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COUNCILLOR WASEEM ZAFFAR
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Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1 1BB
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30th March 2016

Councillor John Clancy
Leader

Dear John,

District and Ward Arrangements and Neighbourhood Challenge

Following discussions at the start of the municipal year, the Corporate Resources O&S Committee and the Neighbourhood & Community Services O&S Committee agreed to undertake inquiries to support the new arrangements for district and ward committees.

The Corporate Resources O&S Committee looked at the arrangements as a whole, whilst the Neighbourhood & Community Services O&S Committee looked at the Neighbourhood Challenge in particular.

The final reports of both inquiries are attached to this letter.

With regard to **District Committees**, members felt that the new structures were starting to work well and some had made real progress with important issues in their districts. However, it was still early days and ways of working have yet to be embedded and not all were convinced by the changes. The main points made were:

- The leadership role of Chairs is critical, as is the support given to the Chairs;
- Whilst the structures are now more flexible than they had been, there was still room to accommodate more local difference, for example on allowing more co-optees;
- Flexibility on where to hold District Committee meetings was also requested by some – though other members felt that holding these meetings in the Council House was the right option. Whilst there was no consensus within the Committee on this, this should be considered in future arrangements.

There were concerns that the current structures did not go far enough in empowering local residents to become active citizens; whilst there were areas of good practice, a fundamental transformation had not been achieved. Proposals put forward to strengthen local leadership included:

- That District Committees /Ward Committees should have budgets (as recommended by Kerslake) to fund smaller organisations in their area, to be meaningful and to

solve issues in the ward. It is recognised that from April 2016, District Committees will have responsibility for approving grants from the Local Innovation Fund. However, the full details of this are yet to emerge;

- Support for members was also raised. It is important to note that this is not just about having officers for district/ward administration but crucially about “bending” corporate resources to support local priorities. There was a view that the officer support regime is limited to “doing what we do” rather than exploring new ways of working in localities.

Furthermore, there was agreement that the current boundaries, based on parliamentary constituency boundaries, were artificial and not an effective basis for local decision making. It was also acknowledged that, by 2018 with the new ward boundaries, this model would no longer work. Members were in favour of removing district committees and focusing on wards as more reflective of local communities. Looking forward to 2018 and beyond, alternative models should be explored, perhaps including a flexible devolved model that allowed for different areas to come together as required.

It was also acknowledged that there is a need to address working with all partners at local level – including Amey and other contracted services, to ensure that the best local fit is achieved.

With regard to **Ward Committee/Forums**, the changes here were widely welcomed, with the flexibility to hold meetings in different styles and move away from simply receiving reports. It was suggested that mobile technology should be used to livestream meetings.

The inquiry into **Neighbourhood Challenges** found that a number have taken place on a variety of different topics using various approaches. There were areas of good practice identified, including:

- Discussion on progress and sharing emerging best practice at District Chairs meetings;
- Some Districts provide progress updates at their District Committee meetings;
- Learning from the challenges is shared with other districts.

It was suggested that consideration should be given to discussing Neighbourhood Challenge reports at Council as this would facilitate wider sharing of best practice and shaping of service improvements.

It was noted that there was limited evidence of citizens being involved in Neighbourhood Challenges. It was the Committee’s view that more needs to be done to facilitate wider sharing and promoting of service improvement work with partners and citizens and informing them about how they can become involved. One way to do this would be for District Committees to have work programmes, similar to scrutiny, so that all councillors, partners and citizens can know in advance what will be coming up and can get involved.

Reference was made to the resources available to support the Neighbourhood Challenge work and it was suggested that, in order to do the work justice within the limited resources available, each District should only do one Neighbourhood Challenge a year.

The inquiry identified the need to monitor the developing relationship between the work in the Districts and what is being done in Scrutiny to see how any potential duplication or overlap is being avoided.

Neighbourhood challenge provides a genuine opportunity to work collaboratively with partners, to break down silos between teams within the Council and for councillors to work together across the political parties. This seems to be happening widely but not yet in all districts.

We ask that you take each of these points into consideration when reviewing the Constitution and arrangements for devolution in May 2016.

