hinder the ability of District Committees to stimulate partnership working to improve local services and support new initiatives to improve the quality of life?
3. What should Councillors do to promote local action to solve local problems and encourage greater involvement of residents, local businesses and local services?
4. Any feedback on the issues to be considered by the Boundary Commission?

Specific questions relating to the Sutton Coldfield town Council proposal are covered in Section 4 ahead.

Representativeness

Although strenuous efforts were made to publicise ways that people could make comments on the Consultation Papers, it is not possible to have an open access online survey and, at the same time, ensure that responses by different groups of people are proportional to their numbers in Birmingham's population. Respondents were asked to complete personal profiles on aspects such as their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age and whether they had a disability or long term condition/illness. A large majority of respondents also answered these questions and a detailed analysis of these data is contained in Appendix II. In summary:

- Significantly more men answered the survey than women (58% vs 34%);

- The proportion of minority ethnic respondents were a much smaller than in the population of the city as a whole (84% of respondents described themselves as White);
- 11% reported that they had a disability or long term limiting illness;
- 6% stated they were gay, lesbian, bisexual or other; and
- The age profile of respondents was older than that of the city: 31% were over 65 years of age while only 9% were younger than 35.

Analysis of the postcodes of respondents to the online Be Heard survey show that 60% were residents of Sutton Coldfield, more than the rest of Birmingham's other nine Districts put together. (See table below.) In addition, as reported above, the overwhelming majority of email and letter submissions were dominated by those submitting views only on the Sutton Coldfield Town Council proposal (188 out of 202). This is perhaps not surprising as this was the most specific proposal being consulted upon but it does need to be borne in mind when considering responses to the proposals for Birmingham as a whole.

Be Heard Responses by Birmingham Districts

District	No. of Be Heard Responses
Edgbaston	7
Erdington	3
Hall Green	8
Hodge Hill	2
Ladywood	10
Northfield	7
Perry Barr	2
Selly Oak	7
Sutton Coldfield	93
Yardley	4
Outside Birmingham	2
Unknown	10
Total	155

As open access was an important principle of the consultation process, the responses cannot be claimed to be statistically representative of the views of Birmingham residents. As well as the lower representation of some groups of residents than their proportion in the city's population, responders to any consultation process tend to be those concerned about a particular issue. This was particularly true in relation to the Sutton Coldfield Town Council proposal. **Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that therefore these responses should be discounted as not being representative of the citizens of Birmingham because they do reflect the views of a large number of people in the city.**

In addition, this consultation differed from many other consultations as it not only asked for views on proposals being considered by the Council but also asked for new ideas. Consequently, this report does refer to ideas put forward by one or people for wider consideration.

The value of the consultation process is also in the qualitative information provided to the Council and, conversely, the important role it has played in informing a large number of Birmingham residents, Council service users and organisations in some depth about the community governance options. The impact of this important communication and informing role of consultations is often neglected in assessing the impact of public

consultations. It was particularly important in this instance in relation to the Sutton Council Town Council issue and the parish/neighbourhood council options and to the Boundary Commission process and impact as reflected in the questions asked at the Area Briefings for example.

1.3 Highbury 4 and Earlier People's Panel Focus Groups

The Highbury 4 Convention brought together 113 people from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors to discuss how Birmingham's governance could be improved at three key levels – the region, the city and the neighbourhood. Partners attending included the Local Enterprise Partnership, the Police, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, a number of Business Improvement Districts, the Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, community associations and neighbourhood forums, Localise West Midlands, Birmingham University, housing associations, faith organisations, the Birmingham Disabilities Forum, The Children's Society, Citizens UK and many others. Council attendees included Councillors and staff.

Key conclusions reported from workshops at the Convention were:

- There is a missing level of sub-regional governance, bigger than current individual local authority boundaries, to deal with certain functions such as economic development, transport, skills, welfare, and emergency services.
- Sub-regional governance needs directly elected members to a combined authority. It is hard to see how this function can be undertaken by a single elected mayor.
- The 'functional economic geography' for a combined authority covers Birmingham, the Black Country, Solihull and some surrounding districts with supply chain linkages to Coventry and Warwickshire.
- The combined authority will need a prosperity led agenda that also connects with solving the poverty and disadvantage that has proved so stubborn to shift.
- To build effective partnership working at a city-wide level, we need to start from agreeing the outcomes we want and how we can integrate services flexibly to deliver these outcomes. We also need an agreement on overarching values.
- The District model is a good one and many are committed to making it work. Effective devolution is about harnessing all resources from all stakeholders in an area, not just about changing governance structures.
- We need to move away from a one-way, top-down view of District communication and service delivery – no more 'we do it to them/ they do it to us'. The roles of Districts in bringing people together to tackle local issues need to be made clearer to residents and especially young people. Districts are a visible presence of the Council in a local area and enable local communities and partner organisations to communicate better with the Council.
- Saying everything should be local is not the answer; we have to agree where more local decision making and delivery produces the best results for people.
- There are a lot of good examples of local governance at the Ward and neighbourhood levels in Birmingham. We need to learn from these and actively engage citizens in existing governance models, many of which are working well and need to be kept and improved. It would be helpful to have an officer with the right skills to work with local councillors and communities, bringing people together to respond to local issues and to allow officers to innovate with local people and learn from good examples elsewhere in the city.
- We need different governance models to engage the diverse communities in the different neighbourhoods of our city. These must be centred on enabling independent action, building community capacity and bringing local people together.
- If we want civic good, we need a strong civil society. We all need to change our behaviour - council officers, elected members, businesses, voluntary organisations,

community groups, citizens - to make this happen. Community governance of needs to be based on strengthening civil society.

- We needed to be explicit about the outcomes we wanted to achieve and to develop an agreed, values-based, collective leadership of the city which demonstrated these shared values through its behaviour.

Between the 7th and 9th October 2014, BMG Research, the organisation that manages Birmingham's People's Panel⁴, organised, at the City Council's request, three focus groups to discuss community governance issues. The first group, with 13 participants, was for Panel members who lived in Sutton Coldfield. The other two groups, with 11 participants apiece, brought together people living in the wider Birmingham area. All groups ensured a good mixture of ages, genders and ethnicities.

The questions asked of focus group participants first covered the preferred geographical level for governance of a range of services. The second batch of questions revolved around views on the establishment of a Town Council in the area they lived in. Quotes in the following summary are from BMG Research's reports on these focus groups.

The services on which participants preferred decisions being taken at a city level were: "setting levels of council tax; adult and children's social care; housing management; education services; and economic development services".

