

Item No. 5.	Classification: Open	Date: 12 May 2004	Meeting Name Environment & Community Support Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Report Title:		Community Councils Review – Management issues	
Ward(S) or groups affected:		Borough-Wide	
From:		Chief Executive (Borough Solicitor & Secretary)	

Recommendations

1. That the actions contained in this report are noted and any follow-up work is identified.

Background

2. Birmingham University were commissioned as part of the 6-9 month Scrutiny review and reported their findings in the "Review of Community Councils in the London Borough of Southwark" – the INLOGOV report.
3. At its meeting on the 17 December 2003 the Environment and Community Support Scrutiny Sub-Committee recommended that the Chief Executive provides a report on progress in addressing issues in respect of management of Community Council meetings, resourcing and Officer support. The full scope of these issues are contained in Section 6 of the INLOGOV report of November 2003 and is reproduced in Appendix B.

Key issues for consideration

4. Community Councils are now into their second year of operation and have evolved since their launch in April 2003. Although replacing the Area Forums many of the arrangements put in place were untested especially around the areas of devolved decision-making and community engagement. The flexibility of the management and operational arrangements were such that changes could be introduced and tailored to both the overall objectives and the needs of individual Community Councils. Development continues and our Community Councils are widely acknowledged as successful and innovative.
5. Officers have been collaborating on identifying the key areas of operational improvement and the development of a clear protocol addressing departmental roles and functions to support Community Councils. This will be considered by COT and arrangements introduced as necessary. Since these issues are about 'housekeeping' it is not envisaged that further Member involvement will be necessary.
6. Progress on the individual INLOGOV issues is as follows:

Management of Community Council meetings (6.3 – 6.8)

7. The choice of venue is subject to the availability of premises – some areas are better served than others and each Community Council has settled into a regime of rotation or regular use of one or two venues. The standard for suitable premises eliminates a considerable number and we are in competition with other uses, especially for venues such as community halls. The INLOGOV suggestion was that this issue may require a discreet piece of consultation. Consultation was undertaken prior to the launch of Community Councils and the matter is raised at meetings occasionally. Feedback from questionnaires is not conclusive and is of course biased by those attending meetings. Development of the website coupled with planned use of the e-voting system should enable a broader view to be obtained.

8. The frequency of meetings is related to two matters, officer resourcing and realistic time spans to achieve progress. It has proved difficult to schedule the same matter to eight meetings concurrently. Equally each Community Council independently calling for further reports and updates in following months has put a strain on resources. Options are being explored to lengthen the Community Council cycle to 6 weeks as well as regularise them in line with similar options for other Council meetings.
9. All Officers with a general or specific interest in agenda planning are invited to the meetings. Usually this will include Officers with a specific item for the agenda as well CIDU and Community Council Officers. Some sessions are attended by the assigned Chief Officer and the E&L Dept. lead officer. It is at these meetings where the nature of specific officer support is established.
10. Community Council Chairs and Vice-Chairs are invited to meetings twice a year with the Deputy Leader and key officers to discuss common issues – these meetings are similar to the Overview and Scrutiny co-ordinating group concept and future meetings could be arranged along the same lines with external facilitators. The next meeting should take place around June / July and could build upon previous discussions around best practice.
11. All Community Council meetings have settled into what appears for them a comfortable arrangement of format and layout. All recognise the balance between encouraging community participation and formal decision-making. Other than slight variations due to venue layout it is not proposed to change existing formats and layouts.
12. All suggestions for improving publicity have been acted upon within the limits imposed by the budget allocation. We have recently appointed a person within CCCR (0.5 person) to lead on Community Council marketing and publicity. A draft pro-active communications plan has been prepared and when finalised will form the basis for raising wider awareness of Community Councils, promoting individual meetings and addressing community engagement issues. The overall approach and specific ideas are discussed at regular meetings with the Head of Communications.
13. All Chairs guidance now contains prompts for welcoming people to the meetings.
14. The return rate for questionnaires at meetings has fallen dramatically and they are no longer in use. Agreement in principle has been obtained to using the e-voting system quarterly to obtain feedback and with better use of enhanced website facilities more meaningful responses should be achieved. Specific arrangements will be discussed with individual Chairs.
15. The Consultation Unit provided previous questionnaires, analysis and summary reports on a chargeable basis – these will not be continued with the introduction of the above arrangements. New options are being considered by the Community Council Manager and the new Head of Research.
16. The specific Community Council Feedback forms are still in use at a level only slightly lower than post launch. Forms are 'processed' by the Customer Feedback Unit and any future changes in customer care arrangements will be adopted at Community Councils.

Resourcing and Officer support (6.9 – 6.14)

17. There are no expectations that all officers are experts in all fields. Assigned Chief Officers attend meetings both to observe and pick up on cross-cutting, corporate or sensitive issues. Specialist Officers overall fulfil their responsibilities e.g. Legal, Planning and Licensing Officers. Officers do however need to be more proactive in offering advice to Members and responding to community issues.

