THE UNIVERSITY
OF BIRMINGHAM

Review of Community Councils in the London Borough of Southwark

Report of the Institute of Local Government Studies,

School of Public Policy

University of Birmingham

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Review of Community Councils

London Borough of Southwark

By the Institute of Local Government Studies.

1 Introduction

1.1 Southwark Council established eight Community Councils (CCs) in April 2003 and committed to review their development after 6 months of operation. They were allocated funds to support the Greener, Cleaner, Safer agenda, delegated responsibility for the consideration of local traffic management, planning and licensing applications, and the appointment of primary school governors. The Institute of Local Government Studies was invited to support the review of the Community Councils and the results, contained within this report, are intended as an evidence base for the LBS's Overview and Scrutiny process.

1.2 The review included individual or group interviews with 22 Elected Members, 54 people who attend CCs, and 18 Officers. (These figures include a small number of emailed responses to questions.) Other facets of the review were: the observation of 4 CCs, desktop research of area arrangements nationally, and the application of the professional knowledge and experience of Inlogov staff.

1.3 The report is structured by outlining general comparisons of practice in other local authorities considered to have 'good' area arrangements; the views of people who attend Southwark's CCs, Elected Members, and LBS Officers on current practice and future direction; and key considerations as recommended by the Inlogov team.

1.4 As with most situations people have many different perspectives. The power of reviews of this nature is often the process of people becoming aware of each other's perspective and experience. For this reason the views expressed by those who participated in the review have been

directly reported. The recommendations are those of the Inlogov team and are based on a holistic view of all the issues raised and are intended to help the organisation make its own choices for moving forward.

2   Summary statement

2.1   It should be noted at the outset that there is a good deal of enthusiasm for the CCs amongst all of the interested parties, and in terms of their current remit, and their relative newness, can be deemed to be working well. As with all new organisational initiatives, experience has thrown up opportunities to learn and improve. Those that were felt by the review team to be of most significance within the current CC remit (based on observation and feedback) are noted at 6. For the longer term, if they are to be sustained, fit within broader organisational strategy may be the key issue (discussed at 7).

3   Recommendations

3.1   That consideration be given to the issues raised in section 6 of the report with the aim of learning from the experience of the CCs to date, and improving practice within their current remit.

3.2   That a longer term view of the role of CCs be considered, particularly fit to wider organisational strategy and practice.

4   National Data

4.1   Decentralisation to sub-localities, be it area-based or neighbourhood-based arrangements, tends to offer local authorities two significant means to advance sub-local working: neighbourhood management and area committees/forums.[1] Statutory guidance on the introduction of area committees formed part of the Local Government Act 2000 (Part II Section 18). The guidance did not present a 'blueprint' for the

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[1] H. Sullivan, M. Smith, A. Root and D. Moran (2001), Area Committees and Neighbourhood Management, London: LIGU.

introduction of area arrangements, allowing them to take on either advisory or consultative roles or decision-making roles with powers for example in licensing and planning.[2] The White Paper Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services (2001) subsequently supported local authorities' introduction of sub-local decision-making and service management structures.[3]

4.2   Against such a policy background, area committees/forums have the potential to address the twin objectives of local service design and targeted delivery and the modernisation of political decision-making through involving non-executive councillors and engaging with local people and communities.[4] In doing so, they contribute to a range of current policy agendas, not least modernisation, community well-being, sustainable communities, neighbourhood renewal and Best Value reviews. In very broad terms their introduction offers the following positive outcomes:

- Better representation and accountability of elected members, enhancing the elected councillor community relationship;

- Changes in attitudes and behaviour for front-line and backroom staff;

- Engagement and active involvement of local communities, developing citizen involvement;

- Involvement of range of agencies to solve local problems, improving partnership working at the local level;

- Better results and resource allocation through more effective response to different needs of each community.[5]

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[2] F. Taylor and L. Gaster (2001), In the Neighbourhood. Area Decentralisation and New Political Structures, London: LGA.
[3] MORI (2002), Area Forums and Local Governance. Research Conducted for Southwark Council.
[4] F. Taylor and L. Gaster, p. 4.
[5] F. Taylor and L. Gaster, p. 3.