The wider Birmingham groups "were more likely to want decisions made at a city level, although Group 1 also wanted many decisions to remain at a city level." Reasons for wanting some services decided upon at a city-wide level included the need for a greater overview and knowledge to manage these services and to ensure a fair distribution of resources. In the wider Birmingham groups "the issue of fairness was raised several times, with a view that having city level decisions prevented resources being diverted or held by more affluent areas to the detriment of more disadvantaged areas."

Services that participants felt would be best governed at a District level were: "managing and running sports and leisure centres; deciding on locations for new housing developments; and managing parks and open spaces." It was felt that there would be a greater awareness of and responsiveness to the needs of local people at the District level although " , it was noted that in order for this to be effective individuals at District level need to have 'real' decision making and enacting powers so as not to get delayed by different levels of bureaucracy."

At a Ward level, participants tended to prefer decisions in the fields of "introducing and managing local parking schemes; opening and running youth activities; introducing traffic calming schemes; and managing and running libraries." Again, it was felt that at this level "there would be a greater awareness of the needs and requirements of local people, particularly about youths, traffic, and parking in wards which were very specific to the local area." Some participants said that for success "at Ward level sufficient powers and funding needed to be provided."

Focus Group participants were also asked about the 'Quadrant approach' of devolving some decisions on local services to four 'quadrants' of the city. "However, there was little appetite for this approach, with participants feeling this would be adding a further level of complexity to the existing structures which was not needed; although some felt they would need further information to be able to decide."

⁴ The Birmingham People's Panel has over 2,200 members who are broadly representative of the population of Birmingham. It was established by the Council as one way of obtaining the views of the people of Birmingham to shape services, policy and strategy.

Turning to the issue of Town Councils, the Sutton Coldfield Group was “were considerably more positive about the introduction of a Town Council than those in” the wider Birmingham groups. This was because many of the participants in the first group believed “that the introduction of a Town Council would ensure greater control over local decision-making, particularly over local issues that were important to participants such as parks entry fees. There was also a view that residents in Sutton Coldfield did not all feel as closely linked to Birmingham city as those in the other groups, with several reference to the town’s history and it only becoming part of Birmingham in 1974.” There was also a greater willingness in this group to pay an additional precept though this was dependent on the services that could be bought with the additional funding.

In contrast, many in the wider Birmingham groups felt that a Town Council would add a layer of bureaucracy with additional costs and that existing structures such as District Committees could be used to do the job. In addition in these two groups “there was a strong sense of belonging to Birmingham as a city as opposed to specific localities. As such several participants felt that further dividing the city with Town Councils would lead to a loss of a sense of community, and increased divisions in the levels of service offered in the different areas.”

1.4 Structure of Report

This report gathers the views expressed through the different consultation mediums into the key themes of the consultation. Each of the following sections except the last starts with the consultation questions relevant to its theme.

The next Section summarises comments in relation to the options around the changes in relation to District Committees.

Section 3 covers the wide range of comments made in relation to the options for community governance at a Ward and neighbourhood level and Councillors’ roles in relation to community leadership.

The Sutton Coldfield Town Council proposal is the subject of Section 4.

Views expressed in relation to citywide and Boundary Commission issues are drawn together in Section 5.

Finally, issues raised in relation to the consultation methodology and a wide range of other issues touched upon are reported in Section 6.

The Appendices contain the Be Heard questions and the demographic breakdown of respondents to that survey. Individual reports on each of the consultation meetings held and on the Highbury 4 Convention are also available.

2. Districts

Consultation Questions

1. Do you think that changing the role of districts in holding to account local public services and monitoring what they deliver will improve local democracy and these services?
2. What would help the districts to monitor and improve local services?
3. What would prevent districts from monitoring and improving local services?
4. What type of service improvements do you think the Local Innovation Fund should be spent on?
5. Should districts continue mainly as committees of Councillors or change to partnerships?
6. Do you have any other ideas on strengthening district level governance?

The presentations at the Area Briefings explained that some changes linked to Kerslake's recommendations to be implemented at the May Council AGM including removing the direct management of local services to four 'service hubs'. At the same time, it was proposed to maintain governance arrangements in the ten districts with a shift in Districts' role from current limited control of localised services and budgets to:

1. Shaping community governance in their District
2. Developing community plans
3. Ensuring good community dialogue
4. Building local partnership working
5. Assisting in the commissioning of services that best meet the needs and priorities of the local area
6. Stimulating social innovation and strong engagement with communities
7. Improving the accountability of all local services to local communities.

Changing roles of Districts: committees or partnerships?

Support for maintaining structures at the level of the 10 Districts was expressed at the Highbury 4 Convention, some of the Area Briefings and Ward Committees and through Be Heard. 70% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of Districts holding local services to account.

When commented upon at Area Briefings, was strong support was expressed for Districts to play a role in holding all local public services to account, a view supported by almost three-quarters of the Be Heard respondents (See table below.)

Do you think that changing the role of districts in holding to account local public services and monitoring what they deliver will improve local democracy and these services?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	109	70%
No	23	15%
Don't know	18	12%
Not Answered	5	3%

This was tempered by a feeling expressed by some that managing Council services on a Quadrant basis would lead to a weakening of power of Districts and relative centralisation compared with current devolution arrangements, a view echoed in the submission from the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny (O & S) Committee which argued for a 'locality commissioning' model that avoided the problems of the previous Service Level Agreements operated by Districts. Districts needed to have *'levers with teeth'* to be able to influence local services.

Similar points were made in some submissions and in many Be Heard responses, for example:

*"The only way to achieve genuinely democratic governance at the community level is by **devolving spending powers downwards**. If ward committees can take spending decisions people will get involved. If district committees can take spending decisions, likewise. So long as budgets are centralised and decisions are taken at the top, people will remain disaffected no matter how many "partnership arrangements" are set up."*

The reduction in the number of the Council's central Overview & Scrutiny Committees to three, as recommended by the Kerslake Review, was likely in this context to lead to less local accountability of public services according to a couple of Area Briefing participants and in the submission by Birmingham Against the Cuts. The O & S Committee submission reported that there was *"near but not unanimous agreement about the need to retain broader city-wide scrutiny structures."*

Furthermore, a Councillor at the East Area Briefing stated that her experience of the current Overview and Scrutiny arrangements was positive, with other public services being very willing to attend meetings and answer questions and with a system in place to track recommendations and hold organisations to account that works well. She expressed concern that the District Committees would not have sufficient authority to do so at a more local level and that it would be difficult for other organisations to attend 10 different District meetings to report on scrutiny related issues. This could lead to competition between Districts and there would be a need for an arbiter centrally to ensure fairness and consistency.

Discussions at Ward Committees also wanted to see local matters dealt with locally and a degree of control over centrally negotiated contracts, including contracted-out services.

