

Area committees and neighbourhood management

A study of local government activity in England suggests that new policy agendas offer local government significant opportunities to fulfil its community governance role and deliver on the social inclusion agenda in local communities. The study, which examines current and past experiences, raises a number of issues that local authorities need to take into account in order to maximise these opportunities. It found:

- f** Current local authority approaches to area working contain elements of localisation but overall local authorities are not seeking to create 'mini town halls'. Instead the emphasis is clearly on the ways of devolving power and influence to communities.
- f** However, awareness of the possibilities of decentralisation is accompanied by a clear sense of practical obstacles in implementation and emerging policy tensions.
- f** Well-prepared decentralisation strategies are important both for designating responsibilities appropriately at the area level and securing a positive relationship between area and strategic levels.
- f** The two key proposals for implementing area working are area committees and neighbourhood management. However, there are differences between the two mechanisms that will create tensions in the absence of a clear local authority strategy.
- f** The researchers conclude there is a need for action in four areas simultaneously:
 - Developing community leadership at the area level, whilst linking it into authority-wide executive and scrutiny functions.
 - 'Joining up' service delivery by establishing the necessary infrastructure, e.g. area co-ordinators, budgets, IT systems and linking this with mechanisms for service improvement, e.g. Best Value.
 - Supporting partnership working with key stakeholders from all sectors and integrating this with strategic activity through Local Strategic Partnerships.
 - Boosting the involvement of communities by supporting initiatives to enhance both the representative and participative sides of local government and acknowledging the variety of communities within a local area.

Background

Following policy initiatives on the modernisation of local government and on social inclusion, there is renewed interest in the potential contribution of 'sub-localities' to local government. 'Sub-localities' are the geographical divisions within a local authority. These divisions may be at 'area' level, which can be ward level or above, or 'neighbourhood' level, which is smaller and based on community boundaries. There are two key strands to policy proposals: those affecting the internal organisation of local government, e.g. new political management arrangements, and those concerned with refashioning the overall framework for local governance, e.g. the establishment of Local Strategic Partnerships. The potential interaction of these proposals at the 'sub-local' level presents a significant opportunity and challenge to local authorities.

This research explores the way in which local authorities are responding to the two agendas and analyses past experience. It highlights the potential and pitfalls for local authorities of working at the 'sub-local' level and produces guidance for local authority members and officers contemplating working in this way.

The potential of decentralisation

Fulfilling these various policy agendas requires action at a number of different levels, from the strategic through to the neighbourhood. This places pressure on local government to identify what should and can take place at each level and to develop the appropriate tools for successful implementation. The researchers found that well-prepared decentralisation strategies are of vital importance in designating responsibilities and activities appropriately at the 'sub-local' levels and securing a positive relationship between 'sub-local' and strategic levels.

Decentralisation strategies can also help promote community governance and social inclusion as:

- Decentralisation to the area level helps develop the elected councillor community leadership role at an area as well as strategic level by giving local councillors the opportunity to bring local stakeholders together to plan for the needs of their communities.
- Decentralisation enables partnership working to operate at the area and neighbourhood levels. This helps involve a wider range of community and voluntary stakeholders in policy planning and bidding for resources. It also exposes any imbalance of power between statutory and voluntary and community sector partners and provides an imperative for addressing this.
- Decentralisation strategies can help involve a wider range of citizens in local government by focusing on issues that are important to neighbourhoods and communities. This develops

both local government's representational role and residents' participation in local government, helping these two roles to work in tandem.

Area committees/forums and neighbourhood management

Recent policy initiatives propose two ways to help 'sub-local' working - area committees or forums and neighbourhood management. Local authorities found that there are a number of differences between the two mechanisms that can create tensions in the absence of a clear local authority strategy. These include:

- Local authorities lead the implementation of area committees/forums; neighbourhood management may be led by one of a number of bodies.
- Councillors are integral to area committees/forums but may be marginal to neighbourhood management boards.
- Area committees/forums cover large areas and are universally applied in authorities while neighbourhood management covers smaller populations and is targeted on particular places.
- Area committees/forums exist to decide or advise, neighbourhood management to implement.
- Area committees/forums need resources from within the local authority; neighbourhood management infrastructure may be resourced by central government.

