Community leadership

Learning from comprehensive performance assessment: briefing 1
The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.

The Commission is publishing a series of ‘Learning from CPA briefings’, to accompany the national report Patterns for Improvement: Learning from Comprehensive Performance Assessment to Achieve Better Public Services (April 2003). Each briefing examines a key driver for improvement identified by the first round of CPA for single tier and county councils, describes the critical success factors for improvement, and signposts sources of help and advice. As the briefings are published they will be made available on the Commission’s website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/ CPA/analysis.asp

Introduction

1 The first round of comprehensive performance assessments (CPAs) for single tier and county councils has identified community leadership as a key driver for improvement. The purpose of this briefing is to:
   • explain the concept of community leadership;
   • give some of the headline messages and findings from the corporate assessments;
   • describe some critical success factors that have resulted in improved community leadership;
   • identify notable practice where community leadership is working well;
   • outline future Commission work in this area; and
   • suggest where more information and advice can be found.

2 This briefing is designed to assist those who are interested in how a council can improve its community leadership role. Councillors and officers at all levels, working with partner bodies both at an operational and strategic level, will find this briefing a useful starting point in improving their community leadership by building on the key learning points from CPA.

Community leadership

3 While the Local Government Act 2000 has given councils a clear role in leading their communities, community leadership is not a new concept: councils have always had some community leadership functions and many councils have been ‘leading’ their communities effectively for decades. Community leadership has three aspects:
   • local democratic leadership;
   • leadership through partnership; and
   • communities leading themselves.

Local democratic leadership

4 Councils bring people together, develop a vision for their areas, produce a community strategy and deliver improvements in the quality of life for local people. Central to this
are the ideas of transparency of decision-making and accountability for the value for money and impact of local services, and of the involvement of local people in political decision-making.

Leadership through partnership

Community leadership is often delivered through partnership, particularly when it is tackling cross-cutting issues. Local strategic partnerships (LSPs) have been introduced to bring together key players from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Councils’ abilities to lead or contribute to partnerships are increasingly important to enable them to secure improvement for their localities.

Communities leading themselves

Successful community leadership is about more than having robust democratic structures and working in partnership. It is also about developing social capital so that local people can become politically, socially and economically engaged. However, community development is complex and councils may need to lead and challenge communities as well as support them, for example to counter prejudice and to build social inclusion.

Messages from corporate assessments

As part of CPA, corporate assessments were carried out at each council by a small team, that included an auditor and an inspector as well as officers and councilors from ‘peer’ councils. The outcome of the corporate assessment was a high-level report on the council’s strengths and weaknesses and a judgement about its ability to improve, that contributed to the council’s overall CPA.

Corporate assessments examined how councils were fulfilling their community leadership role. Most councils had positive stories to tell. Seventy-two councils demonstrated strong community leadership and commitment to extending this leadership – particularly through partnerships, including the LSP. The best councils had prepared ambitious community strategies in consultation with, and owned by, other partners.

An analysis of a representative sample of corporate assessment reports has identified five factors that are critical to successful community leadership [Exhibit 1, overleaf]:

- awareness;
- focus and prioritisation;
- working together;
- clarity of roles; and
- building leadership capacity.
Exhibit 1
Critical success factors for community leadership

Corporate assessment reports have identified five factors critical to successful community leadership.

Although it helps to make progress in all five areas, moving forward in one area can be a good start. Learning from CPA suggests that the strength of councils’ leadership role will vary across topics and communities and that to improve, councils need to identify areas of weakness, outline their improvement needs and learn from their existing strengths.

Success factor one – awareness

Councils performing their community leadership roles well will have good local intelligence about their areas and communities. They understand the social, demographic, environmental and economic context of the locality they operate in, using information collected from a variety of sources including census data, internal statistics, partners, members, staff and the local community. Strong awareness of community issues is complemented by good consultation and engagement mechanisms, both within and outside the council. Good councils have effective networks in place which enable targets to be set in consultation with partners, residents and the wider community, and provide feedback on the reasons behind council decisions. This creates a shared vision and shared priorities, leading to wider ownership from partners and the community. For example, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has good intelligence-gathering mechanisms in place and consults widely and frequently with partner organisations and the local community, responding to comments received and taking these into consideration when preparing local strategies.

Source: Audit Commission analysis of corporate assessment reports
Self-awareness of a council’s strengths and weaknesses and regular critical appraisal of its plans and actions are also important. This applies to both officers and councillors. The best councils are self-critical and challenging, learning from external feedback and from their own experiences. They appreciate the limits of their own capacity and of the influence they have on partners. They also realise the extent of their partners’ capacities. This understanding has helped councils to build capacity both internally and in collaboration with local partners.

Success factor two – focus and prioritisation

Excellent and good councils generally provide a clear and ambitious vision for their communities, with a defined set of priorities based on widespread consultation and a commitment to serving local people. The community strategy provides a coherent framework for service planning for the council and its partners, and is recognised at all levels within the organisation especially by members and senior management. These councils have succeeded in balancing national and local priorities, particularly by making national priorities relevant to local circumstances.

