

Appendix A

'A Partnership for Success' - the role of ward councillors in the Tower Hamlets Partnership



London Borough of Tower Hamlets
February 2006

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Acknowledgements

Working Group chair:

Councillor Marian Williams (Liberal Democrat)

Working Group members:

Councillor John Griffiths (Liberal Democrat)
Councillor Julia Mainwaring (Labour)
Councillor Fanu Miah (Labour)
Councillor Doros Ullah (Labour)
Councillor Betheline Chattopadhyay (Labour)

Andrew Mahoney (Partnership Management Group)

Policy and Partnership:

Ian Lewis, Partnership Support Team, Service Head

Research and Scrutiny:

Michael Keating, Service Head
Alan Steward, Scrutiny Policy Manager
David McNulty, Scrutiny Policy Officer

The Working Group would like to thank all of the respondents, councillors, members of the Partnership Management Group, Area Directors and Partnership Support Officers for their responses to the survey conducted as part of its review.

Chair's foreword

As a local Councillor I am increasingly aware of the importance of Partnership working in Tower Hamlets. Greater partnership working presents both a number of opportunities and also a number of challenges, in particular to the role of elected Members under the governance arrangements for Local Strategic Partnerships.

As Chair of the Working Group I have been keen to discover how other areas have responded to both the opportunities and challenges of greater partnership working. In addition to the Working Group meetings I attended a number of policy conferences which considered community leadership issues and the role of councillors in partnerships.

This report focuses on a number of areas which require developing if we are to have a representative, dynamic and continuously improving Partnership. The areas are not unique to Tower Hamlets and apply to partnership working across the country. However, this should not deter us but encourage us locally to seek ambitious solutions.

There are a number of specific recommendations which the Working Group has highlighted as requiring attention. It is my wish though that the report as a whole will prompt and contribute to a wider discussion on the involvement of councillors in the Tower Hamlets Partnership. This requires the involvement of all within the Partnership: councillors, residents, service providers and other members.

I am optimistic that in the spirit of partnership together we can address the issues which this report raises.

Cllr Marian Williams
Scrutiny Lead, Excellent Public Services

Recommendations

The Working Group recommendations focus on four areas requiring consideration and action from the Tower Hamlets Partnership, the Council and all local councillors. The recommendations are presented as a useful starting point for improving how ward councillors help further develop the Partnership to benefit local people.

1. Defining the role of ward councillors in the Partnership

Councillors are different from other representatives in the Partnership as they are directly elected and have a unique democratic legitimacy. Although this does not mean they are more important than other partners the difference should be recognised within the Partnership. Expectations about the involvement of councillors should be clearly defined and recognised.

- 1.1 A job description for 'councillors as community leaders' should be formulated with the involvement of both councillors and the wider Partnership. This would include the community leadership councillors provide through different partnership forums, cabinet, overview and scrutiny and casework.
- 1.2 The role of councillors should be recognised in the Tower Hamlets Partnership Charter.

2. Developing the capacity, skills, expertise and knowledge of ward councillors

Developing the capacity, skills, expertise and knowledge of ward councillors is crucial to realising their potential contribution within the Partnership. This is not just an issue of training and development but includes how councillors are supported and encouraged by the Council and the Partnership. In turn ward councillors should be expected to show commitment to the work of the Partnership.

- 2.1 Learning and development should include greater emphasis on the skills of councillors to engage with their local wards. This would include developing an understanding of accountability, community leadership, public and stakeholder engagement and service improvement.
- 2.2 Support to councillors should include a greater emphasis on how to develop their role at LAP level as community leaders – beyond administrative support.
- 2.3 Ward performance data should be provided regularly to councillors in an accessible format to enable them to formulate evidence-based judgements.

3. Improving linkages between the Partnership and ward councillors

The linkages between local knowledge and skills of councillors and the wider work of the Partnership need to be improved. The Partnership Support Team and Area Directors could play a significant role in enabling this to happen.

