

**Patrick Clark Consulting**

**Evaluation of the Bromsgrove  
Community Influence Framework**

**Final Report**

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# Section 1 – Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a review of Bromsgrove District Council's Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots undertaken between September and December 2007. Supported by the West Midlands Local Government Association (WMLGA) Learning 2 Deliver programme this review sought to evaluate the progress of these pilots in the light of national best practice and local stakeholder views.

This review is timely as it operates within the context of the Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities", The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill (2007) and a raft of other related policies and initiatives that put neighbourhood and locality structures and processes at the heart of Local Government and partnership working. For example, the Local Government Association's (LGA) report: "Independence, Opportunity, Trust – A Manifesto for Local Communities" considers the two main challenges facing local government as securing the improvement of public services and reducing public disaffection with politicians and traditional political processes. In response to these challenges, the LGA has developed a vision for independent self-governing communities and they outline ten key objectives to be met in order to address these challenges facing Local Government. These objectives are:

1. Bring real power close to the people
2. Devolve power from central Government to local Councils
3. Devolve power through local Councils to individuals, communities and local organisations
4. Strengthen local political leadership
5. Secure efficiently provided local services tailored to individual and local needs
6. Steer all community public services to meet priorities agreed with local people
7. Transfer key public services and agencies to local democratic control
8. Reform local taxation
9. Streamline inspection
10. Create an equal partnership between local and central Government

Several of these objectives are addressed by the Neighbourhood Area Committee (NAC) pilots.

## 1.1 Background

During Spring 2007, Bromsgrove District Council set up two Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots in the communities of Rubery and Alvechurch, with a commitment to evaluate these over their first year of operation to help inform the future development and role out of these structures within the District. This ongoing evaluation and sharing of good practice and ideas was to be undertaken by a Steering Group of senior officers of Bromsgrove District Council and lead Councillors from the two pilots with external evaluation being provided under West Midlands Local Government Association "Learning 2 Deliver" programme by Patrick Clark Consulting.

Though no clear objectives were stated for these Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) a number of key features for the pilots were identified. These were:

- That they should not add another tier of local democracy and should instead build on and supported the role of local members.
- Providing a forum for local agencies to work together.

- The NACs to operate between the operational (PACT) and strategic (LSP) levels to deliver tactical responses to area based issues.
- Organised themselves in response to local circumstances i.e. there is no “one size fits all” model for the NACs.

A budget of £8,000 for 2007/08 was allocated for the administration and operation of the pilots and local Bromsgrove District Councillor and high level officer support was committed at this stage.

## **1.2 The Commission**

The evaluation has been undertaken by Patrick Clark Consulting between September and December 2007. We were asked to review the Neighbourhood Area Committees and national best practice and make recommendations for the future development of Neighbourhood Area Committees within Bromsgrove District.

The initial project proposal was for a review of best practice in areas similar to Bromsgrove District Council followed by observations of the Committees in action and a series of 15-20 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and partner agencies to assess the effectiveness of the pilots and gauge opinion as to the future development of Area Committees and/or similar structures within Bromsgrove District.

After early discussions with the key council members leading the two Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots the nature of the project altered slightly with a greater focus on the structures themselves and less emphasis on wider stakeholder views and related processes and structures such as PACT and Parish and Town Councils. This narrower focus, along with some uncertainty about the outline objectives for the pilots, has affected this study and narrowed its scope. As such rather than providing a comprehensive evaluation of the NAC pilots, this report should be seen as report on an interim evaluation making recommendations not only for the future development of Neighbourhood Area Committees themselves within Bromsgrove District but also for the continued evaluation of these processes over coming years.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The chosen methodology was qualitative rather than quantitative and as such was more concerned with providing depth and gauging opinion than a quantifiable test of people’s views. A number of methods were used:

### **Observations:**

Observations were carried out of the Bromsgrove Partnership “Town Hall Meeting” and Rubery Area Committee. This helped provide context for the rest of the evaluation.

### **Desk Review**

Examples of national best practice were drawn from a desk review of similar evaluations, web reports and the results of follow up telephone conversations with a small number of lead officers in other districts. The key themes for the desk review were:

- Arrangements in areas similar to Bromsgrove – strengths and weaknesses
- Evaluations of other area committee structures
- Findings of national research into Neighbourhood Management / Area Committees

### **Consultation:**

Eight semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key members of the Neighbourhood Area Committees, Council Officers and a small number of key stakeholders with additional less structured telephone conversations with a Parish Clerk from one of the pilot areas. Interviews took place in person or over the telephone. The themes for the interviews were drawn from the desk review with key areas, such as community engagement cited as important features of successful neighbourhood management nationally.

