

What is an empowering authority?

Community empowerment and
organisational culture

August 2010

This paper is based on work originally published in
2008 for the Neighbourhood Action Network

Overview

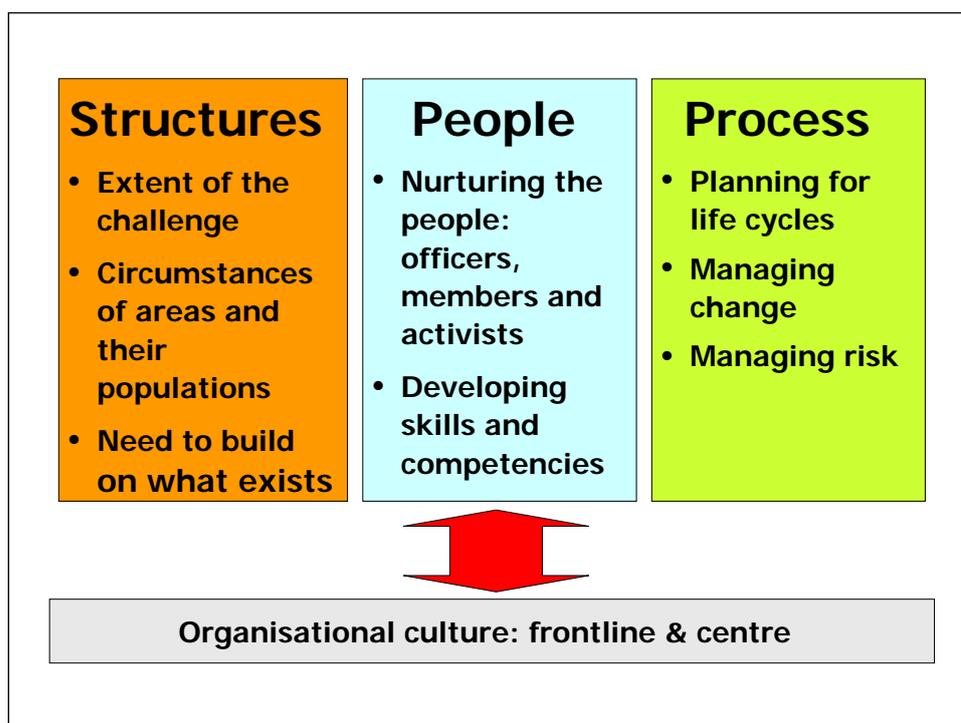
This paper builds on the Young Foundation's practical experience with local authorities to develop and deepen understanding of how organisational cultures affect the success of neighbourhood working. It looks at how culture interacts with structures, people and processes and highlights tools for thinking through the cultural challenges that arise from partnership working, looking particularly at the work of Edgar Schein and Mary Douglas. These theories can aid understanding of the plurality of cultural mindsets that different stakeholders bring to neighbourhood working. Understanding both the wider culture of the local authority and the cultural assumptions of frontline stakeholders is vital for working through bottlenecks and building shared expectations.

The paper concludes with a checklist for diagnosing both where neighbourhood working fits within the culture of the wider local authority, and levels of conflict and collaboration between different 'subcultures' of officers, members, service providers and residents in specific neighbourhoods.

1. Why is a supportive organisational culture important for working at community level?

Through its work with local authorities the Young Foundation has developed a model for understanding why working at the very local level, often called neighbourhood working, to empower and engage communities and deliver services is more successful in some areas than others. Although solutions are by their very nature local and impossible to prescribe in detail, four dimensions emerged as critical for effective community empowerment and neighbourhood working: structures, people, process and organisational culture.

Figure 1: Four dimensions for effective community empowerment and neighbourhood working



According to this model organisational culture underlies and permeates structures, people and process. So the nature of that culture is crucial to successful community empowerment and neighbourhood working. A supportive culture within the wider local authority understands community empowerment and neighbourhood working as a useful lens for thinking about the activities of the council as a whole rather than a distinct and limited area. This open attitude leads to ideas, approaches and ways of working that empower and involve communities being embedded into core services. Empowering authorities and agencies have an organisational culture with a healthy attitude to risk and innovation on the frontline and make use of elected members as the democratic interface between the culture of communities and local authority agencies and partners.

