NEIGHBOURHOOD
Area Committee

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Neighbourhood Area Committee Pilot

Full Evaluation Report

May 2026



Executive Summary

Context

1. The Neighbourhood Area Committee pilots (July–December 2025) were established to test a neighbourhood governance model in Surrey to **strengthen local engagement and inform future unitary arrangements** in Local Government Reorganisation.
2. Four pilot areas were agreed – Dorking & the Villages, East Elmbridge, Farnham, and North Tandridge.
3. The evaluation used a "**test, learn and grow**" approach. This means the team tested the model, learned from feedback, and made improvements during the pilot.

Evaluation methodology

4. **80 survey responses** from committee members
5. **29 semi-structured interviews** with committee members and staff from working groups
6. **10 focus groups** or workshop discussions with supporting staff, partners and committee members, with over 180 participants in total (total not unique number)
7. **842 residents** were engaged through in-person outreach (high streets, libraries, markets, local events).
8. **Digital engagement** across pilots totalled 1,963 site visitors, 167 respondents, 203 contributions, and 313 news subscribers.

Key findings

9. Evidence from surveys, interviews, workshops and resident engagement shows that the NAC pilots provided a **strong foundation for collaborative working and local governance** at neighbourhood level in Surrey.
10. Across four diverse areas, NACs brought together elected members, public sector partners, voluntary and community organisations and residents with a new purpose and format, helping to **establish shared, evidence based local priorities**.

11. **Confidence in the NAC model increased** over the course of the pilot, with improved understanding of purpose and process and **growing optimism about its potential** to support and enhance local prevention and early support activity.
12. End-of-pilot surveys found strong support for continuation:
    - **100% of respondents support continuation** in 2026
    - **88% are optimistic** about the NACs' potential to make a difference locally
    - **83% report a positive impact** on their work
13. Participants consistently valued **partnership working, networking and shared understanding**. Early tangible impacts have emerged not only during the third meetings where committees moved more decisively towards action planning and shared ownership, but also through the networking opportunities that were created.
14. The evaluation highlights that impact depends less on meetings alone and more on what happens between them, including **clear routes from discussion to action, realistic pacing, sufficient resourcing and transparency around influence and decision making**.
15. Feedback also emphasised the importance of sustaining and **strengthening inclusive resident engagement** as the model evolves, particularly with young people, people with lived experience and seldom heard communities.

Headline recommendations

1. Share **clear, consistent messaging** about the future purpose, scope and role of NACs within Surrey's evolving neighbourhood governance arrangements.
2. Put in place a **clearer framework for influence, decision making and governance**, including how local priorities connect to wider organisational decisions.
3. **Standardise core processes**, coordination and follow-up across all NACs, while allowing **flexibility for individual areas** to reflect local context and test different approaches.
4. Ensure **sufficient staff capacity** and resource is in place to support effective meetings and, critically, to **enable collaboration and delivery between meetings**.
5. Explore options for **devolved funding and decision making** within a defined and transparent framework, to support timely, place-based action.

Contents

Executive summary 2
Introduction 5
Methodology – what we did 7
Phase 1 10
Phase 2 20
Phase 3 34
Conclusion 51

Introduction

Background

In response to national direction on neighbourhood-level engagement set out in the English Devolution agenda, Surrey County Council tested a new approach to neighbourhood governance in 2025.

Initially framed as Community Boards and then renamed Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) after government guidance in June 2025, the pilots were designed to strengthen local engagement, inform future arrangements under forthcoming unitary authority structures, and complement existing "towns and villages" work.

Four pilot areas were selected - Dorking & the Villages, East Elmbridge, Farnham and North Tandridge – with boundaries built from electoral divisions (2024 review) to create practical geographies for collaboration. Initial workshops were held in three areas in July 2025, with the first workshop in Farnham being held in September 2025.

The NACs operated as advisory bodies (not constituted decision-making committees), bringing together elected members, local partners and community representatives to agree evidence-based priorities and action plans through a "test, learn and grow" approach.

Twelve core principles guided the pilots, emphasising inclusive membership, councillor leadership at place, robust insight, and tangible local action.

Purpose of the research

The evaluation aimed to understand how effectively the NAC model operates in practice and to identify improvements before potential scale-up.

Objectives were to:

- Assess the effectiveness of the pilot programme and NAC ways of working
- Understand stakeholder and resident experiences of participation
- Evaluate progress toward intended outcomes (e.g., agreed priorities, collaborative action, strengthened local partnerships)
- Identify opportunities to adapt and scale the model for future neighbourhood governance under new unitary arrangements.

The evaluation also aimed to test impact metrics and establish a baseline, not yet for impact in the wider community (that area will be developed in 2026 when action plans begin to be implemented) but for participation, partnership working and governance.

Evaluation approach

Six key lines of enquiry, or evaluation themes, were established, with the first three focused on the effectiveness of the pilot programme and the model, and the second three focused on impact and ways of working:

1. **Process** – Membership, logistics and meeting arrangements
2. **Communication** – Clarity and transparency around purpose and timelines
3. **Model efficacy** – Suitability of the NAC model to achieve its purpose
4. **Participation and representation** – Quality and diversity of community involvement
5. **Influence** – Perceptions of ability to shape priorities and outcomes
6. **Partnership working** – Connectivity and ease of collaboration

Methodology – what we did

Summary

Evaluation fieldwork took place between July 2025 and December 2025 (with the exception of interviews with Farnham committee members in February 2026).

Each pilot area convened an initial multi-stakeholder workshop in July 2025, followed by three formal NAC meetings, concluding in December 2025.

Evidence was gathered at and in between each stage, including post-workshop and post-meeting surveys, qualitative interviews/focus groups with participants and resident engagement via in-person "Let's Talk" activities and via digital engagement platforms.

Overall response and participation numbers

Participation was strong across stakeholders and residents:

- 160 unique stakeholders attended the workshops and NAC meetings across the four pilots.
- 80 survey responses from committee members
- 29 semi-structured interviews with committee members and staff from working groups
- 10 focus groups or workshop discussions with supporting staff, partners and committee members, with over 180 participants in total (total not unique number)
- 842 residents were engaged through in-person outreach (high streets, libraries, markets, local events).
- Digital engagement across pilots totalled 1,963 site visitors, 167 respondents, 203 contributions, and 313 news subscribers.

Detailed methodology table

The table on the next page explains what happened during each phase of the pilot and how evidence was collected. It should be read alongside the summary above.

Phase	NAC activity	Evaluation activity
Phase One	Initial workshop Webinars and briefing sessions - SALC, District / Borough Councillors and SCC Councillors	**Post-workshop survey** with 40 responses 3 **focus groups** (debrief sessions), one with each of the first three NAC teams 11 **semi-structured interviews** with NAC team members Voluntary and public sector **partner workshop**
Phase Two	Meeting #1 Meeting #2	**Post-meeting survey** with 29 responses **Focus group** - SCC officers **Focus group** - NAC chairs and partners **Additional qualitative feedback** via email from several committee members in lieu of survey responses
Phase Three	Meeting #3	**13 semi-structured interviews** with NAC members completed before meeting #3 **In-meeting discussion** of draft evaluation findings and recommendations **Post-meeting survey** with 24 responses **8 semi-structured interviews** with Farnham NAC members completed in Feb 2026 **Discussion** with committee chairs and partners in Feb 2026
Community engagement	In-person NAC awareness engagement events NAC priority surveys	Online (Commonplace) **survey questions,** in-person surveys and qualitative feedback

Accessibility

- Paper printouts of all surveys were made available, including large font
- Online engagement via Commonplace was developed in line with accessibility policy and guidance
- Mix of in-person and online focus groups
- Interviews were offered in whichever format was preferred by the participants

Analysis

- Quantitative analysis of survey responses
- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts with coding against the six evaluation themes and additional sub-themes identified
- Light touch thematic analysis of debrief sessions, focus groups and other informal feedback

Summary

There was a low number of responses to two surveys in some NAC areas, however, the key findings were repeated sufficiently across different research methods to provide confidence in having reached saturation point i.e. further responses would have generated similar results.

It is also worth noting that interviews with Farnham committee members were not held until February, by which point the summary evaluation report had already been published. This was due to the slightly altered timeframe for the Farnham NAC in relation to the other three areas.

Phase 1

The first workshops

The first stakeholder workshops were held in July 2025, with Farnham following in September 2025. The working group members explained the context of LGR and the purpose of the pilot programme and then facilitated break out discussions for local leaders to capture initial questions and reflections and to consider what might make their particular NAC most effective.

Key topics discussed included:

- diversity of representation
- processes for electing members and chairs
- potential devolution of decision-making power
- potential for funding
- roles and responsibilities

Table discussions – summary of key themes

- Strong support for NACs in principle, provided they are clearly community-led, inclusive and not dominated by professionals or politics.
- Repeated concern about NACs becoming a "talking shop" unless they have clear purpose, authority, resources and visible outcomes.
- Clarity is critical: participants want a simple, shared understanding of the NAC's role, powers, remit, and how it differs from existing forums.
- NACs are expected to act as a bridge between residents and decision-makers, helping clarify "who does what" locally.
- Strong emphasis on amplifying resident voice, especially marginalised, seldom-heard groups and young people.
- Preference for flexible membership: a small core group with the ability to bring in others based on priorities or themes.
- Fixed representation models (e.g. 7-7-7) were questioned as too rigid; representation should follow need and ability to act.
- Councillors seen as important enablers but concerns about over-representation crowding out community voice.
- Faith groups, voluntary sector, frontline services, housing, health, business and lived-experience voices seen as essential.
- Clear need for mechanisms to hear from those not in the room (e.g. online feedback, trusted intermediaries, existing networks).

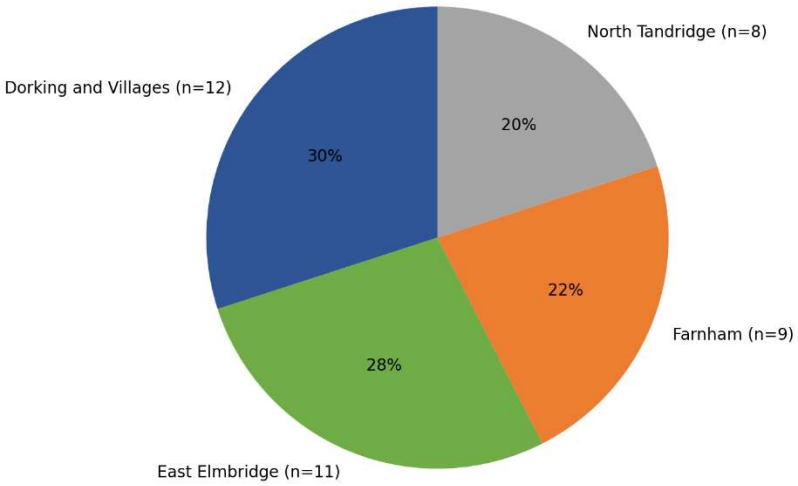
- Strong focus on joined-up, preventative, place-based working, particularly across health, care and community support.
- Participants stressed the importance of mapping existing assets and networks to avoid duplication and bureaucracy.
- Effective NACs will need strong chairing, clear agendas, good facilitation and follow-through, plus ongoing communication between meetings.
- Simple, accessible communications and a clear "elevator pitch" are vital so residents understand what NACs are and how to engage.
- Funding or access to resources (direct or indirect) is seen as key to credibility and impact.