- 3.1 The five scrutiny leads should have a standing invitation to the relevant Community Plan Action Groups and be encouraged to attend and participate.
- 3.2 The accountability arrangements for Area Directors should be clarified to enhance the working arrangements of LAP steering groups.
- 3.3 The Partnership Support Team should play a key part in the Member induction programme.
- 3.4 A major role of the Partnership Support Team should be to enhance the skills and capacity of LAPs, including councillors. This would develop their ability to make the links between their work as ward councillors with the work of the wider Partnership.

4. Developing the involvement of ward councillors in the Partnership through Overview and Scrutiny

The ODPM Vision for Local Government, and a number of responses to the survey carried out by the Working Group, highlighted the need to develop links between Overview and Scrutiny and the Partnership.

- 4.1 A LAP based scrutiny project should be piloted which could include how 'choice and personalisation' of public services is being delivered in a local area.
- 4.2 The monitoring of the Local Area Agreement through LAP-based performance indicators by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be developed.

Introduction

1. The Working Group was established in September 2005 to investigate the role of ward councillors in the Tower Hamlets Partnership. A number of scrutiny councillors had identified looking at their role as ward councillors in light of the local evaluation of the Partnership. At the same time there are wider national debates around the governance arrangements for Local Strategic Partnerships and the role of ward councillors following the Local Government Act 2000.
2. The review has therefore also considered more broadly the role of councillors in the community leadership of Tower Hamlets.

The definition of community leadership adopted by the Working Group was:

‘The pursuit of community well being through the facilitation of strategic interventions that would not otherwise have happened and which are informed and accountable to the public.’

- ODPM Meta Evaluation of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (2005)

3. The Tower Hamlets Partnership (Partnership) is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) for Tower Hamlets. The Partnership is widely recognised as being an example of excellent partnership working and has been awarded numerous accolades for the way in which it functions and has delivered benefits to the local area.

The Government Office for London recently commented:

‘Tower Hamlets Partnership is a strong and inclusive partnership which is ambitious and outcome focused but responsive to local needs, and which is making real progress across a range of floor targets. It is aware of its strengths and achievements, but is honest and realistic about the challenges ahead... Despite its considerable success and the plaudits received to date, the Tower Hamlets Partnership is continually striving to improve – both itself as a partnership and the impact it has on improving conditions for the borough’s residents.’

- Government Office for London (2005)

4. To ensure its effectiveness and improvement the Partnership regularly reviews its performance. The Working Group has sought to contribute to the wider review of the Partnership with the remit ‘to explore the role of ward councillors within the Partnership and identify ways in which it might be further developed’. The Working Group comprised 6 councillors (4 Labour and 2 Liberal Democrat) and also a co-optee, Andrew

Mahoney, who is a resident member of the Partnership Management Group (PMG).

5. In completing its review the Working Group held a total of three meetings which Ian Lewis, Head of the Partnership Support Team, attended. It also conducted a survey of councillors, the PMG, the Partnership Support Team and the Partnership's Area Directors.
6. The first meeting considered information about the structure of the Partnership and the current role of councillors within it. The meeting also reviewed national discussions about the governance arrangements for LSPs and the role of ward councillors as community leaders, focusing on the ODPM's ongoing evaluation of LSPs (specifically its guidance note on governance arrangements). The Group also looked at the implications of the ODPM's Vision for Local Government 'Vibrant Local Leadership'.
7. The second meeting considered the results of the survey seeking the views of all councillors and the PMG. Following this discussion the Working Group asked that the survey be extended to include both the Partnership Support Team and the Area Directors to broaden the perspective.
8. The final meeting discussed the findings of this later survey and also considered a draft of the final report and proposed recommendations which will be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then to the Partnership Management Group.
9. The findings of this report are divided into four main sections mirroring the evidence the Working Group considered during the review.
 - The Tower Hamlets Partnership
 - ODPM Evaluation of LSPs
 - Vibrant Local Leadership
 - Local Survey Response

Also the report considers a number of 'emerging issues' for the role of councillors within the Tower Hamlets Partnership. Finally, it draws together the Working Group's conclusions which reflect the key issues running throughout the report from which its recommendations are drawn.