4.3 The absence of an overarching 'blueprint' for area arrangements has led to the emergence of a number of contrasting practices across local authorities. However, broadly speaking, area arrangements tend to operate as open forums/public meetings dedicated to consultation with communities or as local decision-making structures whereby ward councillors meet in public in local community venues. Whilst it is not suggested here that there has to be a clear trade-off between one form of area arrangements or the other, the balance between what can be termed 'public meetings' and 'meetings in public' will necessarily impact upon the potential outcomes of area arrangements. In particular, there might develop over time tensions between the representational function of area arrangements and their community engagement function. Mediating between these two functions will potentially determine the sustainability of area arrangements and community support.

4.4 Against such a background, a survey of area committees and forums across local authorities reveals a number of responses to mediating the tensions of representation and participation.[6] Firstly, the workings of forums can be integrated into the development of community strategies and community plans. Barnsley MBC for example established its area forums in February 1999 and, like a number of authorities, tied the development of its forums to the production of community plans. Each forum develops a local community plan that feeds into the Barnsley Forum Executive strategy. Reports from area forums are received in Cabinet.

4.5 Secondly, the organisation and management of meetings can offer formal and informal points of access for local people. Thus in Barnsley, each meeting of an area forum has a dedicated 30-minute slot for a public 'question and answer' session. Tameside MBC has enabled residents to table through websites questions for its Open Forum period of its local assemblies. The authority has also moved from a four-week

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[6] The discussion of these authorities is based upon reports of the IDeA, see www.idea.gov.uk

to an eight-week cycle of meetings. Alternatively, Doncaster has established a Black and Ethnic Minority forum and a Youth forum alongside its consultative area forums. The rotation of venues may well encourage local participation, but it can also lead to fragmented decision-making as people find it difficult to attend consecutive meetings.

4.6 Thirdly, the decision-making roles of area committees and forums can be designed to reflect local community priorities and concerns. Following an evaluation of its area arrangements, North Wiltshire DC removed planning from the remit of its local forums and delegated planning to separate committees. This move to separate out planning from area structures was replicated in Tameside where the authority removed planning and appointments of school governors from consideration by its local forums. Salford City Council has attributed a local scrutiny role to its area committees, which feed into the Best Value review process.

4.7 Fourthly, support arrangements and community representation for the running of area committees and forums can vary, engaging for example area coordinators, links officers, community officers, elected member and officer champions, and community chairs and community representation alongside members on local forums. Tameside has also established a procedure whereby members of the public, business representatives and representatives from voluntary and community groups are appointed as advisory group members. In Barnsley, area forums can nominate persons from local organisations to Council to act as co-opted non-voting members (approved by Council).

4.8 The evaluation or benchmarking of the particular area arrangements within a local authority is obliged therefore to recognise the diversity of contexts, and multiplicity of practices that are emerging (see below). Attendance at meetings is one simple benchmark. Attendance at Tameside MBC is approximately 400 people every seven weeks at its 8 district assemblies whereas average attendance at each forum in Barnsley is between 20-30 members of the public.

4.9   Yorkshire Forward argues that the benchmarking of community participation has to be viewed as a method of comparing and contrasting performance <u>within</u> a scheme, focussing on continuous improvement and seeking to evaluate performance one year from the next. Geographical and cultural diversity, different relationships between key stakeholders, and different starting points all militate against standard approaches towards benchmarking.

4.10 Given the barriers to traditional methods of benchmarking, consideration of the effectiveness of exercises in area committees/forums evaluation of area arrangements should concentrate upon establishing 'fitness-for-purpose', or rather the appropriateness of current arrangements in terms of their capacity to meet local needs and expectations. Such an approach reflects the current diversity of local practices and supports the findings of Sullivan *et al*, which concluded that 'there is no single best solution [for sub local arrangements] : each local authority needed to consider the purposes and principles behind their approach and then the structure and processes that would deliver these purposes.'[7] INLOGOV has advocated the application of generalised approaches across authorities that allow for differential delivery mechanisms across each authority in response to the needs of different areas.[8] Indeed, a number of authorities, for example Doncaster and Tameside, have acknowledged that a critical success factor in their area arrangements has been allowing sufficient time for new arrangements to develop at their own speed, building on what works rather than imposing any pre-defined blueprint.