Post-workshop surveys

A survey was shared with participants immediately after each workshop, with 12 questions exploring the six key evaluation themes, and allowing for any additional qualitative feedback.

There were 40 respondents in total, which constituted roughly 35% of the workshop participants.

Graph showing survey responses by area after the first workshops by area
(40 responses)

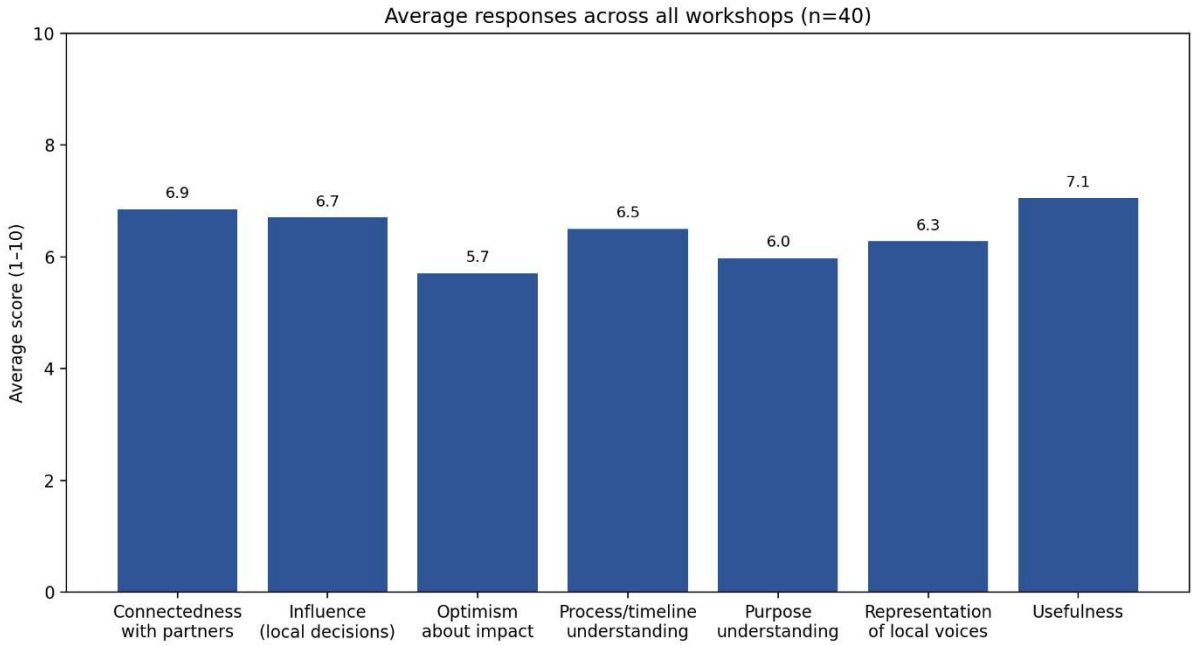


On average, participants in all four geographic areas felt that the workshops were **useful starting points**. In the post-workshop survey, the overall average score for workshop usefulness was **7.1/10**.

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They were also asked to rate six other areas out of 10 with 10 being the highest and 0 the lowest based on their experiences.
These responses are captured in the graph below.

Graph showing average scores across all pilot areas in response to seven questions.



However, the survey results suggest that while participants valued the session format and cross sector discussion, **clarity about what the NACs are, and how they will deliver change, was still developing**. Confidence in understanding the **purpose** of the committee averaged **6.0/10** and understanding of the **process and timeline** averaged **6.5/10**, indicating a mixed picture with some respondents feeling confident and others unsure.

The **lowest overall score** related to **optimism about the pilot's potential to make a difference**, with an average of **5.7/10**. This aligns with the qualitative feedback, where participants welcomed the concept but frequently asked for greater clarity on decision-making power, resources and practical pathways to outcomes.

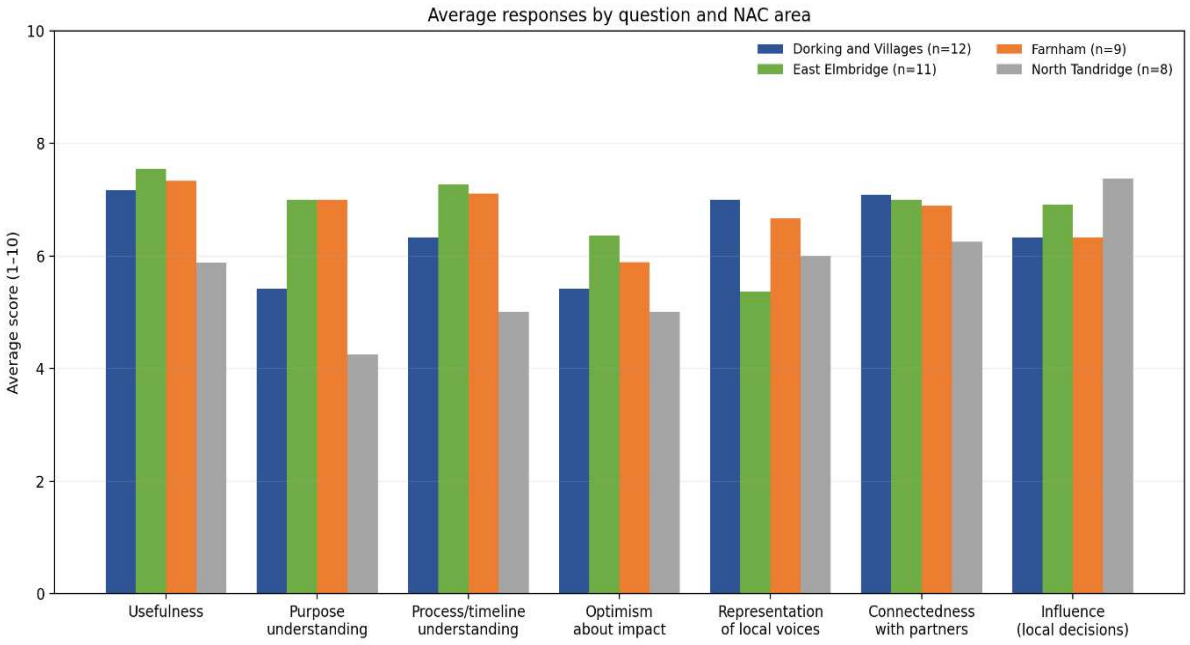
When capturing a baseline of how connected and empowered participants currently felt in their local systems, responses were slightly more positive and relatively consistent across areas. Average baseline scores were **6.9/10 for connectedness** with

local partners and **6.7/10 for perceived ability to influence** local decisions and activities. This suggests that many workshop participants already experience a moderate degree of partnership connectivity and influence in their areas, and that the "added value" of the NAC model would need to be articulated clearly to increase optimism.

Comparison across the four geographic areas

Survey responses were split across the four workshops as follows: **Dorking and Villages (12), East Elmbridge (11), Farnham (9), North Tandridge (8)**. Although the response rate was good, the absolute numbers are still small when broken down at this level, so these comparisons should be treated as **directional rather than definitive**.

Graph showing average scores in each NAC pilot area in response to seven questions



Across the measures, **East Elmbridge and Farnham showed the strongest results for clarity**, with average understanding of purpose scoring **7.0/10** in both areas, and understanding of process and timeline **7.3/10** (East Elmbridge) and **7.1/10** (Farnham). East Elmbridge also scored highest for overall usefulness (**7.5/10**) and optimism (**6.4/10**).

By contrast, **North Tandridge recorded the lowest average scores for usefulness (5.9/10), understanding of purpose (4.3/10) and of process and timeline (5.0/10)**, suggesting that participants in this workshop left with more unanswered questions

about the model and what would happen next. Notably however, North Tandridge reported the **highest baseline of perceived influence** (**7.4/10**), indicating that lower optimism or clarity here is unlikely to reflect a lack of local leadership or agency, but more likely reflects uncertainty about the NAC model's role and potential at this early stage.

Dorking and Villages showed relatively strong scores for perceived representation of local voices (**7.0/10**) and connectedness (**7.1/10**), but lower confidence in purpose (**5.4/10**) and optimism (**5.4/10**), reinforcing the pattern that participants valued engagement but wanted stronger clarity on how the model would deliver outcomes.

There were also some extremes, with several scores sitting at 1/10. Where qualitative feedback was provided, this indicated scepticism that likely existed before the meeting and was evidently not allayed during it.

Qualitative feedback

Open text survey feedback reinforced the themes above. Several respondents described the workshops as well run and valuable for networking and cross sector connection for example, "Well run and interesting workshop…", "Great to network…". At the same time, there were recurring requests for increased clarity and specificity - particularly around what NACs can decide or influence, whether they will have devolved funding or decision-making powers, and how they will **avoid becoming a "talking shop"**.

Participants also highlighted the importance of representation and authority to act, including the need to ensure the "right people are in the room" and that key local organisations and community voices are not missing. Workshop design considerations were also raised, for example, the value of clear facilitation and accessible materials, reflecting how delivery quality can shape participants' sense of confidence and readiness for the next stage.

Taken together, the survey findings suggest that the first workshops successfully generated engagement and cross sector connection, but that **improving clarity on purpose, powers and membership** were the most important areas to focus on in the first committee meetings.

Debrief sessions and interviews with staff

This section summarises reflections gathered after the first Neighbourhood Area Committee (NAC) workshops from colleagues involved in planning and facilitating the sessions (including Surrey County Council, NHS/Health partners and District &

Borough colleagues), alongside additional stakeholder and partner reflections captured through follow-up conversations and planning workshops. In total, the views of between 40 and 45 individuals were collected.

Overall, staff feedback suggests the first workshops were operationally successful and generated momentum, but also surfaced recurring issues around clarity, representation, power dynamics, and sustainability that are important to address in the next phase.

Key themes are explored below:

Workshop format and facilitation

- Small-group table discussions were consistently identified as the most effective format for inclusive participation and high-quality interaction, especially when each table had a dedicated facilitator and note-taker.
- Facilitator and note-taker roles were described as critical to maintaining pace, capturing nuance, and supporting balanced participation; accessibility considerations were noted as a clear strength to retain.
- Practical improvements suggested including allowing more time for discussion, simplifying slide content (avoiding dense text), and recognising that some groups prefer verbal discussion over writing on post its.

Clarity on purpose, scope and next steps

- Participants frequently focused on “how will this work?” (chairing, minutes, administrative support, funding) and sought definitive answers; this sometimes reduced time available for discussing priorities and outcomes.
- Repeated questions related to the NAC’s scope and authority: what it can decide or influence, whether any budget or devolved decision-making will sit behind it, and how the pilot will translate into tangible change.
- Staff reflections suggested that clearer pre-workshop framing (scope, objectives and desired tangible outcomes) would improve confidence and reduce confusion.

Representation – the right people in the room (including decision-making authority)

- Designing membership was described as one of the most complex elements, particularly in areas with many parish councils and multiple existing local networks.

- Colleagues emphasised that even greater diversity of representation is necessary, and also that that those present need to have the authority to make commitments on behalf of their organisations (not only delegates attending in place of decision-makers).
- Specific representation gaps were repeatedly noted in early reflections, including education and faith groups in some areas, alongside a need to ensure business voices are included where local economic development capacity is limited.