The local authority response

The case study local authorities had developed a variety of ways for responding to the new policy agendas and tackling the potential tensions. The strategies adopted depended on the local context (political, socio-economic and geographical). There appears to be no single best solution; each local authority needed to consider the purposes and principles behind their approach and then the structures and processes that would deliver these purposes. However, whatever the context, the study identified common areas for action.

Developing community leadership at the 'sub-local' level

Working at the 'sub-local' level facilitates the identification of local community need in partnership with relevant local stakeholders. This can enable councillors to develop their community leadership role in relation to policy-making and service delivery. However, local authorities expressed concern that this role would not develop if area working were considered a compensatory role for 'backbench' councillors. Instead, it requires a firm link between area bodies and the executive and scrutiny functions. This could involve a local authority Cabinet member having responsibility for areas and conducting regular meetings with chairs of

area bodies or it could involve Cabinet members sitting on area bodies. Some local authorities were contemplating working in this way. A similar relationship needs to be established with the scrutiny function. If the community leadership role is to have credibility with communities and partners then councillors will need to be able to build consensus, resolve conflicts and act as facilitators. This could be problematic in areas where the council was seen to be part of the problem, rather than an 'honest broker'. Resources to support the development of these skills have to be available.

Service organisation

Decentralisation provides opportunities to co-ordinate service planning and delivery at the 'sub-local' level and to meet the needs of disadvantaged communities. However, evidence from the case studies and wider local authority experience demonstrates that effective service co-ordination requires an infrastructure to support its operation. While adding this responsibility to existing job descriptions is important to secure senior level commitment, dedicated resources are also needed to ensure that decisions are followed through in practice. Officers play a variety of roles at the 'sub-local' level, e.g. manager, co-ordinator, planner, facilitator and monitor. They also require specific skills and capacities, e.g. communication, networking, consensus building, budget management, negotiating and strategy building. However, evidence from past local authority experience and current practice in the case studies showed that local authorities need to ensure that officers working at 'sub-local' level have the appropriate level of seniority to fulfil their tasks and that their roles and capacities are valued by the whole organisation.

Other issues in relation to service organisation are:

- Finding a way of linking service decisions back to local councillors, particularly where service organisation was not decentralised but where significant power was devolved to officers.
- Identifying criteria to determine which services could and should be subject to 'sub-local' influence.
- Control of financial resources. For most local authorities having an influence over budget allocations is more important than actually controlling and managing the resource.
- Making effective use of IT. Use of websites and other forms of IT is increasingly common at the area level. However, this option is expensive and has implications in terms of data protection and so requires careful consideration.
- Taking account of authority-wide mechanisms, e.g. Best Value, and building them in to 'sub-local' operations.

Partnership

Partnerships at the 'sub-local' level can do two things:

- Bring together those from public service organisations who have a responsibility for the 'patch' and can act across the strategic/operational divide.
- Facilitate the involvement of a wider range of community and voluntary stakeholders in policy planning and bidding for resources.

The case studies showed that there is a danger of potential 'partnership fatigue' in local communities unless local authorities recognise the legitimacy of the different stakeholders and enable them to operate effectively. Where local authorities are considering developing 'sub-local' partnership bodies, links with strategic partnerships need to be built in. Opportunities for capacity building of the whole partnership should be sought. This could include 'away days' or whole partnership events where partners got to know each other and spent time deciding how they wanted the partnership to be run. It could also include alternating business meetings with more reflective events where partners considered the effectiveness of the partnership. Capacity-building activities help to establish 'the rules of the game', articulate and address problems in relation to power relationships and identify the level of resources within the partnership as a whole.

Community involvement

Decentralisation can help a wider range of citizens become involved in governance by focusing on issues that are important to neighbourhoods and communities. Establishing how and where communities want to become involved before initiating activity appears to pay dividends in implementation. However, involving communities fully required local authorities to invest in community development. This includes using a range of mechanisms to engage and attract different communities and targeting those known to be 'hard to reach'. It also means maintaining council-wide mechanisms for involving communities that are not reducible to geographical areas, e.g. communities of identity or interest, and negotiating ways of working with other 'community leaders' with other sources of legitimacy.