At the Partners' Round Table, there was a willingness and eagerness to work with the Quadrant model of four local service hubs. This matches the police quadrants and the groupings of education institutions but not the structures of the health economy although health organisations were keen to be involved. There was also a desire for systems to be kept simple and co-ordination and partnership arrangements to be kept simple and to be communicated clearly.

Questions were raised at some of the Area Briefings on how District arrangements could influence city-wide issues. Ward Committees also raised the issue of how they would relate to Districts.

There was significant support for greater partnership involvement in Districts when discussed at Area Briefings. In addition, 55% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of Districts becoming partnerships against 20% for remaining as Committees. (See table below.)

One detailed paper submitted argued for moving closer to the Leeds model and for other 'citizens' representatives' to be elected to District governance structures to improve the interaction between elective and participative democracy. Some of the Be Heard comments focussed on the need to have representatives of local residents and community organisations on the District partnerships at the same time as ensuring that those on these partnerships are not just political or unaccountable appointees. The submission from the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee weighs up various options for adding partners and local representatives onto District Partnerships. Some of the Ward Committees that discussed this issue wondered how local residents would fit in with a partnership structure as well as suggesting that the proposals on new District structures were unclear.

Should districts continue mainly as committees of Councillors or change to partnerships?

Option	Total	% of All
Continue as committees of Councillors	31	20%
Change to become partnerships	85	55%
Don't know	19	12%
Not Answered	20	13%

One submission also stressed the importance of engaging at all levels with people of disabilities, suggesting the creation of a disability expert reference group.

Local Initiatives Fund

Few comments were made at the Area Briefings around the proposal to create a Local Initiatives Fund for Districts to allow innovations in local services although two participants at separate Area Briefings stated that the Community Chest had been useful to support local groups in the delivery of local services. One participant at the Specific Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group complained that the Community Chest had been reduced and was now being abolished as it was a good example of enabling the community to do some positive things. It was explained that a version of it would be reintroduced in 2016/17.

A wide variety of uses were suggested by 90 Be Heard respondents to the question: What type of service improvements do you think the Local Innovation Fund should be spent on? These suggestions have been grouped into broad headings and are listed below together with the number of times mentioned by respondents. (Note these add up to more than 90 as many respondents mentioned more than one services.)

- Supporting community action to improve their local area (23). This included subsidising rents and other running costs for community organisations, volunteering, litter pick-ups, linking service providers and residents to try innovative ways of providing services, one suggestion being to spread the usage

of the 'digital logbook' pioneered in housing. Three quotes convey the richness of the suggestions:

'Experimentation in new ways of delivering services by city, volunteers and combinations of the two. We are already doing this in Longbridge Ward and Northfield District. We have the example of Frankley and Cockhill. Frankley is enormously successful in delivering partnership working, adjacent Cockhill is the opposite. We are trying to determine the reasons. The approach we take is that you need to know why things work as opposed to how things work.'

'Working towards greater citizen participation, by newspaper articles, talks to schools and meetings with business organisations. The efforts of the Neighbourhood Forums could be praised and they could act as conduits for issues to district and ward level.'

'There are many groups and organisations in Birmingham that are bonded within their own bubbles. Money should be spent on getting organisations to bridge to the local community. E.g. the hospitals are powerhouses of know-how, equipment and facilities that could be shared with the local community. Schools likewise. health trusts have an army of people visiting homes and could be referring people on where there is a need to friends groups, gardening groups, job clubs and other local voluntary social activities.'

- Street cleaning, small environmental works, waste disposal, civic buildings' appearance, lighting and 'beautification' (13).
- Transport including reducing local bottlenecks, highway safety and improved rail travel (12).
- Parks (9) including Sutton Coldfield residents who made specific reference to Sutton Park.
- Health care (7) including piloting innovative approaches such as:

'Health, particularly innovative outreach services to difficult to reach groups. E.g. for TB services.'

- Provision for older people and for vulnerable people (7).
- Schools, education and skills (5).
- Employment initiatives and workspaces (4).
- Libraries (3)
- Leisure provision (3).
- Children's play areas (3).
- Improved IT and communications such as computers in public buildings (2).
- A 'greater focus on planning controls' (2).
- Neighbourhood Wardens and Community Care social enterprises (2).
- A range of issues raised by single respondents including young people, housing, retention of local assets, training of 'officials', places of worship, food hygiene and retention of local assets.

The importance of local people being able to decide was emphasised by 19 respondents, four of whom were concerned with what they called abuse of the Community Chest by local Councillors. Five respondents said that which services should be targeted would depend how big the Local Initiatives Fund was and that without this knowledge it would be impossible to answer the question. One commented that "the list of services which need improving in Birmingham is pretty large".

Other Issues

At the East Area Briefing there was some discussion as to whether the boundaries of the Districts were correct. Did it make sense to base them on parliamentary constituencies

when these included very different Wards? Aren't some Wards closer to Wards in other Districts than in Wards in their Districts? The example of the differences between the Bordesley Green, Shard End, Washwood Heath and Hodge Hill Wards within the Hodge Hill District was cited. These individual Wards had more in common with Wards in other Districts, e.g. Stechford and Yardley North in Yardley and Lozells and East Handsworth in Perry Barr, than each other. A similar point was made by the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A number of comments through Be Heard and at the Partners' Round Table stressed the importance of good, well-communicated information and skilled officers for effective performance of Districts. These were linked to contributions on the role of social media and internet-based communication methods such as the Council's website and live streaming. Some said that an over-reliance on such communication methods would exclude those without access to the internet; others felt that these methods would widen engagement especially of young people, a point endorsed by many of the young people consulted in the subsequent meetings.

3. Wards, Neighbourhoods and Community Leadership

Consultation Questions

7. What do you think Councilors should do to improve their “community leadership”?
8. What do you think your Councilors should do more of (e.g. meetings with local people and groups, dealing with residents’ problems by meeting service providers)?
9. And what should they do less of?
10. Do you think that Ward Committees improve local democracy or services?
11. Do you think that Neighborhood Forums are helpful in improving local democracy and the local area?
12. If yes, what should be done to strengthen them further?
13. Which of the three policy options on neighborhood councils would you like us to adopt? Please choose one only
 - *The status quo (await any petitions for parishes before reviewing them thoroughly – but not encouraging them)*
 - *Adopt a policy of encouraging proposals neighbourhood councils with only a light touch Community Governance Review to ensure local residents are happy with the proposed boundaries and costs of the council*
 - *Undertaking a parishing exercise for the whole city and consulting local residents on boundaries. This would be done through a further Community Governance Review.*
14. Would you like a parish, town or neighborhood council in your local area?
15. Do you have any views on other possible arrangements at this level such as “Community Forums”?

