1 Introduction

1.1 A key part of the Local Services and Community Safety portfolio is to ensure the ‘development of ... methods of ensuring that local residents, tenants and community groups have the facilities for full participation in the decision making processes of the Council.’

Birmingham City Council Constitution, Volume A, Part 2

1.2 The Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee has spent some time looking at the issue of how Birmingham residents engage in the City Council’s decision-making processes. Catalysts for initiating this work included:

- The intensified focus by CPA on community engagement;
- The inception of Local Area Agreement, a key outcome of which is to empower local people to have a greater voice and influence over decision making and delivery of services.

1.3 However, an immediate issue is that of continued funding for the Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums (BANF) and Birmingham Community Empowerment Network (BCEN). A recommendation about the future structure and funding of these bodies was subject of a report to the BSP on 29 September (a summary of the report is attached in Appendix 1).

1.4 In light of this, the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee has brought forward this report to provide an opportunity for Member discussion of this important matter. As the City Council is the accountable body for the BSP funding, the final decision will be taken by the Executive, but it is our view that this should not go ahead without discussion at City Council.

1.5 Members are therefore asked to consider our key findings with regard to BANF and BCEN as set out in this report and use the City Council discussion to make a contribution to this debate. We also ask that the two suggested actions in this report are endorsed.
2 BANF and BCEN

The Organisations

2.1 Two of the dominant bodies in community engagement in Birmingham at the moment are the Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums (BANF) and the Birmingham Community Empowerment Network (BCEN).

2.2 BANF is an independent company which receives a Council grant. It provides support in design, printing, training, dispute resolution and operational guidance to Neighbourhood Forums. It is a membership organisation with Neighbourhood Forums sending delegates to Association meetings. Neighbourhood Forums are resident groups that constitutionally agree to a set of “democracy” norms. These include holding AGMs and holding a minimum of 3 public meetings each year. BANF staff are either directly employed by BANF or are seconded from the Birmingham City Council.

2.3 BANF is the city-wide umbrella organisation providing neighbourhood forums with the “necessary support to ensure that they are as effective as possible in involving and representing local people.”1 The BANF office at the Neighbourhood Forums Resource Centre in Nechells provides a wide range of services, including:

- Design and printing;
- Training;
- Technical advice;
- Advice on claiming grants.

2.4 Funding for BANF comes from the City Council: £60,000 of temporary funding was agreed for BANF on 17 March 2006 (alongside £60,000 for BSTRONG – see below).

2.5 Community Empowerment Networks (CEN) were established by the Government in 2001 to enable the community and voluntary sectors to participate in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). There are ten District Community Networks in Birmingham – one in each Constituency – and these select people to represent active citizens in the District Strategic Partnerships. These are supplemented by other Community Networks with Black and Minority Ethnic groups; women's groups; older people; young people; people with disabilities; and refugees and asylum seekers in Birmingham. There is also a wide range of smaller Community Networks in the city, including Birmingham Open Spaces Forum and the Community Safety Network.

2.6 BCEN provides support to these Community Empowerment Networks. It has a Steering Group comprised of nominees from a number of voluntary bodies and from District Empowerment Networks. The staff of BCEN are employees of BVSC (the Accountable Body for the CEN programme).

1 http://www.banf.org.uk
2.7 BCEN aims to “help communities get involved in decisions and action to improve neighbourhoods in Birmingham”. This is done via:

- Helping community and voluntary groups and active citizens to link up and get involved in Community Networks;
- Providing small grants, including £150,000 through the Real Time Community Change programme;
- Staff time to give the community sector the technical and training support received in the voluntary and public sectors.

2.8 BCEN is not funded by the Council directly; however in April 2006 the Council became the accountable body for its funding under the Local Area Agreement.

2.9 The Committee found that Neighbourhood Forums (NFS) and Community Empowerment Networks (CENs) are vital and can be effective in terms of engaging people in decision-making and allowing them a voice and influence, as they supply community representatives on Council bodies such as Ward Advisory Boards (WABs), Local Delivery Groups (LDGs) and District Strategic Partnerships (DSPs). The results of our survey of the membership of WABs and LDGs are detailed in Appendix 2.

3 The Issues

3.1 The Committee was able to draw a number of conclusions about the requirements for the effective operation of NFSs and CENs:

- Coverage and stability;
- Fairness and transparency, including the absence of party politics;
- Accountability;
- Appropriate funding.

3.2 The issue of coverage is important as although NFS’s cover approximately 70% of the city, this still leaves significant gaps. There are District Community Empowerment Networks in each Constituency. The Committee accepts this is difficult to manage: the stability of groups varies – with some extremely active and involved, others inward-looking and ineffective. Also groups evolve over time. Support for these groups is therefore critical.

