Power Partnerships: learning from Southwark

About the Power Partnerships action-research project

The Commission on the Future of Localism was set up in 2017 to consider how to reinvigorate localism and strengthen community power. It was Chaired by Lord Kerslake and brought together politicians, policy experts and community leaders. We published the Commission’s findings in ‘People Power’ in 2018.

Over the past year, in partnership with Local Trust and Power to Change, we have been working on an action-research project in four areas to test our findings and recommendations in practice. Through this project, we hope to show how local authorities can drive forward a radical new localism agenda.

We have been working with Cornwall, Stevenage, Southwark and Wigan. Our learning from working with Southwark Council and community organisations in Southwark is summarised in this report. You can also read our full report with our findings from all four areas in ‘Power Partnerships’ online at locality.org.uk/power-partnerships
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Summary of our findings in Southwark

Our research has taken place at a time of reform for Southwark’s localism and community engagement landscape. Our action research with VCSE organisations and council officers has captured some of the current challenges and opportunities within local engagement and how new structures and approaches are being designed to address these. As such, our research provides some insight into the process of reforming current relationships and structures of engagement, as well as the outcomes of this reform.

Last year, a new ‘Place and Wellbeing Directorate’ in Southwark Council was established to bring together planning, regeneration, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector engagement and public health. A key driver of this was to support a closer alignment of priorities around community, social value and regeneration. In addition, the process to rewrite the New Southwark Plan has also been a key opportunity for activists seeking stronger community involvement in planning. A local governance review has also seen Community Councils (local area committees with delegated neighbourhood decision-making) replaced by a multi-layered ward meeting structure and a new ‘Empowering Communities’ programme.

The council have also carried out a review of community engagement over the last year, seeking to broaden diversity in community relationships and strengthen VCSE partnerships. Alongside this, a new ‘Faith Strategy’ has been co-designed with faith leaders. Southwark is a diverse borough, with over 120 languages spoken; approximately 40% of residents are currently living in communities ranked in the 20% most deprived areas. Southwark has a rich and vibrant voluntary and community sector which is a huge source of advocacy and support for communities, from community anchors, to faith organisations, to resident groups and activists.

Our research has explored the importance of culture change in council engagement. We examined how genuine partnership-based relationships can be developed, including through a case study of the new Faith Strategy. More opportunities for embedding participatory democracy within neighbourhood governance are also highlighted, along with a strengthened role for community voice and leadership across council decision-making. Our research has also highlighted that collaborative working across the VCSE is an essential resource, both in terms of influencing council engagement as well as building resident power and activism.
Our research activities

Our research explored a number of key themes including: community involvement in planning and regeneration; local governance; the Faith Strategy; VCSE relationships and community engagement.

We held interviews with council officers and directors, including from Place and Wellbeing and Communities Departments. We also held interviews with VCSE organisations in the borough and hosted a VCSE roundtable with Community Southwark, Southwark Law Centre, Time and Talents, Pembroke House, Bede House, South Bermondsey Big Local, Peckham Vision, Southwark Planning Network (SPN) and United St Saviours. This was an opportunity to explore themes around community engagement in the borough, as well as how different organisations and networks within the sector are working together to increase community voice and resident power and participation.

Working with the Southwark Planning Network (SPN), we also held a roundtable with Southwark community groups and observed a meeting organised by the network between SPN members and the council.

In May, we brought our findings together in a local workshop at Cambridge House. Attendees included council officers – from community engagement, faith and planning teams – and voluntary and community organisations. The workshop also included a presentation on the council’s new community engagement approach and Empowering Communities programme, and a discussion with participants about the future of localism and community power in the borough.
Barriers for community power in Southwark

Our Localism Commission explored the key barriers that communities, local councils and VCSE organisations face within the localism agenda across the country. These barriers included top-down decision making where things are ‘done to’ communities and not with them. They also included lack of control over local funding and resources, narrow participation and involvement, and a ‘transactional’ approach to accountability and engagement. A combination of these barriers can frustrate the capacity of community action and reinforce a cycle of powerlessness.

