

The Evolution of Devolution

Outline Work Programme for the Cabinet Committee Local Leadership 2016-18

Background: The Evolution of Devolution

Birmingham City Council has for decades had an interest in how to engage communities and neighbourhoods in local democracy and local services, recognising the scale of the city and the inevitable remoteness of the central council. Neighbourhood Forums and Ward Committees were followed by the “Local Involvement Local Action” initiative and then by the decision to go for a more radical approach, following the recommendation of Sir Adrian Cadbury’s Democracy Commission in 2000.

After a lengthy period of policy development and consultation (including the Highbury 3 conference and the Constitutional Convention) and two years of detailed planning, the district devolution model was put in place in April 2004. The thinking behind that model was that it was essential to devolve control of services (budgets and management) to a more local level. This was only practical at the district level (and only for a limited number of services). Ward Committees were therefore retained to provide a focus for community engagement at a more local level.

Over time that system has proved unsustainable. Localised management of services and budgets was often more theoretical than real and the costs of the system became unaffordable following the cuts from 2011-12. But the Community Governance Review (started in 2014) and the Kerslake report also suggested other more positive reasons for changing direction and developing a new community leadership role at the local level.

At the same time other significant changes are taking place in the role of local government in Birmingham, around the country and internationally, such as:

- The development of a new approach to metropolitan governance, with the Combined Authorities and metro mayors
- The devolution process and devolution deals
- The ongoing challenge of the spending cuts but also the shift to local finance rather than government grants and the debate on new responsibilities that will accompany this
- Profound changes in specific service areas such as health and social care, education and housing
- The upcoming shift to an all-out elections with new ward boundaries and fewer councillors

- The emergence of urban parish councils, not least the largest town council in the country in Sutton Coldfield.

In response to this, a long term programme of change was started last year, through the cross party Community Governance Working Group, with the following phases:

1. 2015-16: Initial changes to the constitution to reduce the number of scrutiny committees, change the role of district committees from service management to neighbourhood challenge and community planning and begin to shift ward committees towards a “ward forum” approach.
2. 2016-18: Further development of new approaches to local leadership in preparation for the changes in 2018, including the changing role of wards, the future of districts and wider area working, the potential for further parish councils. This will include alignment of these changes with the emerging Future Council operating model for local services and changes at the city and city region level. This phase could include piloting of diverse approaches in local areas which could be rolled out later.
3. 2018-2022: Implementation of new ward arrangements and embedding the changes developed in the previous two years.

The future vision for local leadership

The establishment of the Cabinet Committee and the Assistant Leader posts and the initiation of this work programme for the next phase of devolution provide an opportunity to develop a genuinely radical agenda for change.

Our ambition is to put Birmingham at the vanguard of reform and new ideas on local governance and community leadership, building on the tremendous diversity and vibrancy of our civil society and its social enterprises, community and voluntary organisations and restoring the reputation for good governance that once characterised the city.

It is a vision based on the idea of dispersed leadership in which everyone in the city can aspire to make a difference. It is a vision based on a new sense of pride and purpose and the unique character of Birmingham’s public life expressed through innovation, invention and true leadership. It is a vision based on devolution from central government with new powers to act along with our West Midlands partners but also the empowerment of local communities and individuals in the city.

The Future Council programme and the 2020 Vision discussion paper which went to full council in November, as well as the direction set by the Leader of the Council provide a new context for these changes. The Cabinet is working on more complete Vision that sets out the administration’s priorities for change in the city and how the City Council will contribute to those in partnership with others. It will also focus on the future role of the council and the key areas where the council itself must change. This will steer the work of the Cabinet Committee in the area of local devolution and leadership.

The overriding theme is a shift to a **partnership-based approach**, recognising that wider outcomes for the city will only be achieved by working with others and that the role of the council will be to *lead the city but not run the city*.

In terms of governance and democracy this implies a shift from a *constitutional and internal focus*, based on *direct service delivery* (top down) to an *external and partnership focus* (bottom up and outside in). See box below.