3.3 NFS have built democratic norms into their operation and are regulated, although sanctions for non-compliance are limited to suspension from BANF (NF’s are independent bodies). Whilst on the whole Neighbourhood Forums work well and can be effective, the reputation of the network is sometimes damaged by reports of the poor conduct of other Forums.

2 www.bcen.net
3.4 This leads to the question of how such people are held accountable to their local community. BCEN's preference is for seeking active citizens willing to organise themselves rather than impose a structure on them, which is more appealing to some people. Indeed, the advantages of having a range of bodies is that it reflects the different ways in which people want to get engaged in civic life: there are those concerned with a particular issue or area, those who simply wish to improve their immediate locale, those who are happy in the more formal atmosphere of a Neighbourhood Forum and those who prefer the looser Network approach. However, if people are appointed onto WABs and DSPs, there needs to be some form of accountability back to the community they are representing.

3.5 Whilst the funding given to BANF and BCEN is not large by City Council standards, it is significant and of course the Council has to ensure efficient and appropriate use of its money no matter how small. The main concern here is duplication: are we funding different people to do the same thing? When looking at community engagement generally, the aim is to increase capacity not restrict those who wish to engage. However, the same principle does not apply to support and resources: different people can organise in different ways but their support needs are essentially the same. This is a critical area to resolve in considering the future of BANF and BCEN.

4 Some Solutions

Accountability

4.1 A key issue is establishing accountability for those who receive Council funding. The difficulties have already been noted: ensuring accountability without elections is clearly tricky, and again the risk is that overly onerous burdens will be put on volunteers. However, there are some simple steps that could be taken:

- Maximise information so that people in the locality can see what their local organisation is doing in their name, and comment or contribute if they wish to;
- Ensuring that the appropriate development opportunities are open to those who do participate, both in terms of developing their skills, but also their understanding of the role they have taken on;
- The Council should do its bit in looking at how it engages – how and where it holds meetings, for example. Constituencies are leading the way here.

4.2 One major step would be to ensure there is a robust code of conduct and complaints procedure to support the operation of NFs, with sanctions available for failure to uphold these. The Committee recognises that a balance must be struck between heavy regulation – which would discourage many from participating – and no guidelines or parameters, which leaves the door open for those who wish to use such groups for their own purposes, not those of the community.

4.3 Appropriate arrangements should be in place so that the activities of the Forum are carried out for the benefit of the community and while there might be party political differences on Forums it
should nonetheless be possible to reach agreements on the way forward. However, the Committee understands that local politics could not be entirely avoided. Involvement in democratic organisations can be ‘messy’ and so robust standards are needed to ensure that democratic norms are built into the operation of Forums. Other measures to build in safeguards could include where Neighbourhood Forums are represented on Ward Advisory Boards (WABs), the WABs should be notified where a Forum’s membership of BANF had been suspended.

4.4 There is also a need to set out clearly what is expected of those who sit on WABs and DSPs etc. Having clear expectations of both representatives and others engaged in these processes (officers, Members) would limit the opportunity for those who attempt to bring party politics to the table and those who would use contact with members and senior officers as an advice bureau.

4.5 This does already happen to some degree: for example, Community Advocates serving on the Hodge Hill District Strategic Partnership (DSP) must meet selection criteria in their appointment. Other constituencies have similar arrangements and this should be encouraged across the board – perhaps including a form of terms of reference for members setting out their accountability in reporting back to those being represented.

4.6 Such a clear approach would also benefit those individuals involved as it would enable the clarification of training needs and other support requirements.

Rationalisation

4.7 It seems clear that to some extent BANF and BCEN fulfil different facets of a similar role, and are being funded to perform similar tasks. For example, the Committee was struck by the similarity between the networks described by BCEN and the citizens’ representative proposal from BANF.

4.8 The Committee acknowledges that people can and will organise themselves in different ways and the City Council should certainly not be restricting participation. The question for the City Council is to what extent this is supported, and whether we are funding groups to do essentially the same thing.

4.9 A further issue has been the differences of opinion in the past between BANF and BCEN – largely resulting from how both have evolved, but nevertheless a hindrance to fully effective community engagement.

Encourage individuals to participate

4.10 Discussing concepts of community engagement in Committee, it was felt that allowing those to be involved who were not usually involved was key. The organisations we have been discussing depend wholly on those people who participate, and the Council’s role here is to encourage and support individuals to participate. The more people engage then the more confident the Council and Members can be that they are getting the appropriate range of views.

