1. Executive summary

This evaluation was commissioned by Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Management (ELH NM) to provide an evidence base to inform their priorities and business plan for the next five years. It reports on ELH NM’s achievements since 1 April 2010; whether a positive relationship has been established between the organisation and the local community; and the reputation of the organisation in terms of credibility and ability to deliver on its goals. It also advises on developing effective monitoring and evaluation systems that will enable the organisation to reflect, learn and demonstrate impact in the future.

In total, 539 adults (i.e. aged 16+) participated in the research, including 25 interviewees; 52 focus group participants; and 462 survey respondents. The participants were selected to reflect a representative range of the local population.

Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Management (ELH NM) is a resident-led voluntary organisation working in much of Easton and Lawrence Hill (including Barton Hill, The Dings, Old Market, Greenbank, Netham, Whitehall, Newtown, Redfield and St. Judes). The organisation formed in 2010, as the legacy of two former regeneration programmes – the New Deal for Communities programme in Barton Hill (Community at Heart) and the Neighbourhood Renewal programme in Easton (Easton Community Partnership).

ELH NM’s stated and documented aims are to address multiple aspects of deprivation; to increase the confidence, knowledge and skills of local residents to address their needs; to improve relationships within and between residents and service providers; to make better use of public money; to build a stronger community; to ensure local people are informed about and can influence the decisions that affect them; and to increase inter-cultural understanding and awareness.

A number of communications, community development, area championing and problem solving activities are utilised to deliver this purpose including developing a local Neighbourhood Forum that reflects the views and priorities of the diverse population; developing positive relationships with diverse local communities, the City Council and other statutory agencies; targeting resources where there is a need; sharing information between residents and organisations; disseminating accurate information and helping to bring funding into the area.

To some extent, these process and outcome priorities have emerged from the history of the organisation which initially had to manage a transition from previous well-funded regeneration programmes. Therefore, the evaluation looks at ‘distance travelled’ since the transition began in 2010.
1.1 Needs identified

The Easton and Lawrence Hill area has a number of characteristic demographic features, in particular, a high rate of population growth, ethnic diversity, young people and disabled people. National and local datasets describe problems in relation to educational attainment, community cohesion, crime and poverty, especially child poverty. The survey of local perceptions of need carried out for this evaluation to some extent reflects this, with residents overall identifying cleaner streets, more jobs, less poverty, better housing and less crime as the priority improvements necessary.

When looking at the priorities of particular groups, there was some disparity according to educational level, which is used here as an approximate indicator of social class. The most important issues for those with a degree were street cleanliness (72% of those surveyed mentioned this); poverty (56%) and jobs (48%). For those with basic and intermediate qualifications, up to degree level, the most important issues were also street cleanliness (58% of those surveyed mentioned this) and housing (49%). For those without qualification, the most important issues were crime (61%), street cleanliness (58%) and jobs (53%).

The focus groups and interviews confirmed that these issues were important to local people and there was also much discussion about a shortage of local school places; crime and safety issues, often related to the impact of drug use and street drinking; incidents of racial harassment; and community tensions (mistrust and negative attitudes and behaviours towards other groups) underpinned by a shortage of resources.

1.2 Activities and theory of change

In order to address local needs, ELHN’s staff and board members believe in theories of change that build upon empowerment of communities and linking of communities in order to alleviate poverty and to increase community cohesion. It draws upon understandings of social capital, though no-one specifically used this terminology; whereby face-to-face relations of relative equality, social networks, and the mutual trust and capacity for collective action which they are seen to engender, can be the basis for enhanced democracy, reduced crime and economic prosperity.

The activities ELHN now engages in can be broadly categorised under ‘communications’, ‘community development’, ‘championing the area’ and ‘alleviating deprivation’.

ELHN use a range of communication methods to inform, empower, inspire and entertain the local community including a quarterly newsletter, ‘Up Our Street’, delivered to most doors in the area. The community development work, similarly, uses a diverse array of methods of formal and informal support, empowerment and
enabling. For example, one of ELH NM’s primary activities has been to organise the Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Forum (ELH NF) on behalf of Bristol City Council, a body where local views can be aired and fed into the Neighbourhood Partnership. ELH NM also engage in community research, such as door knocking and street surveys to try to identify local issues, particularly those experienced by residents who are generally unengaged or whose voice is often not heard. In addition, the organisation has mediated between different groups when there have been tensions and directly enhances well-being through breaking down isolation and feelings of hopelessness.