In the presentations to the various meetings, the Service Director for Localisation explained that the aim of the Council was to bring about a greater diversity of arrangements for local decision-making, community action and services in each local area of the city as each area was different and ‘one size does not fit all’. The Council would provide a flexible framework so that different areas could innovate according to their needs and the wishes of local people. There were a number of possible alternative models of community governance such as Neighbourhood Forums, Neighbourhood (Parish) Councils, Neighbourhood Management Boards/Trusts and Ward Partnerships which could be adopted.

In this flexible framework, District Committees would play a key role in shaping community governance at this Ward and neighbourhood level. There would also be a Neighbourhood Charter, that is, a set of standards on how these various forms of local

governance should operate together with guidance on and enabling tools for their operation.

The Community Leadership role of Councillors would be important in the success of whatever form of community governance is adopted at this level. Community leadership was at the heart of the mission of elected members in serving their electorate.

Ward Committees

There were mixed views on role of **Ward Committees** when discussed at Area Briefings. They were seen as very important and successful by some and less effective by others. Some Ward Committees were very well attended and were at a geographical level that residents could relate to. Often the high level of attendance was because of opposition to a specific proposal but it was also because things could be made to happen as a result of attending, because of local publicity given to the meetings (as opposed to just advertising them on the Council's website) and because other partners (e.g. police) gave reports.

The majority of those consulted appear to place some importance on them as part of the complex of community governance mechanisms; for example 44% of Be Heard respondents saw them as improving local democracy and services against 22% who did not. At one Area Briefing, a local Councillor made an impassioned case for their retention and their value to local residents and the dialogue between local Councillors and their constituents.

Do you think that Ward Committees improve local democracy or services?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	68	44%
No	34	22%
Don't know	38	25%
Not Answered	15	10%

Some submissions also referred to the increased reliance on Ward Committees for engagement by local residents, businesses and service providers if District Committees continued to meet in the city centre. One submission suggested that 'residents' panels' be set up in each ward to provide local feedback.

Consultees felt that attendance at Ward Committees tend to be higher when there is opposition to a proposal, particularly planning, when other service providers are involved, and when local Councillors, as part of their community leadership role, actively promote the meetings.

There was also a call at one Area Briefing and through one submission for partners and local citizens to be represented on Ward Committees and for local residents having the ability to set their agendas. And how did they influence decisions taken at District and City levels?

The variety of views underlines, perhaps, the need, as suggested in the Consultation Papers, for local community governance mechanisms to be shaped by localities or Districts rather than imposed in an inflexible framework from above.

Neighbourhood Forums and Neighbourhood Management

Neighbourhoods were the key building blocks of devolution according to many consultees. This point was made strongly by the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee in its submission:

“Devolution should operate under the ‘subsidiarity principle’ where influence and decisions are taken as close as possible to where people live. From this it follows that neighbourhoods are the fundamental starting point for ‘bottom up’ devolution, and if the aim of the policy is to ‘turn the Council upside down’ as the consultation documents claim, then the logical implication is to start by getting things right at the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhoods can then become the building blocks for aggregating up to areas at a higher level where this is more appropriate for the services that impact on a larger scale.”

Strong support for **Neighbourhood Forums** was visible through all consultation routes. Their positive role was brought up at every Area Briefing and at the Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group. In addition, 62% of Be Heard respondents thought they improved local democracy and services compared with 17% who did not.

Do you think that Neighbourhood Forums are helpful in improving local democracy and the local area?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	96	62%
No	27	17%
Don't know	22	14%
Not Answered	10	6%

There was some discussion on how their role could be extended such as by raising funds for projects and being given funds to improve their area. Some felt that better publicity was needed for their meetings with support from the Council; the £500 annual grant was not sufficient for the production of leaflets advertising meetings. There were also recommendations for the Forums and other community groups to be provided with more encouragement, confidence building, training and support from Council staff and other service providers.

There was also a call for city-wide meetings of Neighbourhood Forums to exchange experiences and ideas.

Many ideas were put forward on the Be Heard survey on how Neighbourhood Forums could be strengthened, chief amongst them being giving them more power and funding. A selection of the most frequently mentioned suggestions follows:

“Provide local websites and advertise these and provide minutes.”

“Guidelines to ensure fair representation, resources to ensure meetings can be held and recorded. Opportunities for them to tackle relevant issues.”

“Funding, training, and access to council resources.”

“Make sure that they are well publicised. Make transport arrangements available for ALL.”

“Give them more support, help them to reach more residents and get them involved. These people are your strongest weapon if you use them right.”

“They need support from a) the Place Manager and local councillors b) support to do things for themselves e.g. setting up a bank account, getting to grips with chairing a meeting, a list of useful contacts that they can access to get things done.”

At three of the Area Briefings there was much praise for **neighbourhood/place managers** and their role as a single point of contact and as people who ‘bang heads together’ to bring about local solutions to local problems. A couple of consultees suggested that some caution was needed to avoid neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood/ place managers being narrowly focussed on just a few people and families in an area. Accessibility and transparency are essential for both.

Parish or Neighbourhood Councils

There was a great deal of interest in the idea of **neighbourhood or parish councils**. At one Area Briefing it was suggested that these could be a countervailing force to the move away from Districts having control of budgets for local Council services and the increase in ratio of electors to City Councillors if a reduction in Councillor numbers is pushed through. Factors in favour of such Councils were the improved identification with the neighbourhood and resulting increased engagement, and the income raising potential. It was suggested that the Frankley Parish’s achievements and experience should be written up so others can learn from them.

71% of Be Heard respondents said they would like such a neighbourhood or parish council in their area. This result is not just a reflection of the high proportion of Sutton Coldfield residents responding as two-thirds of respondents from other Districts were in favour.

Would you like a parish, town or neighbourhood council in your local area?

Option	Total	% of All	Total non-SC Districts	% of non-SC Districts
Yes	110	71%	33	66%
No	27	17%	8	16%
Don't know	10	6%	7	14%
Not Answered	8	5%	2	4%

The majority of respondents also wanted the Council to play a pro-active role here with 33% wanting to see encouragement and 40% wanting a full parishing exercise and only 15% wanting the passive status quo. Results were very similar amongst those who came from non-Sutton Coldfield Districts.

Which of the three policy options on neighbourhood councils would you like us to adopt?