4.11 So this is partly about numbers: for example, despite the good work that the active Housing Liaison Boards can achieve (see below), there are currently around only 400 active participants out of around 80,000 tenants. This has resulted in a limited age range and diversity of participants –
most, whilst very committed, are white and over 60. There is particular difficulty in attracting young people and young families.

4.12 Greater numbers of participants means the Council is less open to accusations of relying on the “usual suspects” to legitimise actions. It also reduces the possibility of “burn out”, whereby certain individuals are over-relied upon to fill community and voluntary roles, resulting in those individuals being unwilling or unable to participate further.

4.13 BCEN’s approach – the networking philosophy – works to ameliorate this by providing a support mechanism, and allowing skills and information to be shared amongst participants. Mentoring and training are an important part of this, so that new individuals are ready to take the place of those who wish to stop. Members are also supported via the covering of small expenses and local resources.

4.14 But numbers of people is not the full story. The level of engagement means ensuring that the expectations of community representatives are realistic. Too often, people are expected to understand and fit in with existing Council structures. Yet, unsurprisingly, few people enjoy attending Committee meetings, voting for motions, have treasurers etc. They want to get the job done, e.g. set up a youth club. It is important therefore for the Council to start where people are, and build the structures that would encourage participation, including reduced bureaucracy and good communication.

4.15 This goes back to the point made earlier about providing appropriate support. Whilst it is true that some individuals tended to focus on single issues, these people can be encouraged to become involved on wider issues. This again requires development with individuals.

5 The Proposal

5.1 The BSP have begun a process of evaluating the organisations involved in community engagement in Birmingham. The first phase looked at BANF, BCEN and BStrong. The proposal presented to the BSP is to approve the establishment of a new Community Engagement Service to integrate the support services for Neighbourhood Forums and Community Networks currently provided by BANF and BCEN. It is further proposed that the role of BStrong should be the subject of a 2nd phase review which will look at the wider range of services that support community engagement.

5.2 The Committee met with those undertaking the BSP review at an early stage and we were able to have input into the outcome of that review. At that early stage, the Committee was clear that the current situation is no longer acceptable and that a single organisation or service to support delivery community engagement outcomes is the best way forward.

5.3 The advantages of a single organisation lie in:

- **Absence of duplication**: as already noted, the client groups for BANF and BCEN are much the same, and certainly have similar support requirements. A single organisation would eliminate this and therefore be more cost-effective.
The sharing of information, expertise and staff support would make a single organisation or service better placed to provide better placed to provide the support and guidance necessary to help maintain the stability of groups, without losing any specialisms.

**Increased capacity and coverage:** a single service could work more effectively to full city coverage, with the infrastructure to cover the entire city. Also there is the opportunity to reach all types of community – for example, a new service could be more inclusive of communities of interest as well as those of place. This supports our findings on faith, which found that faith groups felt distant from Council structures, though there is involvement in some DSPs and WABs. There are no Constituency based multi-faith organisations, and a single organisation operating at a Constituency level would be able to fill that gap.

A single service with a strong framework would enable clearer accountability, and the City Council to insist on certain standards, both for organisations and those individuals participating. The importance of this is discussed further below.

5.4 The Committee found plenty of good practice across the board and this should not be lost. We certainly would not want to lose the strong local level involvement that has developed. It is hoped that the new service would be able to ensure the good is not lost.

5.5 There are some key principles to which we strongly suggest this new service adheres. Firstly, it should have clear terms of reference, which is monitored and to which mechanisms are attached for the City Council or BSP to ensure compliance. This would help to make the service open and fair, non-partisan and would encourage a wider spectrum of people to participate, thus engendering much needed faith and trust in the process. It would aid the BSP’s aim of ensuring the new organisation delivers “specific community engagement outcomes identified in the LAA”.

5.6 Secondly, care should be taken that whilst duplication at a support level should be eliminated, additional capacity at the local level should not. People will choose to organise in different ways, for different purposes and sometimes for limited periods of time. These differences should be accommodated, plus the development and expansion of groups should not be forgotten.

**Suggested Action**

1. That the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety work through the BSP to establish a new Community Engagement Service to integrate the support services for Neighbourhood Forums and Community Networks currently provided by BANF and BCEN.

**6 Other Issues – Phase 2**

6.1 The BSP Review acknowledges the need for a second phase review to “make recommendations which encompass the full range of services that underpin effective community engagement”.
Attempting to cover the full extent of community engagement across the city is an extremely tall order, and the Committee offers the following suggestions.