4.11 Issues of cost and value for money were not included in the terms of reference for the review, but were raised. Value for money is a

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[7] JRF Findings (2001), Area Committees and Neighbourhood Management, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
[8] F. Taylor and L. Gaster, p. 7.

judgement to be made within the organisation. There are no clear 'objective' comparisons to be made nationally. All area arrangements are particular to a local authority and sit differently in terms of overall organisational strategy, purpose, and therefore resourcing. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to make external comparisons. Value for money would be the perceived outcomes for the authority balanced against the cost to achieve the outcomes, and will be a matter of judgement and not objective fact.

4.12 The conclusion of research into the potential for benchmarking therefore is that whilst it is useful to survey arrangements in other local authorities in terms of trawling for good practice, or making simple comparisons perhaps on attendance at meetings (Southwark clearly compares well here), the key message from the data is 'fit' - fit with the community, the organisation, and overall policy and strategy. In particular, and to emphasise a point made earlier, mediating the tensions between the representational function of area arrangements and their community engagement function may determine the sustainability of area arrangements. It is partly for this reason that the second recommendation (at 3.2) has been included in the report.

4.13 Southwark has established good building blocks, and there is some awareness of this tension within the organisation, though it will need to become more conscious of this tension, and consider the issue at a strategic level.

5   What is currently valued about Community Councils in Southwark

–   what officers and members value

5.1 This section of the report draws upon the 40 interviews and observation. It outlines people's views about CCs in terms of what they currently value. These are significant outcomes in themselves and strengths of the current process. Any changes to the role or arrangements for CCs

may need to be carefully considered in terms of what may be lost, as well as the potential gains / improvements. The majority of people who were interviewed were very positive about what was being achieved, and how the Councils are developing.

5.2 The CCs appear to have **increased community involvement** and participation by reaching some people beyond (and including) the 'normal group' of community activists, though **no-one is complacent** about the degree of representativeness.

5.3 Members value the opportunity to **engage** directly with the local community in **debates** about issues of concern for them. It was largely felt that there is no other mechanism in place where this type of dialogue can take place on such a **broad range of issues**. People who attend are encouraged to raise issues and be **party to setting the agendas** for the Community Councils. Subsequent requests to LBS services to respond directly to issues raised, is seen by some as the start of the process of providing more **joined up** working within the Council.

5.4 Many officers also value the direct contact with the community, and use them as **reality checks** for their services. Some also found the process of dealing directly with issues people raised, and successfully **responding**, as very rewarding in itself. Officers and elected members see CCs as a way of achieving a heightened sense of **accountability** both for themselves and the community, and for the public, the opportunity to see their **councillors 'in action'**.

5.5 The meetings have also given the opportunity for officers and members to explain the difficulties and complexities of some issues, which it is felt has lead to increased levels of understanding and **acceptance** of decisions that may otherwise have been contentious.

5.6 Allowing for **tailored responses** to issues around the Greener, Cleaner, Safer agenda is valued by all concerned, and many are pleased with the outcomes of focusing on this agenda, which is broadly felt to be appropriate. The current success and popularity of the CCs is attributed

mainly to the delegation of this budget, **actions can be decided**, and implemented, and the sense of dealing with **local issues** that are **practical and real for residents**.

5.7 In addition, members of the public often see the **results** very quickly when they have raised straightforward issues of failure of service, or requests for simple changes of approach. **Appreciation** is often expressed by the public for work done in response to issues raised at CCs and is valued by members and officers alike.

5.8 **Collaborative ways of working** and involving the public at many of the meetings has been achieved and enjoyed by those who have participated. A **shared understanding** of underlying and interlinking issues for a community is also cited as a healthy product of the CC dialogue.

5.9 Though the original focus was on the Greener, Cleaner, Safer agenda **other agencies** are invited and encouraged to attend CCs where members of the public have raised issues that are not in the direct control of the Local Authority. This aspect of the CC operation is perceived as developing and having great potential.