A good community strategy is translated into targeted activity on the ground and reflected in more detailed plans. Activity is backed up by clear targets, robust management of performance and risk management, all of which are tied to resources. For example, in Norfolk County Council staff have a clear understanding of corporate priorities and how they cascade through to departmental plans and personal objectives. This clarity of understanding also needs to extend to partners and the wider community.

(See also Setting Priorities and Maintaining Focus – Learning from CPA Briefing 2 for more on this success factor).

Success factor three – working together

Councils that are doing well in community leadership recognise the benefits of improved joined-up working (both within the council and with other organisations), at strategic and operational levels, to increase capacity, pool resources and deliver better services to users. Many councils see their role as having changed from one of traditional service provision towards a mixed economy, with a range of services provided by partner organisations. This has helped these councils to identify the importance of partnership working, influencing beyond traditional boundaries and seeking to operate in different ways. For example, Northumberland County Council has worked with neighbouring councils in Scotland and Tyneside to build a stronger regional perspective for the area.

Improving partnership working has helped councils to deliver good outcomes in a number of complex service areas, such as crime, health, transport and education. Many councils now have strong and mature partnership cultures that have resulted in visible benefits to communities. For example, Hertfordshire County Council has developed extremely positive partnership working with the NHS locally and with other
partners to improve preventative and non-acute health and social care. In many cases councils have used the LSP to integrate existing partnerships, and produce community plans owned by partner organisations with robust delivery arrangements in place. They view external challenge as a positive factor and use the results to improve services. Many councils are now sharing their experiences and knowledge with peers and partners to improve capacity and celebrate successes.

Success factor four – clarity of roles

Clarity of roles both within the council and between the council, its partners and its stakeholders is critical to guaranteeing effective community leadership. Successful councils ensure that the roles of councillors and officers are clearly defined from the outset and that these are fully understood and valued. This is further enhanced by having robust and effective scrutiny arrangements in place, which are linked to strategic planning, budget processes and performance planning and measurement. The clarity, focus and consistency resulting from recently revised council constitutions has, in many places, provided councillors and officers with the confidence to translate broad council objectives into policy priorities and to implement new and often innovative approaches to local service delivery. In the London Borough of Camden managers are reassured by the clear messages that they receive from the leader, the executive and the management team, and staff are clear on how their roles fit in with the priorities of the council and that of the wider community strategy.

Increases in the extent of partnership working have meant that clarity of roles between councils and their partners has grown in importance. Good councils enter partnership discussions by outlining their community vision and ambitions to prospective partners, and provide a forum for partners to express theirs. Formal contracts and service agreements clearly set out lines of accountability for each of the parties and these are supported by ongoing dialogue throughout the life of the partnership to ensure good awareness of roles and responsibilities. Service and delivery arrangements are then communicated to the local community and stakeholders to establish expectations and accountability.

Success factor five – building leadership capacity

Community leadership is provided by a range of individuals, including the leader of the council, other councillors, the chief executive, senior officers, partners, and leaders from within communities themselves. Good councils publicly acknowledge and promote their role as community leaders, and this is widely recognised both within the council and among the broader community. But the council also has a key role to play in encouraging other partners in the community to take the leadership initiative by providing support and fostering empowerment. For example, Hounslow Council has re-thought the fundamental role of the council as a corporate, community and regional leader and has developed a plan for the way in which the organisation needs to change to carry out this role effectively.
Successful councils have adopted a community leadership style that is appropriate to the complex environment in which they operate. Depending on the maturity and strengths of partners, partnerships and community organisations this may require strong, directional leadership or subtle management, a facilitative approach rather than imposing particular solutions, sharing control and power and undertaking collaborative work with other partners. In particular, a number of councils are innovatively developing social capital by attracting traditionally excluded groups into the policy-making process through the creation of citizens' panels, youth parliaments and online debates.

Councils have had success in delivering a strong community strategy when councillors and staff, partners and other stakeholders share a common purpose and have the right skills to deliver the agenda. This has meant investing in training and development programmes for councillors and officers, with leadership development being a major component.

Future Audit Commission work on community leadership

The Commission is committed to carrying out further work on community leadership, including:

- projects on sustainable communities and regeneration;
- improving the Commission’s knowledge and understanding through its internal community leadership knowledge network; and
- developing building blocks for effective community leadership to support improvement reporting and CPA for district councils.
Sources of information and advice

Audit Commission Publications
(available from www.audit-commission.gov.uk)


Audit Commission, Quality of Life: Using Quality of Life Indicators, Audit Commission, 2002.


Other Resources

Local Government Association (LGA) – www.lga.gov.uk


LGA, Let’s Talk About It...Principles for Consultation on Local Governance, LGA, 2000.


IDeA – www.idea.gov.uk

New Local Government Network – www.nlgn.org.uk

Library of Local PIs – www.local-pi-library.gov.uk/index.shtml

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – www.jrf.org.uk

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – www.odpm.gov.uk