



Devolution and Localisation

13 January 2004

Devolution and Localisation: Interim Issues Report

1: Introduction

- 1.1 This Task and Finish Committee was established at the start of the current municipal year. Chaired by Cllr Hugh McCallion, the other Members on the Committee are Cllrs Gordon Green, Len Gregory, Les Lawrence, Mike Nangle and Penny Wagg.
- 1.2 The Committee's terms of reference are to scrutinise, complement and add value to the work of the Executive on all issues relating to:-
- i) the City Council's localisation and devolution proposals
 - ii) performance management
 - iii) the Cabinet and Corporate Plan
 - iv) such other policy/performance matters that the Co-ordinating O&S Committee refers to the Task and Finish Committee
- 1.3 Members are well aware that the localisation and devolution plans will bring fundamental change. The delivery of many services, management arrangements and the roles of Members will all be radically affected. With the first tranche due to be delivered in April, this is an opportune moment for the full City Council to share perceptions of progress and agree any fine tuning of the Executive's plans which may be necessary.



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2: Findings

- 2.1 Devolution and localisation together form a key priority for the City Council this year, identified in the Cabinet and Corporate Plan and clearly linked to the wider agenda of developing flourishing neighbourhoods. More detailed performance measures are found in the current Performance Plan, the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety being accountable for four measures, and the Leader for seven.
- 2.2 The City Council itself debated the issues in April 2003, and was updated through a presentation and discussion in October that year.
- 2.3 The Cabinet Committee on Devolution is charged with overseeing the work, guiding and determining specific issues, and keeping the Cabinet and full Council informed. Since June 2003 it has considered 20 agenda items, covering service migration, including support service and accommodation issues; training for officers and Members; the devolution of Housing services; constituency service standards and indicative constituency budget allocations. There were very important issues shaping the development of the localisation framework and we must express our concern that 85% of the reports were not available when the agenda was despatched. All Members need adequate time to consider what can be quite complex issues.
- 2.4 All the work of the Cabinet Committee has of course been available to us. We have concentrated on four important areas:
- the migration of services
 - progress with "pathfinder" Community Based Housing Organisations
 - the timing of the overall devolution programme and housing improvement
 - progress on Constituency Committees.
- 2.5 We discussed the plans for service migration with the appropriate senior manager. The proposals are detailed and comprehensive. They are aimed squarely both at putting new officer arrangements in place before April 2004 and ensuring that the service to the public is maintained during the transition.



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- 2.6 Within these plans, the major outstanding question for us relates to the project on the co-ordination of IT infrastructure and the provision of management information on a constituency basis. We expect to return to this issue in the next stage of our work.
- 2.7 The word of caution here is to recognise the obvious – that having robust plans does not ensure smooth implementation. Indeed, one of the reasons for planning is to be able to assess when a delay is likely to be critical and what remedial action should be taken. The Executive may wish to take advantage of today's debate to update the full Council on the implementation of the plans.
- 2.8 We have also heard from officers supporting both the Hodge Hill and the Northfield Pathfinder Initiatives developing Community-Based Housing Organisations. It appeared to us that the Northfield initiative was somewhat the more advanced of the two. There are different approaches by the two Initiatives; for example, while Northfield is producing a single Statement of Intent, Hodge Hill is producing two. Because local residents' views in the constituency differ from one area to another, there will be one Statement of Intent for the Hodge Hill area and one for Shard End. For a devolution initiative, differing approaches in different parts of the city must be entirely appropriate.
- 2.9 Both Pathfinder Initiatives reported good levels of public involvement. They satisfied us that they will move forward at a sensible pace, ensuring that issues were fully understood by local residents. We would like to see some re-balancing of this involvement. The City Council's policy is that "residents and tenants" be involved, and our conclusion is that at this stage the initiatives could benefit from a little more attention to non-tenant residents.
- 2.10 We would like to let the City Council know that the Committee was informed, in response to a specific question, that, apart from some Neighbourhood Renewal funding, no additional finance had been received by the Pathfinder initiatives for service improvements.
- 2.11 Overall, the two Pathfinders seem to be making good progress. We are aware that many Members are concerned about the balance between improving the Council's housing landlord functions on the one hand and progressing housing devolution on the other. We expect this issue to be addressed in the final report from the Housing Services Task and Finish O&S Committee.



