

in the neighbourhood

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area decentralisation and new  
political structures

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## The context

The Local Government Act 2000 (Part II, Section 18) includes the option of area committees. These may be advisory or consultative bodies, with no specific powers. They can also be decision-making bodies, carrying out local authorities' executive functions. In this case, their authority will need to be defined through published schemes of delegation. Such committees will be treated as normal committees of the council, except that they will not be required to be politically balanced, being composed of (some or all) councillors representing the selected area.

Area committees may also have decision-making powers over selected non-executive functions, for example licensing and planning. One such function, arising from Part I of the Act, could now be to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their local areas (a local authority *power* under the Act) and prepare a local comprehensive community strategy as a contribution to the overall strategy (a new *duty* under the Act). Another possibility would be to take responsibility for Best Value reviews, particularly those which are cross-cutting with an area focus.

Executive decisions can be also delegated to the local level, but the guidance to the Act states that the executive must be seen to be the accountable body for such decisions. Both the constitutional and the day to day relationship between the area committees and the executive will therefore need to ensure that such accountability is a reality, visible and comprehensible to local citizens.

Area committees have a potentially important part to play in policy development, enabling corporate policy to

reflect local needs, concerns and priorities. In this case, it is the council with whom the relationship will need to be clear, both as providing the framework for local policies, and as the recipient of ideas and suggestions from localities.

Area committees also provide a vital route for councillors carrying out their 'representative' role. Councillors will be able to raise matters of local concern at such committees, and the committees will provide a means of consulting local people.

Being composed of the councillors representing the area, such committees will not generally reflect the overall political balance of the council. They are therefore formally excluded from undertaking the scrutiny role themselves (para 9.30 - 9.32 of the guidance). However, they will provide an interesting and so far untested arena for scrutiny, in particular of executive and policy decisions affecting their area, and will be able to feed their views to the scrutiny committees themselves.

Local authorities with area committees will certainly have overlapping membership between area and scrutiny committees. The guidance to the Act suggests that scrutiny of policy would not raise a major conflict of interest, and all that would be required would be a declaration of interest. If a scrutiny committee is examining an area committee's decision, relevant area committee members will be treated as if they have a pecuniary interest, as covered in the code of conduct developed under Part III of the Act.

Area committees are therefore a potentially significant vehicle for involving all councillors in all aspects of the modernisation agenda at the very local level. However, if they are to

be 'successful', they need to be considered within a wider context of neighbourhood and area approaches and of participative democracy. Lessons from the past need to be applied to the new context. A key requirement will be that area committees are seen as part of the whole council's approach to decision-making and policy formation. They will need to be matched with a suitable organisational infrastructure. And they will need support and leadership to ensure that they are not marginalised, politically or managerially. This is not easy.

### **The neighbourhood: new(ish) approaches to policy and practice**

Working at the locality, neighbourhood or area level has new attractions for local government. It provides the opportunity, not just to 'keep backbenchers occupied', but to give real meaning to the representative role and to develop widespread involvement in decision-making, policy development and governance at the local level.

Many councils have been wary about 'decentralisation', basing their views on the experiments of the 1980s. Nevertheless, those experiments, while not always successful, provide useful lessons for the present, and different, policy context.

The range of problems that local government is now expected to solve - on its own or in partnership with others - is very large and continues to increase. An area based approach to many of them would help to make the connections between different strands of policy, and bring local government nearer to residents, citizens and communities in a way that has not so far been achieved. Visibility and democratic accountability can be increased in this way.

The policies to which an area-based approach could contribute are:

- citizenship, community and democracy: participation, consultation and representation (Local Government Act 2000);
- community strategies and a community leadership (Local Government Act 2000);
- social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal (Social Exclusion Unit 2000);
- Best Value reviews and performance plans (Local Government Act 1999);
- regeneration initiatives (SRB etc) and 'zones';
- cross-cutting issues ('joined-up government' - *Modernising Government* white paper, Cabinet Office 1999);
- better, more accessible services (Service First Unit, Beacon Council Scheme).

Local working cannot be a solution on its own. However, it provides the possibility for a more targeted and responsive approach to the different needs of different areas. It also provides the potential for involving both councillors and local people more actively in the decisions which affect their lives.

This requires change in how officers work and in how councillors carry out their democratic tasks.