Option	Total	% of All	Total non-SC Districts	% of All non-SC Districts
A - The status quo (await any petitions for parishes before reviewing them thoroughly - but not encouraging them).	24	15%	8	16%
B - Adopt a policy of encouraging proposals for neighbourhood councils with only a light touch Community Governance Review to ensure local residents are happy with the proposed boundaries and costs of the council.	51	33%	17	34%
C - Undertaking a parishing exercise for the whole city and consulting local residents on boundaries. This would be done through a further Community Governance Review.	62	40%	22	44%
Not Answered	18	12%	5	10%

Community Leadership

There was general support for Councillors playing a more active community leadership role, that is, getting out more to talk to local residents, encouraging local dialogue to solve local problems and encouraging action by local communities in collaboration with local service providers to improve their neighbourhood. One Be Heard respondent, reflecting the views of many, suggested that: Councillors should

“Get out of the office as much as possible. Know their area. Know their people. Know the systems of local government intimately.”

At the same time, it was recognised that Councillors would have some city-wide functions too. Several examples of exemplary work by local Councillors were given, such as one Councillor who would spend days ‘knocking on doors’ of specific streets until their entire Ward was covered. Some consultees suggested that Councillors should be paid more to do this work.

These views were summed up eloquently and pithily by one Be Heard respondent: Councillors should *“be of their neighbourhood.”*

Some consultees, including the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny Committee and respondents to the Be Heard survey, stressed the need for training of Councillors and staff to fulfil this important role.

The importance of the Council providing support and training to the community activists who sustained local governance and engagement processes was stressed at a couple of the Area Briefings.

The role that civil society⁵ is currently playing in sustaining community support was raised at the Partners' Round Table, at Area Briefings and at the SU4B discussion. It was argued that all had a role in ensuring that this role was supported and strengthened in the coming years. The SUB4 discussion stressed the link between a strong civil society (active citizens and community organisations), extensive and effective public participation in decision making on local services (Council and non-Council) and the quality and cost of local services. The positive role that could be played by community development trusts was raised in one submission.

Relevant comments from the Partners' Round Table included:

- We need to be more community focused. We need to empower the neighbourhoods, they want to get things done, but sometimes don't get the traction.
- The Police are looking at neighbourhood policing and realise that different neighbourhoods require different environments. They are therefore trying to develop a typology of neighbourhoods.
- We need to decide what we want to govern at different levels, particularly at a neighbourhood level. It is important to pick out what our outcomes are and unpick what gets delivered better at neighbourhood level.
- Example of the Digbeth social enterprise quarter which has been successful because of a 'light touch' but supportive approach from the Council. In general, the Council should not try to over-manage.
- The Council and what it does need to be more visible if you are going to have more engagement in community governance.

Finally, the SU4B discussion concluded that 'one size fits all' devolution would be wrong, implying that the suggestion in Consultation Paper 2 that there be a flexible framework for local arrangements was correct.

⁵ For example, independent voluntary and community organisations, faith organisations residents who volunteer and good neighbours.

4. A Sutton Coldfield Town Council?

Consultation Questions

16. What do you think the benefits might be of having a Town Council in Sutton Coldfield in addition to the governance arrangements proposed in Paper 2: The Future of Community Governance in Birmingham?
17. What do you think are the drawbacks and costs of a Town Council?
18. What do you think the impact of a Sutton Coldfield Town Council would be on the governance of Birmingham as a whole?

Presentation

The presentations at the Specific Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group and at the North Area Briefing spent more time on the Sutton Coldfield Town Council proposal than at the other meetings and emphasised the following points:

- A Town Council would remain within the Birmingham City Council (BCC) umbrella. BCC would continue as the principal and unitary local authority.
- Powers and the services it could deliver are laid out in legislation. While other services could be passed over to the Town Council, this would need a 'best value' case to be made for these services being governed at a Town Council level.
- A Town Council does not have to deliver services but can exist with its purpose being to allow its residents to influence local services and developments.
- Parish and Town councils are funded principally by an annual precept – an additional Council Tax for local residents. The national average for these Councils is £50 per year for a band D property. However, most properties in Sutton Coldfield are Band D and above and many may therefore pay a higher precept.
- Sutton Coldfield residents will be asked to compare the potential benefits and costs of a Town Council with the benefits and costs of the models proposed for the whole of Birmingham at the District level.
- They will then need to decide whether they want one or the other or both.
- Neighbourhood councils would tend to cover smaller areas than a Town Council

Benefits and support for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council

There were overwhelming numbers in favour of a Sutton Coldfield Town Council in the consultation submissions (203 in favour, 14 against) and at the North Area Briefing (which covered Sutton Coldfield). The reasons given included:

- Identity of and with the Town;
- Greater control of local services;
- Additional services that a Town Council could deliver or buy in;
- A greater ability to control development and the quality of the Town; and

- Greater linkages with, accountability and transparency of local Councillors.

The reasons given by the Sutton Town Council Referendum Group, which consists of all of the Sutton Neighbourhood Forums, Resident Associations, other groups, and Sutton Coldfield residents and which has been campaigning for a Town Council, and which were repeated in many of the submissions, are:

- *“Sutton Coldfield would have a separate independent legal status as a royal town.*
- *The town’s historic boundaries would be defined and protected by law.*
- *Town councillors would be more locally accountable, and all would be local residents.*
- *New funding bids could be submitted, exclusively for investment in Sutton.*
- *Town councils have specified planning powers, including the power to create a neighbourhood or town plan. There is also potential to extend these planning powers.*
- *Town councils with an adopted plan receive 25% of developer’s financial contributions to be spent on local services and amenities within their area.*
- *Some local services and amenities, (potentially including aspects of Sutton Park and Sutton Town Hall), could be managed locally instead of depending on Birmingham Council.”*

Other submissions and many of the comments made at the North Area Briefing placed weight on Sutton Coldfield’s historic status and on local people’s strong identification with it, the following quotes being representative:

“Sutton Coldfield is a separate entity to Birmingham, similarly to Solihull, and has unique historic significance as recognised by its "Royal" status. It should have more control over its own development and where funding would be best used for the residents as a whole. This would enable Sutton to prosper and this would be beneficial to not only Sutton but to the surrounding areas. Town councils have separate planning powers and these could be managed far better locally than from a central Birmingham body. It has the wonderful facility of Sutton Park and this would benefit from local management.”

“A Sutton Coldfield Town Council would, by having a stronger individuality, stimulate a greater pride in citizenship of the Royal Town and support for its management and well-being.”

At one of the workshops at the North Area Briefing, a request was made for a vote on the question of whether to establish a Town Council. Almost all voted in favour with a small number of abstentions and no votes against.

