



The Role of Councillors on District Committees

1 Introduction


1.1 This inquiry builds on the work of the Committee's inquiry: Are Ward Committees Fit for Purpose? and began before the Kerslake review was published¹. The Committee has held three evidence gathering sessions (18th November 2014, 9th December 2014 and 20th January 2015) and undertaken a visit to the Erdington District (2nd December 2014). A survey was also sent to all Councillors – 16 responses (13% response rate) which received wide ranging views.

1.2 The aim of the inquiry had been to strengthen District Committees by considering the role that their Councillors carry out and the support they might need to ensure all committees are successful. Since the publication of the Kerslake review, the Committee focused more on the line of inquiry:

“How will the future changes to devolution impact on roles?”

1.3 The Committee remains committed to the continuation of devolution of real power and resources to local Councillors and citizens in line with the Leader's Policy Statements 2012-14. The Committee's aspiration is that the council becomes an effective devolved administration and moves away from a centralised culture and centralised decision making. The Committee has concerns that key aspects of the Kerslake review risks setting back devolution in the city, rather than assisting with future progress along our intended journey towards greater devolution. In part this is because there appear to be contradictions in the report.

1.4



previously, Councillors certainly have an important role to play in building and nurturing relationships.”

2.7 It is important to recognise that in view of cuts to staffing within districts it is becoming more difficult to meet these aspirations at a district level. In addition, Committee members recognise that engagement itself is just a tool and that Councillors want engagement for action – in other words for engagement to be able to result in actions and decisions on services which meet local needs.

2.8 Citizens themselves play an important role:

“key part of the plan for the ‘Future City Council’ is managing demand for services, by encouraging and supporting individuals, community groups and voluntary organisations to play a bigger role in delivering services. This will require a shift in behaviour, attitudes and culture across the city as well as within the city council”.⁴

2.9 Therefore, Councillors will need not only leadership skills, but the skills to be able to empower citizens, this is especially important as Council services are reduced or in some cases ceased. Standing up for Birmingham (#SU4Brum – a campaign for unity), Community Asset Transfers (CATs), Friends of Groups such as Friends of Parks are all existing approaches to engage with.

2.10 There is a risk that the future structural changes and any recentralisation will undermine these efforts to empower citizens. Furthermore, the Committee recognises the importance of being able to have a real say on how local money is spent, rather than having to have to ask someone else to do it. Wards and Districts should have the power to decide how to use the existing resources to enable them to commission local services or strengthen council services.

Services: Scrutiny and Commissioning

2.11 A recommendation of the Kerslake review is that districts will not deliver, manage or have financial responsibility but will scrutinise services. But the Committee does not find this convincing, as we find the experience of district level scrutiny unsatisfactory and largely ineffective. Scrutiny reports on devolution for the past decade have been critical of the way in which districts have had little or no influence on services managed through Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

2.12 The issue of poor performance does not go away with a change to structures and a removal of direct responsibility over that budget line. There still needs to be a solution as to how Councillors can get redress and service improvement, in the first place from council services.

2.13 One risk, although this was not agreed by all members of the Committee, is that giving districts a scrutiny role could lead to a partisan and adversarial approach; conflict between the central Executive of the majority party and some District Committees run by the opposition parties, following party lines rather than the best interests of devolved services.

⁴ <https://standingupforbirmingham.wordpress.com/about-standing-up-for-birmingham/>



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- 2.14 Scrutiny of all public services is proposed. Currently it is unclear what the willingness of partners is to be scrutinised as they currently have their own scrutiny / appeal mechanisms i.e. health, police and fire services. This will require production of understandable information by partners and have member development implications. A first step could be closer collaboration with public services, but not necessarily scrutiny, building towards scrutiny by District Committees. Leadership will have to come from the top in each organisation as Councillors at a District Committee cannot be expected to gain co-operation unilaterally.
- 2.15 A previous scrutiny inquiry⁵ explored how commissioning could be carried out by districts with economies of scale coming by drawing on local knowledge and combining contracts at the locality level. Any move forward needs to identify how districts, and therefore local Councillors will feed into commissioning, especially third sector commissioning.
- 2.16 The Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership Board is talking to its local clinical commissioning group about locality commissioning. If this is succ

- working with other bodies to response to complex challenges such as natural disasters and other emergencies.”⁶

3.2 To that we might add a more general health and wellbeing priority and broaden the partnership working to address all the other issues, not just disasters. Lyons sets this out as the role of local government. But is this not too the primary role of districts – to build local distinctiveness, identify the local needs and priorities and ensure that all services are meeting those?

3.3 All the issues above: community leadership, scrutiny and commissioning link to this. As does strong advocacy of the local needs from the district into the council as a whole. This requires that two way feedback between districts and the centre is embedded and that officers and Councillors have structures, systems and procedures that enables this to happen on an on-going not one off basis.

3.4 This requires Councillors to focus on outcomes – what is changing in an area, how does it feel, what do citizens feel and how does this sit against objective data?