Further to these reports, the Corporate Resources O&S Committee would like to invite you to the committee meeting on 12th April 2016 to discuss these findings further.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Waseem Zaffar
Chair, Corporate Resources O&S
Committee



Cllr Zafar Iqbal
Chair, Neighbourhood & Community
Services O&S Committee

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cc: Members of the Corporate Resources and Neighbourhood & Community Services O&S Committees



District and Ward Arrangements

Corporate Resources O&S Committee

1 Purpose

- 1.1 At the start of this municipal year, the Corporate Resources O&S Committee agreed to undertake some inquiry work into the new arrangements for district and ward committees, agreed at the May AGM. Since then, the new Leader of the Council has indicated his intention to revisit those arrangements, with a view to “prioritising a radical new approach to devolution within the city”.¹
- 1.2 The Committee held an evidence gathering session to reflect on the district and ward arrangements put in place this year – what has worked well, and what has not worked so well. A note summarising the findings was then circulated to all members of the Council for comment. The findings will form part of the ongoing development process of devolution in Birmingham. Alongside this, the Neighbourhood & Community Services O&S Committee have done some inquiry work on Neighbourhood Challenge, which will also contribute to this work.
- 1.3 This note sets out a summary of the points discussed.

2 The Session

- 2.1 The evidence gathering session was held on Tuesday 9th February; members of the Committee welcomed the following members to contribute to the discussions:
 - Cllr John Alden (Chair, Edgbaston District Committee);
 - Cllr Sue Anderson (Chair, Yardley District Committee);
 - Cllr Peter Griffiths (Chair, Northfield District Committee);
 - Cllr Tony Kennedy (Chair, Hall Green District Committee);
 - Cllr Rob Pocock, (Member, Sutton Coldfield District Committee);
 - Cllr Claire Spencer (Vice-Chair, Hall Green District Committee).
- 2.2 The following members of the Committee were present: Cllrs Marje Bridle (Hodge Hill); Tristan Chatfield (Perry Barr); Mick Finnegan (Erdington); Jon Hunt (Perry Barr); Narinder Kaur Kooner (Perry Barr); Chaman Lal (Ladywood); Gary Sambrook (Erdington); Ken Wood (Sutton Coldfield) Waseem Zaffar (Perry Barr).
- 2.3 This meant that all ten districts except Selly Oak were represented at the meeting.

¹ Key Priorities for 2016, Report of the Leader of the Council, submitted to Corporate Resources O&S Committee on 19th January 2016



District and Ward Arrangements

3 Key Findings

Leadership Role

3.1 The District Chairs were very clear that their role is about leadership, but acknowledged that it is challenging to encourage fellow members and partners to change how they think and behave. A lot does depend on the commitment and ability of the Chair and lead officer. It was acknowledged that the leadership qualities of District Chairs have a strong impact on how the devolution agenda is progressing in individual districts. Some members felt unaware of progress within their districts.

Flexible Structures – but not flexible enough?

3.2 A number of different models of engagement and governance are being used across the city within the district and ward structures. Members welcomed the flexibility within the current structure and appreciated that a *“one size fits all”* approach was not helpful or relevant.

3.3 However, there were still some restrictions that members felt were unhelpful. For example, limiting co-optees to five was preventing some from taking a more strategic partnership/planning approach to District Committees. Current co-optees to District Committees are set out below:

- Edgbaston – West Midlands Police and West Midlands Fire Service;
- Erdington – West Midlands Police and West Midlands Fire Service;
- Hall Green – West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service and Housing Liaison Board Representatives;
- Hodge Hill – West Midlands Fire Service and West Midlands Police;
- Ladywood – West Midlands Police and West Midlands Fire Service;
- Perry Barr – West Midlands Fire Service & West Midlands Police;
- Northfield – West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service a Frankley Parish Council Councillor;
- Selly Oak – West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service, District Housing Panel Representatives and a representative from the Youth Council;
- Sutton Coldfield – West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service, two District Housing Liaison Board Representatives;
- Yardley – West Midlands Police and West Midlands Fire Service.

Where Should the Meetings Be Held?