Some of the practical components of an empowering or supportive organisational culture are set out below to differentiate them from elements of structure and process.

Figure 2: Elements of structure, process and culture

Structure	Process	Culture
Partnerships	Community kitties	Staff development
Community forums	Community pledgebanks	Senior managers buy in to localities
Community hubs	Calls for action	Leaders at ease with multiple conversations
Community charters	Citizens' juries	Nurturing 'empowerment' skills
Asset transfer	Participatory budgeting	Shared ownership by LSP
Neighbourhood management	Neighbourhood tasking	
Redress	Planning for real/design fests	
Directly elected health, police	Joint needs assessment	

The culture of an organisation tends to develop organically over time and is not something that can easily be changed in the short term, though this does sometimes happen. However our work with partners has helped identify a cluster of activities that can help develop an organisational culture more supportive of community empowerment and neighbourhood working. Above all, this requires a balance between strong corporate leadership and ambition, and innovation and experimentation at the frontline and at the centre.

- at the frontline, it is important to focus on partnership working, response to community voices and overcoming existing prejudices
- at the centre, it is crucial that community empowerment and neighbourhood working are embedded in corporate services
- understanding of issues needs to be shared between officers and members
- corporate strategies and community plans need to adopt a 'healthy' attitude to risk and innovation.

The Young Foundation found that local authorities with cultures supportive of community empowerment and neighbourhood or locality working were generally more effective at:

- enabling agencies to overcome long-standing silo mentalities and to integrate community engagement and empowerment at the core of service planning
- learning from past experience, enabling officers and members to take risks and innovate to meet community demands
- creating a vision of participation and partnership which informed the way people work within the organisation's structure, not just a mantra
- aligning the expectations of key stakeholders
- ensuring residents' views informed service planning and prioritisation
- building a collaborative approach to problem solving
- encouraging key stakeholders to modify their working practices

2. Defining organisational culture

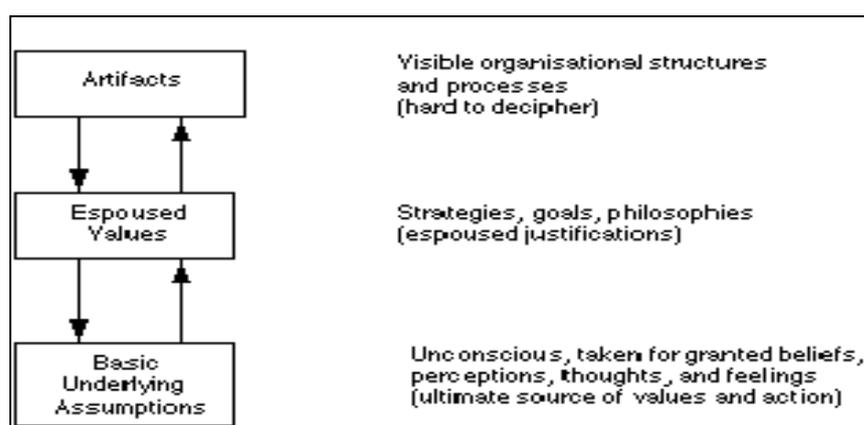
Much of the literature on organisational culture has focused on the importance of clear vision, strong leadership and defined objectives.¹ Strong leadership – where direction and vision is communicated throughout local institutions, organisations and communities – can help everyone understand their role in delivering positive outcomes for communities. Whilst this is undoubtedly important, it is a somewhat narrow understanding of the drivers and dynamics that shape, sustain or shift culture in organisations as complex as local authorities.

A more inclusive definition of organisational culture and one that is not often considered in public sector environments is provided by organisational theorist Edgar Schein:

“The pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaption and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to these problems.”²

Schein suggests that there are three levels of culture – artefacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions. He argues that the pattern of basic underlying assumptions can function as a cognitive defence mechanism for individuals and the group, as a result cultural change is often difficult, time consuming and anxiety provoking. Cultures are deep seated, pervasive and complex and it can be extremely difficult to bring the assumptions to the surface. He uses a three-step approach to discuss change – unfreezing of existing assumptions, cognitive restructuring to develop more positive ones and ‘refreezing’ to embed them in everyday working.