Support for a Town Council at the Sutton Coldfield Discussion Group was more muted though still evident. Key concerns were cost, the limited additional services that could be provided and the extent it would improve people’s identification with local authority structures and processes. In a ‘post your appreciation’ exercise, the idea of a Town Council received a slightly higher number of ‘appreciation points’ than either of the District and other neighbourhood structures⁶.

Relevant points from this Discussion Group were:

- Participants identified a number of issues and services that they were dissatisfied with but almost all tended to take these up by phoning or writing to the Council rather

⁶ Participants were given 5 stickers and asked to assign them to three non-exclusive options of: the reshaped Districts as in Paper 2 (20 stickers), the range of neighbourhood engagement and governance possibilities outlined in Paper 2 (28 stickers) and a Town Council in addition to the other two options (28 stickers).

than going to a local Councillor or Ward Committee. A couple had signed petitions and one was active in a Neighbourhood Forum which he found to be effective. Some were not sure whose responsibility a particular issue was and a few complained about the difficulty of using the Council website.

- Most did not know who their Councillor was although one was commended for the information they provided and the way they took up issues. Councillors “need to be in the local community where people are; they need to go to the people rather than the people having to go to them”
- Issues raised included: street cleaning and waste collection; roads, traffic, traffic calming and parking; the bus station; declining quality of shops and built environment.
- On benefits of a Town Council, one resident cited the American model where meetings are held regularly that are open, clear and where residents can demand answers, adding that if a town council couldn't be exposed to residents in a similar fashion then not 100% sure of the benefits. *“To me they need to be there to be visible where we can interrogate them, give them our feedback to have an exchange and a real dialogue.”*
- Some residents focussed on the services that a Town Council could offer or buy in compared with those provided by the City Council. Participants did know what services a Town Council could provide but were keen to find out. One noted that a Town Council would not be responsible for waste collection and this is an issue they would want to have more influence over.
- One resident asked about the possibility doing more, taking on a bigger role, and providing a service not currently on the list of services a Town council could provide. It was explained that the principal authority (i.e. the City Council) would need to look at Best Value and many services would not meet the Best Value assessment, that is it would be significantly more efficient for the service to be provided via the City Council.

It was also clear at the North Area Briefing that many in favour actually wanted a Town Council with the powers of a District Council and some wanted a return to the pre-1974 borders. Sutton Coldfield District is not the same as historic Sutton Coldfield. Some residents felt that people in Sutton asked for a Town Council with substantial powers but what's on offer is not what was asked for.

Some participants in the North Area Briefing argued that a Town Council would be a stepping stone to a Council more akin to a District Council. This is also the view of the Sutton Town Council Referendum Group which states in its submission that:

“Our wider view is that Birmingham should have a comparable local government structure similar to Greater Manchester with a number of Unitary Authorities heading in to a central Birmingham Council that covers strategic and wider Statutory issues, as with Manchester.”

Concerns around a Town Council

Most supporters dismissed the costs of Town Council being a barrier with a £25 precept being the most frequently suggested amount and also the amount referred to in the Sutton Town Council Referendum Group's submission. Many said that a Town Council would save money as fewer City Councillors would be needed. One Town Council supporter, acknowledging the reference to the national average of a £50 annual precept for a Band D property, wrote:

"I hope there will be protection for households who are already very hard pressed financially, for not everyone who lives in Sutton Coldfield is well off. But most are ok and the money could be put to such good direct use to benefit the whole community".

Though few in number, those against were often equally passionate citing there being no need for an 'extra layer of bureaucracy' that would cost money with little in the way of new services. The following are some examples of this passion:

"As a resident of the pretentious town of Sutton Coldfield could you tell me please how it is that a mere 10,000 signatures justifies a discussion on a proposed town council? 10,000 signatures and the efforts if some "independent local campaigners" is hardly a majority, in fact it works out as 1 in 10 of the total population which tells you hardly anybody wants a devolved council or they just don't care."

"What are the benefits of a Sutton Coldfield Town Council? None, or very few. I have read the arguments of the Sutton Coldfield Town Council Referendum Group and I find them all deeply unconvincing. We have no need in Sutton for another expensive layer of local bureaucracy."

"Why do we need yet another layer of bureaucracy? I remember when I first moved to a road bordering Sutton Coldfield that we paid significantly more rates than the people on the other side of the road in Sutton Coldfield and indeed they did not seem to enjoy as many facilities as Birmingham. All facilities that have been added have been added by being part of Birmingham notably Wyndley Leisure Centre. They relied on Midland Red bus services at that time as the Birmingham buses terminated at the Yenton so immediately the Sutton residents started paying a lot less in bus fares to get to work."

There was a lot of interest at the Specific Discussion group in the additional money that could be raised through a precept and the additional services that could be bought with it. There were concerns that the City Council might then withdraw some services because the Town Council was paying for them resulting in higher Council Taxes but no net gain in services.

Participants at both this Group and the North Area Briefing were looking for clarification on the costs of Town Councils, the finance they could raise and the interaction with services funded by the City Council. There was interest in the level of precept that could be charged and one consultee at the Area Briefing said he wouldn't be making his mind up until he'd seen the trade-off between the extra precept and the additional services that would be provided.

At the North Area briefing, much concern was raised about the Boundary Commissions redrawing of Ward boundaries as it was feared that this might fail to recognise the Sutton Coldfield residents' perceptions of the boundary of their town.

How the decision on a Town Council will be taken

There was a great deal of suspicion at the North Area Briefing and in some submissions that the views of those who wanted a Town Council would be ignored in any decision taken by the City Council. There was also concern for information provided to local residents on the issue to be accurate and unbiased. The proposal for a consultative ballot independently monitored was supported at the Area Briefing with a postal ballot being the preferred method. The Referendum Group also favours this.

Comments submitted and raised at meetings suggest that there should be clarity in any further information provided on the potential services that could be provided by Town Council and its costs and how they would be funded. The information should also be clear

on how the Town Council's powers and service provision could develop within the existing legal framework.

The three Sutton Coldfield Ward Committees that discussed the Consultation Papers also asked for clarification on how the decision would be taken and the need for a more thorough consultation process with local people. They also asked for clarification on:

- whether the funds raised through the additional precept would be retained locally, and
- for further clarity on the Neighbourhood Planning process.

Interaction with the rest of Birmingham

Many of the submissions to the consultation argued that the rest of Birmingham would be better off if Sutton Coldfield had a Town Council as there would be more time to focus on issues of concern to the City as a whole. The views of the Sutton Town Council Referendum Group were repeated in many of the submissions, namely:

- *“Birmingham would be a more democratic City as a whole, better run, and more accountable to its citizens, if other areas also took up the idea with their own community councils like this. We want other areas of Birmingham to follow Sutton.*
- *Birmingham needs a centralised council concentrating on regional issues.*
- *Birmingham City Council could then concentrate on central, statutory and Government requirements, and expansion of inward investment in Birmingham's industry and tourism in which it is already successful.”*

The three Ward Committees from Sutton Coldfield District asked what the relationship would be between Town Councillors and City Councillors if a Sutton Coldfield Town Council was established. For example, would the Town Councillors sit on the District Committee or Partnership?