3.4 There was a divergence of views on whether District Committee meetings should be held out in the districts, or in the Council House where they can be livestreamed and recorded for later viewing. Those in favour of keeping the meetings in the Council House argued that it gives those people who are interested more opportunity to find out what is going on and is a way to get information out to more residents. However, those members who thought meetings should be held



in the district emphasised the importance of local people being able to attend and how that could give people a better opportunity to participate and engage.

- 3.5 The timing of meetings – being held during the day – was also raised as a potential barrier to participation.

What's Been Achieved

- 3.6 The members present outlined the activity undertaken, particularly as related to community planning and Neighbourhood Challenge:

- **Community Plans:** varied experience across the board. Some members could see the importance for their local areas whilst others were less convinced. In Shard End they were focusing on producing a ward plan as they felt it was more appropriate for the area. Councillor Anderson (Yardley pathfinder) valued the additional support being provided via the Future Council programme in drawing up their district community plan. District Conventions have taken place across a number of districts and the general consensus was that they have gone well especially in terms of highlighting key priorities for going forward. Concern was, however, raised about the impact the boundary changes will have on the community plans.
- **Neighbourhood Challenge:** a number of the Neighbourhood Challenges being undertaken were outlined; this is the subject of an inquiry by the Neighbourhood & Community Services O&S Committee, however it was commented that some topics lent themselves to longer timescales than a year.

- 3.7 On the whole, members felt that these had worked well and enabled them to make progress with important issues in their area. However, questions were raised as to whether District Committees were as effective as they could be, and whether they had fully settled into their “scrutiny” role. It was still seen as a “talking shop” by some. There was a disconnect as residents see the City Council as being about providing services and that was not what District Committees do.

- 3.8 Some District Committees have cross-party membership and there were mixed experiences though, on the whole, things were now working well. Having cross-party members on sub-groups or as champions was a good way of using all members of the Committee.

Ward Committee / Forums

- 3.9 The changes to Ward Committees were generally welcomed – the “old style” of receiving reports was not useful and had been replaced with something more effective.

- 3.10 A number of comments were received from members on Ward Committees/Forums:

I would like to say that our Ward committee, which has continued to function as it operated previous years, is performing well. We have had 3 meetings so far this year and I would think the average attendance is near to 80 people a time. We have focused on the local area and it seems to be effective.... Overall I think



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it is absolutely vital we strengthen wards, as these are where the Council actually is seen by the public.

Wards should become more influential: basic services, street cleaning, environment and so on should be dealt with at ward level.

Those wards where WABs still operate should be given help to encourage them

- 3.11 In all, 79 ward meetings have been held or are scheduled to be held before the end of the municipal year (a full list is attached in Appendix 1).
- 3.12 Members proposed that livestreaming and/or recording of ward committee meetings should be brought in, as the mobile technology is available, and has already been done in one ward.

Empowering Citizens

- 3.13 Nonetheless, there were concerns that the current structures did not go far enough in empowering local residents to become active citizens: *"We need a better deal for our communities"*. In particular, District Committees were becoming more distant from communities and moving them back into the local area would go some way to reconnecting with residents. Currently there was no real opportunity for community engagement or interaction at these meetings.
- 3.14 Good practice in wards included:
- Shard End has established two Neighbourhood Forums and ten new resident groups at a neighbourhood level across the ward
 - Kings Heath has employed a "Neighbourhood Innovator" funded via community chest monies but will be expected to fund raise for their own position in future. The Ward Forum has also been renamed as a "Neighbourhood Partnership";
 - Ward Advisory Boards (WAB): active in Perry Barr and Stockland Green wards. Some members felt the local community were more likely to attend a WAB as opposed to a ward committee.
 - It is more critical now than ever to engage with citizens and the most significant challenge for local authorities is to get the right level of infrastructure support for officers, members and citizens to take forward the ambitions.
- 3.15 Nonetheless, the challenge was issued as to whether we were still doing enough to get citizen engagement and involvement to bring about a fundamental transformation.

Further Improvements

- 3.16 A number of proposals were put forward to further strengthen local leadership arrangements.
- 3.17 Firstly, there was a strong feeling that District Committees/Ward Committees should have **budgets** (as recommended by Kerslake) to fund smaller organisations in their area, to be meaningful and to solve issues in the ward. Members told us:



A small pot of money is extremely useful and we in Edgbaston used to use a lot of it on COUNCIL services – extra street cleaning, double yellow lines etc. Things we bought off the Council which the Council centrally had not enough funding for. I thought that was ideal.