Figure 3: Schein’s levels of culture



¹ See *Change Here! Managing Change to Improve Local Services*, Audit Commission (2001) and *Transform your authority, create real and lasting change*, ODPM (2005)

² *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein, 2nd. Ed. San Francisco, CA. Jossey Bass (1992).

According to this definition elements of organisational culture may include:

- stated and unstated values
- overt and implicit expectations for member behaviour
- customs and rituals
- stories and myths about the history of the group
- shop talk—typical language used in and about the group
- climate—the feelings evoked by the way members interact with each other, with outsiders, and with their environment, including the physical space they occupy
- metaphors and symbols—may be unconscious but can be found embodied in other cultural elements.

3. The significance of sub-cultures

According to Schein, cultural analysis is especially valuable for dealing with aspects of organisations that seem irrational, frustrating, and intractable. He writes, "The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them."³ It is significant that Schein uses "cultures" in the plural. This recognises that members of a group culture may also belong to subcultures within an organisation. Since organisations do have a shared history, there will normally be at least a few values or assumptions common to the system as a whole. But sometimes, the subcultures have had different experiences over time, and their group learning has produced very different sets of basic assumptions.

Within a local authority there is potentially a multiplicity of sub cultures. Services have their own culture, which is often stronger than that of the local authority as a whole. Professional cultures both reinforce and cross service boundaries. Local offices develop their own culture which can vary widely across the geographical area. Councillors have a different culture from officers and within the membership political parties have cultures of their own. With the development of cabinet government has also come the culture of the leadership and that of back benchers.

Thinking at the community or neighbourhood level, equally important are the cultures of the other public agencies involved – the police, housing association, local school and of the community – residents are very likely not to have a homogeneous culture, community groups and local businesses will have their own sub-cultures.

At best this multiplicity of viewpoints and practices can lead to new forms of innovation, user insight and empowerment. At worst this cultural mix leads to stalemates, feuding and spirals of distrust. Each member's (or sub-system's) set of beliefs, values, and assumptions becomes their unquestioned "reality" or "cultural bias"; they then perceive behaviour inconsistent with their own biases as irrational, or even malevolent.

This take on organisational culture suggests reinterpreting such conflict as a product of different sets of experiences. Instead of looking at conflict as "right" versus

³ Ibid, p375

"wrong," this approach suggests that subcultures examine the assumptions underlying their behaviour, honour the experiences and learning that led to those assumptions, and then investigate whether those assumptions still work well in the present. Most aspects of culture are difficult to designate as clearly good or bad. Instead, it is more productive to focus on the tensions between the creative and destructive possibilities of culture formation.

