

Constitution Working Party

Neighbourhood Governance: directions and next steps

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1. The Council has considered various approaches to neighbourhood governance, civic engagement and localised service delivery over the past two decades. And a range of innovative solutions have been adopted to developing neighbourhood governance, engaging citizens and making services more responsive locally. In July 2005 the Audit Commission and the IDEA, following a two year consultation exercise, published a paper entitled “Fitness for Purpose”. Its aim was to set out a helpful framework for Councils to consider how best to make explicit strategic choices in balancing their community leadership, civic engagement and service delivery purposes.
2. In Lewisham, the existing arrangements in respect of neighbourhood governance - for six “area forums”, comprised of three wards per area, is set out in the Council’s Constitution. These arrangements were adopted as the then best compromise in meeting a number of objectives, including:
 - enhancing councillors’ community leadership role; and
 - enabling a range of public services to be held to account within localities
3. There are a number of important issues to be addressed at the outset. These need to be taken into account in considering how best to develop and agree our policy direction on neighbourhood governance locally. Here in this outline note I include six of the key issues. At the meeting I shall provide further information about the social and economic diversity of Lewisham’s wards as well as information about local service and management issues across public services locally (Council services and other public service partners).

Foundational issues ...

4. First, the very notion of neighbourhoods and localities is contested in inner London. Communities of interest, identity, faith, ethnic origin and culture

are simply not reducible to straightforward communities of place. These communities are powerful sources of personal identity to people - more so than residence and locality. And life in London is not, for most, lived extremely locally. Survey evidence indicates that people in Lewisham identify with London more than with their locality (although they have a stronger sense of belonging to their locality than to Lewisham as a borough). Added to this are the competing claims as to what constitutes “natural areas”, geographical boundaries and neighbourhoods in the complex social contours of Lewisham. An early discussion and consideration about what constitutes neighbourhoods in Lewisham may be illuminating and insightful. But, we need to avoid entering an “intricate wood of briars and thistles from which those who lost themselves in it brought back many scratches and no food”.

5. Second, Lewisham changed the number of electoral wards in 2002 so that each ward now constitutes some 10,000 electors or 14,000 residents. This is probably the largest ward size in London. It raises significant issues for community leadership and civic engagement for ward councillors and it also makes Lewisham’s wards less like “neighbourhoods” themselves. Few would agree that a neighbourhood is best defined as a local area of some 14,000 people.
6. Third, the Council is a mayoral form of local government. The mayor is, relative to councillors generally, a highly visible local political figure and therefore serves to act as a focal point of citizen contact and engagement. This is an inevitable feature of the mayoral form and the issue for the Council is how ward-based or locality-based approaches can complement and/or supplement this fact.
7. Fourth, the approach adopted in Lewisham in respect of localised service delivery and neighbourhood governance has been highly pragmatic. We have not applied a uniform and consistent “blueprint” across the Borough. The approach has been one of requisite variety. Citizens demand some services to be of basic minimum standards across the borough and require close community liaison - safer neighbourhood teams, for example. Other services need to be more intensely delivered in some areas than others. And some public service agencies (such as health services) have designed

their service delivery at a larger scale than the borough's wards. Moreover, we need to acknowledge that community social capital and capacity varies and the Council has focussed more attention and resources on some areas (such as Downham and Deptford) than others.

8. Fifth, it is vital to consider the core purposes of any proposed neighbourhood governance arrangement - particularly in respect of any devolution of mainstream budgets and powers. Neighbourhood governance that holds public agencies and private actors to account need resources and sanctions to operate effectively. It would be wise to develop worked estimates of such costs. Moreover, if neighbourhood governance is to have powers of any allocation of resources (of whatever scale in terms of revenue or capital) it is vital for us to consider how to balance considerations of local responsiveness considerations of equity and fairness.
9. Sixth, there is a developing agenda nationally to devolve the ownership and management of some public assets and facilities directly to community groups themselves. This is not, of itself, contrary to the efforts of Councils to introduce neighbourhood governance but it does point to the need to consider a community-based "bottom up" approach rather than a Council-led "trickle down" perspective. Members will know that I am leading a national review, for the Secretary of State, on these issues.
10. At its meeting on 26th July the following (amended) motion was agreed at Council:

"The Council believes that local government is strengthened by engaging with the public at the lowest level. It notes the Government's desire for Councils to deliver a community governance role and to develop closer links with local communities. Council therefore requests the Constitution Working Party to bring forward proposals as to how to replace Area Forums with a system of neighbourhood governance which includes devolved budgets and a range of powers developed in consultation with the local community. The emphasis of such proposals should be to develop initiatives that strengthen communities and increase participation both in the establishment of and the subsequent running of the new arrangements".

11. To address this resolution thoroughly it is vital that the Constitution Working Party (CWP) has information on levels of community participation and involvement throughout the borough. And particularly the CWP might wish to examine those localities and/or communities that are least engaged with public decision taking at present. If the aim is to “strengthen communities” and not simply reorganise the framing of public decision making, we need an assessment of community capital and capability locally alongside an appraisal of the likely efficacy of Council initiatives in achieving the desired changes.

12. This early meeting of the CWP should help steer a direction forward on this issue generally and agree next steps in terms of reports to be commissioned. I envisage that reports to the CWP can be prepared for December/ January so that recommendations can be made to the Mayor & Cabinet and then the Council in the February/March cycle.