It became clear early in the discussions with stakeholders that a diverse range of views existed regarding the purpose and effectiveness of the pilots and as a result we took the decision to defer further interviews with a wider group of stakeholders until after the recommendations of this report had been considered. An evaluation of structures or projects with unclear objectives is difficult and in our view further interviews at this stage would not have added value to the report (please see findings for further detail regarding this).

Discussion themes for the consultation were identified as:

- Clarity about the purpose of the Area Committees
- Linkages with other mechanisms (e.g. Partners and Communities Together (PACT) and Parish and Town Councils)
- Linkages with the community
- Level of involvement
- How they were invited / clarity about their role
- Strengths and weaknesses of existing arrangements
- Future priorities and challenges
- (Where appropriate) The level of partner support for arrangements

## **Section 2 – Desk Review Findings**

A desk review was carried out of key literature relating to neighbourhood management, area forums and area committees and also of the Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots. This included a review of the approaches adopted within similar local authorities and of other studies relating to this subject (where authorities illustrate a point they will be included in brackets). Rather than identifying best practice at this stage the review sought to highlight some of the key issues for discussion and exploration during the interviews that Bromsgrove District Council might wish to consider in developing their pilots further.

### **2.1 The national picture**

According to LGA research in 2004, at that time 26% of councils had area committees with decision-making structures in place below the whole local authority level (19% of districts) and 54% of councils had area forums in place below the whole local authority level (49% of districts). Many more Local Authorities had plans to develop them in the next two years, so it is safe to assume that the numbers of Local Authorities supporting such initiatives has increased. However, there has only been limited evaluation of the arrangements in place and where this does exist it is complicated by the differing aims and objectives behind the development of area arrangements and the nature of these arrangements themselves. These different aims and objectives can be summarised as:

Different emphasis / focus of area arrangements, including combinations of:

1. Delegated decision making or consultative / advisory roles
2. Local Authority Business
  - a. Delegated (Chester / Sefton)
  - b. Consultative (3 Rivers, Salisbury) or
  - c. Wider Community Focus (North Tyneside)
3. Council led structures or with partners as well
4. Closed or Open meetings
5. Committee style or participative
6. Delegated budgets or partnership and added value.

Differing objectives:

1. Localised Management (making services more responsive and community centred)
2. Engagement (involving and empowering citizens and communities, building community participation and community cohesion)
3. Governance (devolving democracy and decision making, leading to more active and empowered democratic representatives).

Different types of neighbourhood / area body:

1. Area Committees
2. Area Forums
3. Neighbourhood Fora

## 2.2 Key themes:

1. The purpose and objectives behind the area/neighbourhood arrangements needs to be clearly defined and agreed. Evidence suggests that devolved decision making for Local Authorities does not necessarily equate with enhanced community participation and satisfaction (Herefordshire LAFs). Likewise neighbourhood management arrangements at the local level may not have the necessary buy-in of key stakeholders like partner agencies and/or key local authority services if objectives are not clear and agreed (Mansfield). Setting out the objectives for the area arrangements in the first place enables effective evaluation of progress against initial aims (Chester City Council).

As an example, North Tyneside Council's Area Forums have the following objectives:

- To increase democratic participation by local people
- To encourage openness and transparency
- To assist the council to achieve Best Value and continuous improvement in service delivery
- To play a role in scrutiny and in holding the executive to account
- To complement partnership working by providing a mechanism for the views of residents to be fed into the various partnership boards and the North Tyneside Strategic Partnership
- To develop area plans to inform the Community Plan
- To improve community leadership for the benefit of the whole area.

Though there are some issues with the measurement of several of these objectives, they have enabled North Tyneside to track their progress and ensure greater buy-in to the forums from stakeholders including the community.