5.10 Each CC is **developing differently** in response to its particular community and is perceived on the whole as a major strength of the current approach, though this does cause some difficulties in terms of support. There were also some concerns expressed about the rationale for the boundaries for CCs.

5.11 Where there are strong links between CCs and **Street Action Teams** the work of both is perceived as being better informed (though there are some boundary issues that may need to be resolved in the future).

what people who attend value

5.12 People who attend CCs have broadly similar views to those expressed by officers and members in terms of what they value. Many are very

enthusiastic and complimentary about the process (this is also reflected in feedback from questionnaires collated by LBS's Consultation Unit). In particular they see them as routes to **express their views**, as well as **find out information** (including future plans), vehicles **to get things done by**, **have a say** about their area, and opportunities to meet Councillors and officers **face to face and question** them.

5.13 They are also seen as a platform to raise **collective concerns** as well as identifying others who have the same concerns (feelings of having a **strengthened voice**), and for some to **represent others' views** – including those who would find it difficult to participate directly.

5.14 **Information** about the community, what **services** are available to them, **networking** and meeting 'neighbours', and the **social element** to meetings is also valued by many and gives a sense of belonging to a community and a starting point for **feeling less disconnected.**

5.15 The **approachability and openness** of members and officers is appreciated along with greater transparency and faster **decision making**. **Insights into the costs** of projects and services are gained, along with an awareness of the finiteness of council resources. Elected Members are perceived by some to be **collaborating** more as a result of the CC process.

5.16 **Challenging** the quality of service delivery and especially **getting quick responses to problems** is seen as a major benefit to attendance at CC meetings. Devolved funding and **choice in how money is spent** was also highlighted, and getting things done for the people who they represent, particularly, **getting financial support for projects.** The meetings are seen by many to be very **practical**.

5.17 They are perceived by some as encouraging democratic participation and are about **devolving power** to the people.

6 Learning from experience and improvement – to date

6.1   As with all new organisational ventures and in the light of experience, there are a number of areas where improvements have been suggested by those participating. If CCs were to continue with the same remit, either over the short or the longer-term, the following issues have been noted as needing further consideration: management of meetings, resourcing and officer support, safety, perceptions of 'the Council', and issues of function. They have mostly been identified by the people participating in the review, but have the support of the INLOGOV review team.

6.2   It is suggested that these issues could be taken forward by a project group. In many cases the solution to the issue may merely be a matter of raising people's awareness and understanding; others will require collaborative working. There may seem to be a large number of issues to address, which may have to be prioritised (and perhaps within the context of potential longer term change), though from an organisational development perspective these represent the normal process of learning and adjustment.

Management of the meetings.

6.3   There are mixed views about the overall benefits of moving the location of the CCs' meetings to different locations, this issue may require a discreet piece of consultation. There are some questions over the frequency of meetings. These relate to resourcing issues for officers and members, and realistic time spans to achieve progress on agreed outcomes.

6.4   Although meetings take place between officers and CC Chairs for **planning agendas,** some people have suggested that the approach could be improved, including the formulation of a **co-ordinating group** similar to the Overview and Scrutiny co-ordinating group. The degree of freedom and flexibility for CCs has caused some tension in managing

officer support and it has been also been suggested that some sharing of practice and **learning** gained from experimentation would be helpful for all concerned at this point. The key issues here are identifying the nature of officer support required to best facilitate agendas and the design of the structure of the meeting itself, with the aim of achieving more productive and constructive meetings.

6.5   Agendas have been described as too long, resulting in a perceived superficial treatment of items, or meetings that go on too long. Most CCs allow some involvement in agenda setting but consideration could be given to make it standard practice. There were also many comments about trying more **innovative formats and layouts** in meetings

6.6   Many felt that awareness of the CCs in the community is low and the advertising of the CCs could be improved. Many suggestions were made **regarding the marketing and publicity** of CCs – a review of the approach may be valuable.

6.7   Though many people who attend find CCs welcoming, others feel more could be done to **welcome newcomers** in particular.

6.8   The supply of equipment and the administration of feedback forms has improved though some further improvements may be necessary.