Relationship with




training had been provided and Councillors had attended. Capacity needs to be found to allow Councillors time to attend training events. There must be a robust and compulsory induction programme for new Councillors. However, the role of Councillors has changed considerably in the last ten years and continues to do so, so even long-standing Councillors should take up opportunities for development

Challenges (Things to Resolve Now)

3.11 There are a number of issues that need to be resolved before moving forward to enable clarity about the role of Councillors on District Committees:

- The Executive needs to ensure there is a clear and absolutely unambiguous direction of travel regarding devolution; will there continue to be progress to greater devolution or a reversal of policy towards recentralisation? If there is a recommitment to progress further with devolution in line with existing policy then a number of issues need to be resolved:
- One size doesn't fit all and with limited resources, services may need to be delivered differently in different areas to best meet local needs. The structures moving forward need to be able to allow this flexibility and Councillors have a role in this.
- Budgets and resources (staffing).
- Good communication needs to ensure that citizens and partners receive a clear and consistent message as to the purpose of devolution and the remit of District Committees.
- To formalise better understanding of implications in districts when the Executive is making decisions.
- SLAs were never resolved – the services they currently cover will remain a line in the budget and with their proposed scrutiny role District Committees should have an opportunity to hold service providers to account. With SLAs Councillors have continually been frustrated about the lack of influence and being able to hold service providers to account. Getting rid of SLAs does not get rid of this issue. Councillors on District Committees need to be able to influence and hold service providers to account for devolution to have an impact.
- If District Committees are to hold all public services to account, this will require both leadership at the top and partnerships across the city.
- If services need to account to ten District Committees then Councillors may need to be aware that the capacity to do this may be limited and that other districts may be asking for additional services or doing things in a different way. Conflicts here too may need to be resolved by a city-wide partnership or leaders and chief officers.
- Moving forward with a Councillor development programme and building in an approach of Councillor mentoring.
- Every Councillor in a district needs to have a meaningful role. One way of achieving this would be to extend the District Champion roles: giving Councillors an issue or area of expertise to

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- In order to be locally effective, Councillors want to have a delegated budget for their areas as well as being able to have a say on the local use of city-wide budgets.

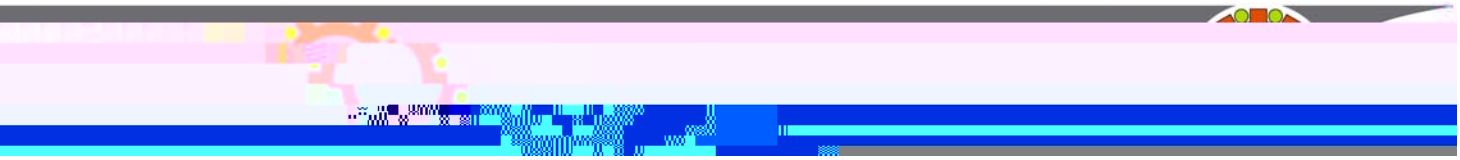


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APPENDIX 1: SWOT (TOWS) Analysis of the Role of Councillors on District Committees (or any successor arrangements)

Moving Forward from Kerslake

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced Councillors. • Elected and accountable to the voters. • There is a public mandate – the public want it to work. (We need structures that ensure citizens are listened to). • Providing quicker responses to issues raised by residents is appreciated by citizens. (Devolution provides the opportunity). • The size of the city means there is a lot of experience across it and the Council can partner other organisations. (It needs to be internally reorganised and outward looking). • Councillors can build expertise or play to their strengths when the role becomes more varied and they are given more responsibility. (Linked to the opportunity of appointing Members to work on topics and report to Cabinet Members). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment especially problems with attending day time meetings for those Councillors that have another job. • Lack of experience in managing budgets. • The current constitution. • The public perception of the number of Councillors (it would be useful if citizens were provided with the number of Councillors per population in the wards and comparatives with other areas outside Birmingham). • The number of Councillors per wards needs to have cross party consensus. • Birmingham is too big. • Opaque or insubstantial 'feedback loop' between localities and the centre. E.g. how are District Leads involved in shaping new service contracts? • Cultural issues – can be task led rather than outcome led (processes get in the way of outcomes). Need to be able to utilise opportunities that come our way. • Silo working of districts and within e.g. Neighbourhood Tasking Groups do not always communicate with Ward Committees. This is reinforced by the structure of the Council. • Having the time and capacity to be able to access external resources such as grants and pooling budgets with other partners. • Not using community expertise enough. • Ambiguous direction of travel – are we working towards more or less devolution.



Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Provides a chance to change the organisation of the Council to make	



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APPENDIX 2: District and Ward Committees (or equivalent) in the Seven Core Cities Local Authority Areas

Local Authority	District and Ward Committees or Equivalent
Bristol City Council	14 Neighbourhood Committees that sit within Neighbourhood Partnerships. The Committees/Partnerships contain 2 – 3 wards.