Findings

The Tower Hamlets Partnership

The structure of the Tower Hamlets Partnership:

Local Area Partnerships (LAPs)

There are eight LAPs providing the formal structure through which residents are involved in the Partnership. They involve people in their locality, considering views on how things can be improved and the ways in which they want to influence local services. They provide local people with the chance to scrutinise the performance of the Council, health, police and other services to ensure that standards are met and promises kept.

Community Plan Action Group (CPAGs)

There is a Community Plan Action Group for each of the key themes in the community plan: Creating and Sharing prosperity, Learning Achievement and Leisure, Living Safely, Living Well and Excellent Public Services. CPAGs are charged with delivering joined-up services in line with the priorities agreed with local people through the LAPs.



Partnership Management Group (PMG)

This group involves representatives from across the borough, representatives of the CPAGs, together with local councillors and representatives from the major service providers, businesses, voluntary and community sectors. It is a strategic group with responsibility for developing the overall strategy and ensuring that plans are delivered effectively.

Community Plan

Following extensive consultation across the borough the Community Plan was launched in May 2001 with a vision for the future of Tower Hamlets to 2010 and a list of priorities to achieve it. All component parts of the Partnership (LAPs, CPAGs and PMG) have a part to play in making real improvements to the quality of life for local people. The Council's role in delivering the current priorities identified in the Community Plan is outlined in the Strategic Plan 2002-2006.

10. All councillors are invited to their LAP steering group with at least two formally elected. Five councillors currently chair LAPs. The involvement of councillors in LAPs is at their own discretion. There are Executive Members involved in each of the five CPAGs. There are also three councillors who are members of the Partnership Management Group.
11. The Tower Hamlets Charter outlines the purpose of the Tower Hamlets Partnership, its objectives and what is required from various members of the Partnership. At present the Charter does not recognise the role of councillors. As a Working Group we believe that the role of councillors should be recognised in the Charter as this would help further clarify it.

ODPM Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships

12. We wanted to consider wider national debates around the role of councillors in LSPs and we looked at the national evaluation of LSPs which the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has commissioned. A central aspect of the evaluation examines the different governance arrangements employed by LSPs across the country. The starting point for the evaluation's consideration of governance is that 'LSPs are not simply a partnership between key provider organisations, but a link, through the local authority, to the democratic accountability of local public services to local people' a view which we share.
13. We share a number of the concerns which the report recognises in the tension across LSPs between the 'legitimacy' of the democratic process of representation through local councillors and the more complex 'legitimacies' of LSP representatives. We also noted the concern that councillors may feel excluded from decision making with partnership bodies tasked with the greater delivery of services.
14. We were interested to note the results of a qualitative study, carried out as part of the evaluation, on the views of councillors towards partnership working. The study found councillors:
 - generally supportive of LSPs, although support was more marked amongst executive councillors
 - had no discernible difference in attitude related to political party membership
 - view LSPs as strengthening the consultation process
 - saw LSPs as a crucial way of building support for initiatives
 - were afraid of losing powers to the LSP
15. Councillors are identified as playing a 'unique' role in governance arrangements for LSPs. We agree with this view but are quite clear that this unique role does not make councillors more important than other partners. The responsibility of councillors should be in carrying a wider 'overall balance in governance in an area.' Councillors should bring a broader understanding of local areas and can 'step outside the narrow range of services and look more widely at community needs'.

16. We recognise from our own experiences as councillors that LSPs have opened up opportunities for us to fulfil our community leadership role. We are provided with chances to influence a range of service providers and believe there is considerable evidence that this is happening in Tower Hamlets. We feel that carrying out this role requires considerable leadership skill. A key factor raised is the skills and capabilities of councillors being able to adapt to new roles and their ability to work in partnership situations.