I think it imperative that devolution means control of the finance. Control means responsibility. Thus if Constituencies run a deficit they should not be bailed out by all the rest as happens at the moment. Irresponsibility should result in a forfeit of some kind related to the area in which the overspend occurs.

- 3.18 From April 2016, District Committees will have responsibility for approving grants from the Local Innovation Fund. However, the full details of this are yet to emerge.
- 3.19 There was some discussion of the boundaries used for local areas. Some members felt the **use of constituency boundaries** was artificial and irrelevant. These were not an effective basis for decision making, as this puts some very different areas of the city together for purely administrative purposes. It was acknowledged that, by 2018 with the new ward boundaries, this model would no longer work. Members were in favour of removing district committees and focusing on wards as more reflective of local communities. Looking forward to 2018 and beyond, alternative models should be explored, perhaps including a flexible devolved model that allowed for different areas to come together as required.

Support for Committees

- 3.20 A number of members made reference to the lack of “back office” support. They felt they were taking on heavier workloads (partly due to the impact of staff cuts within the council and also some councillors having to dedicate considerable time to championing some of the areas of improvement identified), which was preventing them from carrying out their community leadership role. There were three elements to this:
- Corporate support for local priorities / “bending” corporate resources to support local priorities: There is a view that the officer support regime is limited to “doing what we do” (e.g. Hall Green intends to submit a report to Cabinet on their plans to get corporate support).
 - Support for District Committees – Yardley had support on community planning (as one of two pilots) so were able to develop it “as it should be”, with support and time for face to face interviews, working with partnerships and attending partnerships.
 - Support for ward administration – members having to do a lot themselves (e.g. leafleting about ward meetings; supporting community engagement).

Good Practice across the country

- 3.21 Members cited some useful examples from other areas:



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- Queens Park in London, London's first Parish council with 14 local community councillors representing approximately 12,500 residents. They administer their own small grants programme. The Community Grant is worth £30,000 per annum allowing applications from £100 to £10,000 and is open to individuals, community groups and local organisations and charities based in Queens Park;
- Poplar HARCA (Housing and Regeneration Community Association) a registered social landlord managing around 9,000 homes in Poplar, East London; the majority of which were transferred from Tower Hamlets back in 1998. There is an active Community engagement model in place.

3.22 Within Birmingham there is currently one parish council (New Frankley in Birmingham) and this was cited as a good example of citizens getting together to work for improvement in their locality, which we can learn from.

Contact Officers:

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Appendix 1: Ward Meetings in 2015/16

District/Ward	Number of Meetings
Edgbaston:	
Bartley Green Ward	4
Edgbaston Ward	1
Harborne Ward	4
Quinton Ward	3
Erdington:	
Erdington Ward	3
Kingstanding Ward	1
Stockland Green	0 (active WAB)
Tyburn	1
Hall Green:	
Hall Green Ward	3
Moseley & Kings Heath	2
Sparkbrook	1
Springfield	3
Hodge Hill:	
Bordesley Green	2
Hodge Hill	1
Shard End	4
Washwood Heath	0
Ladywood:	
Aston	0
Ladywood Ward	2
Nechells	1
Soho	2
Longbridge:	
Kings Norton	2



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Longbridge	2
Northfield Ward	4
Weoley	0
Perry Barr:	
Handsworth Wood	1
Lozells and East Handsworth	4
Oscott	3
Perry Barr Ward	2
Selly Oak:	
Billesley	1+police tasking
Bournville	2
Brandwood	1
Selly Oak Ward	2
Sutton Coldfield:	
Sutton Four Oaks	1
Sutton New Hall	1
Sutton Trinity	1
Sutton Vesey	3
Yardley:	
Acocks Green	2
Sheldon	4
South Yardley	3
Stechford & Yardley North	2



Appendix 2: Neighbourhood Challenge

Neighbourhood and Community Services O&S Committee

1 Purpose

- 1.1 The Neighbourhood and Community Services O&S Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry to investigate how the Districts were progressing with their Neighbourhood Challenges.
- 1.2 The intention was that this work should complement and contribute to the work being done by the Corporate Resources O&S Committee, looking at the new arrangements for district and ward committees which were agreed at the AGM in May 2015.