Power dynamics and political culture

- Staff and partners observed differences in communication and debate style among participants, with risks to equal participation.
- Suggested mitigations included strong facilitation, seating plans, shared expectations for participation, and reinforcing the NAC as a collaborative space focused on outcomes for residents.
- Uneven access to pre-workshop information was also seen to reinforce perceived power imbalances, underlining the need for consistent communication across sectors.

Place identity, naming and neutrality

- Geography and naming prompted strong reactions in some areas, with participants expressing concern about being excluded if they did not identify with the named towns; maps and boundaries can therefore shape legitimacy and engagement. For example, in North Tandridge, those based in the east of this area were concerned the needs of their large rural communities would not be prioritised if the NAC retained the name of Caterham & Warlingham. The voice of parish councils was important in this regard.
- Venue choice was highlighted as influential: neutral, community-grounded venues (e.g., libraries) were suggested to support inclusion and reduce political framing.

Communications, transparency and engagement

- Staff reflections emphasised the need for transparency and consistent information sharing (e.g., sharing invite lists where appropriate, maintaining a central shared workspace, and ensuring facilitators are aware of what attendees received in advance).
- Communicating outcomes to wider residents - especially those who are digitally excluded - was flagged as resource-intensive and needing explicit planning and clear role expectations for members to cascade information within their sectors.

- Partner planning notes highlighted concrete actions to support transparency: sharing membership lists, communicating a clear proposed timeline for the pilot stages, and mapping local assets (e.g., schools, community centres, youth services) to support place-based planning.

Pace, sustainability and resourcing

- The pace of delivery was described as intense and energising, but difficult to sustain alongside existing roles; staff highlighted the importance of delegation, deputies, and avoiding single points of failure.

Phase One conclusions

Following the initial workshops and early implementation activity, the Phase One evaluation identified two clear sets of learning. The first captures longer term learning relevant to any similar neighbourhood-based pilots. The second identifies practical 'quick win' actions to strengthen delivery ahead of, and during, the first NAC meetings.

Longer-term learning

1. **Set clear expectations for members and stakeholders**
   - Provide clear guidance on roles, responsibilities and intended outcomes.
   - Share the rationale and purpose ("the why") behind the NAC model to support shared understanding and alignment.
2. **Establish core infrastructure early to support delivery**
   - Put collaboration tools such as SharePoint or Teams channels in place from the outset.
   - Establish regular rhythms for working groups (for example, weekly check-ins or informal briefings) to maintain momentum.
3. **Involve those with local knowledge at an early stage**
   - Engage community-facing staff, such as Community Partnership Officers, in shaping early plans.
   - Use local insight to identify suitable venues and undertake more comprehensive stakeholder mapping.
4. **Brief and onboard partners sooner**
   - Provide early briefings for all sectors (not only all tiers of elected members but also voluntary sector, business and public sector) to avoid partners having to play catch-up once NACs are underway.

- Share insight packs, workshop outputs and background materials in advance.

5. **Delegate and share leadership within NAC working groups**
    - Avoid single points of failure by appointing deputies or co-leads.
    - Encourage distributed leadership and shared ownership across sectors.

Quick wins identified for the next three meetings

1. Provide clearer pre-session materials to support a more level starting point for all participants.
2. Clarify and reiterate the purpose, timeline and key milestones for the pilot phase, alongside the roles of members and wider stakeholders.
3. Share practical examples of comparable models, including other NACs and similar approaches used elsewhere.
4. Consider project-based membership, sector-led representation and transparent attendee lists.
5. Develop communication channels (for example WhatsApp groups or shared digital spaces) to support collaboration between meetings.
6. Ensure faith groups, schools and grassroots organisations are actively included.

Actions taken and changes made in response

Ahead of the first and second NAC meetings, a number of actions were progressed in direct response to the Phase One findings and recommendations.

1. **Sector-led representation and leadership**
    - At a cross-sector partnership workshop, it was agreed that VCSE representatives would be encouraged to take on the chair or vice-chair role within each NAC.
2. **Strengthened town and parish council involvement**
    - SCC officers engaged more closely with town and parish councillors through SALC to increase local democratic input.
3. **Improved geographic clarity and representation**
    - NAC names and maps were updated across internal and external communications to better reflect local identity and geography (for example, Cobham and Esher became East Elmbridge, and Caterham & Warlingham became North Tandridge).
4. **Addressing gaps in representation, particularly faith groups**

- Following targeted engagement, at least three NAC areas secured faith representation, with further discussions ongoing in others.

5. **Increased transparency**
    - Each NAC circulated a full membership list and a clear description of decision-making processes in advance of the first committee meetings.
6. **Strengthened collaborative working arrangements**
    - VCSE, Health, District or Borough officers and SCC officers were involved in the working groups supporting each NAC.
    - SCC facilitated a cross-sector workshop in August to share learning and decision-making across NAC working groups, with a further workshop planned for November.

Phase 2

First and second committee meetings

In the second phase of the pilot programme, the first two NAC meetings were held in each geographic area, with a survey after the first meeting mirroring the initial workshop survey as closely as possible. This aimed to help identify whether the changes in structure and communication, as well as the delivery of the first meeting, had brought about any change in understanding and sentiment and also to ensure that any changes in membership were captured.

Qualitative feedback was captured from a range of sources, including a focus group as part of a wider workshop with SCC officers and a similar workshop with partners and committee chairs, capturing learning so far for both the short-term and long-term.

Post-meeting survey

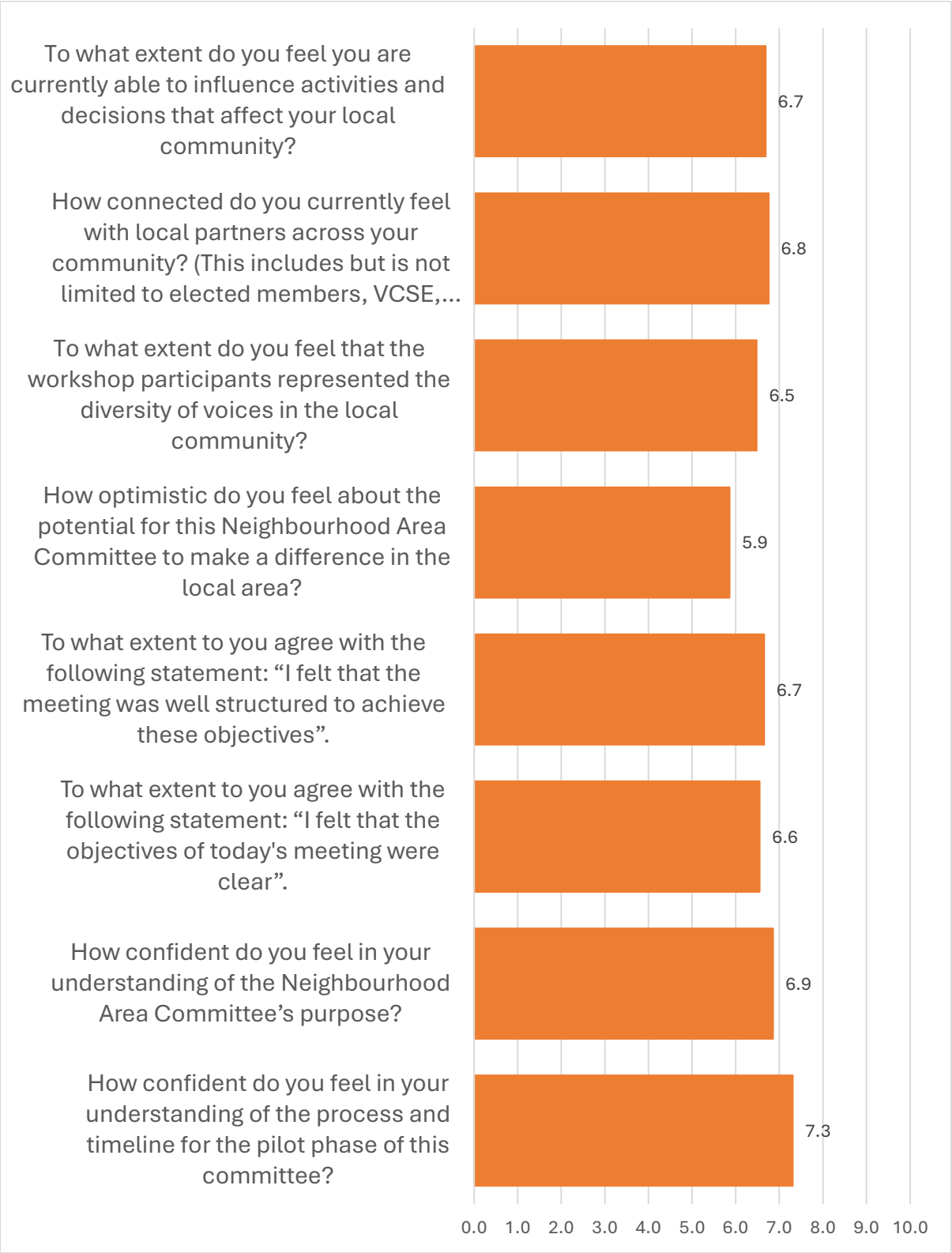
The full list of survey questions was shared both in printed format and online via QR code. There was a smaller number of meeting attendees and therefore respondents at this stage, and although at an aggregate level this is still valid and useful data (similar response rate of 30%), the quantitative findings from North Tandridge and from Dorking and Villages were not drawn from a sufficient sample size to be representative of their area's membership.

There were 12 responses in East Elmbridge, 9 in Farnham, 4 in North Tandridge and 4 in Dorking and Villages.

Key findings from quantitative data

At an aggregate level, the results showed a clearer shared view than in Phase One. There were fewer very low scores, apart from one outlier in each pilot area. This suggests less scepticism, or at least a stronger shared commitment to the pilot, while some concerns remained.

Graph showing overall scores across all NAC pilots in response to eight questions



Optimism had increased slightly from 5.7 (Phase One results) to 5.9, and the **communication of process, timeline and purpose had clearly had significant impact, with scores for understanding increasing from 6.0 to 6.9** (understanding of purpose) **and 6.5 to 7.3** (understanding of process and timeline).

Perception of diversity of representation showed marginal improvement (6.3 to 6.5) but this would be expected to change further following the second meetings in which voices of those with lived experience and subject matter experts were more directly and indirectly included.

The baseline metrics capturing existing perceptions of connectedness and influence in the community were helpfully consolidated, as there was very little variation in these data points. Participants scored 6.9 and then 6.8 for feelings of connectedness, and 6.7 in both surveys for perceived ability to influence local decisions. Both areas show room for improvement, with the hypothesis being that membership of the local NAC will increase these perception scores over time.

Overall, the feelings of cautious optimism were reiterated and moved a small step forward, although the qualitative feedback provided several areas for focus in terms of improvement still needed.

Qualitative feedback

Open-text responses following the first NAC meetings clustered around a small number of consistent themes. Overall, respondents valued the intent of bringing partners together and in some cases described the facilitation and table discussions positively, but raised recurrent issues about clarity, meeting design, and diversity of representation.