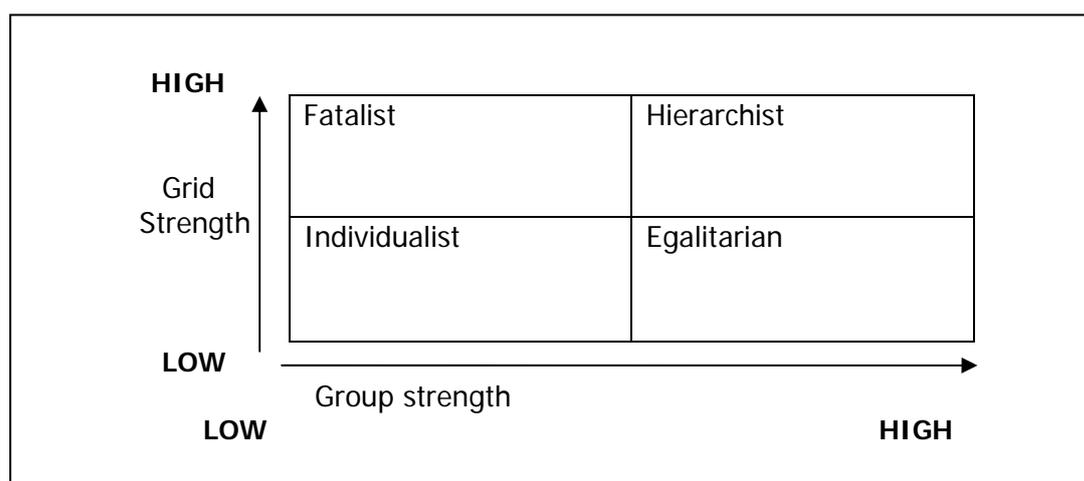
4. Mapping cultural bias

This section provides tools for thinking about such tensions derived from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. Young Foundation director Geoff Mulgan has argued that her cultural theory offers a simple but "powerful tool for understanding social relations, and for making sense of how people see the world".⁴ She provides a method for classifying the different cultural systems of institutions, and understanding how they create and maintain ways of thought, or cultural values.

Douglas argued that any culture can be mapped on two dimensions.⁵ On one axis is "grid," the extent to which behaviours and rules are defined and differentiated, for example by public rules deciding who can do what according to their age, race, gender or qualifications. Examples of "high grid" would include a large corporation, or a traditional agrarian society, or families with clear demarcations of roles and times (when to eat, go to bed). On the other axis is "group" – the extent to which people bond with each other, and divide the world into insiders and outsiders. The more difficult the group is to get into, the stronger this sense of group will be.

These two dimensions come together to provide a simple 2x2 matrix: high grid and high group is hierarchy; low grid and low group is individualism; high group and low grid is egalitarianism; low group and high grid is fatalism.

Figure 4: Douglas' group-grid cultural framework



Within a **hierarchical** culture, the world is seen as controllable so long as the right structures are in place. Most governments tend towards hierarchy. It is the natural

⁴ *Mary Douglas Remembered*, Geoff Mulgan, Prospect (2005)

⁵ This account is derived from *Mary Douglas Remembered*, Geoff Mulgan, Prospect (2005)

worldview of civil servants, political leaders and of most consultants working in and around big business and governments. To every problem there is a solution – as long as it is firmly enough implemented by a sufficiently powerful leader or elite.

In an **egalitarian** worldview, problems usually arise from too much hierarchy and inequality, and not enough bonding and solidarity. More discussion with more people is an unmitigated good, and any measures which widen inequalities are to be resisted. In an **individualistic** worldview, the answer to problems is more freedom – let people determine their own choices and things will come right. Dissent is to be celebrated; rebels are heroes, and the world is made, and remade, by the imagination and energy of individuals. The **fatalistic** worldview is most common among people with little power or experience of power.

Advocates of Douglas' approach claim these four worldviews can be found at every level of human organisation – from families and streets to global companies and the UN. They are constantly in tension, merging and combining in new ways. Indeed, they need each other. Hierarchies need to re-energise themselves with the creativity of passionate individuals, and some egalitarianism to reinforce their sense of common purpose. Egalitarian cultures need some hierarchy to resolve disputes and make decisions. Individualist cultures need some hierarchy to enforce the rules, and some egalitarianism to encourage people to care for each other. All, perhaps, need some fatalism to get by and avoid a constant state of rebellion. Moreover the positions within the framework can be fluid or static overtime – people can hold a mix of different views or move from one category to the other.

The table below summarise the respective weaknesses of each category of organisational bias.⁶

Figure 5: Weaknesses of different cultural frames

⁶ *The Art of the State*, Christopher Hood, Oxford University Press (2000)

Type of Bias	Achilles heel	Vulnerable to
Hierarchist	Misplaced trust in authority and expertise	Dramatic collapses of ambitious thinkbig plans or projects
Egalitarianism	Unwillingness to accept higher authority to break deadlocks	Failure stemming from unresolved feuds or collegiality degenerating into hostility
Individualist	Tendency to put individual before collective benefit	Lack of cooperation and individual corruption
Fatalist	Unwillingness to plan ahead to take drastic measures in extreme circumstances	Failures from excessive inertia and passivity

5. Applying the group/grid framework to community working

Viewed through the prism of 'group/grid' categories government policy that sets out to empower communities is arguably an attempt to impose an egalitarian cultural frame on organisations that tend to operate within a hierarchical frame. This highlights a paradox of central government initiatives to encourage local government to empower communities: the use of top-down hierarchical means to engender egalitarian bottom-up practices in local government.