Vibrant Local Leadership

17. We were keen to consider the wider role of councillors following the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000. In doing so we looked at the ODPM's vision for 'Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity'. This sets out action to revitalise neighbourhoods, enhance local leadership, and increase regional prosperity. One of the key documents is 'Vibrant Local Leadership' which considers issues relating to how all councillors could fulfil the role of community champions or community leaders. The vision of councillors as champions for their local area is one we share.
18. The ODPM paper catalogues changes to the nature of local leadership following the Local Government Act 2000 with the introduction in the majority of local authorities of executive decision making and a separate scrutiny function. It highlights a number of outstanding issues relating to the role of councillors as community leaders and seeks the views of local authorities regarding possible solutions.
19. A key aspect of the vision is how to improve the role of scrutiny within local government and as part of governance arrangements 'which integrate wider locality and community dimensions in a way that is tailored to local circumstances'.
20. We share the ODPM's view that 'local councillors should be acting on their own volition in scrutinising the delivery of all services in their area and making representations to other service providers where action is needed. Acting collectively, local councillors can use the scrutiny function to oversee how councils and other providers are responding to calls for action by neighbourhoods across the area.' However, this will require support from the wider Partnership to ensure success. We think that a way of improving this would be to improve information sharing and scrutiny leads should attend CPAG meetings and be encouraged to do so by the Partnership.
21. It is important that we realise the opportunities that exist for scrutinising external service providers rather than the present focus on Council services. This could be through extending the formal health scrutiny powers of the Council to other service providers such as the police. For instance, the recent announcement of the Respect Action Plan included

proposals for the scrutiny of community safety issues. We consider this to be a key area which will have to be grasped by both councillors and the Partnership.

Councils need to provide leadership to localities by developing:

‘A collective vision for their area and bringing partners together to achieve it.’ Councils which have started to do so – usually through their Local Strategic Partnerships - ‘have been highly effective in beginning to develop this type of leadership role and have leaders – political and managerial – able to undertake it and to earn the trust and support of local communities and wider partners. Looking ahead, it means that those councillors and officers who are going to be most directly involved in leading the locality as a whole will need to be of a calibre that commands confidence and respect among partners and diverse sections of the community.’

- ODPM ‘Vibrant Local Leadership’ (2005)

22. Greater commitment is needed by the Council to realise the potential of non-executive councillors. There needs to be a development of genuine, local community advocacy requiring a strong commitment from Executive Members and senior officers ‘to identify ways in which resources of the organisation can more effectively support this activity’. This needs to be considered locally by all political groups, individual councillors and the way they are supported by officers across council directorates - not just by teams supporting councillors such as Democratic Renewal and Engagement and Research and Scrutiny. We also share its conclusions that the ‘framework for the future should signal significant changes in the nature of local leadership’.
23. This would place community leadership at the centre of every councillor’s role and provide opportunities to make this leadership more visible, stronger and more accountable. Within the vision councillors would be seen as leading their neighbourhoods, actively representing and championing communities in their area, playing important roles in neighbourhood consultative arrangements and participating in a range of local, community and partnership organisations. The scrutiny process would be an important mechanism for them to influence policy and deliver real changes and improvements on the ground.
24. Vibrant Local Leadership has given us a wider appreciation of the role of councillors following the Local Government Act 2000. It touches on some of the key roles and responsibilities that councillors can and should play in the Partnership around community leadership, community advocacy and the scrutiny of local service providers.

Local Survey

25. Following our consideration of the Partnership's performance and wider national discussion on governance arrangements for LSPs and the role of councillors we were keen to seek the views of our colleagues and also members of the PMG.
26. At our first meeting we agreed to conduct a survey of all councillors and members of the PMG. The survey was designed to give us a qualitative understanding of the views on the role of ward councillors in the Partnership. There were five questions on which views were sought:
 1. What contribution do ward councillors make to the Partnership?
 2. What added value do they bring?
 3. What is their role in reaching "hard to reach groups"?
 4. What should they do differently to improve their contribution/value?
 5. What are the key areas for ward councillors to improve?
27. Our survey asked respondents to state if they were councillors or members of the Partnership. Councillors were also asked to state which political group they belonged to and also whether they were Executive Members.
28. There were 20 returns, of which:
 - 8 were members of the Labour Group
 - 9 were members of the Liberal Democrat Group
 - 3 were not councillors
 - 5 were members of the PMG
 - 1 was an Executive Member
 - 6 were members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Although we are clear that the response does not represent the views of the entire Partnership, it does provide reasonable evidence as the basis of this report.

What contribution do ward councillors make to the Partnership?