In Southwark, we have explored some of the experiences of barriers to community power and localism. The pace and scale of development within Southwark is key to understanding community activism and dynamics of local power. Southwark is a densely populated and rapidly growing inner London borough - its population projected to grow by almost 20% by 2030\textsuperscript{iv}, and there has been significant regeneration projects from Elephant and Castle, to Canada Water. Housing is the concern most referenced by people thinking about change in the borough; this is particularly in relation to affordability, availability of social housing, and resident integration between housing tenures.\textsuperscript{vii}

We spoke to community organisations and activists who have been involved in advocacy, campaigning and resident representation around planning and regeneration. Interviewees spoke of the “hierarchical” and “paternalistic” culture of the planning system, described as more “developer-led”, than “community-led”. This balance of power in favour of developers refers to a number of barriers local groups have reported, including: exclusion from pre-planning phase, lack of access to accurate information and draft reports, and limited time to make objections within the Planning Committee structure.

We heard from community organisations based in areas that had experienced regeneration about the “cycle of powerlessness” which can be exacerbated by poor consultation or transactional engagement.

“The community expects to be listened to at the start – but when nothing changes, the feeling of powerlessness builds. When it is about the fundamental things – things happening to you, like changes to your housing situation, this leads to total resignation and isolation.” – Community organisation, Southwark.

At our local workshop, participants spoke about the need for a more dynamic approach to local accountability. Representative democracy in the form of
councillor elections was viewed as insufficient for a thriving local democracy, particularly within a fast-changing borough; participants discussed the need to bolster existing neighbourhood governance structures and powers, as well as to grow more participatory models of decision making. This echoes a key finding from our Localism Commission. To strengthen community voice as part of local decision-making and to disperse power within neighbourhoods, democratic tools of elections and consultations must be supplemented by participatory democracy, coproduction and community development.

Interviewees discussed the need to reset the power balance and support greater resident voice and engagement by reforming existing neighbourhood governance. Southwark’s local area committees (Community Councils) were discussed as an important forum for residents to hear from councillors and ask questions about local decisions. However, interviewees highlighted there were greater opportunities for more participatory formats and for communities to shape the agendas for the meetings. There were also calls for working groups to be established with community leadership which would have meaningful powers within wider council governance and decision making.

A recognition of some of these barriers and challenges has been one of the drivers for Southwark Council in reviewing their community engagement strategies. A major consultation process ‘Southwark Conversations’ took place in 2018, to understand more about residents’ views and key concerns for the future of their neighbourhoods. This process shaped the objectives for a further review of the council’s community engagement. In particular, the reform aimed to broaden engagement beyond existing structures (including Community Councils, resident forums and VCSE networks). It also aimed to increase diversity of involvement and reach ‘seldom heard’ voices; improve feedback mechanisms with communities; and drive increased coproduction and partnership with the VCSE.

“Too often, there is a consultation, which our residents give their time to, coming up with creative solutions and fighting for their community, but we don’t do well enough to tell them that we have listened.” – Cllr. Rebecca Lury – Review of Council’s Approach to Community Engagement.

Resetting the power balance – cultures and behaviours

The importance of changing culture and behaviours was a key theme of our Localism Commission. For localism to flourish, it is often the changes to relationships and cultures of engagement that can make as big an impact as the mechanisms or structures which are in place.

Throughout our work in Southwark, the importance of behaviours and relationships were commonly cited in interviews with both VCSE organisations and council stakeholders.

Our research has observed some of the challenges in council/community relationships in the borough. Some community sector interviewees have referred to a “top-down” culture of engagement. This refers particularly to deficits in early and meaningful engagement, which means communities can feel “done to” not “done with”. We have also heard how these experiences lead to frustrations and anger within the community and a breakdown of opportunities for constructive engagement.

We also explored the forms of engagement that were viewed positively in the borough. The council’s VCSE Strategy ‘Common Purpose, Common Cause’ (2017) has helped to shift relationships. For example, community organisations highlighted increasing examples of the council involving them early in the ‘ideas generation’ phase of new policies, rather than waiting until formal consultation begins. This ensures that a range of community expertise can be included in shaping the parameters of policy. The council’s engagement around new social indicators in regeneration and planning decisions was referenced as an example of this process working well.

We have also observed community-led efforts to drive a new culture of engagement with the council. For example, the Southwark Planning Network (SPN) – a network of activists and community groups with an interest in planning issues – have been seeking to increase community involvement in planning.

Our research observed one of the key meetings between the SPN, councillors and senior officers to discuss key community concerns around planning and regeneration. From organisers and contributors to this event, we heard how the tone at the meeting was designed to facilitate constructive engagement and further collaboration. This was described as a response to their experiences of poor council consultations leading to no opportunity for constructive dialogue. They described that public meetings can often be set-up to assume there will be
community tension, with structures that seek to control those the tensions rather than resolve and discuss them. This includes, for example, limiting the time given for community representation and retaining tight control of the agenda.