### **What can be achieved through a neighbourhood/area-based approach?**

Five positive outcomes can be achieved through taking a neighbourhood or area-based approach. They are:

- better representation and accountability of elected members;
- new, more appropriate attitudes and behaviours in front-line and backroom staff;
- engaging and actively involving local communities;
- involving a range of agencies to solve complex local problems;
- achieving better results and a more appropriate allocation of resources by responding more effectively to the different needs of each area.

### **Political arrangements**

Critically, they give a role to all councillors, and can, through delegated decision-making on local matters, reduce what will certainly be a huge overload in the executive. They will also provide a counter-balance to the centralisation produced by the creation of an executive. This is a matter of concern for many councillors.

### **Getting results**

Taking a neighbourhood approach can be a good way of ensuring that the local dimension is included in political decision-making, particularly if budgets and decisions affecting the area are devolved to the area level. The area approach also ensures that councillors are involved and visibly

accountable for financial and resource decisions. At the same time, resources can be more appropriately targeted towards identified need, which will be different in nature and scale in different areas. This allows more efficient use of resources, while at the same time achieving better results locally. The area approach provides an opportunity to produce better value and higher quality results across a local authority area.

### **New ways of working**

The benefits of area working can also be found in more effective ways of working.

With increased credibility in achieving change and influencing policy, councillors can develop and expand their representative function, working actively with local communities rather than spending a lot of time reacting to individual cases.

If councillors are sufficiently involved and committed, they can demonstrate to local people that they can influence decisions. This encourages local communities to become more actively involved in different ways. This in turn draws in a wider range of the general public (not just the local 'activists'), which ensures increased participation in debate and a more representative sharing of views.

The benefits from this include a greater knowledge of local affairs, better relationships with local councillors and officers and greater clarity of potential areas for local influence. A comprehensive 'community empowerment' approach, based on very small neighbourhoods, can engage and mutually educate local people and other agencies (for example police and

health organisations), providing the basis for local partnership working.

Particularly where initiatives have been targeted towards deprived areas, a range of agencies can be brought together to develop 'problem solving' and 'action planning' work at the local level. The work can be facilitated by local agencies working closely with and in some cases led by local communities. A prescriptive approach is unnecessary and indeed undesirable, given that each area is different, as long as all partners are clear about their roles and responsibilities and accountabilities are clear and agreed.

### **New skills**

Councillors and officers can (and need to) learn new skills. Communication skills are of paramount importance, both vertically within the organisation and horizontally across a range of individuals, groups of citizens and partner agencies. Perhaps for the first time front-line staff can be properly valued and indeed trusted to take some risks for the benefit of the local community. Simultaneously valuing the public, encouraging, respecting and acting on their views results in new and constructive relationships, contributing in turn to the development of real 'democratic practice'.

The potential benefits of area-based working are considerable. However, careful thought needs to be given to how best to put the concept into practice. Agreeing the policy is only the first stage.

### **Setting it up**

Getting the framework right is essential. Of the many factors affecting success in the early stages, we would pick out four:

- clear objectives;
- clear schemes of delegation to officers and area committees;
- clarity about how local people and front-line workers are to be involved/ empowered;
- consideration of officer-member relations at the local level.

### **Objectives**

Area-based approaches are a means to an end. The 'end' therefore needs to be clear, although it will also evolve over time. The two broad types of objective are:

- solving local problems of service design and delivery, improving the environment, and tackling economic and social well-being;
- developing democratic practice: actively involving non-executive councillors and empowering local people and communities.

These objectives will, more often than not, run alongside each other. However, it is important to ensure that there is a full debate about *what* is intended to be achieved and *how*. This will be different in each place.

In councils where little systematic work to involve local people or to improve services has taken place in the past, an incremental approach may be necessary so as to bring everyone on board. In areas where an infrastructure of, say, decentralised service delivery already exists, it will be necessary to review such arrangements and to align the new with the old. In still other cases, the need for a shake-up is so great that a 'big bang' approach may be needed. Changes of

political control (or fear of losing control) may in practice trigger this approach.

However, in reality, both approaches (incremental and big bang) must be clear about their long-term objectives. Both approaches must also recognise the need for sustained organisational and political change over a considerable period.