Communication ahead of meetings

A dominant theme was the need for **clearer, earlier and more consistent pre-meeting communication**, including timely circulation of papers and a concise explanation of actions needed. Several respondents described information arriving too late to read properly: “The papers did not arrive until… Thursday evening for a meeting on Monday… did not give sufficient time…”. Suggested improvements included a single clear email, sharing agenda/purpose in advance, and allowing more time to absorb packs: “More time to read and absorb information packs sent.”

Purpose, objectives and defining success

Although the quantitative feedback suggests that clarity of purpose and timeline has improved, respondents in the qualitative feedback repeatedly asked for a **clear statement of what the NAC is meant to achieve**, how it will achieve it, and how success will be defined - both for the pilot and for each meeting. In some cases, respondents said they became clearer as the session progressed, but others remained uncertain about objectives/directives and the NAC's purpose: "Clarify what success looks like. Still not sure of objectives." "A clear statement of what it is meant to achieve and how it is supposed to achieve it."

Meeting structure and dynamics

Several respondents praised facilitation and the value of getting people "in the room", with table discussions described as the most productive element. However, there were recurring frustrations that time was spent revisiting papers or debating the concept or process rather than progressing the work. Some feedback also noted behaviour that was overly political or which made the meeting feel like a council meeting, with concern this could deter community partners.

- "Nothing - I think the meeting was very well facilitated."
- "Well structured and kept on track."
- "The first half was mainly spent… going through papers… or dealing with… process…"
- "I would like to see less political point making and more about working together…"
- "There should be a ground rule about politics should take a back seat…"

Priority-setting process

A subset of responses highlighted that the priority-setting element felt **rushed** or overly influenced by a small number of voices, with suggestions for a more transparent approach (e.g., table-level capture first, shortlist, then agree). Some also noted it would have helped to know in advance that ideas would be narrowed (e.g., to a small set).

- "Rushed… still rushed."
- "It would have been helpful to be told that the 'insights' were to be narrowed down… This part… was too rushed…"

Representation and diversity

Respondents commonly observed that the first meeting did not fully reflect the diversity of the community, with calls to include **young people**, **ethnic minority communities**, and other seldom-heard voices. Specific groups/sectors suggested for future inclusion included: disability and LGBTQ representation, mental health, transport, probation, housing associations, police, fire, Resident Associations (with debate about how), and service users and youth leaders.

Transparency and need for a longer pilot

A smaller set of comments raised questions about **openness and transparency** e.g., how chairs are chosen, how decisions are made, how quickly outputs are shared. Some respondents were also concerned about whether the pilot duration is sufficient to move beyond relationship-building and deliver meaningful change.

- "It seemed that some of the meeting had already been decided… for example the Chair… ensure openness and transparency."
- "Results of meetings take too long when they have to be shared."
- "I'm not sure what can be realistically achieved in 3 meetings."

Focus groups – SCC officers

A workshop for SCC officers was held in October after the first NAC meetings, to reflect and capture learning so far.

Key learning is captured below under the six evaluation themes:

Process

- The rapid pace of the pilots' monthly meetings enabled early learning, while also highlighting the importance of **allowing sufficient time for planning, logistics and follow-up which proved to be challenging**.
- Forward planning for venues, accessibility and papers emerged as an area where **earlier confirmation would support smoother delivery**.
- The pilots surfaced opportunities to **make fuller use of available officer capacity** and balance workloads more evenly as the model develops.
- Community venues were positively received and supported local accessibility.
- Delegation and the use of sub-groups helped maintain momentum under tight timescales.

Communication

- Communication was consistently recognised as **central to effective engagement**.
- Explaining purpose and expectations was more challenging while the model was still evolving, underlining the value of **clear, shared narratives**.
- Timely and consistent information flow was identified as an important enabler of confidence and preparedness.
- Transparent ways of working, including use of SharePoint, were welcomed.
- Where communication was timely and clear, engagement and alignment were noticeably stronger.

Model Efficacy

- There was strong confidence in the **overall value and potential of the NAC model**.
- Clarity around scope, role and expectations was seen as key to ensuring the model functions as intended.
- The pilot approach successfully tested feasibility, while also highlighting the need for a **pace that supports learning and delivery**.
- The model demonstrated it could be mobilised quickly.
- Action-focused workshops were particularly effective where expectations were well defined.

Participation and Representation

- Overall participation was strong, with a good spread of partners engaged.
- The pilots highlighted opportunities to **further broaden representation**, including faith groups, grassroots organisations and some seldom-heard voices.
- Creating spaces where all participants feel equally confident contributing was seen as an important factor in inclusive engagement.
- Strong attendance, including in politically complex contexts.
- Use of community venues and visible local presence supported engagement.

Influence

- Being clear and realistic about the **nature and extent of influence** was important for managing expectations.
- Where pathways from discussion to action were clear, confidence in the NACs' influence increased.

- Political dynamics reinforced the value of neutral facilitation to maintain focus on shared priorities.
- Action-planning discussions helped clarify how local priorities could be progressed.
- Consensus-building approaches were effective in several areas.

Partnership Working

- Partnership working was one of the strongest features of the pilots.
- Collaboration across SCC directorates and with borough councils added significant value.
- Where relationships were already well established, progress was quicker and more confident.
- Cross-sector collaboration and shared problem-solving.
- Relationship-building through workshops and informal networking.

Three 'golden rules'

SCC officers were also asked in groups to engage in a 'pay it forward' activity, capturing the top three learnings they would want to share with a future group of officers and partners planning a similar pilot programme of work.

1. Get absolute clarity on purpose, expectations and scope from the start

This was the most consistently repeated lesson across all table discussions. Officers stressed the importance of establishing a shared understanding of why the NAC exists, what it is there to do, what it will produce, and what it is not. Clear, realistic expectations - including about timeframes, roles and influence - were seen as essential to confidence, buy-in and focus.

2. Communicate in advance, keeping everyone equally and consistently in the loop

Communication appeared in every group's feedback, often explicitly flagged as a top tip. This included **equal briefing** (for different stakeholders from different sectors) more timely information sharing, early invites with pre-reading, accessible documents, and making sure the whole officer and partner team has the same picture. Officers linked good communication directly to trust, preparedness and effective participation.

3. Invest time upfront in relationships, local knowledge and facilitation

Officers repeatedly highlighted that how people are brought together matters as much as the structure. This included **knowing the local area and stakeholders**,

understanding councillor and group dynamics, starting relationship-building early, and ensuring **strong, neutral chairing** to keep discussion focused, inclusive and action-based — and to manage political dynamics constructively.

Additional reflections

A few additional themes and reflections were also worth capturing from the discussion:

- Allow enough time to plan properly and take a longer-term view rather than rushing.
- Get the practicalities right early: venues, accessibility, risk assessments, timings.
- Be transparent about membership: who is in the room, who is not, and why.
- Have a clear engagement plan beyond the room, including young people, minorities and seldom-heard groups.
- Keep the NAC action-focused, with a clear sense of added value (not a talking shop).
- Use simple tools to support delivery, such as a visual project plan and agreed meeting agenda and timings.

Partnership workshop

The same questions were discussed with representatives of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and public sector partners in a separate workshop with around 25 attendees.

Process

- Community venues were strongly welcomed, helping to reduce formality, address power dynamics and create a more inclusive, local feel.
- Behind-the-scenes coordination between SCC and partners worked well and helped build trust quickly.
- The rapid pace enabled early progress, while also highlighting the value of allowing **more time for planning, accessibility checks and learning between meetings**.
- Clearer and more consistent processes (e.g. chair selection, meeting frequency, terms of reference) were identified as an opportunity to support future scale-up.
- Partners emphasised the importance of mechanisms to **share learning across NACs**, not just within individual pilots.

Communication

- Transparent ways of working, including the website 'Commonplace' and shared information spaces, were positively received.
- Communication was seen as central to confidence and effective participation, particularly when information was timely and consistent.
- Partners highlighted the value of **equal briefing across all sectors**, not just elected members.
- Earlier circulation of agendas and papers would help representatives gather insight and contribute more fully.
- Clear, accessible language, with less council jargon, was seen as important for inclusion and shared understanding.

Model Efficacy

- Partners viewed the pilots as a **significant achievement**, particularly given that many organisations had not previously worked together.
- Strong chairing and a safe, inclusive environment helped maintain focus and build trust.
- Some partners found it difficult initially to visualise how the model would operate over time, reinforcing the importance of **clear narratives about the journey and end-state**.
- The pilots highlighted the need to balance consistency with flexibility, recognising that different areas may require different structures.
- Clarity around funding, decision-making and how priorities translate into action was identified as important for future effectiveness.

Participation and Representation

- Partners welcomed the breadth of representation and noted improvements in participation and behaviour over time.
- Engagement from health, police and community groups was particularly valued.
- The pilots surfaced opportunities to **further strengthen diversity**, business representation and inclusion of smaller parishes.
- Timing of meetings and unbriefed substitutes were seen as factors that can affect consistency of participation.
- Clearer roles, expectations and accountability for members would support confidence and continuity.

Influence

- Partners were clear that **shaping local priorities is the core reason for involvement** and saw early signs of influence.
- Use of data and lived experience (including young people's voices) was a strong enabler of meaningful discussion.
- Greater clarity around **funding, decision-making powers and routes to impact** was identified as key to sustaining engagement.
- Partners highlighted the importance of being explicit about what NACs can influence directly and what sits at a wider system level.

Partnership Working

- Partnership working was widely seen as one of the strongest aspects of the pilots.
- The NACs helped strengthen existing relationships and accelerate collaboration across organisations.
- Networking and informal relationship-building were consistently cited as high-value outcomes.
- Political and relational dynamics reinforced the importance of neutral chairing and shared ways of working.
- Partners expressed appetite for **working groups and collaboration between meetings** to maintain momentum and shared ownership.

Additional engagement and insights

A briefing session for town and parish councillors across the whole of Surrey was held in collaboration with SALC in September, generating several useful insights for current and future engagement.

Councillors questioned how NAC members are selected, and on what basis, particularly compared with democratically elected parish councillors, and whether NACs risk becoming an additional layer with unclear authority, or a "chatroom". It was clear that more communication is needed to clarify the focus on cross-sector collaboration, prevention work and to reassure councillors of the clear intent to work together rather than to duplicate their work. The need for clarity around membership and geography was also raised, and the process for appointing chairs.

Key takeaways from this session include the need to:

- Be **consistently explicit** that NACs complement, not replace, Town & Parish Councils.
- Repeat clear messages about **advisory status, influence routes and limits**.
- Recognise the importance of clear and transparent processes e.g. around membership selection and chairing, even during pilots, as this will help provide reassurance and credibility.
- Explain geography and boundaries in **simple, visual ways**.

Further qualitative feedback was gathered from committee members and wider stakeholders primarily via email after the first and second NAC meetings.

This feedback reinforces that the NAC pilots have been effective in bringing together partners who would not typically work in this way, enabling stronger relationships, shared understanding and early movement towards collaborative action.

Several people highlighted the added value of working at neighbourhood scale with a broader mix of partners, noting that this created opportunities to influence priorities and mobilise non-financial resources in ways that existing governance arrangements alone have not always enabled.