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- 2.12 At a meeting on 13 October, we considered progress at that stage towards appointing Constituency Directors. At that stage, just after the first recruitment round, four Directors had been appointed. With regard to the remaining vacancies, we were informed that options under consideration ranged from immediate re-advertising to taking temporary measures such as secondments to the vacant posts.
- 2.13 In the event, the posts were re-advertised. Tasks fell to existing staff to carry out. At the time of putting this report together, fresh interviews have not taken place, let alone appointments made.
- 2.14 This brings us to the last set of issues in this interim report. The Constituency Directors, once appointed, will undoubtedly play key roles in supporting the development and work of the Constituency Committees. How have they fared over the last few months?
- 2.15 It must be remembered that this municipal year is intended to be used by Constituency Committees in preparation for their full operation. The target in the Performance Plan – for all the Committees to be operational has been met, and all have met at least once.
- 2.16 Nevertheless, there are expectations on Constituency Committees. The report to Council in April 2003 expected that Constituency Committees would produce an Interim Constituency Governance Framework by the autumn of 2003. It also called for an Annual Plan for Consultation and Engagement. The Cabinet Committee on Devolution agreed the Outline Services Migration Plan in July. That report expected that constituencies would develop their draft service structures for approval by the Strategic Director of Resources by the end of November.
- 2.17 On 24 November we heard from three members who chair Constituency Committees, Cllrs Steve Bedser, Frank Coyne and James Hutchings. The evidence therefore came from one representative of each of the three main political groups on the City Council.



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- 2.18 The Council's aims for devolution and localisation are that it should lead to more responsive, customer focused service delivery, and form a focus for increased citizen participation. The three chairpersons left us with a consistent but contrasting view of the current position. The message we received was one of relative disengagement from the current process. The perception was that this was centrally driven through the Cabinet Committee receiving advice from centrally-based officers. Constituency Committees and their Chairpersons were not being included in discussions, and because of a lack of their own officer support they could not themselves engineer opportunities for involvement.
- 2.19 At that time – the end of November – the Cabinet Committee had just agreed papers on Indicative Constituency Budget Allocations and on Constituency Service Standards. The perception was, therefore, that the benefits of advance involvement of and discussion with Members chairing Constituency Committees had been missed. This in turn could be linked to the view that the Committees were not yet attracting public involvement partly because of a lack of publicity, and partly because issues of local interest are not yet being taken. Underlying this again was the lack of resources available at local level to support localisation and devolution.
- 2.20 Finally it is worth giving thought to the Constituency Service Standards. These include service specifications and key performance indicators, underpinned by performance management systems and information. The service specifications will be the Council's statement to the Constituency Committees of what the Committees are required to deliver for each service and the minimum service standards applicable.
- 2.21 In this context we feel there would be value in a discussion to ensure that there is a consistent understanding of what will be prescriptive and what permissive. The mantra "one size does not fit all" is one much in vogue not just in Birmingham but nationally at the moment and must be essentially right. But there will be some consistent core standards and requirements which are required across the whole of the City Council. The approach taken by the Cabinet Committee to identify these must be taken forward expeditiously, but coupled with a shared understanding of how they have come about.



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3: Conclusions

- 3.1 The purpose of this interim report is to inform the City Council of some of the issues raised through our work. We are an *overview* and scrutiny committee. We believe that some of our best work comes out of the overview and scrutiny function when we can proactively overview and help shape matters rather than reactively scrutinise decisions once they have been made. We are wanting to work in this way and believe that this is beneficial to all parts of the Council. That is why we wish to promote this discussion at the City Council itself.
- 3.2 Devolution and localisation represent the biggest organisational and cultural change the City Council has faced for a long time and we need to make sure we get it right. We invite other Members to develop and add to these issues. Through discussion and debate we hope that misapprehensions can be corrected and future necessary steps can be identified.

MOTION

That the City Council discuss the issues raised in this interim report alongside the accompanying report from the Executive.