The 2000 Local Government Act gives impetus for a 'big bang' approach. The framework for the whole area needs to be laid down from the beginning, and there are clear advantages in getting an area approach up and running across the board. This would ensure that two parallel decision-making processes are not running alongside (or possibly competing with) each other, as has been the case in areas with a pilot or targeted approach. Nevertheless, there will be differences between areas in how they implement the new structures. Also, it is more than likely that successful schemes would develop further, as experience grows, real results are achieved, and local involvement increases.

### **Schemes of delegation**

Where area committees are to be set up, the 2000 Local Government Act specifies that 'schemes of delegation', identifying the scope of local and central decision-making power, will have to be set out in a public document.

These schemes will have to identify the degree to which local (area) committees will be able to make decisions about executive and non-executive areas of the council's work, together with budgets, financial procedures and protocols that ensure accountability to the executive and the council and, ultimately, to local people.

In parallel, the ethos of delegated/devolved decision-making will need to be developed within the office cadre. Too often, well-intentioned decentralisation policies have been frustrated by the unwillingness of the departments and professionals in 'the centre' (or backroom) to 'let go'. If area-based working is to succeed, and if councillors are to achieve all they want in their areas, then officers working in the areas need to be able to work appropriately. They need the authority to make decisions, involve local people, and develop networks and partnerships. If officers are given these kinds of *tasks*, they need the delegated *power* to make it happen.

The LGA hearings into neighbourhoods (*Local voices: the neighbourhood dimension to governance, 2000*) showed that a 'tight-loose-tight' approach was favoured by most of their witnesses. This enables an authority to clarify and make explicit its main corporate policies ('tight' strategic frameworks) and what it wants to achieve ('tight' targets and outcomes), while giving discretion to local committees, local workers and local people to put the policies into effect in a way that suits that area ('loose' processes and structures). This philosophy would provide a fruitful way forward for the development of area committees and supporting arrangements.

### **Involving and empowering front-line staff and local people**

A 'bottom-up' approach is essential. This means that the public and locally based staff should be informed and consulted about the ideas being put forward at the earliest possible stage. Their ideas, based on their knowledge of what is needed in the area and what will work, will help the process of decision-making. If they are not involved,

they will not be committed to making it work themselves. This will isolate the area committees and leave them as symbolic gestures rather than active forums.

In many areas, community-based activity already exists. Also, some services have encouraged the development of user groups and local forums. These will provide an excellent basis for consultation about new area-based development.

In other areas, such activities do not yet exist, whether because the local authority has not been supportive, or because local people are too alienated, transient or uninterested to get involved.

In all areas, excluded or 'hard to reach' groups will need special attention. Different methods of consultation, involving outreach and community development, will be needed over a considerable period.

Front-line staff are generally the least powerful people within local government. They are the visible part of the organisation and, for most of the public, the only part of the organisation they know. Getting them involved in and committed to the new ways of working is vital. They need to be public-oriented, able to network and develop local partnerships, and to work constructively with councillors and communities. These skills need to be valued, developed and nurtured.

### **Officer - member relations**

Councillors have always worked at the local level in their representative role. They take up cases and raise issues of local concern with officers and in committees. Area committees should act as a stimulus to a new style of working where, if one-stop

shops or other forms of decentralised service delivery can be used to provide an infrastructure, immediate problems can be referred and dealt with locally, and councillors can spend more time on planning, design and strategy. The dividing line between what councillors do and what officers do could become blurred in the process.

Formal or informal protocols could be developed to help identify the respective remits, and to encourage constructive relationships between councillors and officers at the local level. It will be important to ensure that, on the one hand, councillors do not act as if they are day to day 'line managers' to officers. At the same time, officers need to understand more clearly than ever the political context within which they are working. Particularly for junior officers, this may be a new experience, for which they will need guidance, training and support.

### **Making it work**

All the factors identified in the previous section need to be sustained over time if the new arrangements are to be given a chance to work. On top of that, a minimum of four other factors should be actively considered. These are:

- the use of pilots, and decisions about geographical targeting;
- co-ordination, community development and officer support;
- professionalism and organisational culture;
- flexibility and responsiveness to change.