At the same time, the feedback highlights a tension between the ambition of the model and the constraints of a fast-paced pilot. Some participants felt that too much meeting time was spent on governance and process, reducing space for inclusive exploration of priorities and action planning. At risk of over-simplifying the feedback, this point does reinforce several previous insights from other sources of feedback in Phase One and Phase Two, suggesting that there are two contrasting views on the purpose and benefit of the NACs, with one group identifying the benefits of collaboration and wanting to put this into tangible action against local priorities, while another group wanting first to clarify scope, processes and governance.

There was also a clear desire across all additional feedback for greater clarity about purpose, outcomes and how the pilot would be judged as successful, alongside concern that without visible routes to action, the NACs risk being perceived as discussion-focused rather than delivery-focused.

Across areas, strong chairing, good facilitation and the use of data and lived experience were repeatedly identified as critical enablers of productive discussion and confidence in the process. Feedback also emphasised that momentum depends heavily on what happens between meetings, including follow-up activity, working groups and continued

partner engagement, which in turn requires ongoing resourcing and realistic expectations about capacity.

Key takeaways from these additional insights include:

- **NACs add most value when they bring partners, data and lived experience together**, enabling shared priorities and action that go beyond existing forums.
- **Clarity of purpose, outcomes and routes to influence is critical** to sustaining confidence, particularly for stakeholders who are sceptical or time-limited.
- **Strong chairing, facilitation and meeting design matter**, helping manage dynamics, focus discussion and avoid meetings becoming overly process-led.
- **Momentum depends on what happens between meetings**, including follow-up activity and working groups, which has implications for resourcing and sustainability.
- **Communication and accessibility directly affect engagement**, including timely agendas, concise minutes and formats that work for non-council participants.

Phase Two conclusions and recommendations

The Phase Two evaluation indicates that the Neighbourhood Area Committee (NAC) pilot programme has made measurable progress in building shared understanding, confidence and commitment among participants, while also surfacing clear learning about how the model needs to evolve to maximise impact. Quantitative findings show improved understanding of purpose, process and timelines compared with Phase One, alongside a slight increase in optimism. This suggests that changes to meeting structure and communication have begun to address early uncertainty, although confidence remains cautious rather than assured.

Qualitative feedback from officers, partners, councillors and wider stakeholders consistently highlights the value of bringing partners together at neighbourhood scale. The NACs have created new relationships, improved connectivity and enabled joint consideration of local priorities informed by data and lived experience. Strong chairing, effective facilitation and the use of community venues have been important enablers of trust and productive discussion. At the same time, the feedback reveals an ongoing tension between the ambition of the model and the constraints of a fast-paced pilot. In particular, participants continue to seek greater clarity about purpose, success

measures and routes to influence, alongside reassurance that the NACs will move beyond discussion towards tangible action.

Across all feedback sources, there is a clear message that the long-term effectiveness of the NAC model will depend less on the meetings themselves and more on what happens between them. Sustaining momentum requires realistic pacing, clearer prioritisation, activity outside formal sessions and sufficient resource to support follow-up and partnership working. Addressing these factors, while continuing to strengthen communication, transparency and inclusive participation, will be critical if the NAC model is to mature into a credible, trusted and impactful form of neighbourhood governance in future phases.

When analysing all the quantitative and qualitative feedback above, the most relevant and salient points under each of the six evaluation theme headings are as follows:

1. Process

- The fast pace enabled early learning, but feedback consistently highlights the need for more time for planning, preparation and follow-up, particularly between meetings.
- Community venues and clear meeting structures supported engagement, while over-emphasis on governance within meetings reduced space for action-focused discussion.

2. Communication

- Earlier, clearer and more consistent pre-meeting communication remains one of the strongest enablers of confidence and effective participation.
- Transparent, accessible communication (including concise agendas, papers and minutes) is particularly important for non-council participants.

3. Model efficacy

- There is strong belief in the potential value of the NAC model, especially in bringing partners together at neighbourhood scale.
- Confidence in the model is closely linked to clarity of purpose, success measures and visible routes from discussion to action.

4. Participation and representation

- Participation was generally strong, but perceived gaps in diversity and representation (e.g. young people, ethnic minority communities, business, faith groups) remain a recurring theme.
- Flexibility in membership and clearer expectations of roles help sustain meaningful participation as priorities become more defined.

5. Influence

- Stakeholders are most engaged when pathways from insight to action are clear, and when the advisory nature of the NACs is well understood.
- Use of data and lived experience strengthens confidence that priorities are grounded and relevant.

6. Partnership working

- Partnership working is consistently identified as one of the strongest features of the pilots, with new relationships and collaboration emerging.
- Momentum depends on ongoing collaboration between meetings, including working groups and shared ownership, which has implications for resourcing.

While more detailed recommendations were discussed and actioned within each of the working groups for each NAC, the following helps to summarise the key themes into tangible actions that apply to each NAC for the third meeting and final phase of the pilot.

Recommendations

1. Communicate the purpose and process effectively (**keep reiterating** through **different channels**) and **keep reinforcing the 'why':**
   - **Set realistic expectations** for the final two meetings, with **clear deliverables**.
   - Share **clear message about the future** – what will be likely to happen in 2026.
   - **Ensure transparency in decision-making** and membership.

2. Address and manage political dynamics – **develop a shared collaborative working agreement** and share this publicly (also communicate it 1-1 if needed).

3. Identify and **fill in any remaining gaps in representation**.

4. Prioritise **engagement and participation** outside of the meetings.

5. Share dates and venues further in advance.

6. Empower and **maximise skills of all council officer and partner staff** (especially Community Partnership Officers).

Phase 3

Third committee meetings

The final NAC meetings were held in December, with a focus on finalising local priorities, capturing reflections on the pilot programme so far and discussing next steps for 2026.

Survey questions were also shared at the end of these meetings, to capture any changes in metrics from the first workshop through to the third meeting and any qualitative reflections.

The evaluation team also conducted interviews with several NAC members after the second meetings, although these were delayed until early 2026 in Farnham due to the tighter meeting schedule. Notes and transcripts were analysed and the key findings captured below.

Table discussions

Key insights and recommendations from the evaluation so far were presented to participants and discussed in groups.

Notes from table discussions showed that conversations became most detailed and productive when they moved to **working through concrete actions** (e.g. food pantries, youth wellbeing packs, transport access, community hubs).

Participants were more actively engaged when asked to identify **owners, partners, resources and timelines**, reinforcing earlier evaluation findings that **confidence and perceived value increase when discussion moves towards delivery**.

Across both areas, participants repeatedly proposed:

- **Working groups** between meetings,
- Named leads and partner ownership,
- Follow-up activity outside formal sessions.

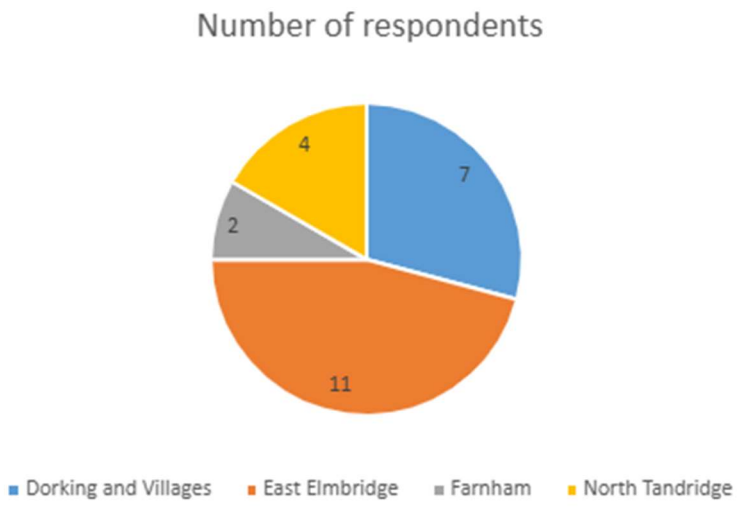
This directly echoes feedback from surveys, officers and partner workshops that **NACs succeed when meetings enable action, but delivery happens elsewhere**. The meeting notes provide concrete examples of how this was already happening (or beginning to happen) by Meeting 3.

The North Tandridge notes, in particular, show how resident engagement insights (youth soundbites, survey data, place-based engagement) shaped discussion and prioritisation, especially in the youth health and wellbeing work. This supports the evaluation claim that data and lived experience strengthen focus and credibility, and that participants respond positively when these are integrated meaningfully into discussions.

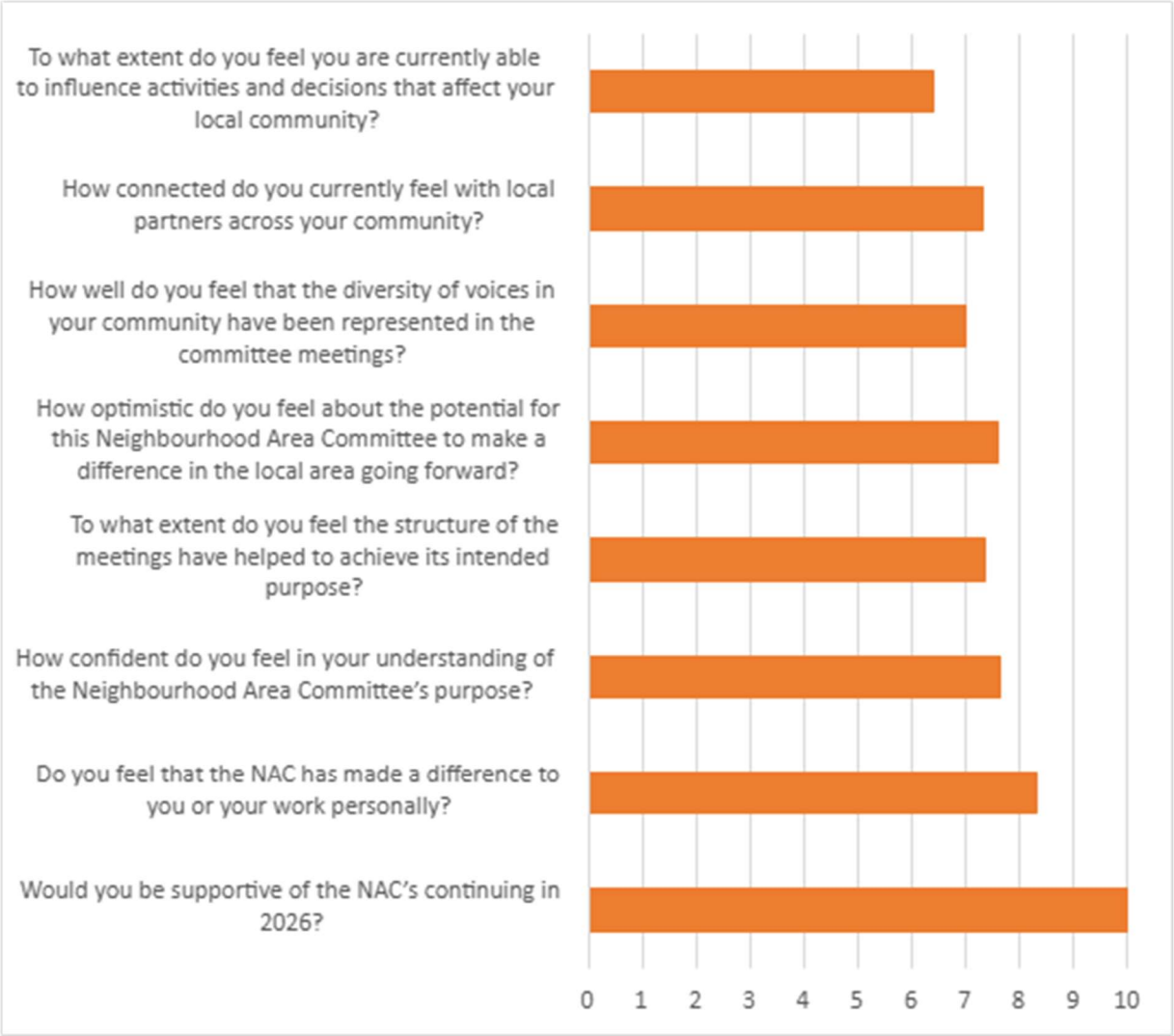
Post-meeting survey

A survey was issued after the third NAC meeting in each pilot area, capturing a mix of quantitative ratings and qualitative reflections on experience, representation, influence and whether participants would support continuing in 2026. The dataset includes responses across all four pilot areas, with aggregated metrics presented alongside area-level averages and open-text feedback.