On the one hand this is a part of a wider socio-economic recognition that effective services and desirable social outcomes require the participation of users to work.⁷ On the other there is a danger that the attempt to impose this agenda from above will fail because:

- it provokes defensive reactions amongst those involved in service planning and members
- a spiral of disappointment amongst community activists with increased expectation of involvement
- on-going fatalism among the disempowered and unengaged residents due to infighting and recrimination by different groups and lack of change on the ground.

The framework presented above does not automatically generate a set of solutions or tools for creating a supportive organisational culture. However it does emphasise that support for community empowerment and neighbourhood working across the local authority requires the winning of trust across different subcultures, and will usually need to make sense in several different cultures, combining some elements

⁷ See *The user generated state: Public services 2.0*, Charles Leadbeater and Hilary Cottom, <http://www.charlesleadbeater.net/archive/public-services-20.aspx>

of hierarchy (for example, as in the police ordering neighbourhood working), some bottom-up egalitarianism and probably some element of individualism that gives scope for people to trade and exchange.

6. Changing people, structures and culture

Winning trust highlights the importance of *people* who can mediate between different groups to make things happen. This role *people* play within the local authority organisational culture model is presented on page two of this report. Given the range of different neighbourhood structures, the *people* who play this role will differ according to local context. They will include both members and officers and may include both those who have a formal role (such as neighbourhood managers) and those who have taken on a mediating role for other reasons.

As suggested in the organisational culture model on page 2, *people*, if they are to be effective mediators, need to develop their skills and competencies. Research by the Department for Communities and Local Government on capacity building identified major skills and knowledge gaps in partnership working for both officers and members. These included skills in consensus building, negotiating and influencing.⁸ Research by the Young Foundation on the future role of ward councilors identified a range of mediation and brokering skills as key to fulfilling a new community leadership role.⁹

On the *structure* aspect of the model there is evidence that a neighbourhood management structure brings benefits in terms of cultural understanding and support for locality working. A recent evaluation of Neighbourhood Management pathfinders found that the presence of a locally-based team had clearly facilitated:

- improved mutual understanding and trust between the service providers and residents involved
- increased level and quality/depth of resident involvement in consultation on services, with many instances of modest changes made to those services as a result
- local innovation in engagement methods resulting in greater confidence and capacity by service providers to repeat the process
- a greater degree of organisation and support for community and voluntary groups who generally welcome the local network of support.¹⁰

However creating structures supportive of neighbourhood working will not necessarily change organisational culture. Rather structural change can exacerbate fears and heighten expectations, reinforcing subcultures both within and external to the local authority. So culture needs to be explicitly addressed alongside structural change. A cultural lens can help identify new *processes* to enhance collaboration such as more regular forms of communication between partners, flexibility for partners to work outside formal meetings, greater budgetary transparency and regular responses to resident queries.