In contrast, at the meeting set up by SPN, council representatives were deliberately in ‘listening mode’ rather than being there to defend previous decisions or respond to challenges. Instead of a Q&A structure, key topics were established first and residents had prepared statements to raise their concerns and ideas. In turn, there were commitments from council representatives to collaborate further and follow up on key actions.

**Case study: Southwark’s Faith Strategy**

Our research has examined the process of developing the borough’s new Faith Strategy. This is a valuable case study for how Southwark Council have sought to change and improve relationships with faith communities, responding to past challenges.

Faith organisations are a hugely powerful partnership for local authorities due to their deeply networked connections within communities and capacity for mobilising volunteers and social action. Faith organisations provide a significant contribution across a number of areas, including community development, service delivery, prevention, health and wellbeing. In Southwark, there are approximately 400 faith organisations providing services, networks and places of workshop across the borough. Over half of the borough describe their religion as Christian, with 8.5% of the population stating their religion as Muslim. The borough also has one of the highest concentrations of new black majority churches outside of Africa.

The aim of developing a new strategy was to strengthen relationships with faith communities and increase partnership with faith organisations around joint priorities. The process involved: setting up a steering group with faith leaders to co-design the strategy and shape the engagement process; a listening exercise with faith communities; and workshops with the community and faith organisations.

“In resetting the relationship with our faith communities, we wanted to create a collaborative approach between the council and our faith communities that helps us all to best come up with solutions to some of the problems we face as a Borough.” – Cllr. Rebecca Lury, Faith Strategy
One of the key drivers of establishing the steering group was to mitigate risks from poor engagement. A further key aim was to map the assets within faith communities and to improve council communication with the diverse range of faith organisations. This was a particular priority for the many smaller, less-resourced black majority churches, where there is not a larger infrastructure or membership organisation. For the council to develop its relationships with these organisations, this required a renewed communication strategy based on improved understanding of their needs. Designing the right communication approach has required meaningful and consistent investment in building these relationships.

As one faith leader described, “the process of developing the strategy has seen a genuine shift in relationships.” Interviewees valued “honest and frank” conversations with council officers. These were based on an open recognition of challenges and a genuine commitment to thinking differently and listening, without making assumptions about their perspectives.

One interviewee on the steering group described the process of co-designing engagement: “It was clear from the start there was going to be some kind of change, with clear parameters and mutual understanding. It wasn’t going to be about coming up with evidence for ideas they were already going to do.” This was also reflected from the council side, as one officer described: “We tried to get away from always saying ‘we heard what you said, and we’ve got the solutions’, to a more genuine relationship based on bringing about the solutions together.”

Interviewees also reflected on how the process of engagement was refined over time. For example, at the start the council designed an online questionnaire for faith groups. However, the response rate was low initially because there were no relationships to build on. The questions were seen as too “council-led” and were driven by council priorities to create a baseline. Faith leaders encouraged a different approach, and this involved council officers seeking face-to-face opportunities to engage instead. This involved going to places of worship, community centres and residents’ associations at the weekends and for community events. As one faith leader described, “This is what made a real difference...The independent churches now have a personal link with the council.”

This also increased the engagement rate with the survey, which reached approximately 100 faith organisations. This is an example of the council getting out of the ‘comfort zone’ of engagement and forging a different way of working and different relationships. Council officers have also reflected on the trust that has come from building these relationships, and the ability to have more genuine conversations about the council’s role in supporting faith communities.
Case study: Big Local South Bermondsey Partnership

The Big Local South Bermondsey Partnership (BLSBP) was established in 2012. As part of the national Big Local programme, they are a resident-led partnership with an endowment of approximately £1 million to spend in their neighbourhood over ten years. We interviewed some of their key community partners, as part of our project, to find out more about their Big Local journey, their challenges and their impact in the local area.

The Big Local partnership covers 6 housing estates in South Bermondsey along the Old Kent Road. We spoke to members of three of the resident associations, as part of this project, about the impact of BLSBP on community engagement. Through organising local events, fun days and activities, BLSBP have been bringing together residents from across the estates, strengthening local relationships. As the chair of one resident association described, “the biggest impact [of BLSBP] is that neighbouring estates actually know each other...we didn’t have any contact before really, but we’re now building a bigger community.”