Policy and practice issues

Current local authority approaches to area working contain elements of localisation but overall local authorities are not seeking to create 'mini town halls'. Instead the emphasis is clearly on the ways in which power and influence can be devolved so that all relevant stakeholders may contribute to improving the quality of life for communities.

However, awareness of the possibilities of decentralisation is accompanied by a clear sense of

practical obstacles in implementation and emerging policy tensions. Key issues identified from the research are:

Practical issues

- **Multi-tier working:** developing an approach that is consistent yet locally specific in county areas.
- **Consulting the public:** specifying a message which is honest and clear and which allows debate about the value of decentralisation.
- **Time:** implementing decentralisation strategies takes a lot longer than anticipated and often local political contexts militate against allowing sufficient time for strategies to 'bed down'.
- **Cost:** decentralisation is not a cheap option and requires considerable realignment of staff as well as budgets.
- **Making decentralisation standard practice:** developing an area focus across the whole organisation rather than limiting it to those who have designated 'area' responsibilities.
- **Retaining the cohesion of the locality:** managing the corporate/'sub-local' balance is difficult under current arrangements and some local authorities anticipate it will worsen with the separation of elected member roles into 'executive' and 'scrutiny'. Finding ways of linking all councillors into the corporate level as well as the 'sub-local' is essential.

Policy issues

- **Resolving 'top down' and 'bottom up' dilemmas:** Most local authorities were concerned about how to balance centrally prescribed national targets with flexibility and sensitivity at the 'sub-local' level.
- **Combining the modernisation and social exclusion agendas:** This may be helped by 'joined-up' guidance from central government, for example, ensuring the national Best Value indicators take account of 'sub-local' working.
- **Enhancing community leadership:** At the 'sub-local' level elected councillors will only have credibility as 'community leaders' if they are able to influence partners. However, their capacity to do this will depend on the flexibility partners have. This can be difficult where partners have to respond to central government performance targets. In addition, local authorities will need to consider their capacity to act as 'community leaders' at a regional and sub-regional level and to manage their links between levels.
- **Reconnecting with communities:** The focus on areas and neighbourhoods emphasises the need for local authorities to re-engage communities in the provision of public services and to be held to

account by them. However, in many cases this conflicts with the need to deliver services and regeneration programmes cost-effectively. Finding a balance between the two will be made more difficult if the tension is not recognised by central government. Building on the experience of Best Value could be helpful here.

- **Resource allocation:** Area and neighbourhood working can expose the unequal pattern of resource allocation within local authority areas. This may give rise to questions about the balance between maintaining consistent service standards across a local authority area and the need to redistribute resources to tackle social exclusion.

About the study

This study was carried out by Helen Sullivan and Mike Smith at INLOGOV, University of Birmingham, and Amanda Root and Dominique Moran of the Local Government Centre, University of Warwick, between November 2000 and March 2001. The first stage comprised documentary analysis of previous local authority decentralisation strategies. The second stage focused on 13 local authority case studies selected primarily from the membership of the Social Exclusion Network, facilitated through the University of Warwick's Local Government Centre. Additional local authorities were sought in order to provide as complete coverage as possible of the local authority contexts in England. Core selection criteria were: type of authority, political control and past experience of decentralisation. Interviews were carried out with key local authority members and/or officers.

How to get further information

Further information about the study is available from Dr Helen Sullivan, INLOGOV, University of Birmingham, B15 2TT, telephone 0121 414 4975, email h.c.sullivan.20@bham.ac.uk.

The full report, **Area committees and neighbourhood management: Increasing democratic participation and social inclusion** by Helen Sullivan, Mike Smith, Amanda Root and Dominique Moran, is published by the LGIU (price £10 or £5 for LGIU members). It is available from Central Books, 99 Wallis Road, London E9 5LN, Tel: 0208 986 5488, email: mo@centralbooks.com.