"Councillors provide leadership in making sure local needs and concerns are taken into consideration prior to policy and decision being agreed."

- A Partnership for Success 'Survey Feedback' (2005)

29. We found the majority of respondents focused on the role of ward councillors in their Local Area Partnership (LAP) rather than other Partnership forums. This highlights the broad community leadership role which ward councillors contribute to the Partnership through:
 - having local knowledge of their ward and being able to advocate local concerns and issues through their LAPs
 - bringing democratic accountability to partnership working

- facilitating dialogue between local people and service providers
 - articulating the views of people not normally heard
 - publicising and explaining the role of the Partnership to local people
 - making sure local needs and concerns are taken into consideration before policy and decisions are agreed
 - holding the Partnership to account through their scrutiny role
 - Executive Members participating in CPAG meetings
30. Some responses did note that the role of ward councillors as community advocates requires further consideration. Further thought is required on the contribution councillors make to the Partnership attending LAP Steering Groups and how the knowledge they have of their local ward can better be utilised.
31. A number of the respondents highlighted the contribution ward councillors make to the development of LAP action plans and lobbying different Partnership agencies for service improvements in response to local demands. The responses suggest though that this happens in an ad-hoc manner and is down to the initiative of the individual councillor.
32. Non-councillors of the PMG expressed a lack of knowledge about the role of ward councillors in the Partnership. One member of the PMG responded “the honest answer to this is “I don’t know””. We think that this needs to be improved with links fostered between the work ward councillors undertake and the Partnership.

What added value do councillors bring to the Partnership?

“Advocacy ... Overview and local in-depth knowledge ... Networks ... A bit of passion!”

- A Partnership for Success ‘Survey Feedback’ (2005)

33. The responses focused on the ability of councillors to advocate ward issues within different policy making arenas and bring pressure to bear on different service providers to meet ward needs. This was through having good networks and contacts inside the Council. The role of ward councillors was seen as being able to link the work of LAPs with wider Community Plan targets, and other information which exists within the Council such as ward data reports and the Annual Residents Survey. A number of respondents noted that councillors facilitate community engagement and help the Partnership access isolated communities and institutions, voluntary sectors, charities.
34. We also found councillors feel they can relate to local people in a way which officers are not able to do. Equally they can help develop LAP priorities which relate to local concerns of residents rather than the Council’s corporate view of its role as a service provider. We think that there are strong links between the responses given and the issues raised in the ODPM evaluation on councillors taking a broader view of their ward and borough rather than service providers.

What is their role in reaching hard to reach groups? “Councillors’ role in reaching ‘hard to reach’ groups is intimately connected with their role as elected representatives. They can either take a reactive approach, essentially responding to local concerns as brought to them, or they can be proactive... The Partnership is at its best if it can act as a mechanism by which elected representatives are alerted to issues and prompted to act.”

- A Partnership for Success ‘Survey Feedback’ (2005)

35. It was encouraging to find that almost all of the respondents highlighted that ward councillors were in an excellent position to engage with “hard to reach groups” either directly or through contacts with wider community networks. Many of the councillors who responded noted that they regularly come across such groups through their casework and ward surgeries.
36. This role was seen as being important in helping to build community cohesion and through such contacts ward councillors can act in response to ‘hidden needs’. The role councillors have is in facilitating dialogue between such groups and the LAPs and other forums within the Partnership through:
 - explaining the procedures and structures of the Partnership
 - helping people to get involved in their LAP
 - representing their views through the Partnership
 - in certain circumstances identifying the needs and work to get services delivered accordingly.

These are views which as a Working Group we share. A way in which our work in this area could be improved would be by improving joint working between ward councillors, Area Directors and the Partnership Support Team.

37. We believe there is an opportunity to better co-ordinate the work councillors currently undertake for example casework, ward visits and surgeries and the work of Area Directors and the Partnership Support Team. Together councillors and Partnership officers can more effectively publicise, contact and be a conduit through which services can be delivered locally to hard to reach groups. This could be done through developing the working relations between the Partnership and Member Services in the Council which directly supports councillors but largely with administrative support.