ELH NM champion the area through articulating common needs but also through highlighting what is positive about living and working in the area in their communications and through their activities. The organisation supports, promotes and engages local people in fun and cultural activities, such as the Easton Arts Trail, the annual Red Fest event and the annual Easter Egg and Treasure Hunt.

ELH NM alleviate deprivation in terms of addressing multiple deprivation which includes the domains of income deprivation; barriers to housing and services; employment deprivation; living environment deprivation; health deprivation and disability; crime; and education, skills and training deprivation (DCLG, 2010). In particular, they are making a difference through their activities which improve the environment; address community safety; improve educational and employment opportunities; and create funding opportunities for deprived groups and individuals.

1.3 Perceptions of Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Management

The survey data indicates that ELH NM is well recognised in the area, with almost half of respondents (48%) saying that they had already heard of the organisation. Though this drops somewhat for the street surveys only, the figure still comes to 39%. Although this is significantly less, it is a remarkable that over one third of the population of the area have heard of a community organisation, especially one that does not strongly emphasise its name as a brand.

The amount of respondents (16%) who said they had contacted ELH NM in the past is also high, being almost half the amount of people who had heard of them. Almost all of those who had heard of the organisation thought it did a good job. However, the survey results showed that the work that ELH NM carries out is often not attributed to the organisation. For example, of those who said they had not heard of ELH NM, 5% had attended or otherwise been in contact with the Neighbourhood Forum; 6% had contacted or been involved with their Street Representatives; 60% said they had seen or read ‘Up Our Street’ and 37% had seen or looked at noticeboards managed by ELH NM. This is likely a result of the apparent confusion over the difference between ELH NM, the Neighbourhood Partnership and the
Neighbourhood Forum. Only 14% of survey respondents said they knew the difference between the three organisations.

1.4 Engagement with ELH NM activities by socio-economic background

There are some disparities in levels of engagement according to socio-economic characteristics. The survey data indicates that those with higher educational qualifications are currently more likely to engage in ELH NM activities, especially in the Forums, Street Representative system and ELH NM supported community groups. Similarly those of White British and mixed heritage ethnic background were more likely to engage in these activities than other groups. In addition, to the extent that we are able to say, it appears that the proportion of disabled respondents that were engaged in ELH NM activities seemed to be generally less than the proportion of non-disabled respondents. In terms of gender, it appears that ELH NM is more successful in engaging women than men. Younger people are more engaged in the events and less in the democratic structures. However, the data suggests that ELH NM engages heterosexual residents and lesbian, gay and bi-sexual residents to a similar extent, and Easton residents to a similar level as Lawrence Hill residents.

Therefore, the statistical data suggests that ELH NM services and activities are used reasonably well across the board, though possibly are taken up more by educated, White British and female socio-economic groups. ELH NM staff and board are conscious of this and have worked hard to counteract this tendency. There are a number of structural reasons why this pattern should occur, but ELH NM may be able look at new ways to engage the less educated, males and BME groups. Alternatively, they may wish to consider prioritising the needs of these groups, regardless of whether they engage or not.

1.5 Achievement and impact

In general, a majority of local people felt the area had improved since 2010 (57% overall, with 18% saying it had not and 25% that they did not know). The different groups reporting this did not differ significantly by socio-economic category. The proportions varied significantly by area, however. Residents from Redfield (70%) and Greenbank (67%) were the most likely to think the area had improved and the least likely to think it had not improved (15% and 5% respectively). Old Market residents were least likely to think their area had improved (36% and most likely to think it had not improved at 55%).

According to the survey data, ELH NM communications are widely read, appreciated and likely to inspire action. This is particularly the case with the newsletter, ‘Up Our Street’, with 74% of respondents saying they had read or seen the publication. Of those, 93% said that they had found it useful or entertaining and 47% said that they had taken action to improve their situation or community as a result of reading it.
The other communications were generally less used but highly valued by those who did use them. For example, 82% of those using noticeboards found them useful or entertaining, with 38% inspired to take action. The survey data suggests that, if ELH NM wishes to target specific unengaged groups, such as young people and those without qualifications, Facebook and Twitter may be most useful. Noticeboards are useful for communicating with White Eastern Europeans, for example. The data strongly suggests that a range of communication methods is necessary to reach different groups.