Resourcing and Officer Support.

6.9   Officers sometimes feel that there are **expectations** on them to be '**experts**' in areas for which they have no responsibility, and sometimes little knowledge. Though they are very happy to follow problems up, to give an immediate response on issues over which they have no direct control or understanding, can be counter-productive. (There may be some question of the effectiveness LBS's normal routes for complaints.)

6.10 Further consideration is needed of the management of the **resource implications** for services, and impact on officers – the balance of the level of service required of CCs and departmental resources allocated /

available. It would also be helpful to officers if further consideration was given to the realistic nature of expectations of responses to issues raised at CCs, both in terms of turn around time, feasibility, and impact on other services.

6.11 **Turn over of staff and a subsequent lack of continuity of support** to CCs from the Community Council Support Unit has posed difficulties. Though action to address the issue is already underway, induction and training for new staff would be a priority. Two-way processes and **relationships** between this Unit and Departments could also be enhanced.

6.12 Each CC is **developing differently** in response to its particular community and is perceived on the whole as a major strength of the current approach. Some difficulties have resulted from this flexibility for officers. Again, sharing of practice and **learning** gained from experimentation would be helpful for all concerned at this point.

6.13 Decisions taken at CCs and passed to departments for implementation have been reported as, on occasion, being unpopular with other local residents who have not attended the meetings - implementation subsequently being held back for further community consultation, which has led to increases in workload for officers, and **delays in scheme completion**. Further clarification of the consultation processes for Cleaner, Greener, Safer schemes would be helpful.

6.14 Further consideration may be required of the best **use of the skills and expertise** of the Community Involvement and Development Unit within the current CC remit, and most definitely in the longer-term, within the context of any strategic changes.

Safety

6.15 Safety issues were raised both by officers and members of the public, particularly when meetings finish late in the evening, are held in areas that are not well lit, or are not easy to reach by public transport.

Perception of 'the Council'.

6.16 Though it is recognised that CCs cannot be depoliticised, members may wish to consider how political debates are played out – there is some feedback from the community that suggests that some current approaches may have a negative impact on CCs in the longer-term. Councillors are also perceived by some as having differential influence.

6.17 Some members of the community have raised the issue of Elected Members sometimes appearing unsupportive of LBS officers, and officials from other agencies. Though clearly members of the public wish their issues to be addressed, the tone and manner in which this is done, including control of the meeting is important – a difficult balance to achieve, but important to developing and maintaining healthy relationships between all stakeholders.

6.18 There is a perception that **decisions** do not always appear to fit the direction of the debate in meetings. (Clearer summing up of the balance of arguments may assist.) There are also some concerns amongst those who attend about the **integrity** of the public consultation and involvement.

6.19 **Training and development** for officers and chairs of community councils would help support them in very difficult roles and build on the momentum and experience already gained. (Officers who are required to attend on an adhoc basis are at a particular disadvantage.)

Function

6.20 There are some tensions in elected members, officers, and the public's, **varying expectations** both of what CCs are currently designed to achieve, and their potential role. This may not be a major issue in terms of current impact, but may have longer-term implications when pressures for change at an operational level begin to determine strategy, potentially in many directions.

6.21 There is a need for an internal debate on the extent to which CCs can be wholly **representative** of (which is clearly not a possibility in terms of attendance), and engage, the community of Southwark, and their use as **consultative** forums. There are some concerns that a perceived move towards the use of the CCs for consultation on borough-wide issues will detract from the local agenda and affect interest and attendance levels. LBS's own guidance to 'Using Community Councils as a Consultation Mechanism' may assist in clarifying some of the issues.

6.22 There are concerns for performance against the national target for **turnaround for planning applications**, and a degree of discomfort for some elected members in taking planning decisions in the CC forum. If deciding on planning applications remains part of the CC brief, improvements to the turnaround time, and close monitoring of the situation will need to be happen.

6.23 Review of the licensing role is required in response to legislation.

7 The Future – Strategic Fit

7.1 LBS has clearly established a good base from which to develop. As previously noted in the summary statement there is a good deal of enthusiasm for the CCs amongst all of the interested parties, and in terms of their current remit, and their relative newness, can be deemed overall to be working well. As with all new organisational initiatives, experience has thrown up opportunities to learn and improve (section 6). They represent the normal process of adjusting in the light of experience, learning and organisational development.