5. Citywide and Boundary Commission Issues

Consultation Questions

19. Do you think we need to establish new strategic partnership arrangements for the city as a whole to improve long term planning and co-ordination of all public services?
20. Do you think the idea of a Community Board would strengthen city wide partnership arrangements?
21. Do you have any other ideas for strengthening city wide partnership arrangements?
22. How many Councillors do you think the City Council should have in total?
Fewer than 120; 120; More than 120
23. How many Councillors do you think should be elected in a ward?
Three; Two; One; Other
24. Do you think the number of Councillors elected to represent a ward should vary according to the size of the ward's population?
25. Would one Councillor Wards improve accountability or service delivery?
26. Would they make it easier to contact your Councillor?
27. Would smaller wards help to improve local democracy or services?
28. We are open to good ideas about how we could develop our governance arrangements in the longer term, including options that would require a future government to change the law. How do you think the city should be run?

City Wide Strategic Partnership

There was strong support at the Partners' Round Table for a city-wide partnership combined with a willingness to engage with co-ordination of local services on a Quadrant⁷ basis and with as much more local engagement as resources allow. Similar support for a city-wide partnership was expressed a few times at Area Briefings although a couple of participants wondered how this partnership would be influenced by more local governance mechanisms. In addition, 85% of Be Heard respondents were in favour of a city-wide strategic partnership.

There was support for a **Community Board** when it was raised at Area Briefings and 62% of Be Heard respondents were also in favour, almost four times as many as those who were opposed. At one Area Briefing it was suggested that the Community Board proposal provided a model that should also be adopted at a District level.

⁷ Local services being co-ordinated through four local service hubs, each servicing approximately a quarter of Birmingham.

Do you think we need to establish new strategic partnership arrangements for the city as a whole to improve long term planning and co-ordination of all public services?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	131	85%
No	12	8%
Don't know	8	5%
Not Answered	4	3%

Do you think the idea of a Community Board would strengthen city wide partnership arrangements?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	96	62%
No	27	17%
Don't know	25	16%
Not Answered	7	5%

The Boundary Commission

There was a view in three of the Area Briefings that the **Kerslake proposals and the Boundary Commission** process and eventual conclusions were being imposed on Birmingham rather than being consulted fully upon, especially the proposals to reduce the number of Councillors. However, a majority of Be Heard respondents (63%) thought that there should be fewer than 120 Councillors in the city, perhaps partly reflecting the preponderance of Sutton Coldfield residents in favour of a Town Council amongst the respondents. On the other hand, when discussed at Area Briefings, there was some concern that this would increase the number of residents per city Councillor, making their community leadership function more difficult.

There was less support for one Member Wards amongst Be Heard respondents with only a quarter being in favour of this option. 47% thought that this would not improve local democracy and services (against 29% who thought it would) and 34% thought it would make it harder to contact your Councillor compared with 28% who thought it would be easier. At the Area Briefings and Ward Committees, fears were expressed that this could mean some areas would not be represented at times because of illness, resignations etc. However, half of the Be Heard respondents thought that smaller Wards would improve local democracy while a third thought that it would not. Some consultees were in favour of smaller Wards but not single Member Wards.

There was also concern that the redrawing of Ward boundaries would be based on inadequate knowledge of local neighbourhoods and communities. Consultees from Sutton Coldfield at the North Area Briefing frequently expressed concern that Ward boundary remapping would yet again redraw the boundaries of Sutton Coldfield as a whole.

Many submissions, comments at Area Briefings and Be Heard responses made similar points with regard to the size of Wards, although this did not necessarily mean support for fewer Councillors. To take one submission as an example:

*“Birmingham wards are too large - many people relate to their local area as distinct from the larger ward which it is in, so the proposal to create more wards is a good one and could lead to more participation. However the ratio of electors to councillors is already unacceptably high (far higher than in some other parts of the country), so that increasing the number of wards while reducing the number of councillors will make the democratic deficit worse. **We need more than 120 councillors, not fewer.**”*

How many Councillors do you think the City Council should have in total?

Option	Total	% of All
Fewer than 120	97	63%
120	34	22%
More than 120	14	9%
Not Answered	10	6%

How many Councillors do you think should be elected in a ward?

Option	Total	% of All
Three	39	25%
Two	45	29%
One	39	25%
Other	22	14%
Not Answered	10	6%

Do you think the number of Councillors elected to represent a ward should vary according to the size of the ward's population?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	96	62%
No	46	30%
Don't know	5	3%
Not Answered	8	5%

Would one Councillor Wards improve accountability or service delivery?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	45	29%
No	73	47%
Don't know	30	19%
Not Answered	7	5%

Would they make it easier to contact your Councillor?

Option	Total	% of All
Easier	44	28%
Harder	53	34%
Don't know	50	32%
Not Answered	8	5%

Would smaller wards help to improve local democracy or services?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	78	50%
No	50	32%
Don't know	21	14%
Not Answered	6	4%

Other ideas on Birmingham governance

One detailed submission argued strongly for the Lyons model to be adopted in Birmingham.

6. Consultation and Other Issues

At Partners' Round Table and at Area Briefings it was suggested that more meaningful consultation would have been possible if the Consultation Papers had been clearer on what services were proposed at each geographical level and with agreement on the outcomes desired from service provision and community governance mechanisms. This view was reinforced by some evidence from the consultation that views on the issue of establishing a Town Council (and other neighbourhood/parish councils) were dependent upon the services involved.

At the Partners' Round Table, points made in relation to this were:

- It was difficult to respond to the consultation documents as there were few firm proposals and more questions around broad approaches and asking for ideas.
- This was in part because the discussion document was suggesting a permissive framework, allowing different arrangements in different Districts and neighbourhoods. However, some felt that while a permissive environment was good, you also need a very supportive environment which means a degree of prescription. In addition, there may be a tendency for consultees to go for the proposals that appeared simpler because they were easier to understand and not because they believed that they were better for local democracy and improving local services.
- Issues of governance could not be properly commented on unless it was clear what services were to be governed or what outcomes were desired. It may have been better to produce the consultation paper on local services before or at the same time as the paper on future governance at District, Ward and neighbourhood levels. To get wider public engagement, you need to agree and be clear what outcomes you want to achieve. If you are talking about engagement, you need to have something to hook it up to.