2. Area arrangements must not be imposed and “local people should be allowed a real say in shaping them” (LGA 2004). Arbitrary boundaries can be a deterrent to community and stakeholder engagement though ward boundaries and other such constraints do restrict the scope for flexibility (Mansfield).
3. Continuing council commitment, involvement and support are essential to ensure wide and representative community involvement which is a key success factor (LGA 2004)
4. Members need to adopt an engaging and facilitative style to encourage participation and involvement (formality can be a deterrent). The amount of time for public involvement may impact on attendance levels and satisfaction (Herefordshire). “The (inevitable) formality of procedures for official committees of the Council makes meetings less interesting and/or more intimidating for members of the public” (Chester) (ORS 2006)
5. As community and stakeholder capacity is finite, linkages with other mechanisms for involvement are important, particularly where Parish and Town Councils and other area based initiatives are already in existence. In two tier areas it is important to be clear about what the relationship between county structures or thematic bodies (LSPs, Older People’s Forums etc) is. What is the relationship and how does this work? Are there opportunities for rationalisation? (Herefordshire, Mansfield).
6. It is important that discussions within area arrangements reflect the public’s priorities or else they will disengage and see them as irrelevant (Mansfield, Chester).
7. Area / Partnership Working – Services within the council and other agencies need to focus on an area basis as well as service wide if they are to increase their contact with communities through the area arrangements. A clear devolution strategy for this work is necessary in the longer term (IDeA).
8. Training and information is required for officers and members to ensure that necessary skills (e.g. facilitation and presentation) are in place to facilitate community and stakeholder engagement (Herefordshire, Mansfield, Chester).
9. Inclusion of the wider community - ethnic minority communities and younger people are less likely to engage with Area Committees (Chester, Mansfield) so particular effort and resources may need to be targeted at these groups or complimentary approaches may need to be developed and fed into the area arrangements.

In 2003, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit identified seven principles of neighbourhood management and these provide a useful framework within which to assess the effectiveness of area arrangements. The seven principles are:

- A clearly defined neighbourhood

- Resident (Community) involvement
- A dynamic neighbourhood manager with clout
- A local partnership to provide strategic direction
- Support and commitment from the local authority and LSP
- Quality information
- Commitment of service providers and mechanisms for engagement
- Between services and residents

The initial trawl of the national best practice indicates that there is much to learn from the experience of other areas in shaping the approach of the pilots, particularly once the key objectives of the Bromsgrove Neighbourhood Area Committee Pilots have been refined.

## Section 3 – Interview Findings

The interviews identified both positive features of the Neighbourhood Area Committees and areas where things did not work as well. These can be summarised as:

### 3.1 Things that work well

- Strong support for operating at an area or neighbourhood level
- Support for structures operating between the PACT level and Bromsgrove Local Strategic Partnership
- A feeling that with support the committees could “add value”
- NACs already addressing community concerns, including some “quick wins”
- Flexibility to meet local priorities
- A greater awareness at all levels of key community priorities
- Recognition of the need to address larger scale local issues

### 3.2 Issues

- A lack of clarity about the aims and objectives of the Area Committee pilots
- A lack of consistency between those objectives that were identified
- Divergent views on the role of local politicians
- Divergent views on the links with other mechanisms such as Parish and Town Councils, PACT
- The role of the community in influencing decisions
- Sustainability of area arrangements
- The involvement of partner agencies and their role

### 3.3 Key Findings

Some findings of the evaluation are cross cutting and relate to both pilots and in other cases the views expressed relate specifically to one or the other. Where this is the case it is indicated in the report. There are some key achievements to date and these should be celebrated. However, for the purposes of this evaluation it is more helpful to focus on the issues and make recommendations for addressing these.

### Aims and Objectives

Many interviewees were unclear about the overall objectives and purpose for the Area Committees and were unable to state any that had been given to them. Some people



were clearer about the objectives for the Area Committees but these were not consistent between interviewees.

However, despite a lack of consistency when asked a number of desired aims, objectives and purposes were identified in the interviews. These were:

1. Addressing local concerns and irritants more effectively
2. Taking a longer term view of local community issues
3. Linking community views to council and other agency's decision making processes
4. Adding value to existing Local Authority and councillor activity
5. Bringing a wider group of people together to address local issues and concerns
6. An unofficial, more informal local council for the area
7. A local partnership to address longer term issues community issues / acting as an area based Local Strategic Partnership
8. Utilising local players to address local issues more quickly.

### **The role of local councillors**

Views on the role of local councillors differed, although a common theme was the need for local councillors of both the County and District council to be involved. Views on the role of the councillors included:

1. As facilitators of local action and activity – ensuring action is taken to address local concerns and issues
2. As the main decision makers (were council services are concerned)
3. To enable them to keep informed of local community views and act as an advocate between communities and the council.

Concerns were raised about the dominance of members and “local politics” within Area Committees and the imbalance of power between them and other members, particularly lay members.

In Rubery there was a difference of opinion as to whether the local councillors should have the decision making role or whether the Area Committee members should have equal decision making responsibilities. However, the majority of respondents across the interviews felt that Councillors, though having an important role in the success of the Area Committees, should not have a dominant role in decision making within the committees.