## **Pilots and targeting**

Local working, through area committees, decentralised offices or local strategic partnerships, can seem risky. Concerns about the use of resources, and the financial or other benefits compared with the up-front costs, have often led councils to try the idea out in one or two areas for a limited time period, as 'pilots'. Similarly, worries about the inconsistent practice between areas (the equity issue) have inhibited the 'centre' from delegating sufficient levels of (accountable) autonomy to the front line. In addition, the idea that local working is inherently about responding to different needs in different ways has led to many targeted initiatives, often based around deprivation and/or the need for regeneration.

The danger with all these 'experimental' approaches is that, unless the political and managerial will exists to take the process forward over time, they can be marginalised. Other parts of the council (and other agencies and possibly local people too) can disregard them, fail to find out what is happening, and find reasons for classifying them as 'failures' before their benefits have begun to accrue. Indeed, since local initiatives require the support of the whole organisation for their success, 'failure' is almost inevitable if such support is not given.

Evidence from past evaluations shows that a more constructive and effective approach is to clarify the long-term objectives at the early stage, and to see 'pilots' as simply the first step in achieving them. Pilots are then used, not to judge the 'success' or 'failure' of the policy, but as a source of learning for the next stages. These may be to develop the approach in new ways in the same

areas, and/or to extend the approach to other areas. At INLOGOV, we have argued for a generalised approach, where the policy applies across the board, but it is applied differentially according to the needs of different areas. This means that the policy of a 'local approach' has a chance of becoming embedded in the normal way of working, rather than being permanently seen as an 'add-on'.

## **Co-ordination, community development and officer support**

As has been emphasised throughout this paper, working at an area level involves new ways of working unfamiliar to traditional local government. In particular, it implies the need to work across boundaries - boundaries between departments, between agencies, and between the service providers and the public. It is clear from past experience that this cannot be done without the injection of specialist resources. First and foremost, active co-ordination, generally through special appointments (or secondments), is essential. It is not reasonable to expect hard-pressed officers to work in this new way without leadership, encouragement and active support. New issues arise which need new solutions. A structure must exist where these can be taken on.

If, as will presumably be the case where area committees are established, there is a political desire to bring democracy closer to people, the need for community development is also clear. Communities, where they exist, do not work to council agendas. The council needs to learn to work to their agendas, while in many cases, local people need to be supported to engage with the council in any way at all. This applies in particular to the 'hard to reach', or

'excluded' groups, who are generally the very people whom targeted policies are aiming to help.

Beyond these two elements, administration and in most cases a local base will also be necessary. The costs of these needs to be offset against the savings of more efficient and appropriate services, better understanding of needs, and higher quality action and decision-making ('right first time') based on local dialogue and participation.

### **Culture, professionalism and 'letting go'**

It is increasingly recognised that working at a local/area level is not just a matter of creating new structures. A new culture is also essential. Indeed, some would argue that this needs to come first - and equally, that the modernisation programme is one route to this. However, the main point here is that local government officers - and members - have to learn and value a less controlling, more co-operative approach, where the experience and expertise of front line staff, of local councillors and of local people is understood and used for the benefit of the local community.

While continuing to value the professional expertise of officers, this needs to be used in a new way. Professionalism is (or ought to be) about encouraging problem-solving and 'joined-up' working, currently widely advocated but rarely put into practice. This is a real shift from the 'we know best', top-down culture, and needs to be taken on board from top to bottom of local government.

### **Flexibility and responsiveness**

The world does not stand still, so it is obvious that, like the rest of local government, an area-based approach must be dynamic. It must be able to respond to and work with new policy and political agendas. The failure of some of the 1980s decentralisation initiatives was a failure to recognise the importance of contractual and partnership working, or to link service delivery with regeneration. Now, the need to develop local strategies and to encourage 'citizenship', renewed democratic practice and human rights will have as yet unknown implications for how things are done.

Evaluation and review, preferably involving local citizens, front-line staff and councillors, are essential tools for finding out the strengths and weaknesses of present arrangements, and for understanding and anticipating new developments. Global and national issues such as poverty reduction, environment, and the welfare of children and young people are some of the immediate issues faced by most local authorities.

Local authorities will need to consider these at a strategic level, but they will also need to think how or whether to work on them at the local level. Possible structural changes in local government - the revived interest in parishes, concern about the inefficiency of two-tier working, and the overall effects of the new political arrangements - could also stimulate further thinking about what is best done locally, what needs a more corporate or strategic approach. This thinking needs to go on at all levels within local government.