2 The Sessions

- 2.1 The Committee held two sessions within two committee meetings to undertake this piece of work. The discussion at the first session on 17th December 2015 included the changes to the Constitution. The second session on 18th February 2016 was used to gather evidence directly from the District Chairs. We would like to thank Cllr John Alden, Edgbaston District Chair; Cllr Josh Jones, Erdington District Chair; Cllr Peter Griffiths, Northfield District Chair; Cllr Steve Booton, Northfield Vice Chair, Cllr Sue Anderson, Yardley District Chair and Cllr Karen McCarthy, Selly Oak District Chair for attending and giving evidence. A number of District Chairs also attended the Corporate Resources O&S Committee on 9th February 2016 to discuss their Community Plans.
- 2.2 In addition we received written evidence from Ladywood, Perry Barr and Sutton District.
- 2.3 This note sets out a summary of the points discussed.

3 What is a Neighbourhood Challenge?

- 3.1 The Constitution, agreed by City Council in May 2015, set out the new duty on District Committees to undertake a "Neighbourhood Challenge". As set out in the constitution, functions delegated to district committees (Executive Members for District):

A duty of "Neighbourhood Challenge" – to investigate, review and gather data on the performance of all local public services, working in a collaborative but challenging way with all service providers and seeking out and promoting new ways of improving services, in conjunction with relevant Cabinet Member(s) as appropriate, including:–



- Approval of grants from the Local Innovation Fund (from April 2016)
- Bidding for external funding to support neighbourhood and service improvement

3.2 In addition, as per the constitution, the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Management and Homes

‘will work with Executive Members for Districts to support their “neighbourhood challenge” role – with the aim of improving the performance of all council services at a local level and promoting partnership working and service integration across the whole public sector on:

Tenant engagement in social housing	Tenant engagement in the management and development of social housing and Housing Liaison Boards.
Neighbourhood Management	Wider council and public sector integration at the local level.
Cleaner Neighbourhoods	Street cleansing, advising the Cabinet Member for Sustainability on neighbourhood issues. Enforcement of legislation relating to litter prevention, fly-posting, placarding, graffiti and fly-tipping.
Pest Control	Provision of the pest control service.
Local Parks and Allotments	Provision, maintenance and usage of local facilities.

4 Topics covered

4.1 Below is a list of the District’s Neighbourhood Challenges.

District	Neighbourhood Challenge(s)
Edgbaston District	Health and Well Being Disability Club in Edgbaston. Jobs and Skills – focus on local apprenticeships and traineeships targeted at young people not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).
Erdington District	Clean and Green.
Hall Green District	Road Safety and “Twenty is Plenty” Co-produced partnership and behaviour change with residents.
Hodge Hill	Youth Unemployment.
Ladywood	To establish the impact that high concentrations of private rented accommodation, HMOs and hostel accommodation have on local communities within the Ladywood District, and explore how this might be better controlled / managed in future.
Northfield District	Housing and Anti-Social Behaviour.
Perry Barr District	To examine and put in place a series of short and medium term action



	plan objectives to address (i) barriers with communication, engagement and coordination between education, jobs, skills, training and volunteering providers (ii) To identify and ensure key target 'hard to reach' groups are accessing the multitude of education, jobs, skills, training and volunteering opportunities available in the district.
Selly Oak District	Does the impact of the regeneration currently happening in Selly Oak reach those residents in the District living in Brandwood and Billesley in relation to jobs and skills opportunities.
Sutton Coldfield District	To identify the services currently available in 3 key areas of the Health agenda, being Obesity, Falls (prevention) and Dementia.
Yardley District	Youth Employment.