Other Bodies

6.2 Firstly, there is the place of other community engagement groups and initiatives in this debate: as already noted, WABs, LDGs and other Council structures have representatives from a range of community-based organisations: Housing Liaison Boards, Residents Associations, Friends Groups (e.g. Friends of Cotteridge Park, of Brandwood End Cemetery, of Hall Green Library). The latter groups receive some support from the Council, via BSTRONG or other community development schemes, but there is no consistent pattern.

6.3 Neighbourhood Forums work alongside Residents’ Associations. It was pointed out that the two bodies were complementary and highlighted that there were some people who preferred to be involved in a smaller group rather than a Forum. Residents’ Associations feed issues into the Forum. In addition, the network of street champions furthers the development of a layer of active citizens which in time should lead to greater robustness within community organisations.

6.4 The Committee also suggests that Parish Councils should be considered within the review. Members visited Frankley Parish Councillors to discuss its operation and are agreed that whilst this is not appropriate for all areas of Birmingham, having a Parish Council could be a valuable addition in others. In the Committee’s view, Parish Council’s work best when they are pragmatic and apolitical, ensuring that the Council is a way of enabling people to work for their community.

6.5 The support for and role of these bodies should be included in any future review: two in particular are already known to be in the frame:

- The Committee took evidence on HLBs and found good practice and examples of tenants having a genuine influence on policy and the local environment, with the backing of the Housing department. One key way in which HLBs can influence local service delivery is through the ability to issue Service Improvement Notices (SIN notice) on departments which consistently fail to meet targets within Service Level Agreements (SLAs). An HLB satisfaction survey in April 2005 found that 71% of respondents believe the work of their HLB has a positive impact on the local environment and housing service.

- B.STRONG (Birmingham Skills Training Reaching Organisations and Neighbourhood Groups) is a community capacity building project that was initiated by the City Council’s Community and Play Service in 1998. The service provides hands-on, practical support to community groups to enable them to function effectively (running a committee, managing finances, writing a business plan etc). Its annual running costs are £120,000 and it employs 5 staff.

6.6 Furthermore, any review should be widened to take a closer look at “communities of interest” and how any centrally organised bodies work with Constituencies.

6.7 With regard to the latter, evidence from the Strategic Director of Local Services stated that “in line with the philosophy behind devolution this is not prescriptive and a number of successful pilot
schemes have been developed in different Constituencies for engaging their communities in, for example, identifying strategic priorities”. The Scrutiny Review of Devolution and Localisation found that:

“...examples of public engagement through the Districts bore good comparison with the Government’s view of what is good practice nationally and noted their apparent interest in developing neighbourhood arrangements.”

Scrutiny Review of Devolution and Localisation (City Council 11 July 2006)

6.8 Many of these schemes are detailed in the Scrutiny Review of Devolution and Localisation and it is not our intention to repeat them here. The point is to show that there is a great deal being done in the city to involve people in the governance of their local area and in the development and maintenance of their local area. Having a multiplicity of ways in which people can engage can only increase capacity, and given that it is not always easy to get people to engage, the Council should be looking to maximise this.

6.9 “Communities of interest” – i.e. those who are drawn together because of similar experience, interests or concerns – are not currently well-addressed in the BANF/BCEN structure. However, a new service provides the opportunity to develop this. The key question for the City Council is to determine how the City Council should foster and support smaller groups, relating to them on their terms and being responsive. Many of these groups are not centralised, and therefore more suited to Constituency level engagement. The Committee did undertake some work on faith groups, and this work will be taken forward with the Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources.

Encourage Individuals to Participate

6.10 There are a number of well-rehearsed barriers to participation:

- Language;
- Fear of travelling;
- Childcare;
- Lack of confidence.

6.11 There was also a view expressed by focus group respondents in the Scrutiny Review of Devolution and Localisation that people’s perception of the type of people who do attend community meetings actually deters a wider range of people from doing so.

6.12 Tackling these issues ought to be a key part of the new service’s work: supporting and encouraging individuals to participate is critical to ensuring people want to get engaged with us. Community development workers already work to build capacity in the community and this should also be incorporated into Phase 2.
The Role of Elected Members

6.13 There needs to be an open debate about the role of Elected Members. There is often concern expressed that increasing community engagement diminishes the role of local, democratically elected councillors. From our findings it is clear that that is not and of course should not, be the case. The role of Elected Members is critical. It is important to emphasise that community engagement is not a substitute for community leadership but something which supports that. Members need to hear the views of a variety of people from different communities of place and interest in order to inform their decision-making, but the ultimate decision-making lies with those Members.

Suggested Action

2. That the BSP incorporate the additional findings of the Committee into Phase 2 of their work, and that the Committee continue to be involved as appropriate.