What should they do differently to improve their contribution/ value? “The Partnership needs to have more ways for councillors to interact with it ... the CPAGs are working well, but the information gathered at LAP level doesn’t go anywhere. If it does feed into the priorities, then this is not fed back to us...”

- A Partnership for Success ‘Survey Feedback’ (2005)

38. The survey backed-up our view that the scrutiny remit of ward councillors could be developed to better incorporate scrutiny of the Partnership. Although the current emphasis of scrutiny tends to be on Council services the Health Scrutiny Panel is responsible for scrutinising health provision in the borough. The Panel has successfully worked in partnership whilst carrying out its reviews into diabetes and sexual health. We think that this approach to scrutiny is a useful model that could be extended to wider aspects of the Partnership but recognise this will need support from partners.
39. A range of different ideas were put forward to improve the contribution of ward councillors. These focused on how the Partnership is structured and developing the skills of ward councillors to improve their local leadership role.
40. A number of respondents felt that it was not always clear how the LAPs, CPAGs and PMG were connected and worked towards the same goals. On occasions, they felt this created confusion and frustration, particularly within the LAPs. We feel that there is a need for greater communication and understanding of how the different parts of the Partnership work together. Ward councillors can play a part in this, particularly between the CPAGs and LAPs. In their role as LAP champions they could increase awareness of how the Partnership works and how the LAPs, CPAGs and PMG work together to deliver improvements for the local area. In this way ward councillors would become not only champions for their LAP but for the wider Partnership.
41. At a more practical level, the survey also confirmed our view that the cycle of Council and Partnership meetings needed synchronisation to better manage the demands placed on councillors time.
42. Some of the councillors noted the need to develop their own roles and skills through being more proactive in:
 - keeping residents informed and engaged in genuine consultation
 - regularly attending LAP meetings and seeing their contribution to LAP steering groups as a priority
 - improving relations with Council officers to ensure the views of LAPs are taken into consideration in service delivery
 - better explaining and providing information on the work of the LAPs to residents

- encouraging residents, community groups and networks to participate in their LAP – particularly in areas where there is low participation
- explaining how the Partnership as a whole worked and how it delivered benefits for people living and working in the borough.

What are the key areas for ward Councillors to improve? ‘Ward Councillors should be involved in helping to support the development of community organisations in their wards or elsewhere in Tower Hamlets encouraging them to identify service gaps and look at ways of delivering these services in Partnership.’

- A Partnership for Success ‘Survey Feedback’ (2005)

43. There is recognition throughout all of the responses that the role of councillors as community leaders needs to be developed further and this is a view which we share. We think that it is important to outline the range of suggestions made to improve the involvement of councillors through:
- enhancing links with grassroots community groups, Tenant Associations, local agencies, GPs, schoolteachers, governing bodies
 - improving communication with local people to develop a better understanding of both local needs and concerns
 - encouraging greater participation amongst local people
 - articulating what the Partnership is doing and the tangible impact it is having in improving local well-being through tackling anti-social behaviour, providing youth services and improving access to services
 - better utilising existing data sources, ward data reports and the Annual Residents Survey to advocate the use of NRF money/ regeneration funds
 - councillors to take greater responsibility for LAP action plans both design and implementation
 - improving understanding of the Local Area Agreement and how it might impact on the delivery of services
 - linking scrutiny and casework of ward councillors to improve services to local residents.
44. One of the issues which we think is important and has been a constant theme throughout the review and in all of the evidence is that the role of councillors in the Partnership needs to be defined. It needs to be clearer to councillors why it is important they attend LAP meetings, what contribution is expected of them, benefits of their attendance and following from this support to enable this to happen. This also applies to better defining the role of LAP steering groups and how Area Directors and the Partnership Support Team support them.