5 Key Findings

Different Ways of undertaking Neighbourhood Challenges

- 5.1 The Districts have undertaken their Neighbourhood Challenges on a variety of different topics using various approaches and carried them out in a number of different ways e.g. evidence gathering sessions in committee meetings, workshops, events and visits etc. This is to be expected as Districts vary greatly and have different issues and priorities and the range of approaches to and topics chosen for Neighbourhood Challenges reflects this.
- 5.2 It became clear that a wide range of service providers and partners have taken part in Neighbourhood Challenges including DWP (Job Centres), colleges, the adult education service, businesses, training and skills providers, West Midlands Police, the Fire Service, community based organisations and the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership.
- 5.3 Members were told that at their District Chairs meetings the Chairs have a useful discussion on progress and share emerging best practice. Also, some Districts provide progress updates at their District Committee meetings. This is important and it could also provide a useful forum to work towards a better understanding on some issues, such as antisocial behaviour, where a more common understanding about what does and does not constitute antisocial behaviour would be helpful.

Mechanism for sharing good practice/learning

- 5.4 There was evidence of much good work taking place which should lead to service improvements. For example:
- Perry Barr District and Selly Oak District have set-up a jobs and skills board/panel.
 - Hall Green District have developed a toolkit for Road Safety that others can use and learn from.
 - Erdington District intend to introduce a 'tracker', similar to the one used in scrutiny, so they can check on progress with recommendations made.



- 5.5 Members were informed that the majority of Districts are aiming to have their Neighbourhood Challenge reports ready for the end of March, which is too late for this report. However, the publication of these reports will help share the research and good practice and also, as per Councillor Peter Griffiths, Northfield District Chair:

“It is my expectation that the report recommendations will lead to improved partnership working locally, stimulate discussion and action across the whole City.”

- 5.6 In order to further assist in the sharing of good practice, learning and improvements more widely and in a more systematic way, it was suggested that a more formal mechanism would be useful. This could be done in a number of ways but one way would be **to have Neighbourhood Challenge Reports discussed at City Council to share best practice with all councillors and to shape service improvements.**

Citizen Involvement/Engagement

- 5.7 There was some limited evidence of citizens being involved in Neighbourhood Challenges. For example, Members were informed that in Northfield, ward committees and neighbourhood forums were consulted and the topic of antisocial behaviour was chosen by residents. Nevertheless we need to find ways of empowering and facilitating citizens to become more involved with and to contribute more widely to Neighbourhood Challenges.
- 5.8 **More needs to be done to facilitate wider sharing and promoting of service improvement work with partners and citizens and informing them about how they can become involved. This could be done in a variety of ways such as through the Council and partner websites, through social media and by discussions at ward and forum meetings.**
- 5.9 It was also suggested that **District Committees should have work programmes, similar to scrutiny, so that all councillors, partners and citizens can know in advance what will be coming up and can get involved**, rather than, in some cases, only the District Chair, or a few councillors being involved. This would help to not only share the workload, but also make it easier for more citizens to become involved and contribute to the work and would also facilitate a wider discussion and debate about the big emerging issues in Districts.

Opportunity for cross –party working

- 5.10 It is clear that there has been a lot of good work taking place in the districts and that the neighbourhood challenge provides a genuine opportunity to work collaboratively with partners, to break down silos between teams within the Council and for councillors to work together across the political parties. This seems to be happening widely but Members were also told that this is not necessarily happening everywhere.



Making best use of limited resources

- 5.11 One common thread was the recognition that there are limited resources available in Districts to support the work of Neighbourhood Challenges which can cause some difficulties. Some Districts Heads support two districts and support from other officers is shrinking as the workforce gets smaller. This makes the issue of increasing citizen engagement in Neighbourhood Challenges all the more important.
- 5.12 The suggestion was that **Districts should only do one Neighbourhood Challenge per year in order to be able to do the work justice with the limited resources available.**

Relationship between Scrutiny and Districts

- 5.13 One of the issues which was set out at the start of the inquiry was to monitor the developing relationship between the work in the Districts and what is being done in Scrutiny to see how any potential duplication or overlap is being avoided.
- 5.14 There are some examples of areas where potentially there could have been duplication between the work happening in the Districts and Scrutiny. For example, Scrutiny looked at antisocial behaviour and this was also a Neighbourhood Challenge for Northfield which was dealt with at the District committee. Similarly, scrutiny looked at problems with missed collections and wheeled bins and Erdington District are looking at the same topic at their District committee. However this appears to have been managed adequately to date by officers liaising, feeding back on outcomes and sharing information informally.

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