BLSBP also seed-fund community-led projects on the estates. For example, they supported residents of Caroline Gardens to start a community planting project with some funding for bulbs and shrubs. This led them to establish a kitchen garden scheme and secure a grant from Southwark Council’s ‘Cleaner Greener Safer’ fund for a greenhouse. The project now works with a local primary school to organise planting days. This initiative teaches the children about gardening and healthy eating; as Caroline Gardens is also predominately an over 50s estate, the project is also part of intergenerational community building.

South Bermondsey Community Kitchen

One of the community businesses that have received support from BLSBP is Bermondsey Community Kitchen. Bermondsey Community Kitchen offers free training and cookery qualifications to Southwark residents aged between 18 – 40. It was founded by a café owner in the precinct where the BLSBP community hub is based; a life-long Southwark resident he wanted to tackle the lack of opportunity he saw for young people in the area. The support from BLSBP helped him secure the premise and access other funding, including mentoring and support from UnLtd.

The space has now been fully renovated and transformed into professional catering training venue and has created an exciting learning community for local young people. Bermondsey Community Kitchen CIC now also runs the café beneath the kitchen, reinvesting profits into the social enterprise, and has
expanded its training offer to include free nutritional workshops, health and hygiene, and barista training.

**Big Local Works**

Big Local Works (BLW) was established in 2017 as one of the key legacy projects for BLSBP. Run from their community hub in a precinct at the heart of the area, Big Local Works provides a range of services to the community. It has three key priorities: benefits and welfare support; training and employability programmes, designed in partnership with other local organisations; and social enterprise and community business mentoring and support. In 2018 they gave free advice to nearly 800 people, supported over 1170 people into training opportunities, and invested in 7 social entrepreneurs.

While BLW are primarily rooted in South Bermondsey, they are increasingly serving a wider constituency across the borough as they grow their reputation for providing tailored and high-quality training. As Luds van den Belt, BLW manager described, a key role of Big Local Works is about coordinating opportunities on behalf of local people:

“There are the opportunities for skills and employment in the borough, but those connections are not always made for the benefit of local people. In highly deprived neighbourhoods, people can feel extremely alienated. Our role is to build relationships, partnerships with other local organisations, and bring those opportunities back to our area.”

The BLW benefits and welfare support service is also a key aspect of Big Local Works. We spoke to Lea-Anne Clayton, who runs that service. She started volunteering with the partnership three years ago. As a local resident, she had put herself forward to be on her estate events committee and through this got more involved in Big Local.

The model for the benefits and welfare service came from speaking to neighbours at local events, and hearing stories which demonstrated the real need for a high-quality local advice service. They work with people one-to-one to navigate benefits processes and understand their rights; they will also accompany people to appeals and hearings. As Lea-Anne describes: “It’s about providing advice - but also about empowering people to make them feel more in control of their lives.”
Resetting the power balance – structures and institutions

Localism requires a robust structure of neighbourhood governance, to enable real power and decision-making to ‘stick’ within neighbourhoods. Our Localism Commission referred to these as ‘institutions for localism’ – one of the four essential ‘domains’ for strengthening community power. As well as providing tangible routes for local decisions making, these institutions are also a key part of embedding localism in the culture of our neighbourhoods. The format and behaviours of local institutions also need to work in inclusive and participatory ways and support dynamic accountability and community leadership at a hyper local level. xvii

Community Councils

In Southwark, Community Councils (local area committees) have been the key vehicle for neighbourhood decision-making. Chaired by a ward councillor, they have some delegated powers around Highways Capital investment and Community Infrastructure Levy, as well as a Neighbourhood Fund and Cleaner, Greener, Safer capital programmes. They are designed as a public forum where residents and community groups can attend, ask questions and raise issues with elected councillors and council officers. They are themed around topics of community interest, from air quality to knife crime.2

Community Councils have recently been restructured as part of the ‘Empowering Communities’ programme and a review of local democratic structures in Southwark. Our research has explored some of the key challenges and experiences of Community Councils, from the perspective of council officers and VCSE organisations. As the new structure of local decision-making takes shape, there are a number of important lessons that should be absorbed into the new system.

The format of Community Council meetings varied across the borough. Typically, they were run as a Q&A format, with some breakout discussion groups and workshops to generate more dialogue and debate on matters of community interest. The council also facilitated online access, through Facebook Live streaming. However, without a standard format to guide best practice, the

quality of engagement through the Community Council meetings has been largely dependent on the decisions of the individual chairs.