45. Some of the respondents noted councillors need to attend consistently and give priority to LAP meetings. However, caution was expressed in placing more demands upon the time of councillors given the existing commitments that they have. We think that an element of the Job Description for councillors should be to prioritise attending LAP meetings.
46. We asked the same questions to the Partnership's Area Directors and Partnership Support Team and had a hundred per cent return from the two teams. The response to majority of the questions was similar to the responses provided by councillors. That councillors had a good knowledge of their local ward, were well connected and that greater use of their skills could be made.
47. Some of the key areas which could be improved were:
 - there should be clarity about what concerns residents are raising with councillors at their surgeries with clearer outcomes
 - a better understanding of roles and responsibilities
 - councillors need to be more committed to Partnership events understanding that they are an important part of LAP steering groups but not receiving special treatment
 - councillors need to strike a balance in participating in meetings without trying to dominate
 - better understanding of local strategic priorities and mainstream service provision
48. We think these issues are valid. We do not think that the role of councillors is to dominate LAP meetings and equally that they should not receive preferential treatment above other LAP members. The onus is also on individual councillors to commit to taking an active part in their LAPs and training provided.
49. However, there should be an expectation that councillors are in a good position, given the knowledge and skills they have and that they are elected, to facilitate and lead Partnership working. They should be actively championing both within the LAP, across different Partnership forms and the Council their local area. Therefore it is important that this role be supported directly by the Partnership Support Team and Area Directors.
50. We recognise the important contribution Area Directors and Partnership Support Team have made to the success of the Partnership. However, we would like to see it made clear who the Area Directors are accountable to. It is not always clear as Members who attend LAP meetings where this accountability lies.

Emerging Issues

51. There are a number of other potential changes to Partnership working which emerged during the course of the review. We think it is important to be aware of these and that there is an opportunity to develop the community leadership of councillors through scrutiny.
52. One of the key developments during the review has been the introduction of Local Area Agreements (LAA): an agreement between the Council, partners and national government to deliver improvements in the quality of life to local people. There are four blocks which make up the LAA: safer and stronger communities, healthier communities and older people, economic development and enterprise and children and young people. There is also the underpinning theme of the LAA of 'making it local, making it personal'.
53. Nationally there have also been increased calls for improving the accountability of partnership working with the Audit Commission's report 'Governing Partnerships – Bridging the Accountability Gap'. The report highlights the potential of councillors to take a more active part in improving the accountability of LSPs.
54. In addition the ODPM published a consultation paper towards the end of our review 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future'. The consultation runs until 3 March 2006, considering all aspects of partnership working but there is also a specific focus upon the governance arrangements. As we have argued there is potential to develop the scrutiny role in relation to partnership working. We believe that a number of the suggestions made in the consultation would be appropriate to develop the Partnership. In particular:
 - scrutinising the four blocks of the LAA
 - extending the formal scrutiny arrangements to other partners
55. We also think that there are opportunities to improve the engagement of scrutiny work with local people in a more direct way. One way in which this might be taken forward is through an innovative LAP based scrutiny project. We suggest a focus on the performance of services by the Partnership within LAPs. This could consider looking at performance indicators, as well as meet with local residents and service providers to look at performance issues. This would bring together the key aspects of our review with councillors engaging with local people, improving their understanding of local issues and encouraging the Partnership to act in response to its findings.

Conclusion and recommendations

56. The Working Group welcomes the progress made by the Partnership in improving the delivery of services and in responding to local needs. Given the evolving nature of LSPs and on going process of evaluation to which they are subject, it is important that we reflect on the involvement of councillors in the Partnership.
57. We recognise that some councillors already play a large part in the Tower Hamlets Partnership. Their involvement in the main is at their own initiative and reflects their commitment to partnership working as a means of improving the well being and quality of life for their constituents.
58. What we are concerned with is how to better encourage and develop the involvement of all councillors, in different ways, in the Partnership. This is important as the contribution councillors already make could be multiplied further if their skills, knowledge and passion for their wards were better utilised. The responsibility for improving the involvement of councillors lies with both the Partnership but more importantly with councillors themselves.
59. The Working Group recommendations focus on four areas requiring consideration and action from the Tower Hamlets Partnership, the Council and all local councillors. The recommendations are a starting point to maximise how councillors might contribute further to improving the Partnership and its work.
60. Defining the role of ward councillors in the Partnership:

As the ODPM evaluation outlines councillors are different from other representatives in the Partnership as they are directly elected and have a unique democratic legitimacy. This is a view which we share. Although this does not mean councillors are more important than other partners the difference should be recognised within the Partnership. Expectations about the involvement of councillors should be clearly defined and recognised. We recommend:

- 1.1 A job description for 'councillors as champions for their ward' should be formulated with the involvement of both councillors and the wider Partnership. This would include the community leadership councillors provide through different partnership forums, cabinet, overview and scrutiny and casework.
- 1.2 The role of councillors should be recognised in the Tower Hamlets Partnership Charter.