### **Linkages with other agencies and processes**

The role of Neighbourhood Area Committees as vehicles for partnership action was felt to be a positive one and it was recognised that some form of neighbourhood committee was desirable between the local (PACT) and District wide (Bromsgrove Partnership). Some suggestions were made regarding the scale of the NACs, with Council wards and Police sub-divisions mentioned and there was agreement that this needs to be considered carefully when looking at a role out of the NACs across the District.

The link with PACT was considered particularly helpful in both NACs and these were regarded as complimentary processes. The role of the NACs in supporting and influencing the work of Bromsgrove Partnership was also mentioned by a number of interviewees though this was felt to be less important with regard to Rubery.

The relationship between Parish and Town Councils and the NACs was unclear and in the case of Rubery NAC, no Parish exists. However, when considering a role out of NACs across Bromsgrove district, the majority of respondents felt that Parish and Town Councils needed to be involved and that they should be encouraged to see the NACs as complimentary to the role of the Parishes rather than a treat.

### **The role of the community**

#### Rubery:

Though the role of the NAC in representing the views of the community and addressing community priorities was felt to be important, there was agreement that the NACs were not the forum for engaging the community. The role of local councillors and PACT in identifying community priorities were felt to be the vehicle through which community engagement could take place.

#### Alvechurch:

Some meetings of Alvechurch NAC were open to the public but opinions differed as to whether this was productive or not. However, again the link with PACT was felt to be important in giving a community view and engaging the community.

Though direct engagement with communities was not felt to be important in Rubery effective communication between and with communities was felt to be an important by both pilots. Promotion of the role of the NACs and their achievements was considered a more important priority than direct community engagement which is achieved through other fora such as PACT, Parish and Town Councils and residents associations.

Both NACs had made moves to improve communication with the local media and were looking at newsletters as vehicles for communicating with the wider community. Alvechurch NAC had actively co-opted a communications expert onto their committee in order to progress this work.

### **Sustainability of arrangements**

Views differed as to the amount of resource required to support the NACs. In the case of Rubery, a devolved or ring fenced budget for use by the NAC was felt to be a key success factor in the future development of the NAC, whereas Alvechurch as more concerned with a small administrative budget to support meetings, communications etc.

There was little evidence from the interviews that Partner agencies would be willing to support the NACs financially, though key partners were prepared to continue sending officers to meetings as and when required. Key partners such as the County Council, West Mercia Constabulary and Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) all had their own community engagement structures in place and therefore would direct their resources at these arrangements first.

Some interviewees questioned whether the level of officer support from Bromsgrove District Council was necessary in addition to the member role. Others however felt that this was appropriate but unsustainable alongside chief officer support at PACT meetings.

### **The involvement of Partner agencies**

Partners were generally supportive of the intentions of the NAC pilots but felt that they were insufficiently involved in shaping the NACs and also felt that they had yet to prove

themselves to be effective. As they had not been involved in shaping the NACs they considered them to be primarily Bromsgrove District Council rather than partnership structures.

## Section 4 – Recommendations

Though some important lessons have been learnt during the first 6 months of the Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots, it is clear that for a number of reasons the evaluation has identified more problems or unresolved issues than solutions at this stage. The key reasons for this are the short timescales involved between the start of the pilots and the evaluation and the lack of clarity about core objectives for the Area Committees upon which evaluation can take place.

However, we are able to make a number of recommendations for the future development of Neighbourhood Area Committees in Bromsgrove District:

1. **A set of core objectives and terms of reference needs to be agreed for all Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots.** Though there is some strength in enabling local arrangements to develop as appropriate to their local circumstances and this flexibility should be maintained, this is at the same time hindered by a lack of consistency in the objectives behind these arrangements. This leads to a lack of consistency in terms of community engagement, resources and the involvement and support of partner agencies. If the NACs are to be rolled out across Bromsgrove certain features will need to be common to all to enable all communities to benefit and to ensure consistency of partner support for example. In addition the Council and its partners need to be clear what role they seek for the NACs. For example, is the primary role to support localised management of services, community engagement and empowerment or improved local governance or a combination of all of these?

We would therefore recommend that both the scope and focus of the pilots and their key objectives are agreed with the key members and stakeholders. As the intention is that the NACs should compliment the role of the Bromsgrove Partnership, we recommend that the Partnership holds a stakeholder event (possibly two) to agree the core objectives and terms of reference of the NACs. The objectives identified by participants in this review could provide the basis for discussions by key stakeholders alongside the key features of effective Neighbourhood Management identified in the desk review. Key features of the event could be:

- The event / meeting would need to involve key stakeholders such as councillors and senior officers of key partners (e.g. West Mercia Constabulary).
- We suggest that the event is facilitated by a neutral partner or an external facilitator.
- This event might also consider:
  - The scale and number of the NACs in the light of these objectives.
  - Linkages with other bodies such as Parish and Town Councils, PACT and Bromsgrove Partnership.