There was a lower response rate for this third survey, dropping to roughly 25%, potentially due to survey fatigue at this stage and also less opportunity for survey completion reminders in follow up communication, given that these took place just before the Christmas break. The results for Farnham (2 responses) and North Tandridge (4) are too small to be fully representative of their respective committee memberships, although there was a consistency in response content which means they can still be indicative when triangulated with the other sources of feedback.



Graph showing survey response average scores across all four pilot areas



Note: the final two survey questions used 'yes' or 'no' responses. For the chart above, these have been converted into scores out of 10. This means 83% of respondents said the NAC had made a positive difference, and 100% supported the NACs continuing in 2026.

At an aggregate level, the results indicate strong confidence in understanding and meeting structure, high optimism, and consistent support for continuation into 2026. Average ratings were 7.6 for understanding of purpose and 7.4 for whether the meeting structure had helped to achieve that purpose.

Most notably, optimism about the NAC's potential to make a difference going forward averaged 7.6, showing a significant increase from the results after the first workshop and this was consolidated with 100% of the 24 respondents indicating support for the NACs continuing in 2026.

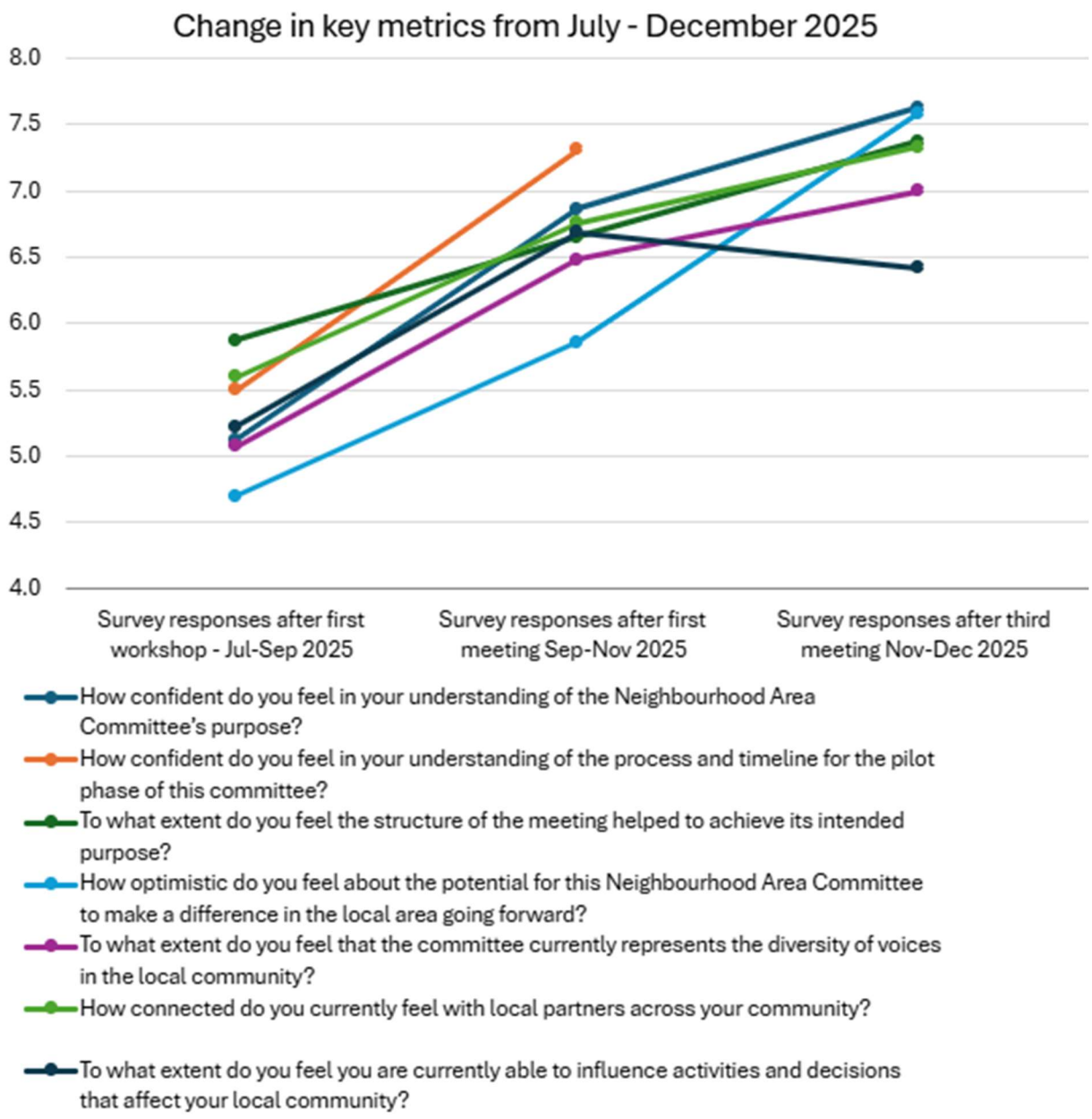
Checking in against the baseline perceptions of influence, representation and connectedness, scores for representation (indicating whether respondents feel that the diverse voices of the community had been represented) had improved to 7.0. This was a slightly different question to that asked previously regarding membership, so the result may be partly due to the increased involvement of those with lived experience and subject matter experts.

Personal influence was the lowest of the core metrics, averaging 6.4, but sense of connectedness had increased to 7.3, which was also reflected in the qualitative feedback where people felt this to be one of the most beneficial aspects of the committee meetings so far.

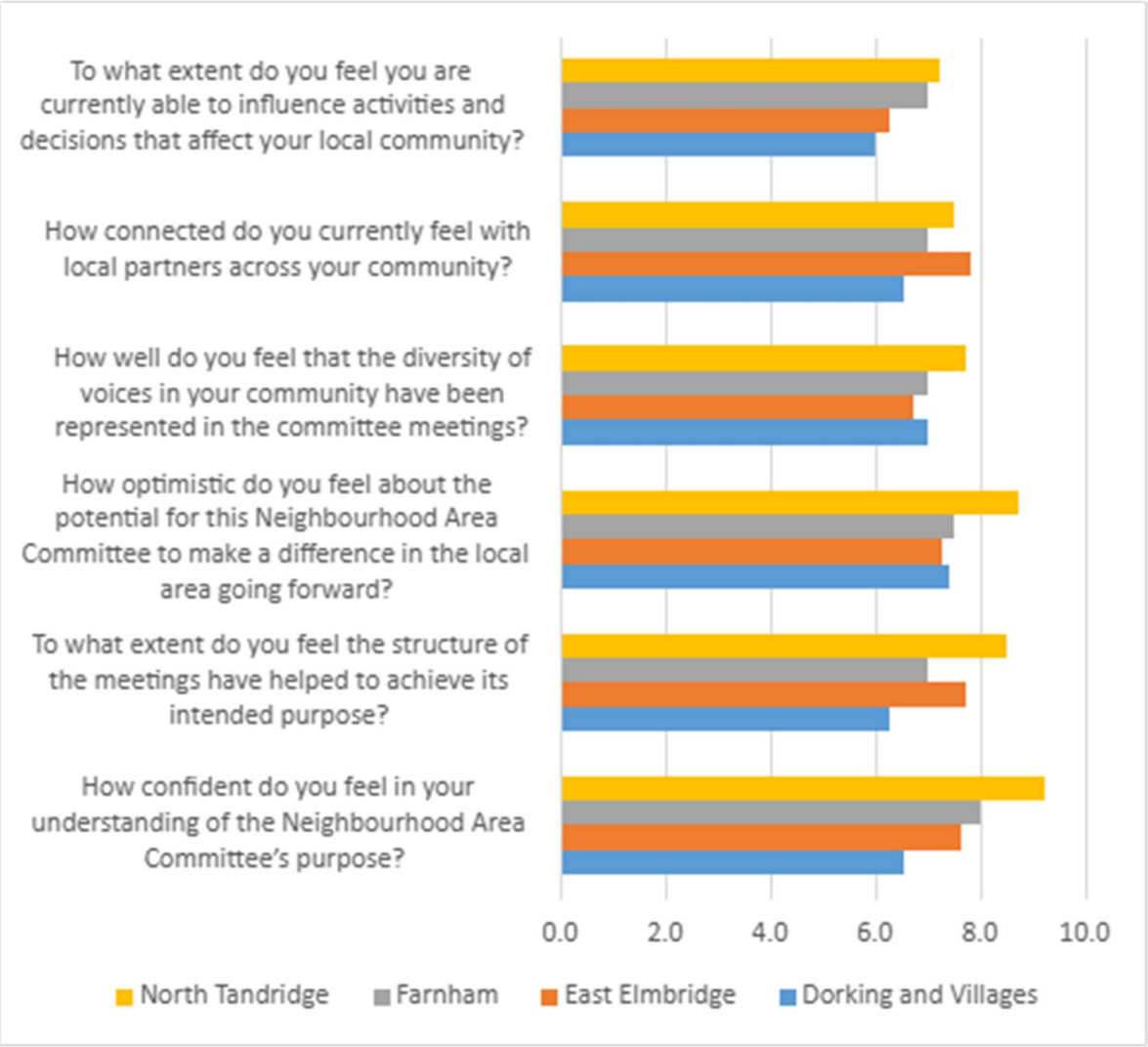
Overall, 83% of respondents felt that participating in the committee had made a positive difference to them or their work.

The graph below shows how the metrics changed from the first workshop to the third meeting. The wording on representation changed slightly in the final survey, and the question on clarity of process and timeline was not asked after the third meeting. This means direct comparisons should be treated with care.

Graph showing change in key evaluation theme metrics from July to December



Graph showing survey responses by NAC pilot area



In the survey responses from the third meeting there is some variation between pilot areas, with the results showing North Tandridge (albeit from a small sample of four respondents) with the highest average scores across most measures (e.g., purpose understanding 9.3, meeting structure 8.5, optimism 8.8, and influence 7.3).