61. Developing the capacity, skills, expertise and knowledge of ward councillors:

Throughout all of the evidence which we considered the issue of developing the capacity, skills, expertise and knowledge of ward councillors was a key theme. We believe this crucial to realise the potential contribution of councillors to the Partnership. This is not just an issue of training and development but includes how councillors are supported and encouraged by the Council and the Partnership.

We think that the support councillors receive at present is based largely on pre Local Government Act 2000 ways of working. In turn ward councillors should be expected to show commitment to the work of the Partnership. We recommend:

- 2.1 Learning and development should include greater emphasis on the skills of councillors to engage with their local wards. This would include developing an understanding of accountability, community leadership, public and stakeholder engagement and service improvement.
- 2.2 Support to councillors should include a greater emphasis on how to develop their role at LAP level as community leaders – beyond administrative support.
- 2.3 Ward performance data should be provided regularly to councillors in an accessible format to enable them to formulate evidence-based judgements.

62. Improving linkages between the Partnership and ward councillors

It is clear from the survey which we commissioned that councillors feel they have good knowledge of their local area and are well connected to different groups and residents. It does not appear though that the links between this knowledge and the wider work of the Partnership are always made.

We think that there should be greater emphasis on improving the linkages between the local knowledge and skills of councillors and the wider work of the Partnership. The Partnership Support Team and Area Directors could play a significant role in enabling this to happen. We recommend:

- 3.1 The five scrutiny leads should have a standing invitation to Community Plan Action Groups and be encouraged to attend and participate.
- 3.2 The accountability arrangements for Area Directors should be clarified to enhance the working arrangements of LAP steering groups.
- 3.3 The Partnership Support Team should play a key part in the Member induction programme.
- 3.4 A major role of the Partnership Support Team should be to enhance the skills and capacity of LAPs, including councillors. This

would develop their ability to make the links between their work as ward councillors with the work of the wider Partnership.

63. Developing the involvement of ward councillors in the Partnership through scrutiny:

The ODPM Vision for Local Government set, and a number of responses to the survey carried out by the Working Group, highlighted the need to develop links between Overview and Scrutiny and the Partnership.

We share this view and believe consideration needs to be given to extending the formal scrutiny of other partner organisations, as currently happens with health. More importantly consideration needs to be given to how scrutiny is developed at a more local level. Therefore, we recommend:

- 4.1 A LAP based scrutiny project should be piloted which could include how 'choice and personalisation' of public services is being delivered in a local area.
- 4.2 The monitoring of the Local Area Agreement through LAP-based performance indicators by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be developed.

64. As the ODPM consultation paper 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their future' notes:

'For [Partnerships] to be effective the local community, voluntary and private sectors must be engaged and their needs, priorities and views taken into account. To meet this criterion, [Partnerships] need to be actively involving backbench and executive councillors, residents and community representatives in their decision-making'.

It is important to ensure that the governance arrangements for the Partnership remain fit for purpose in an ever-changing environment. Our report attempts positively to engage with the debate on how the involvement of ward councillors in the Partnership can be improved.

Research and Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets

The Research and Scrutiny team will work with Council officers, Members and other partners to:

- Identify issues and good practice for exploration
- Monitor and measure performance (and) data
- Publicise and disseminate information and research
- Review and scrutinise services and policies
- Offer practical and evidence based recommendations
- Value and seek the opinions of residents and stakeholders
- Evaluate and track progress of recommendations

Contacting us about Scrutiny in Tower Hamlets

Scrutiny Policy Manager
Alan Steward

London Borough of Tower Hamlets
4th Floor, Mulberry Place
5 Clove Crescent
London E14 2BG

scrutiny@towerhamlets.gov.uk

020 7364 4873