One of the key challenges for Community Councils was about ensuring a balance between council-led agendas and community priorities. Some VCSE organisations described some meetings that were more “hierarchical” than others, “with council officials sitting in the front rows and councillors at the top table.” This can create a “them and us” dynamic. From the VCSE organisations we spoke to, there was appetite for more of a partnership approach with communities in designing the agendas. Interviewees also spoke of frustrations that sometimes meetings are dominated by party political arguments between councillors, rather than genuinely deliberative forums to discuss issues important to the community.

The ‘Cleaner, Greener, Safer’ fund was given as a positive example of devolved powers.xviii This is a capital fund for environmental and public realm projects. Applications and ideas are put forward by community members, and ward councillors take decisions on which projects to fund. Crucially, the people and local organisations who have proposed the project can work directly with council officers to plan and implement the initiatives. As such, while the budget is kept with the council – the power over how it is spent sits with the community.

**Future of Community Councils and local democratic structures**

The Community Council system is being replaced with a new model called the ‘Empowering Communities’ programme. This will involve:

- Community Councils will be replaced by five new multi-ward meetings across the borough. These meetings will take place twice a year and be largely structured around council-led business and presenting decisions around funding applications on key funds including: Cleaner Greener Safer; Neighbourhood Fund; Devolved Highways Fund; and Democracy Fund.

- Individual ward meetings will now be required four times a year (plus attendance at the multi-ward meetings). These meetings will continue to act as a forum for local councillors and residents to meet and discuss local concerns and issues. The agenda will be determined by ward councillors.

- Community Champions have been appointed to represent each of the five multi-ward areas. They are councillors responsible for the Empowering
Communities programme, including encouraging engagement in meetings and local democratic activities.

- A Democracy Fund of £20,000 per year (across the borough) is being made available for community events and activities.

- An Annual Residents’ Conference will be established to encourage resident engagement with shaping council priorities.

As this new structure takes shape, it will be important to review how ward meetings can be designed to encourage more participatory and dynamic engagement. For example, there should be a quality standard for how meetings are facilitated and how community voice is given parity alongside councillors. One of the key criticisms of previous meetings is that they can be too hierarchical, and therefore there is an important opportunity not to replicate these cultures within the new system. One way to achieve this could be having independent facilitators for meetings rather than always having a council-led ‘chair’; another model would be to delegate parts of the agenda to the community groups.

An ambitious extension for the Empowering Communities programme could also include devolving specific functions or initiatives to communities. For example, establishing a participatory budgeting programme for devolved funding within neighbourhoods could be established. The role of residents and community organisations in scrutiny of decision making could also be strengthened. For example, a shadow community panel could be set up to provide an annual appraisal of ward/multi-ward decision-making, that could feed into the Annual Residents’ Conference.

It will also be important to ensure that the Empowering Communities programme works in partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations to enhance community development and participatory engagement already taking place across the borough. For example, the Community Action Networks (CAN) programme managed by Community Southwark is a valuable forum for providing smaller, grassroots organisations with the space, time and support to act and have influence.

Community Southwark have provided training through CAN to develop understanding of how to influence local decision-making and to tackle some of the practical barriers which prevent local groups from engaging in these systems. SPN have also been leading on developing greater peer-learning, training and education on planning issues across the borough, in partnership with Community
Southwark, Southwark Law Centre and Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation (SGTO).

We also heard that the longer-term sustainability of these initiatives requires embedding this capacity at a neighbourhood level, to establish models of community leadership to drive forward local social action and community power.
References


There are approximately 1,200 registered charities in Southwark (80% have an income of under 0.5 million), with a further estimated 4,000 grassroots organisations. More information available at: https://communitysouthwark.org/sites/default/files/images/VCS_Strategy_FINAL%20%281%29_2.pdf


Locality. 2018. ‘People Power.’ Available at: https://locality.org.uk/about/key-publications/findings-from-the-commission-on-the-future-of-localism/

xi LGA and Faith Action. 2017. ‘Working with faith groups to promote health and wellbeing.’ Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/working-faith-groups-promote-health-and-wellbeing


xvi Ibid

xvii Locality. 2018. ‘People Power.’ Available at: https://locality.org.uk/about/key-publications/findings-from-the-commission-on-the-future-of-localism/


xix More information on Southwark Community Action Networks available at: https://www.southwarkcan.org/