East Elmbridge scores strongly on meeting structure (7.7) and connectedness (7.8) but has a lower average representation score (6.7) relative to some other areas. Dorking & Villages shows lower averages for understanding (6.6) and meeting structure (6.3), while still reporting optimism (7.4) and full support for continuation. Farnham's two responses show high understanding (8.0) and stable scores on optimism and representation (7.5 and 7.0), but a recorded value of 0 for the "difference to me/my work" indicator within the analysis sheet (noting that individual open-text comments still describe relationship and networking benefits).

Qualitative feedback

There were more opportunities in this survey for open-text responses, and some rich data was gathered as a result. Across all areas, participants most frequently described the NAC as creating valuable networking opportunities, improving awareness of who is doing what locally, and making it easier to contact partners outside meetings. Several respondents explicitly linked NAC participation to follow-on conversations and meetings beyond the formal sessions, suggesting that relationship-building is already translating into practical collaboration.

A recurring theme is the desire to ensure momentum and delivery, particularly through working groups or activity between meetings. Where participants perceived limited ability to progress work within the meeting format alone, they recommended structured working groups that can meet between sessions and report back, improving ownership and ensuring that meetings remain focused on decisions and next steps rather than revisiting process. This echoed feedback given after the first workshops and first meetings and will be a recommendation to take forward into 2026.

When asked which voices they felt were currently not well enough represented, respondents most commonly referenced “children and young people”, “lived experience”, and “minoritised or diverse communities”. Several responses also referenced gaps such as emergency services (in at least one area), wider community and business groups, and the challenge of including all voices within a finite membership model. Another response recognised the potential future benefit of this model in connecting local community voices formally to the unitary authority.

Despite the quantitative scoring for ‘feelings of influence’ being the lowest data point, when asked “In what ways, if any, have the NACs influenced your feeling of influence?” the majority cited networking and connections as a positive factor here (not only in response to the broader question on this topic), which indicates perhaps initial potential for greater influence that is understandably not yet fully realised. Comments included, “Know who to connect with to influence decisions”. “Demonstrated other partners one can collaborate with to exert influence for good!” and “Creating new connections and better understanding roles within the community”.

This was reiterated in response to the question regarding influence on feelings of connection, with one person writing, “Meeting new people and understanding where our objectives overlap” and another “NAC’s have demonstrated the wide range of interested parties who are committed to improving residents’ lives and well-being. By coming together in a variety of locations and discussing a variety of topics we have become more connected and aligned.”

In East Elmbridge, a notable theme is the perceived benefit of stronger alignment with health footprints and the suggestion that the NAC geography could be smaller or split to improve effectiveness and "get more done". Although in other discussions, for example the partnership workshop, the opposite was suggested, this does highlight the view that the model's success depends on the right operating scale and fit with existing partnership structures.

Overall, the survey feedback suggests the NACs are consolidating trust and perceived value, with participants increasingly recognising benefits around connection, shared understanding, and collaborative intent. At the same time, the feedback reinforces recurring priorities for improvement, most notably:

- ensuring **inclusive representation** (especially youth and lived experience)
- strengthening delivery mechanisms **between meetings** (e.g., working groups and clearer ownership, and facilitating connections between committee members)

Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) to gain more in-depth insight into experiences of the pilot beyond the survey responses. This section summarises cross-cutting findings from 21 qualitative interviews undertaken across the four NAC pilot areas: East Elmbridge, North Tandridge, Dorking & Villages, and Farnham.

The interviews explored participants' views and experiences of involvement in the NAC model, including motivation for participation, what worked well, challenges encountered, communication and information sharing, priority-setting processes, perceived impact to date and looking ahead, and the potential for countywide application.

Sample and data collection

Invitations were issued by email to NAC attendees, with a sampling approach designed to secure participation from a broad range of roles and remits within each committee. Interviews were conducted between November and December 2025 with members of three NACs, largely following second meetings, with a small number taking place after third meetings. An additional eight interviews were carried out in February 2026 with members of the Farnham NAC, following completion of its final meeting and after the

interim evaluation findings had been reported to Cabinet in January 2026. The timing of these interviews should be read in that context.

Interviews were conducted primarily online via Microsoft Teams but also by phone. Participants included county, district and borough, and parish councillors, VCSE partners, NHS leaders and police representatives. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. With consent, the majority of interviews were recorded for the purposes of accurate write-up only.

Data analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key themes, shared experiences and areas of divergence across the pilot areas. Analysis was structured around the six evaluation themes set out in the NAC Evaluation Framework: process, communication, model efficacy, participation and representation, influence, and partnership working.

Findings

1. Process

Across all four pilot areas, participants recognised that the NACs were established quickly using a "test, learn and grow" approach. This rapid set-up was generally welcomed as a pragmatic way to meet national expectations on neighbourhood governance and to start learning early.

However, it also meant that some of the underpinning processes – such as membership selection, chairing arrangements, and the detailed journey from workshops to action plans – initially felt unclear to participants.

Interviewees describe an iterative improvement in process over the course of the pilot. For example, the second and third meetings were often experienced as more focused and purposeful than the first, with a clearer link from evidence to priorities and then to actions. Participants appreciated the structured workshop design, the use of breakout groups, and the step-by-step refinement of priorities. At the same time, they highlighted several process weaknesses that they would like to see addressed in any future iteration of the model:

- a clearer upfront roadmap for the full NAC cycle
- more transparency and consistency around how chairs and vice chairs are appointed

- more explicit guidance on the respective roles of officers, elected members and community representatives in designing and delivering the work.

There is a strong consensus that skilled, impartial facilitation is a critical process element. Where facilitation was perceived to be strong – for example, in managing stronger voices, summarising discussions, and keeping meetings on track – participants felt the process worked well. Where facilitation and chairing felt less clear or too heavily reliant on officers, it could undermine perceptions of local ownership and contribute to early scepticism about the model.

Overall, the pilots demonstrate that with appropriate support, the NAC process can move from initial uncertainty to a more confident, scalable model, but that this requires intentional design and resourcing.

2. Communication

Communication emerges as both a significant strength and a recurring challenge. On the positive side, many participants praise the effort made by the NAC team and local partners to keep people informed, particularly once the pilots were underway. Examples include clear agendas and minutes, narrative "overview notes" circulated after meetings, and the use of online platforms and engagement portals to share information more widely. In some areas, participants explicitly contrasted the quality of NAC-related communication with less effective communication in other forums.

At the same time, interviewees repeatedly highlight issues with the timeliness and volume of information. Agendas and papers, including substantial data and insight packs, were often circulated late, giving limited time for busy members to review them. The density and length of some documents made it difficult for people without analytical backgrounds to extract the key messages. In a few cases, stakeholders also reported feeling excluded from early communications – for example, not receiving initial invitations and having to hear about the NAC through colleagues rather than directly.

Looking ahead, participants suggest that communication would be strengthened by:

- earlier circulation of papers
- shorter, more focused summary documents that clearly explain what is being asked of NAC members at each stage
- simpler and more consistent messaging for members to use when cascading information to their own networks
- regular, light-touch progress updates between meetings to sustain momentum

3. Model Efficacy

Model efficacy – the question of whether NACs “work” as a governance mechanism – is a central concern in the interviews. On one level, participants are overwhelmingly positive about the concept. They see NACs as a promising way to bring decisions closer to communities, to align with neighbourhood health and prevention programmes, and to provide a structured space for cross-sector problem-solving. Several interviewees describe NACs as filling a gap between local and strategic levels, and as an opportunity to move beyond fragmented or ad hoc engagement approaches. NACs were described as a "bridge" between local communities and the future unitary, and as a practical way of "hardwiring" place-based working into the system. One participant said they saw the NAC as "an opportunity to embed new ways of working in [the] unitary structure" and were keen that the pilot did not become "just another body".

On another level, participants are cautious about the model’s effectiveness in practice, primarily because of uncertainty about decision-making power and funding. Many ask explicitly what NACs are able to decide or influence, and whether they are advisory bodies, decision-making forums, or something in between. Concerns are raised that without some tangible levers – such as influence over budgets, formal routes into the new unitary authorities, or clear accountability mechanisms – NACs could become “talking shops”. This is especially salient in areas where previous local forums have been perceived as lacking impact.

The pilots have nonetheless produced early evidence of efficacy in the form of concrete outputs and actions. Examples include cross-agency workshops on children and young people’s mental health, new collaborations between schools and voluntary organisations, and practical connections between services addressing food insecurity and poverty. Participants note that these examples help to counter scepticism and demonstrate the model’s potential.

Overall, the interviews suggest that the NAC model is seen as having most potential when it is connected to visible action and when its advisory role is clearly linked to formal decision-making.

4. Participation and Representation

Participation levels in the pilots have been high, with many interviewees describing strong interest in being involved and, in some cases, more prospective members than could fit within the proposed 7-7-7 model (or the venues themselves). Participants value the opportunity to contribute to local priorities, to share their expertise, and to learn from others. Importantly, there is evidence that participation has strengthened

over time as the purpose of the NACs has become clearer and as participants have seen that their input is taken seriously.

However, the composition of participation raises important questions about representation. Several interviewees note that membership is "councillor-heavy" and that in some meetings elected members dominated early discussions, particularly when the NACs were still finding their feet. Others highlight that certain sectors – such as business, education, agriculture, or faith groups – are represented by only one or two people, who therefore carry a heavy burden of representation. There are also concerns about demographic representation, with some NACs described as predominantly male, white and older compared with the diversity of the local population.

Participants call for clearer and more transparent membership principles. Suggestions include:

- reviewing the 7-7-7 model to allow more flexibility by area
- ensuring that under-represented communities and sectors are actively sought out and supported to participate
- making it explicit that members are expected to disseminate information to, and gather input from, wider networks
- building in periodic reviews of membership to refresh the group and respond to changing local contexts.

There is also a strong message that NACs should be positioned as complementary to, rather than duplicating or replacing, democratic structures – i.e. not as new "parliaments", but as additional channels for community insight and collaboration.

5. Influence

Influence – both perceived and actual – is central to how participants judge the value of the NACs. Many interviewees enter the pilots with some scepticism, shaped by experiences of other forums where discussions did not lead to change. They want to know whether the time invested in NAC meetings will translate into influence over priorities, resource allocation, and service design in the emerging unitary landscape.

The evaluation interviews show that NACs are beginning to exert influence in several ways. First, they create a shared evidence base and narrative around local priorities (for example, youth provision, deprivation, mental health), which is then used to inform local planning and to brief senior leaders.

Second, NACs provide a platform where partners can jointly commit to specific actions – such as convening thematic workshops, piloting new collaborations, or adjusting existing services – lending collective weight to those initiatives.

Third, NACs are seen as an important input into the design of future neighbourhood governance in the new unitary authorities, with several participants explicitly emphasising the need for learning from the pilots to be carried forward.

At the same time, the interviews highlight that the routes of influence need to be made more explicit. Participants ask for clarity on how NAC recommendations will be captured, how they will feed into strategic decision-making processes, and how feedback will be provided on what has or has not been taken forward. Some suggest formalising the NACs' advisory role to select committees or to relevant boards, while others advocate for modest devolved budgets to accompany the NAC work. Without such clarity, there is a risk that perceptions of influence remain fragile, even where real impacts are beginning to emerge.

6. Partnership Working

Partnership working is one of the clearest strengths to emerge from the pilots. Interviewees consistently describe NACs as valuable spaces for building relationships across organisational boundaries, deepening understanding of each other's roles, and identifying synergies between different initiatives. Participants from health, policing, education, local government and the voluntary and community sector report gaining new contacts and insights that they are already using in their day-to-day work.