Having jointly agreed these aims and objectives all stakeholders can take an active role in evaluating the effectiveness of the NACs over time and this could provide a useful basis for a further evaluation process in 12 months time.

2. **The emphasis of the NACs should be to operate tactically** between the strategic role of Bromsgrove Partnership and individual partner agencies rather than duplicating the effort of either and the operational and local role of PACT and other community fora.
3. **BDC roll out the pilots to a further two areas**, in consultation with local members and key partners and with a clear commitment to the agreed objectives of the NACs. We recommend that each area should contrast with the existing pilots to maximise the learning from them. Examples might be a rural deprived area and a dispersed rural area. These additional pilots would further strengthen the ongoing evaluation and 12 month review of progress.
4. As different opinions exist about the use of devolved budgets, we recommend that Bromsgrove District Council consider **devolution of a small local budget to one of the pilots** to enable it to deliver small scale local projects. The success of this devolved budget should be measured according to criteria agreed by the project steering group. We are happy to advise on an evaluation framework for the effectiveness devolved budget, which could test community satisfaction, community awareness etc.
5. **The important role of local members at Parish, District and County Council levels both as key links with their councils and as facilitators of local community action within the NACs needs to be clarified.** Again consistency across all the NACs is a key factor here.
6. Where **Parish Councils exist they need to be encouraged to take part in Neighbourhood Area Committees**, influencing key local decisions and in some cases taking action to address these. Work need to be done to clarify the respective roles of the NACs and Parish and Town Councils.
  - Involve Parish and Town Council representatives (and or Worcestershire Association of Local Councils) in the stakeholder event
  - Involve Parish and Town Council representatives in any new Neighbourhood Area Committees at the outset, as appropriate.
7. In the original paper to Cabinet (January 2007) the concept of Area or Neighbourhood Plans was proposed as a key output from the NACs. To date no progress has been made on these in either pilot. Simple, clear and measurable Area Plans which build on locally agreed priorities help to focus Area Committees and aid clarity about the role and purpose of these groups, which is important in ensuring ongoing community support.
  - **We recommend the development of simple clear and measurable area plans** as a key priority for each pilot over the next 12 months.
8. National best practice suggests that some dedicated officer support for neighbourhood management processes is important. We would consider that this support falls into two categories: Administrative support and senior level officer support. For administrative support we recommend one of two options:

Option One:

Each pilot is allocated a named officer resource to support the administration of the NAC. These officers to be drawn from existing resources which would ensure that this support was relatively cost neutral.

Option Two:

Bromsgrove District Council considers recruitment of a dedicated Officer Support for the two (four?) pilots, potentially part time. The advantage of this option is that the officer will be able to develop additional skills and knowledge of the NAC process and help more consistently with communications, administration and the evaluation of the committees which could aid the future role out of NACs and any potential future officer support requirements.

In terms of senior officer support we recommend that Bromsgrove District Council considers the nomination of individual named officer support for each NAC at a level senior enough to ensure the effective support of decision making within the NACs and the continued buy-in by partners at a senior level. This decision should also be made within the light of the potential role out of NACs across the Bromsgrove District as a whole and the potential sustainability of senior officer support.

## **Section 5 – Conclusion**

This evaluation of Bromsgrove's approach to community influence has been both relevant and timely in relation to prevalent Government thinking on neighbourhood and community engagement and Bromsgrove District Council has adopted a mature and robust approach to developing area arrangements within the District.

There is a strong member role within the NACs and this is well supported by senior level support from Bromsgrove District Council and other key partners. The two pilots have developed quickly, have achieved some quick wins and are beginning to address wider issues both within their communities and in terms of their own operation and structure. However, the pilots are still relatively new and have also developed along very different lines with a different focus and though this is in part a strength, it also creates some difficulties in terms of the future role out of the Neighbourhood Area Committees.

This report suggests some key recommendations for the future development of Neighbourhood Area Committees in Bromsgrove District based on the findings of this study. Much of the recommended activity is developmental and subject to ongoing evaluation and review by Bromsgrove District Council and its partners but this is intended to ensure that the aims and objectives of the Neighbourhood Area Committees are commonly owned and supported and grounded in the principle of what works for Bromsgrove.