This statistical data is supported by the qualitative evidence, which generally showed that ELH NM’s communications are well regarded by both residents and professional service providers. Service providers used the information collated and disseminated in planning and publicising their services. The newsletter was also seen to help with strengthening links between different sectors of the community and found to be useful to local Councillors for both receiving and imparting information. However, several members of the focus groups and a number of survey respondents said that they had, either never received the newsletter, or did not now receive it, even though they live in the target area. There appeared to be an issue with delivering to flats, particularly those in Barton Hill. Some people said the newsletters were left in the foyers and they should be delivered to the door. Some interpreted the lack of delivery as meaning they were perceived as being less important.

Though some concerns were raised about the use of paper and resources, the overall consensus in the surveys, focus groups and interviews was that it is really important to have a printed newsletter, as opposed to solely an online version. Electronic versions were considered to be unlikely to reach a wide range of people.

The survey evidence also showed that ELH NM has an impact on peoples’ lives in terms of several outcomes of community development activity, including increasing local motivation, pride and confidence, as well as developing community links. For example, 47% of survey respondents said they know where to go for help and support as a result of ELH NM activities; and 42% said they now feel more motivated to get involved with the local community as a result of these activities.

The interviews also supported the view that ELH NM makes an impact through their community development, such as in terms of increasing local voice and influence; increasing community connectedness; enabling and empowering the community; and acting as a conduit for local funding.

However, there were some complaints about the Neighbourhood Forums. Some people felt that the issues discussed at the Forums are limited to ongoing themes. Others felt that the Forums lack teeth or that they are not really a venue for open and frank discussion.
1.6 Approach and culture of ELH NM

In terms of approach, ELH NM was frequently described as being inclusive, reliable, supportive, proactive, passionate, committed, innovative, welcoming, flexible, organic, ‘in tune’, skilled, responsible and challenging. These qualities were also evident in the way that the workers spoke about their work.

1.7 Limitations and barriers

However, ELH NM is not without its problems and critics. Interviewees pointed out a number of difficulties with the context of ELH NM’s work (i.e. external barriers and limitations) as well as the content (i.e. the internal barriers and limitations).

In terms of the context of the work, several mentioned the constantly changing political, legal and policy environment which made it difficult for local people to keep on top of how best to engage with service providers, solve problems and implement change. Others discussed the problem of coordinating work across the area. There were also some concerns voiced regarding the effectiveness of the Forums in enabling change, particularly coming from local residents but also some service providers. In addition, there was some fear that ‘engaging local people’ could actually be a way of reducing the Council’s responsibilities and commitments.

There is also the difficulty of reaching across such a wide area with only four members of staff, particularly such a diverse area. The lack of resources in the Easton and Lawrence Hill area was generally seen to be a concern. The organisation’s own financial stability was also considered to be a concern by some management board members and external observers. Though there is no immediate threat to this stability, the current context of austerity and grant cuts is causing some anxiety and reflection regarding whether it would be better to become less dependent on grant funding. This will have to be carefully considered as it could have a major impact on the organisation’s future direction.

With regard to the factors that are internal to the organisation and so, arguably, more amenable to improvement, one issue mentioned on a number of occasions was the need for follow up after ELH NM has given some initial support to a group or individual. It was felt that ELH NM could help groups to understand why their funding bids fail, for example, and to encourage them to try again or look for other ways to achieve their goals and/or meet their expenses.

Furthermore, there are indications of the potential harm that can be caused by residents sometimes being in a competitive situation when they are seeking funding, recognition and support. It can be demoralising for people and it can increase community tensions. When resources are short this can seem like an effective way of distributing what little there is. Those who lose out in these situations were left
feeling confused, suspicious and concerned about why they had not been selected and others had. The competitive set ups could also disadvantage less educated groups (often working class), BME groups and young people, who may not be familiar with the processes. Although ELH NM are not responsible for creating these competitive situations, they could play a role in helping groups collaborate on bids and help to explain why and how funding decisions are made.

ELH NM do put a great deal of effort into making their work accessible in every way but, perhaps there is more work to be done in terms of using more collaborative ways of apportioning funding and recognising community groups.

