Empowering communities:

the role of local government

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Context: terminology

"Community" defined by: Place; Interest; Identity

Engagement:

The process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities.

Empowerment:

The giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them.

Context: recent legislation and related initiatives

Communities in control. Real People, Real power.

- Neighbourhood arrangements: Petitions & Charters
- Sustainable Communities Plans
- Councillor Call for Action
- Participatory Budgeting: draft national strategy (March 08) : "community kitties" : see www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk
- Links with third sector commissioning/community cohesion agendas
- Quirk Review: ownership of community assets
- Community Development Foundation: details of National Empowerment Partnerships (Regional) and Grassroots Grants http://www.cdf.org.uk/

Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007)

- A new Duty to Involve from 1st April 2009

Local Govt. Act 2000 – set up Cabinet structure: general power of well-being

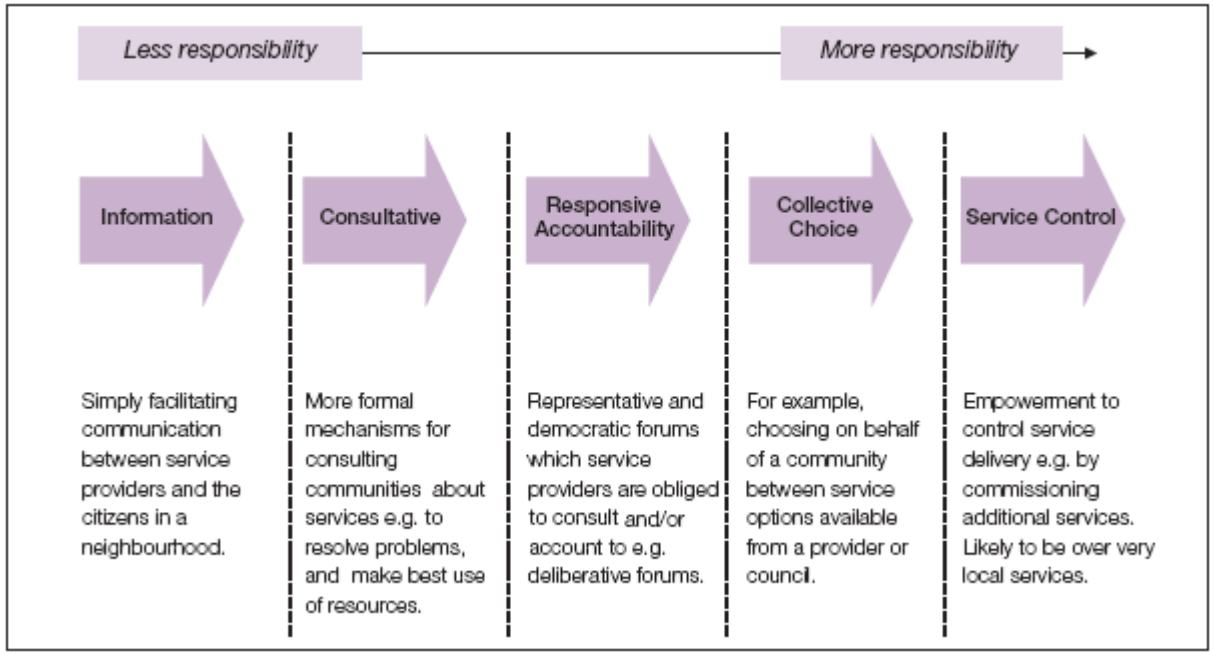
New Partnership/delivery structures: ALMOs; Leisure Trusts; CDRP; Children's Trusts etc

What's the deal?

Citizen engagement and public services

(ODPM/Home Office 2005)

The spectrum of responsibilities



How can we make a difference locally?

- **% of people who feel they can influence decisions in their local area (N.I.4)** key indicator for CAA : 38% in 2007 Place Survey

  Clear correlation between satisfaction with service and ability to influence decisions

- **Incentivise involvement in order to get the 000's of little things right**

- **Act local, think local**: devolve power to local members/committees.

  "*the aim (of local government 2000 reforms) was to enhance the role of the political leadership and as such to limit the day-to –day decision making influence of non-executive councillors*" (ODPM evaluation 2004). Doesn't have to be a zero sum game!

  Many "back-bench" councillors feel resentful and disempowered. "*Unless the perception that councillors lack power changes, nothing else will.*" (Representing the Future: Councillors Commission Dec 2007)

How can we make a difference locally?

- **Be assertive:** “Councils had become dependent on central government not only financially, but in many cases also for guidance, encouragement and permission to innovate. Local government needed to gain ..a sense of powerfulness, with the confidence and capability driven from within” Report of Councillors Commission

- **Beyond the usual suspects**: “Encouraging more people to participate is a forlorn hope and creating more structures wrong-headed… existence of a community elite is not evidence that policies to promote participation have failed. But an elite disconnected from local civic culture is such evidence”.

- **Invest in changing cultures of participation**: change structures to fit people’s participation, not the other way round.

- **Mobilise people to engage in making a difference themselves**, rather than simply make decisions about what others plan to do

“Strong Progress” : CAA

- *listening to and engaging with diverse communities,* with honesty and transparency, inclusivity, fairness and reality are core values
- *commitment evident in corporate strategies* such as the community strategy, local delivery plan, service plans
- *good local intelligence and good relationships with different communities*
- *understanding of different aspirations need to be balanced* by such issues as ethnicity, religion, language, age and locality
- *clarity about the type of connection with users of services, citizens and communities* that is fit for purpose and cost effective
- *matching the method of engagement to the different communication preferences* of users and citizens and can show that this has helped improve responsiveness
- *effective engagement has resulted in change and recognisable improvement*
- *benefits to communities have been increased and a greater sense of inclusion and a willingness to participate in the future*
- *issues of bullying and harassment addressed* in an appropriate and timely manner
- *complaints are listened to, taken seriously and handled sensitively*
- *communications training for Members and staff*

See www.userfocus.audit-commission.gov.uk/KycSectionIntro.aspx

Other useful sources

- An excellent toolkit on National Standards for Community Engagement developed within Scotland. http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/cs_010771.hcsp see also www.scdc.org.uk/voice Visioning outcomes in community engagement

- "Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Well-being. Is there a formula for happy communities?" (June 2008) http://www.youngfoundation.org.uk/node/

- "Community Participation – who benefits?" (2006) Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org

Partnership Development

Scottish Community Development Council:

see www.scdc.org.uk

Community Development Foundation : www.cdf.org.uk

Duty to Involve joint workshops

Participatory Budgeting Unit:

www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

Food for thought?

- Does empowerment have to be a zero sum game?
- Roles of ‘backbenchers’ and community reps
- Plural political structures? How does this relate to the controlling group’s politics?
- Empowerment: but on whose terms? Use of internet and open source resources
- Incentives to make a difference
- Townships/areas/neighbourhoods
- Is there an agreed ‘unit of currency’?
- Can it be resourced and at what level? The ‘monkey and organ grinder’ problem
- Focus on ‘strategic’ links with LAA/CAA or local issues?
- Terms of reference:
- clarity on voting, budgets and decision-making powers
- devolution and subsidiarity