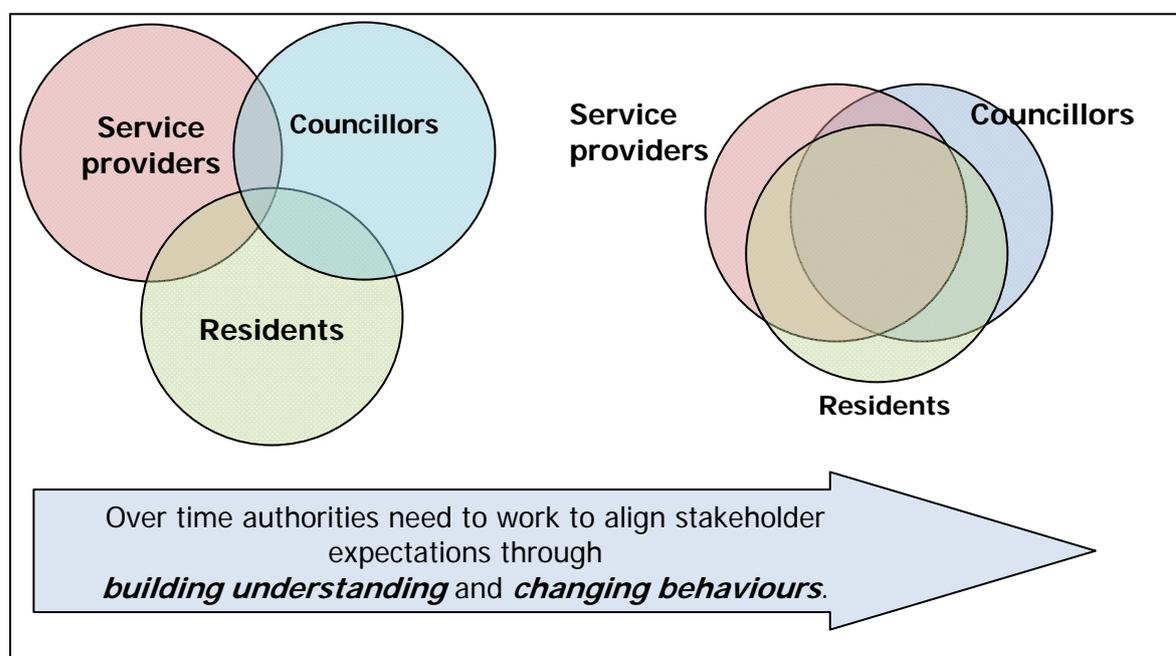
⁸ *Capacity Building*, Final Research Report, DCLG (2006)

⁹ *Ward councillors and community leadership, A future perspective*, Saffron James and Ed Cox, J RF (2007)

¹⁰ *Neighbourhood Management: empowering communities, shaping places: Review 2006/7*, DCLG (2007)

One way of thinking about this is along the lines of how to build shared expectations – effectively a shared culture which does not replace the various community and public sector subcultures – but overlays and influences those sub-cultures. A diagram of how this might work is given below:

Figure 7: Building shared expectations



In 2006, the Young Foundation work with the London Borough of Lewisham identified and started to address the issues involved in building shared expectations.

Lewisham has a strong history of both partnership and neighbourhood working. In recent years neighbourhood management has been introduced to the most deprived parts of the borough. Recently a new format of cross-borough localised working has been adopted. 18 Local Area Assemblies based on ward boundaries have been set up, with an emphasis on community empowerment and planning. The Young Foundation worked with the key stakeholders involved in this transition – residents, councillors, officers supporting the structure and service providers, to understand their expectations.

In Lewisham each of these stakeholder groups spoke highly of the need to involve the community in planning and decision making, there was a strong understanding of the goal of the new approach amongst senior leadership, operational staff and councillors. But different stakeholders had different expectations of working practices, behaviours, and how organisational resources were being deployed.

For example:

- Residents wanted to see more of individual service providers, whilst service providers fear they will have to attend all meetings
- Councillors want a more prominent and visible role, whilst residents and some officers were fearful the councillor agenda would dominate proceedings

- Area Coordinators wanted more autonomy and decision making power, but councillors saw this as their role
- Councillors and residents wanted more money devolved direct to communities, whereas officers were more hesitant.

The Young Foundation's work confirmed the need to consolidate the shared understanding of the new goal by developing an understanding of the views of other stakeholders, maximising organisational buy-in and, crucially, embedding the necessary change in working patterns and behaviours.

This task is undoubtedly challenging for all authorities. No matter how well thought through a structure is on paper, staff, councillors and residents are likely to continue to use tried and tested methods to contact each other or elicit information. Prior perceptions, some of which may be unhelpful or entrenched, are unlikely to change overnight.

Stakeholder perceptions may begin to further align over time as each group builds shared experience. However, without being open and discussing differences in expectations or behaviours early on, stakeholder positions can become entrenched. This is when the risk of preconceptions, misconceptions and stereotyping is at its greatest.