Lastly, one of the issues that seemed to evoke the most discussion during the research was the question of ELH NM’s identity. There was clearly a great deal of confusion over the difference between the Neighbourhood Management, Neighbourhood Forum and Neighbourhood Partnership, not only for residents, as outlined earlier, but also service providers. The lack of clear perceived identity potentially undermines the organisation’s ability to attract funding and its relationship with residents. Several people thought that ‘Up Our Street’, as a more recognisable and user friendly name, might be preferable.

1.8 Suggestions for an internal monitoring and evaluation framework

This should relate directly to ELH NM’s purpose and distinguish between process goals (e.g. community development, communications and championing) and outcome goals (e.g. reducing poverty, increasing educational and training opportunities) and be conscious of the theory of change that is being utilised when focussing on a process or outcome goal.

It is recommended that ELH NM adopt a ‘needs based’ monitoring and evaluation framework which captures the 14 domains of need identified in this report. In terms of capturing the qualitative and quantitative data, ELH NM already collects this to some extent, but this process needs systematising and standardising. Recommendations are given for how this could be done but the process will require time and resources.

1.9 Finally

ELH NM is clearly an effective organisation in terms of delivering on its process and outcomes goals. It has performed well in terms of ‘distance travelled’ since 1 April 2010. As well as transitioning from two distinct regeneration programmes to a new unified organisation and area of responsibility, it has made a strong impact in terms of communications; community development; championing Easton and Lawrence Hill (people and place); and alleviating some aspects of multiple deprivation.
It is now at a turning point and there are numerous questions to consider: How to cope with a continually changing political environment? How to best coordinate the community work in the area? How to encourage service providers to listen and respond adequately to local peoples desires and demands? How to ensure that engaging local people in actions to directly tackle local problems does not undermine the need to hold service providers to account? How to respond to such a diverse array of needs across a vast area with few resources? How to maintain financial sustainability while still empowering local people to engage in democratic structures? How to best follow up the support given in a context of few resources? Whether to develop a more collaborative funding and recognising ethos? Whether to change the name of the organisation and, if not, how to ensure the work is recognised when it needs to be?

ELH NM has been addressing some of these issues relatively successfully for some time so it is likely it will continue to do so. ELH NM is well aware, and it must be reiterated, that achieving community engagement in the sense of the community owning and taking decisions is a very long-term process. However, it appears to be making significant progress with this as relationships of trust are being built up that will provide the foundations for such engagement in the years to come.

1.10 Recommendations

It is recommended that ELH NM continue to do what they have been doing for the most part. They might also do the following:

Communications

- Continue to produce a printed newsletter that is delivered through letter boxes, alongside all the other communications.
- Ensure noticeboards inform people when they are to be updated.

Community development

- Consider focussing on the issues identified here as resident priorities - cleaner streets, more jobs, less poverty, better housing, less crime and less inter-cultural tension.
- Consider focussing on the issues pertinent to those less likely to command resources e.g. with lower educational qualifications, BME groups, older and younger people.
- In order to improve cross-area coordination, consider inviting other local organisations to a relaxed event to share information about their priorities, focus and direction.
- Consider organising activities that enable and encourage residents to collaborate around grants applications and projects.
Championing

- Emphasise to service providers how local resource shortages in the context of a growing population could increase community tensions and that there is a perception that this may be happening.
- Consider working with local service providers to help them to really listen to, respect, and act on, the wishes of local residents as far as they possibly can so as to avoid the possibility of disempowering participation processes.
- Consider more strongly emphasising that residents should have expectations of service providers as well encouraging the do-it-yourself approach so to avoid alienating those groups who are too exhausted and stressed to engage in the latter.

General

- Consider changing the name of ELH NM to one that is more easily differentiated from the Neighbourhood Forum and the Neighbourhood Partnership.
- Attempt to engage more with those currently least served by ELH NM - less educationally qualified groups (largely working class), BME groups, disabled people and males. Where this is not possible, aim to make a difference for them.
- When setting up monitoring and evaluation systems, see that they relate directly to ELH NM’s priority purposes and distinguish between process goals (e.g. community development, communications and championing) and outcome goals (e.g. reducing poverty, increasing educational and training opportunities).
- Consider a ‘needs based’ monitoring and evaluation framework.
- Continue to use ELH NM’s widely appreciated approach to the work that is inclusive, reliable, supportive, proactive, passionate, committed, innovative, welcoming, flexible, organic, ‘in tune’, skilled, responsible and sensitively challenging.