The NAC format appears particularly powerful in bringing together partners who rarely sit around the same table – for example, schools and mental health services, or food banks and community infrastructure organisations. The shared focus on a small number of agreed local priorities helps to align efforts and reduces the risk of duplication. In some areas, NACs have also strengthened relationships between different tiers of local government, with town, parish, district and county representatives working together more closely than before.

The interviews do also reveal challenges in this area though. Partnership benefits are not distributed evenly: county-wide organisations in particular note that it is difficult to sustain attendance at multiple NACs, and some sectors (such as the police or fire services) have found it hard to prioritise attendance given operational pressures. There are also instances where key partners felt excluded from sub-groups or follow-up meetings, which undermined feelings of shared ownership. Participants therefore argue for clearer expectations and protocols around partner engagement, including

how thematic sub-groups are formed, how membership is decided, and how learning and action from those groups flows back into the NAC and into wider governance structures.

Place-based insights

It was important when analysing the interview notes and transcripts to recognise that the NAC model had been experienced in local contexts that differed from each other in terms of rural-urban split, demographics, political dynamics or number of town and parish councils, with at least some variation also in starting points, priorities and pace of progress.

The notes below capture some of the key findings from the interviews which are specific to each individual Neighbourhood Area Committee.

East Elmbridge

East Elmbridge was consistently described as a large and complex area, and some interviewees suggested that, over time, smaller or more focused neighbourhood arrangements might be easier to manage. Within this context, the NAC developed a strong focus on children and young people, with many partners seeing it as a valuable opportunity to bring attention back to youth provision and to address long-standing gaps in prevention and early help.

Participants spoke positively about the practical organisation of meetings, including venues, logistics and the use of an online engagement portal. The use of mixed breakout groups was seen as particularly helpful in bringing together different perspectives and encouraging more open discussion. Several interviewees felt that these formats helped surface insights that might not otherwise have emerged.

Some early meetings involved differing perspectives between councillors and frontline partners, particularly around lived experience of youth issues. Interviewees reflected that, as the pilot progressed, the sharing of local intelligence from youth workers and the police helped build a more shared understanding and shifted conversations in a constructive direction.

Looking ahead, participants identified communication between meetings and clarity around governance arrangements – such as chairing and membership – as areas where greater transparency would be helpful. Overall, there was a strong sense that the East Elmbridge NAC had significant potential to act as a catalyst for re-prioritising youth and prevention within local decision-making, provided the model continued to mature.

North Tandridge

In North Tandridge, interviewees described the NAC as bringing together a broad mix of district, county, parish, education, business and voluntary sector representatives. Many explicitly compared it with previous local committee structures, often favourably, particularly because of the opportunity to hear directly from people working on the frontline in communities.

Participants valued the contributions of schools, foodbanks and advice services, and several noted a clear shift between the first and second meetings. Over time, councillors were described as becoming more open to learning from others, and interviewees pointed to tangible benefits such as new links between schools, youth clubs and mental health services, as well as a stronger shared understanding of how local data could support joint work.

Some challenges were identified around leadership, facilitation and balance within the group. A few interviewees felt that chairs would benefit from clearer expectations and stronger early support, to help them feel confident in the role. Others noted that the balance between councillors and community or business voices could be refined further, and that follow-up between meetings did not always happen as hoped.

Looking forward, participants suggested that clearer role definitions for chairs and facilitators, a more deliberate approach to balancing membership, and additional support for collaboration between meetings would help the North Tandridge NAC build on its early progress.

Dorking and Villages

The Dorking and Villages NAC covered a diverse area, including both a market town and a range of rural communities. Interviewees were keenly aware of differences between town and village perspectives, and some parish representatives emphasised the importance of ensuring that village-specific issues – such as traffic, antisocial behaviour and access to services – continued to be visible alongside town priorities.

Participants valued the opportunity to explore issues that had been generated by the group itself and welcomed the use of data to move discussions beyond anecdote. Several interviewees felt this approach helped ground conversations and supported more productive debate.

At the same time, questions about influence and impact were particularly prominent in this area. Because the NAC was non-statutory and did not control a budget, some

participants wanted clearer reassurance about how recommendations would be heard and acted upon, especially in light of experiences with other local forums. Interviewees emphasised the importance of clearly articulating the NAC's distinct role and its connection to future decision-making within the new unitary arrangements.

There were also reflections on membership and representation, including the absence of some sectors and a desire for greater demographic diversity. Participants suggested that being clearer about purpose, remit and routes to influence would help strengthen confidence in the model over time.

Farnham

Farnham stood out both because of timing and context. Interviews took place after three NAC meetings, allowing participants to reflect not only on early process but also on emerging actions. Farnham also benefited from a strong foundation of existing multi-agency relationships, including established health inequalities and integrated care arrangements, which shaped how the NAC model was received and applied locally.

Feedback from Farnham was consistently positive. Interviewees described high levels of engagement, goodwill and a strong sense of both personal and collective responsibility to drive forward positive change in the local area. More organisations wanted to be involved than the 7-7-7 model could formally accommodate. While there was some early push-back against the idea of SCC "doing to" the area, this was balanced by very positive feedback about the way SCC officers and local facilitators worked alongside partners. The relationship with Farnham Town Council was widely described as collaborative and based on working together rather than imposing a model. Independent facilitation was seen as a particular strength, supporting inclusive discussion and helping to manage strong voices.

Participants pointed to clear examples of early impact. A frequently cited example was the bringing together of schools, Mindworks and health partners around children and young people's mental health, which several interviewees described as unprecedented locally. Action groups formed around themes such as mentoring and volunteering, and visible progress helped to address earlier concerns about NACs becoming a talking shop.

Interviewees also reflected on the use of evidence and insight. While the data pack was seen as useful to a point, participants felt Farnham already had strong local knowledge and access to richer, more granular insight. Rather than relying on the data pack alone,

partners described layering this information with existing local intelligence to inform priorities and action.

Alongside this optimism, Farnham interviewees were realistic about sustainability. They noted that the current level of support from the NAC team may not be maintainable in the long term and described the work as a “coalition of the willing” that would require ongoing resourcing and more formal backing to endure. Participants also highlighted the need for clearer routes from discussion to action, greater transparency in the governance of sub-groups, and continued attention to representation and diversity as the NAC evolved.

Conclusion

This evaluation set out to assess whether the Neighbourhood Area Committee (NAC) pilot model provides a credible, effective approach to neighbourhood level governance in Surrey, and to identify what would be required for it to mature and scale within the context of Local Government Reorganisation.

Process

Overall, the pilot programme was well designed and delivered at pace, and the "test, learn and grow" approach enabled rapid learning and visible iteration across the three meeting cycle. Participants consistently recognised that establishing the NACs quickly was a pragmatic response to the wider context, and many described a clear improvement in how sessions operated over time, with the second and third meetings experienced as more focused and purposeful than the first.

The combination of structured agendas, facilitated breakout discussion and step-by-step refinement of priorities supported a stronger line of sight from evidence to priorities and, by the third meetings, towards clearer action-orientated conversations. Community venues and accessible locations were also repeatedly identified as important enablers, supporting a more inclusive atmosphere and helping to reinforce the intended neighbourhood focus of the model.

At the same time, the evaluation evidence shows that the pace of delivery created predictable pressures, particularly in relation to planning, logistics and follow-up activity between sessions. Participants and delivery partners were clear that some underpinning process elements initially felt unclear, including how membership was selected, how chairing arrangements were determined, and how the overall journey from workshops to priorities and action plans would operate in practice.

Looking ahead, the process would be strengthened by a clearer upfront roadmap for the full NAC cycle, greater transparency and consistency in chair and vice-chair appointment, and more explicit guidance on the respective roles of officers, elected members and community representatives in shaping and delivering the work. The evaluation also reinforces that skilled, impartial facilitation is not an optional extra but a critical process component: where facilitation and chairing were strong, participants reported higher confidence in the model and greater ability to keep discussions inclusive, balanced and on track.

Communication

Communication emerged as both a notable strength of the pilots and one of the most consistent areas for improvement. Quantitative findings indicate that understanding of purpose and of process and timeline improved over the course of the pilot, suggesting that changes to meeting structure and communication did begin to address early uncertainty. Qualitative feedback also highlights examples of effective practice once the pilots were underway, including clear agendas and minutes, narrative overview notes, and the use of shared online spaces and engagement platforms to support transparency and wider access to information. Officer and partner reflections emphasise that where communication was timely and clear, engagement and alignment were noticeably stronger.

However, the evaluation also indicates that communication was not consistently timely or accessible for all members. Interviewees and open-text survey respondents repeatedly noted that papers and insight packs were often circulated late, limiting the ability of busy members to prepare and, in some cases, creating an uneven starting point across sectors. There were also consistent observations about the volume and density of material, with some members finding it difficult to extract key messages or understand what was expected of them without shorter, clearer summaries.

Looking forward, communication would be strengthened by earlier circulation of agenda papers, shorter and more focused summary products that clearly set out what is being asked of members at this stage, and simpler, consistent messaging that members can use to cascade information into their own networks. Participants also identified the need for regular, light-touch progress updates between meetings to sustain momentum and reinforce transparency as the model transitions from pilot activity towards delivery.

Model efficacy

The evaluation evidence suggests that the NAC model is a credible and promising approach to neighbourhood-level governance. Participants valued the chance to bring elected members, partners and community leaders together at a neighbourhood scale. Several interviewees described NACs as a useful bridge between local communities and the future unitary system. The pilots also showed early practical value, including new connections and collaborations around shared local priorities.

Summary

Taken together, the evidence from surveys, interviews, workshops and resident engagement demonstrates that the NAC pilots have **successfully met their core objectives**. Across four diverse areas, the pilots brought together elected members, public sector partners, voluntary and community organisations and residents in ways that had not previously existed at this neighbourhood level.

They **established shared, evidence-based local priorities, strengthened cross-sector relationships, and created the conditions for collaborative action** focused on prevention and early support.

Confidence in the NAC model increased over the course of the pilot. Quantitative data shows clear improvements in participants' understanding of purpose and process, alongside rising optimism about the model's potential to make a difference locally.

Qualitative feedback consistently highlights **partnership working, networking and shared understanding** as some of the strongest outcomes, with early examples of tangible impact emerging by the third meetings, particularly where discussions moved decisively towards action planning and ownership.

At the same time, the evaluation highlights important considerations for the next phase of development. Although the process and structure of meetings are important for some members, **the overall effectiveness and credibility of the NAC model depends less on the meetings themselves and more on what happens between them**. In order to sustain momentum, there need to be **clear mechanisms for translating discussion into action**, as well as **realistic pacing and sufficient resourcing** to enable this.

The research also pointed to a need for **greater transparency about influence, decision-making- and governance arrangements.** Consideration also needs to be given to on-going **resident engagement and inclusive participation** – especially with young people, people with lived experience and seldom-heard- communities – as the model evolves.

Overall, the findings show that Neighbourhood Area Committees have **clear potential to support place-based decision-making** in Surrey under future unitary arrangements. This potential will depend on clear governance, visible routes from discussion to action, continued resident engagement, and enough capacity to support delivery between meetings.