Potential direction of change (the “big shifts”)

- The focus will shift from districts to wards and real neighbourhoods
- There will be no “one size fits all” across the city - instead local areas will develop a diversity of structures and ways of working
- The focus will shift from formal decisions made by committees and cabinet to decisions made with the community
- Integrated services and partnerships with a wider range of providers, including civil society and community groups will mean that even fewer decisions will fall within city council accountability mechanisms. We will need to learn to be accountable through partnership and influence and not control
- Such a shift will require a very different way of working for councillors – emphasising their role as democratic leaders working with other community leaders
- Over time the “centre of gravity” of governance in the city will shift from the Leader and Cabinet to the local leadership of councillors in their communities.

The proposed new smaller wards will enable individual councillors to focus on specific neighbourhoods but will preclude the previous committee approach.

A new landscape of public services is also emerging, including:

- More integrated services across the public sector
- The development of local area hubs providing single access points or gateways to services
- A focus on “whole person, whole family and whole place” and on prevention
- Greater diversity of local services including delivery and action by community and civil society groups
- Innovations that focus public resources on priority outcomes and groups, such as the proposed “Open for Learning” approach to information, advice, learning and skills and the new approach to sports and physical activity.

The principles that will guide the work of the Committee are set out overleaf.

Our Principles of Local Leadership

Based on the big shift and the context outlined above, the following principles will guide the next stage of the “evolution of devolution” and the work of the Committee:

Subsidiarity – activities should take place at the lowest possible level. Devolution should be driven from the bottom up, starting at the level of real neighbourhoods that people identify with

Partnerships – the partnership theme in the overall Future Council vision should be even stronger at the most local level

Diversity – there is no “one size fits all” solution to this – we need to allow different local areas to develop their own ways forward and to innovate and take risks from which the whole city can learn

Local leadership – we need a framework that will support stronger local leadership of all sorts, including enabling local areas to set out their priorities and plan their future (community planning) and to challenge service providers (neighbourhood challenge). Leadership should also be supported through diverse forms of local engagement, stronger community assets and open data.

Co-production – working together to identify problems, develop solutions and take action, rather than delivering standard solutions to the community. Local leadership is based on taking action with communities not on council budgets and decision making structures

Modern public services – we should develop new models of local services that are accessible and responsive to local communities and individuals, joined up and focused on the local place.

A focus on outcomes that matter

From the start, this work must be based on outcomes that matter to the people of Birmingham.

An early part of the work programme will be to set out a clear scheme of outcomes that will guide the Committee’s work. This will also be used to assess the progress with this way of working, including the effectiveness of the Assistant Leader role. Outcomes will be drawn from existing service improvement targets for local services, public priorities in terms of how they can influence and get involved in local democracy and objectives for specific policy areas within the Policy Review (see below). More details on this will be reported to an early meeting of the Committee.

The role of the Cabinet Committee and the Assistant Leaders

Both the Cabinet Committee and the Assistant Leaders will play a central, leading role in taking this agenda forward. This will divide into two areas of work: the ongoing functions of the committee and a policy review designed to take forward the next stages of the evolution of devolution, starting in 2016-18 but continuing beyond 2018.

1. The ongoing work of the Committee and the Assistant Leaders

In addition to the need to support the meetings of the Committee and ensure that communications are in place, the role description of the Assistant Leaders (Appendix 1) indicates that the following areas of ongoing work will need to be supported:

On a city wide basis: leadership and policy development in the areas identified in this document

On an area basis, within their area:

- Promoting and supporting changes to the practice, culture and capabilities underpinning the role of “front line councillor”
- Shaping and supporting local partnership working and engagement with communities and local stakeholders
- Shaping neighbourhood governance and neighbourhood delivery plans working alongside District Committee Chairs
- Ensuring that arrangements are in place to move beyond the districts model whilst capturing the learning and the partnerships developed in previous years and supporting the role and contribution of all local councillors
- Ensuring that local issues and innovations are reflected in strategic decision making with regard to Local Leadership, Every Place Matters and A Better Deal for Neighbourhoods.

2. Policy Review of local leadership and community governance

The Policy Review will be taken forward throughout the next phase and we will not put an artificial deadline on its completion. However work on specific areas of policy within the Review will be completed within the current municipal year or the year after. All significant policy proposals will be reported to Cabinet for approval.

The review will be in three parts:

1. Area working – looking at what will replace the districts model
2. A Better Deal for Neighbourhoods – looking at how we can improve local services and enable stronger community engagement
3. Every Place Matters – looking at how we can spread the benefits of devolution and economic growth to the whole city and regenerate areas of the city in need of change.

More detail is given on each of these below.