18. Regular meetings take place with the Head of Planning to address specific issues around planning protocols and procedures. Environment and Leisure Department are reviewing their approach to Community Council support. It is anticipated that operational matters will continue to be refined during 2004/05.
19. Training on presentation skills has been offered to all officers attending Community Councils – those who have attended have found it useful and a noticeable improvement in the interaction with the public can be observed. There is common acceptance that Officers may need to come back with an answer and this honest approach seems to be more appropriate. Officers within service departments will need to provide clearer advice on matters raised at Community Council meetings and provide this within the context of the current level of support funding they receive for Community Council work.
20. All Community Councils have break periods when members of the public can talk to Members and Officers. This is a valuable means of direct contact and there are no plans to remove this opportunity. Questions about the effectiveness of the Council's complaints procedure need to be addressed elsewhere.
21. At the time of the publication of the INLOGOV report, arrangements were already in hand to permanently recruit to the four Community Council Development Officer posts. As of February 2004 all posts had been filled. Handover and induction training was an integral and on-going part of establishing these permanent posts. Joint meetings and joint training sessions were a common feature for the new Community Council Team which has and will continue.
22. The starting process for the Cleaner, Greener, Safer programme has been radically revised for 2004/05. The key areas have been an earlier start to the programme, and agreed approach between E&L, CIDU and Legal & Democratic Services and joint working on the review and filtering of suggestions. The next stages of consultation have been clearly set out in the jointly agreed programme.
23. A discussion paper is being considered by officers addressing some of the roles and relationships between departments. Other issues are likely to come from the scheduled debates for Members and Officers due to take place in June / July. Any resource issues will need to be considered later.

Safety (6.15)

24. The safety of officers is addressed under Health & Safety requirements and is the responsibility of individual Business Units. Risk Assessments have been carried out for L&DS staff and arrangements are in place for escorted return to the Town Hall and secure home journeys. Most officers attending do not use public transport and wherever possible assistance is offered. Within the constraints of the availability of venues we always attempt to use those that are accessible by public transport. We continue to offer transport to disabled people to access the meetings.

Perception of 'the Council' (6.16 – 6.19)

25. Members' handling of political debates is not a 'housekeeping' issue but may need to be considered elsewhere.
26. There have been no formal complaints from either members of the public or officers around Members' conduct although there have been some areas of concern which are under investigation or review. The Member Development Programme includes options for managing meetings, public participation etc.
27. Links between debates and discussions around issues and the summing up and decision-making by Members is open and transparent. Whilst some difficulties remain around the

purpose and content of minutes of meetings the whole process is in keeping with guidelines and practice. Comments highlighted in the INLOGOV report probably reflect early cynicism and doubt that has not been borne out by formal complaints from the public.

28. In addition to the training identified in paragraph 19 the Member Development Programme contains specific options for chairs. Further training, open to both officers and Members, is being arranged in the areas of Planning and Licensing.

Function (6.20 – 6.23)

29. The issues of varying expectations of the role of Community Councils and their role in borough-wide consultation will form part of the wider Member debate on 'strategic fit' and will be subject to further reports.
30. The projected number of planning applications has not been reached with fewer cases being put forward for Community Council consideration. A number of factors may have influenced this including the introduction of the new process, the size and scale of the applications received and the designation of schemes as strategic. A number of applications to Community Councils have been deferred without obvious benefit and in the absence of clear officer advice. This is a significant area of work for the authority and has key performance indicators and improvement targets to achieve. Analysis of the applications by Community Council is in hand and may require a more significant review. Any performance issues in this area will need to be reported separately.
31. The potential review of the Licensing function is being considered elsewhere. Until Regulations are issued and / or Standards Committee considers the matter the function will remain with Community Councils.

Further actions

32. A number of 'suggestions' were made in the report, which are not directly addressed above. Three areas were identified, consultation on venues, the role of a co-ordinating group and guidance on consultation.
33. Further consultation will be considered as part of new arrangements through the Research and Consultation Officers Group. It will be important to gain views of people who do not normally attend Community Council meetings.
34. Establishing a co-ordinating group at this time would place additional burdens on Chairs with no identifiable benefit. An initial approach would be to introduce a regular bulletin to share experiences and best practice amongst Chairs / Vice-Chairs.
35. Increasingly diverse parts of the Council and our partners are interested in the consultation function of Community Councils – usually coming into the arena too late to be useful. "Using Community Councils as a Consultation Mechanism" guidance will be produced which should help those undertaking the consultation get the most out of it and Chairs and L&DS officers better plan for future agenda.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Review of Community Councils in the London Borough of Southwark	Town Hall	Graham Love

APPENDIX A - AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Deborah Holmes, Borough Solicitor	
Report Author	Graham Love	
Version	Final	
Dated	10 May 2004	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Borough Solicitor & Secretary	N/A	
Chief Finance Officer	N/A	
Executive Member	N/A	
Date final report sent to Constitutional Support Services	N/A	

APPENDIX B – Section 6 of the INLOGOV report

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.*