7 Motion

That the suggested actions in this report be endorsed and that the Cabinet Member be requested to report back on progress to the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee in six months time.
SUMMARY

In March 2006 the BSP Board commissioned a review of community empowerment in the city. This report presents the findings of that review.

Most significantly it proposes that the existing support services for Neighbourhood Forums and for Community Networks (ie services currently provided by BANF and BCEN) be merged into a single service focused on delivering the LAA outcomes as set out in a new service specification.

1. THE REVIEW

1.1 In commissioning the review the BSP focused its scope on:

“the main community empowerment organisations and services involved in the delivery of the outcomes:

- BCEN
- BANF
- BStrong”

……. while acknowledging the key role played by other organisations and services and accepting that the work “could highlight many issues, challenges and opportunities that it will not be possible to deal with in the scope of this review. Any such issues would form part of a follow-up phase”.

1.2 The review has been managed by the SSCF Block and overseen by a Reference Group comprising all relevant stakeholders, including representatives from the other LAA Blocks. GOWM funded a Neighbourhood Renewal Adviser (NRA) to carry out the core work of the review and to report with recommendations.

2. KEY ISSUES

The outcomes of the review have been driven by some key issues, including:

2.1 There is a need to preserve the best of what already exists. Neighbourhood Forums provide a sound basis for local community representation; Community Networks have made valuable contributions to engagement in some areas.

2.2 Engagement resources must support delivery of the LAA outcomes. It is clear that presently the services of BANF, BCEN and BStrong are not harnessed effectively to delivering these outcomes. This means doing more to integrate the “safer” and “stronger” elements of SSCF, as well as with other LAA blocks.

2.3 There is a need for an agreed Engagement Strategy for the city

3. OUTCOME TO THE REVIEW

3.1 The draft report of the NRA was presented to the final meeting of the Reference Group on 5 September.
3.2 The report made a number of recommendations and set out 3 options for future delivery of engagement services. The 3 options were:

1. The development of a consortium approach to deliver community engagement outcomes through the LAA process.
2. The merging of the services to create a single mechanism to deliver community engagement outcomes through the LAA process.
3. The commissioning of a new service to provide the service specification to deliver community engagement outcomes through the LAA process.

3.3 The Reference Group agreed to recommend option 2 to the BSP.

4. SERVICE SPECIFICATION AND FUNDING

4.1 As part of the review a new specification has been developed to underpin the delivery of the new service arrangements. This is included as part of the background paper. The specification makes it clear that the new service must be fit-for-purpose in delivering the BSP requirements and will:

   a. Deliver the specific community engagement outcomes identified in the LAA and any required through the annual ‘refresh’ process.

   b. Work with citizens and partners in the SSCF block to promote and provide interventions that will assist in the delivery of the objectives, outcomes and targets within the LAA.

   c. Engage with the 2nd phase review to better integrate community engagement structures and services across the 4 LAA blocks.

4.2 The new service will be delivered within the existing budgets for BANF and BCEN

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

   a. The Board approve the establishment of a new Community Engagement Service to integrate the support services for Neighbourhood Forums and Community Networks currently provided by BANF and BCEN and to coordinate wider engagement activities to support delivery of the LAA outcomes.

   b. The Board request an implementation plan for its October meeting.

   c. The Board approve the wider recommendations from the Review.

   d. The Board approve the commissioning of a second phase review and ask for a draft scoping paper to be presented to its October meeting.

   e. The Board ask the SSCF block to:
      i. Oversee the 2nd phase review;
      ii. As part of this process to develop an Engagement Strategy for the City;
      iii. To consider establishing an Engagement Board to oversee delivery of community engagement services;

   f. The Board agree to defer a decision on the role of Bstrong until after the 2nd phase review;

   g. The Board approve the draft Service Specification as the basis for the commissioning of the new service.
Appendix 2: WAB Membership – Community Representatives

Source of community representation on Ward Advisory Boards

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Note: These refer to stated representations – but some representatives tick more than one box: for example in Washwood Heath:

- There is an HLB member but she is on the WAB due to her being a representative from a Residents Association. Therefore, the box for HLB’s is not ticked.
- There is also an elderly person but the box for elderly is not ticked because they attend as representatives of Residents Associations or Neighbourhood Forums.
# Local Delivery Groups – Membership

From the Scrutiny Review of Anti-Social Behaviour (to be presented at City Council, 07 November 2006)

(Shaded boxes indicates Chairmanship of the LDG)

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<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>BCC Constituency</th>
<th>BCC Housing</th>
<th>BCC YOS</th>
<th>BCC Other</th>
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Community Engagement
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