## **Current experience of area committees and forums**

Recent research (Snape, Leach et al, 2000) in local authorities anticipating the legislation on new political arrangements has shown that area-based arrangements are likely to be a significant part of the formal decision-making process. However, their purpose differs, as does the frequency of meetings, the provisions for chairing meetings, the support from officers and actual membership. Formal area committees, composed of councillors, take decisions and have delegated powers (some with delegated budgets). More informal area forums, with a variety of membership, including local organised interests, mainly perform a consultative role.

Key points from the research are:

- Decentralisation is a key component of the new political structures

Identified aims have included: creating structures which will enhance the community representation role of councillors; providing a role for non-executive councillors; and providing a vehicle for encouraging public involvement in council matters. However, many area forums lack clarity of purpose. For example, they have not resolved fully whether the forums are for councillors, members of the public or for local organised interests. There is an assumption that all these interests can be served, but there is a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders.

- Centre/executive-local relationships

Unresolved issues include the balance of power between the centre and the locality

and the respective roles of councillors and officers. The nature and mechanisms of the relationship between the area structures and the 'centre' needs to be thought through, made explicit, and consciously nurtured.

For consultative area forums in particular, a widely understood administrative mechanism for linking the work of the forums to the executive itself does not always exist. The link often depends on the attendance of chief officers or cabinet members at area forums. If clear procedures for linking with the executive are not established, then confusion about the role of forums in the decision-making process remains.

- Forums for public grievances

Although area forums are intended to be used for consultation on 'big' issues such as unitary development plans or community plans, they have a tendency in the early stages to develop as meetings to address public grievances. Usually the focus of these grievances is street-based services, often highway issues. It has been important for the credibility of the forums that these are taken seriously. In some authorities queries are systematically followed up by officers and progress is reported back to later meetings. In others, administrative procedures for tracking the resolution of issues are less developed.

- Political representation in the areas

Majority councillors are often concerned about the creation of area structures in areas which are dominated by opposition groups. The scheme of delegation, the use of a 'tight-loose' decision-making process, and the use of joint chairing arrangements are some of the solutions being pursued.

- Member and officer issues

Members tend to be enthusiastic about area structures, whereas some officers are concerned about the amount of officer time required, and by fears of unmet public expectations. Partner organisations have usually been supportive. While some authorities have appointed lead officers or designated support officers, more substantial area re-structuring of officer support has not taken place. Training and development for the decentralised functions, for both members and officers, has been found to be essential.

- Public access to area-based decision-making

Success or failure depends not only on the issues identified above, but also on the detail of how the process is managed. The use of different meeting places, different meeting times, a well thought-out strategy for public information, the provision of crèche and language facilities are all important in area forums, just as they are in other forums for public participation. Attention had not always been paid to these issues. In addition, the research did not come across evidence of specific attempts to include excluded or 'hard to reach' groups.

- Importance of evaluating forums

It was increasingly recognised that the effectiveness of area structures should be comprehensively evaluated. Evaluation needs to recognise that real change (results) will take time to emerge, and that different 'stakeholders' will have different perceptions of what counts as 'success'. In particular, structures seeking to encourage public attendance should monitor the attitudes and opinions of those who attend.

### Conclusions:

- area-based arrangements are potentially a key part of the decision-making structures and processes of the new political arrangements and modernising local government;
- they should not be set up because they are a 'good idea', but because they will achieve an objective or solve a problem that the council and the community wants. Objectives must, therefore, be clear and agreed;
- they are not an answer to all problems. A *range* of options should be considered, and area arrangements should only be used where they are the most suitable for the issue in hand;
- the same solution will not be suitable for all circumstances. Learning from others is important, but developing local solutions even more so;
- they should be dynamic, able to respond 'holistically' to new problems and policies;
- they should be comprehensive, involving the 'front line' and the 'backroom' (officers and members) within the local authority, and all those communities and agencies who can contribute to the development of local solutions to local problems;
- they should relate clearly and procedurally to decision and policy-making structures within the council, that is, to the executive/mayor, the council and the scrutiny committees;
- at the heart of the area-based approach, is the ability to demonstrate how key themes of modern local government - devolution, consultation, better services and better use of resources - can be put into practice.

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