Changing working styles and culture requires an understanding of the existing stakeholder values and behavioural norms. Ultimately this involves encouraging stakeholders to understand each other's perspectives and to map out where these are in conflict with their own, agreeing where behaviours need to change and putting resources in place to support these changes

7. Checklist for creating an empowering organisational culture

This paper has focussed on understanding and working with multiple cultures rather than creating or imposing single culture. Community empowerment and neighbourhood working take place at the interface between different cultural mindsets - of residents, service deliverers, senior officers and members. The ongoing challenge is to find ways in which the mindset of community empowerment can complement the hierarchical culture of officers, work with the participatory demands of community groups and challenge the sometimes fatalistic attitudes of cynical residents reluctant to get involved with activities associated with the council.

While not discounting the role of leadership in shaping the overall vision of an organisation, this perspective highlights the importance of dialogue and understanding between different sub-cultures that exist within local authorities and their partners.

Undertaking a cultural audit of a local authority can help reveal the relationship between structures for community engagement and neighbourhood working and the rest of the organisation. In so doing this can help identify bottlenecks that may result from different expectations and perceptions. Bottlenecks might include limited

influence of local assemblies on local authority service planning or reluctance to devolve budgets through lack of trust or fears about losing power.

We conclude with a checklist of questions to help you use the theories explained in this paper to think about both the organisational culture of your local authority and the various sub cultures involved in neighbourhood working.

Where community empowerment and neighbourhood working does fit within the local authority?

- Is the wider culture of your local authority supportive of community empowerment and/or neighbourhood working?

Which subcultures are involved or influence neighbourhood working?

At the local authority level:

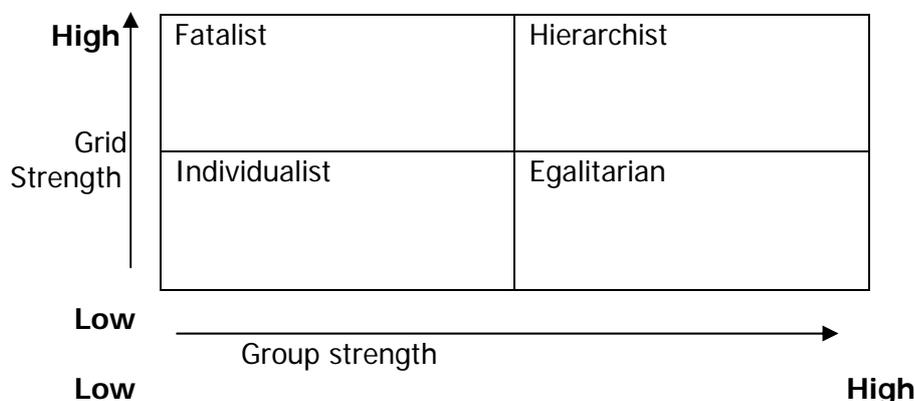
- What **local authority subcultures** can you identify that are involved with or have an impact on neighbourhood working?
- Which are supportive?
- Which are not supportive?
- In what ways are they supportive?
- How could subcultures be influenced to be more supportive?

At the neighbourhood level:

- What **subcultures** can you identify at the neighbourhood level?
- Which are supportive?
- Which are not supportive?
- In what ways are they supportive?
- How could subcultures be influenced to be more supportive?

Balance and relationship between subcultures

Looking either at the whole local authority or at a specific community where do subcultures fit on the grid?



- How balanced are levels of influence between different groups?
- Where there is conflict among subcultures within a neighbourhood what are the most effective ways of building shared expectations and a positive approach towards partnership working?

Some points to consider:

- How to develop understanding of others perceptions and objectives (for example, do people share the same vision, expectations and perceptions of influence and impact, agreement around quick wins to build shared confidence?)
- How to create positive changes in working patterns and behaviour (for example, styles of communication, flexibility for partners to work outside formal meetings, greater budgetary transparency, having political leaders attend key meetings, agree minimum response times to residents, greater and more regular access to senior management, clear opportunities to inform the work of the LSP)
- What resources are needed to support changes?

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs. We have a 55 year track record of success with ventures such as the Open University, Which?, the School for Social Entrepreneurs and Healthline (the precursor of NHS Direct). We work across the UK and internationally – carrying out research, influencing policy, creating new organisations and supporting others to do the same, often with imaginative uses of new technology. We now have over 60 staff, working on over 40 ventures at any one time, with staff in New York and Paris as well as London and Birmingham in the UK.

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August 2010