7.2 Lessons from national data and experience indicate that the next major stage of their development, may to be further define / review their strategic 'fit' - fit with the community, the organisation, and overall policy and strategy; in particular, the mediation of the tensions between their

representational and community engagement functions. Indeed, the sustainability of Community Councils may depend on this.

Strategic fit

7.3   Questions of fit within broader strategy have been raised by a number of people who have participated in the review. However, the varied nature of the internal views expressed regarding the future role of Community Councils – Appendix 1 - (as well as some current contradictions and misapprehensions) also suggests that if this issue does not get resolved consciously within the organisation over the medium term, there will be many tensions created by the pushing or pulling of CCs in very different directions.

7.4   Although the agreed strategy for allowing CCs to develop differently according to their community is very constructive and to be applauded, parameters that are 'loose', coupled with very different current and long term expectations, may stretch structures and crucial support beyond their capacity. This does not imply tight inflexible control, or complete standardisation.

7.5   A further long term pressure on having a clear view of the future role may be the longer-term expectations of those who attend, as well as their very limited representativeness – which alone suggests that it will be important to see CC within a much broader strategy of community engagement (if community engagement / involvement were chosen as the broader over-arching direction).

7.6   The varied nature of area arrangements across the country indicates that there are almost infinite choices in terms of purpose, processes, structures, and key relationships. Fit for purpose will mean fit for the purposes of Southwark Borough and its community. However, the most common choices in terms of overarching fit with organisational strategy are: community development, community engagement, community

leadership, modernisation agenda / political structures, Local Strategic Partnership / 'joined-up' service provision, community well-being, sustainable communities, and neighbourhood renewal. (Links to the work of the Southwark Alliance may be an example.)

7.7   INLOGOV has developed a checklist of key questions against which such fitness-for-purpose could be established that may be helpful in the future development of CCs. Issues that could guide any establishment of fitness for purpose include:

- How will any new remit of Community Councils be established

- Where will Community Councils feed into the wider strategic agenda?

- Will they enhance local partnership working?

- To what extent will the new arrangements enable the involvement of the community and voluntary groups?

- What organisational infrastructure will need to be in place to support the running of the Community Councils?

- How will meetings be managed?

- How will Community Councils fit with the executive and overview and scrutiny process, and how will issues raised in area committees/forums feed up?

- What will success look like?

- What recording and performance management mechanisms need to be in place?

7.8   Strategic fit and clarity of purpose will allow for a clear vision of success which if required could lend itself to 'measurement' and integration with performance management processes. Though fit with the overall political management structure of the authority was not raised directly in the