There was also a view that there was a need for more information on how the Council could do more to support and interact with civil society. Partners at the Round Table discussion said that the resilience of all the faith networks in the city had been quite remarkable. For example, the Church of England had been increasing its capacity from 2007 onwards because everything else was in decline. The Cathedral has been open day and night with volunteers but the Library is under threat. Faith networks have also been important for the work with troubled families.

The SUB4 discussion stressed the link between a strong civil society (active citizens and community organisations), extensive and effective public participation in decision making on local services (Council and non-Council) and the quality and cost of local services.

Other points made on the consultation, including a variety of submissions and Be Heard responses, and detailed comments from the Districts and Public Engagement Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee and from five Ward Committees, were:

- There should be less jargon in the consultation material. More people, including those not deeply involved in the issues, should be asked to read and comment on consultation papers in the future.
- There was a huge need more youth engagement. (Young Be Heard respondent numbers were very low as were the numbers of BME respondents.)
- Far more time was needed for the consultation. (It was explained that this particular component was driven by the need for some decisions to be taken at the Council's AGM after the local elections in the wake of the Kerlake Review, and that consultation on most of the issues would continue.)

- The Be Heard questionnaire was too long, needed better hyperlinking to explanations, and needed the ability for respondents to move quickly to the sections they were most interested in.
- It would have been helpful to have a paper-based questionnaire available at public meetings, including at Ward Committees, for people who could not respond electronically.
- The Area Briefings needed more promotion. It was an additional barrier to ask participants to register using Eventbrite if they wanted to attend.

Other points raised included:

- Would any of the proposals being promoted 'from above' (i.e. the recommendations of the Kerlake Review and the Boundary Commission issues) change after the General Election if there were a change in Government?
- The need to do more to engage with residents of Birmingham who are disabled. As one consultee put it:

"I think you need a Disability expert reference or focus group to help you identify and address disability issues. You seem to not realise the impact of some of the things done.... Brum could be much more disabled friendly."

Points made by the young people consulted at the two meetings held following the closing of the official consultation period included:

- More young people would be engaged through the use of social media and apps.
- Young people would be better engaged if the Council were to visit schools and youth clubs more, and hold events targeted at young people to hear their views and explain what the Council does, how it works and how you can influence what it does.
- A suggestion was made for mock elections in schools while one participant suggested lowering the voting age to 16.
- However, to sustain engagement, many stressed that young people needed to be listened to as well when they turned up at events.
- Many of the young people involved said that Councillors should also visit schools and youth clubs, providing regular updates on what was happening. A suggestion was made that Councillors should also support young people when they raised concerns at meetings.

Appendix I: Be Heard Consultation Questions

29. Do you think we need to establish new strategic partnership arrangements for the city as a whole to improve long term planning and co-ordination of all public services?
30. Do you think the idea of a Community Board would strengthen city wide partnership arrangements?
31. Do you have any other ideas for strengthening city wide partnership arrangements?
32. Do you think that changing the role of districts in holding to account local public services and monitoring what they deliver will improve local democracy and these services?
33. What would help the districts to monitor and improve local services?
34. What would prevent districts from monitoring and improving local services?
35. What type of service improvements do you think the Local Innovation Fund should be spent on?
36. Should districts continue mainly as committees of Councillors or change to partnerships?
37. Do you have any other ideas on strengthening district level governance?
38. What do you think Councillors should do to improve their “community leadership”?
39. What do you think your Councillors should do more of (e.g. meetings with local people and groups, dealing with residents’ problems by meeting service providers)?
40. And what should they do less of?
41. Do you think that Ward Committees improve local democracy or services?
 - Yes, No or Don’t Know
42. Do you think that Neighbourhood Forums are helpful in improving local democracy and the local area?
 - Yes, No or Don’t Know
43. If yes, what should be done to strengthen them further?
44. Which of the three policy options on neighbourhood councils would you like us to adopt? Please choose one only.
 - A. The status quo (await any petitions for parishes before reviewing them thoroughly – but not encouraging them)
 - B. Adopt a policy of encouraging proposals neighbourhood councils with only a light touch Community Governance Review to ensure local residents are happy with the proposed boundaries and costs of the council
 - C. Undertaking a parishing exercise for the whole city and consulting local residents on boundaries. This would be done through a further Community Governance Review.
45. Would you like a parish, town or neighbourhood council in your local area?

46. Do you have any views on other possible arrangements at this level such as “Community Forums”?
47. How many Councillors do you think the City Council should have in total?
- Fewer than 120
 - 120
 - More than 120
48. How many Councillors do you think should be elected in a ward?
- Three
 - Two
 - One
 - Other
49. Do you think the number of Councillors elected to represent a ward should vary according to the size of the ward’s population?
- Yes, No or Don’t Know
50. Would one Councillor Wards improve accountability or service delivery?
- Yes, No or Don’t Know
51. Would they make it easier to contact your Councillor?
- Easier
 - Harder
 - Don’t Know
52. Would smaller wards help to improve local democracy or services?
- Yes, No or Don’t Know
53. We are open to good ideas about how we could develop our governance arrangements in the longer term, including options that would require a future government to change the law. How do you think the city should be run?
54. What do you think the benefits might be of having a Town Council in Sutton Coldfield in addition to the governance arrangements proposed in Paper 2: The Future of Community Governance in Birmingham?
55. What do you think are the drawbacks and costs of a Town Council?
56. What do you think the impact of a Sutton Coldfield Town Council would be on the governance of Birmingham as a whole?

Appendix II: Be Heard Demographic Breakdown

Gender

Option	Total	% of All
Male	90	58%
Female	53	34%
Not Answered	12	8%

Ethnicity

Option	Total	% of All
White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	130	84%
Any other White background	4	3%
Mixed/Multiple ethnic group	3	2%
Asian/Asian British	6	4%
Black/African/Caribbean Black British	1	1%
Other ethnic group	0	0%
Not Answered	11	7%

Any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting last for 12 months or more?

Option	Total	% of All
Yes	17	11%
No	117	75%
Prefer not to say	11	7%
Not Answered	10	6%

Sexual Orientation

Option	Total	% of All
Heterosexual or Straight	116	75%
Gay or Lesbian	5	3%
Bisexual	3	2%
Other	1	1%
Prefer not to say	20	13%
Not Answered	10	6%

Age

Option	Total	% of All
18 or younger	0	0%
19 to 24 years	1	1%
25 to 34 years	13	8%
35 to 44 years	25	16%
45 to 55 years	35	23%
55 to 64 years	26	17%
65 to 74 years	38	25%
75 or older	9	6%
Not Answered	8	5%