Area working

- The development of a new area geography for the city, based on the new ward boundaries and bottom up collaboration between wards.
- The potential to develop new integrated local services and early intervention focused on key outcomes within our goals of preventing family breakdown, maximising independence for adults and economic growth and jobs.
- Flexible working across ward and district boundaries on different priorities – developing a new bottom up geography for the city
- The development of new governance models such as town and parish councils and the agreement of devolution to those bodies
- The provision of new “hubs” or “gateways” to services which could link local residents into services provided at an area, city wider or even combined authority level
- Leadership development programmes and culture change – from “back bench” to “frontline” councillors
- The work of the Assistant Leaders set out above – including the areas of the city and policy specialisms they will cover and evaluating the impact and value of their work.
- The establishment of the Local Innovation Fund, including details of how it will be allocated and the criteria for spending.
- Any updated guidance to District Committees and Ward Forums as may be necessary to reflect the changes being made.

A Better Deal for Neighbourhoods

- Ward Forums – developing these as an interface between residents and local community organisations and public services and elected representatives.
- Support for neighbourhood forums and other community led bodies and their relationships with councillors
- The capacity of the voluntary and community sector and communities themselves in different parts of the city and how this can be improved
- Enhancing the “ownership” and control exercised by social housing tenants and the role of District Housing Panels and Housing Liaison Boards

- The value of models such as neighbourhood management and neighbourhood tasking and how they can be supported
- Open data and new forms of digital engagement, for example performance data on services, ward based asset registers, promotion of volunteering opportunities and time banking
- New forms of neighbourhood delivery and partnership – for example social investment, community trusts, community based housing associations or other examples developed elsewhere through the national Our Place initiative
- Enhancing influence on services across the public sector through very local Community Planning or Neighbourhood Challenge processes (perhaps linking into those for wider areas) and well established methods such as working with the Police on Neighbourhood Tasking
- “Neighbourhood Agreements”, “Charters” or “neighbourhood promise” – a compact between public service agencies and local communities on service standards and the responsibilities of services and the public
- Neighbourhood or community councils (parish councils) - there is the potential for more parish councils to be set up at a similar scale to new wards. One idea is for the City Council to do local “devolution deals” with them to localise some services. This would create a new element of very local democracy with an additional resource arising from the Council Tax precept.
- Improving the way we work at a local neighbourhood level through linking new approaches to service delivery (“operating models”) with the role of councillors in working with local residents. This means finding ways to make services more responsive and ward/neighbourhood level engagement more powerful within the design of services.

Every Place Matters

- A new policy for local centres – the creation of a Big City Plan style framework document for the city’s local centres and an implementation/action plan to take it forward
- Local Skills and Employment Plans – building on the work done in some districts over the last year and putting in place local plans for skills and employment across the city.
- Area policies for other key policy areas such as housing development and clean and green neighbourhoods.

Resources to support the Committee and the Assistant Leaders

The following resources are already in place to support this work:

1. Ongoing work of the Committee and the Assistant Leaders

- A named Corporate Leadership Team lead: Strategic Director Place, supported by another JNC officer in Place Directorate.
- The four remaining G7 “District Head” posts. These roles are evolving as we move away from the District model. They will devote a proportion of their time to supporting the work of the Assistant Leaders, dependent on the ongoing requirements to support district committee and other local activities.
- The four G5 Community Support and Development Officers – a portion of their time dependent on other local duties
- Three Governance Managers and one administrator are dedicated to supporting ward level work but this will make a contribution to the work programme set out here.
- A Committee Clerk.

2. The Policy Review officer team

A core team will support the policy development work of the committee. This will be supplemented by a range of other staff working on specific strands of the work (details to be reported to the Cabinet Committee in due course) and by the use of external expertise from partner organisations such as the universities and input from community based organisations.

- A portion of the time of a JNC officer and one of the G7 District Head posts
- A portion of the time of two Corporate Strategy Team policy officers
- Contributions from the Economy and People directorates as appropriate
- Such Corporate Support as is needed to supplement this staff, for example legal, finance and HR input

The Cabinet Committee will undertake a review of resource needs as it develops its proposals for future arrangements. The evolving approach will also be supported by the Local Innovation Fund and the Cabinet Committee will set out a detailed approach to how that money will be invested. The resources dedicated to local working will evolve over time and will be a key consideration in future budget reviews.