review, firmer / clearer links could be developed, but again within the context of the current and / or future role – fit for purpose. Officer support structures need careful consideration both now and in the future depending on the role and function of CCs. In most cases form does need to follow function.
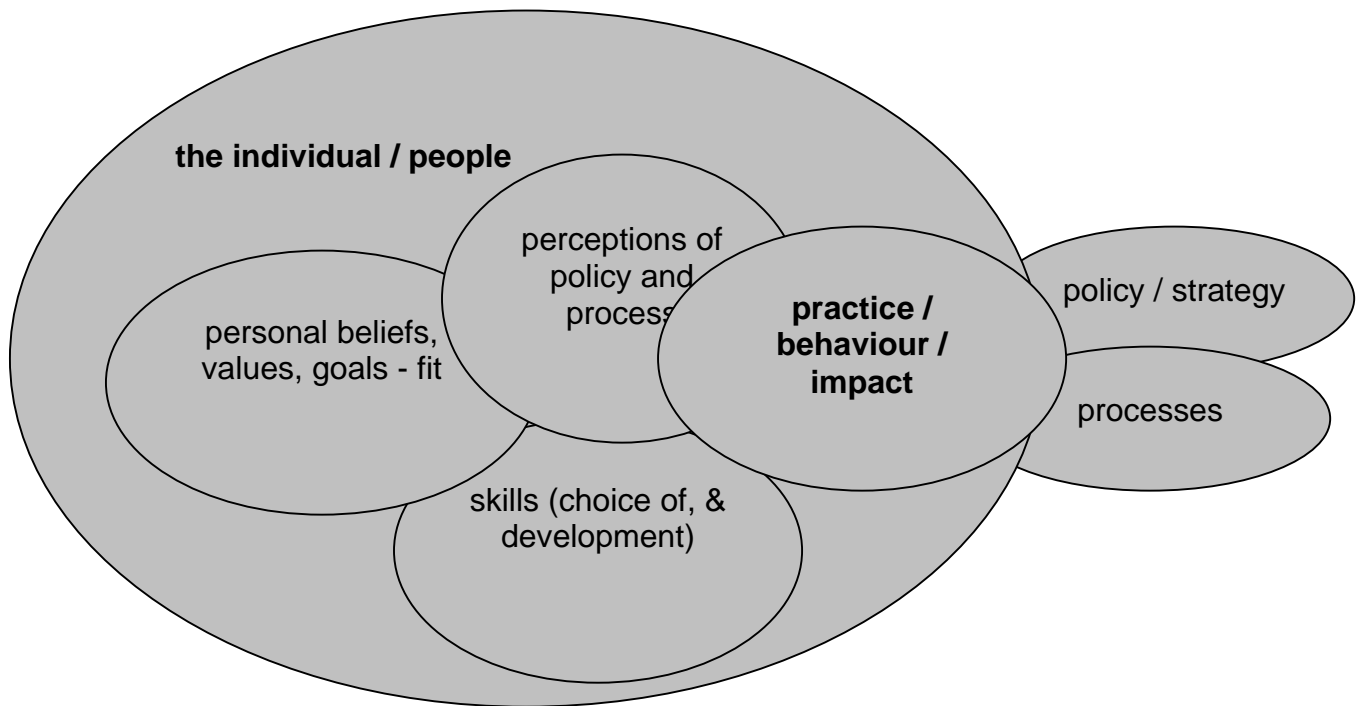
8 Way Forward

8.1 The review team's recommendations have already been highlighted at the beginning of the report:

- That consideration be given to the issues raised in section 6 of the report with the aim of learning from the experience of the CC to date, and improving practice within their current remit.

- That a longer-term view of the role of CC be considered, particularly fit to wider organisational strategy and practice (section 7).

8.2 The details of section 6 highlight issues identified as needing further development, or attention, if the current success and remit of the CCs is to be maintained in the short to medium term. Section 7 identifies pressures for determining the long-term future of Community Councils particularly with regard to strategic fit, and offers a checklist to facilitate the process.

8.3 All of the above issues may be seen as making adjustments to some of the key features of organisational processes in order to impact on practice, which at a very simplified level could be represented by the following model.

the individual / people

perceptions of policy and process

personal beliefs, values, goals - fit

practice / behaviour / impact

policy / strategy

processes

skills (choice of, & development)

8.4   Outcomes are affected by a huge range of issues, however, an organisational development or people perspective would highlight the links between individuals and processes . It is the behaviour of people that delivers organisational outcomes and services. People need to be clear (perceptions) about what is intended (policy / strategy), and understand any arrangements or procedures that have been put in place to deliver the policy (processes). Ultimately, if any of these things conflict greatly with their own personal values, beliefs or goals, individuals may find it difficult to comply (fit). The skills individuals choose to use will depend on their perceptions of what is required, and / or new skills may need to be developed, which is often accompanied by a good deal of apprehension and discomfort.

8.5   For these reasons people involvement and support is often the key to organisational success, at least in achieving intended outcomes. People who have participated in the review have pointed to the need for adjustments in each of these areas, and have largely identified 'what' needs to change. An additional important factor to consider is 'how'. Engaging people in the organisation is as important as engaging people in the community.

Finally the INLOGOV review team would like to thank Southwark for the invitation to support review. We would also like to take the opportunity to thank all those who gave their time and their views, particularly the members of the community, and wish all those involved with Community Councils success in their continuing development.

Steven Griggs   Mike Smith   Carol Yapp

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