

# ***Soft skills and support for councillors and officers***

NAN action learning day  
22 January 2008



# Findings from Young Foundation research



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# Research on skills and changing roles

## Neighbourhood Action Network

- Practical project on councillor roles with Surrey and Hackney
- Practical project on organisational cultures with Lewisham and Haringey

## Transforming Neighbourhoods

- Included practical work with on frontline councillor role with Haringey, Waltham Forest, Surrey, Wakefield, and Wiltshire
- Officer skills emerged from other projects around country

## JRF project – future role for frontline councillors

- Work in Newham, Surrey, Salford, Newcastle



# Context



# Local context

- Neighbourhood working now combines:
  - engagement
  - governance
  - service management and delivery
- Neighbourhoods are changing more rapidly than ever before
- We are working in increasingly complex environments.  
e.g. YF currently working on London estate of 350 units where mapped underlying **tensions** between:
  - residents and local young people
  - council and a local community centre
  - some residents and the community centre
  - some community activists and the Residents Association

# National context

“need to reaffirm the importance of councillors’ role as **democratic champions**”

- **Enhanced frontline role** for non-executive members
- Potential for significant **new responsibilities**

## Community champion

- scrutiny, CCfA, speak up for constituents, delegated budgets

## Community leadership

- involvement in LSPs, health and wellbeing partnerships and others

## Community engagement

- lead role inform/consult/involve, engagement experiments

# Councillor role and skills

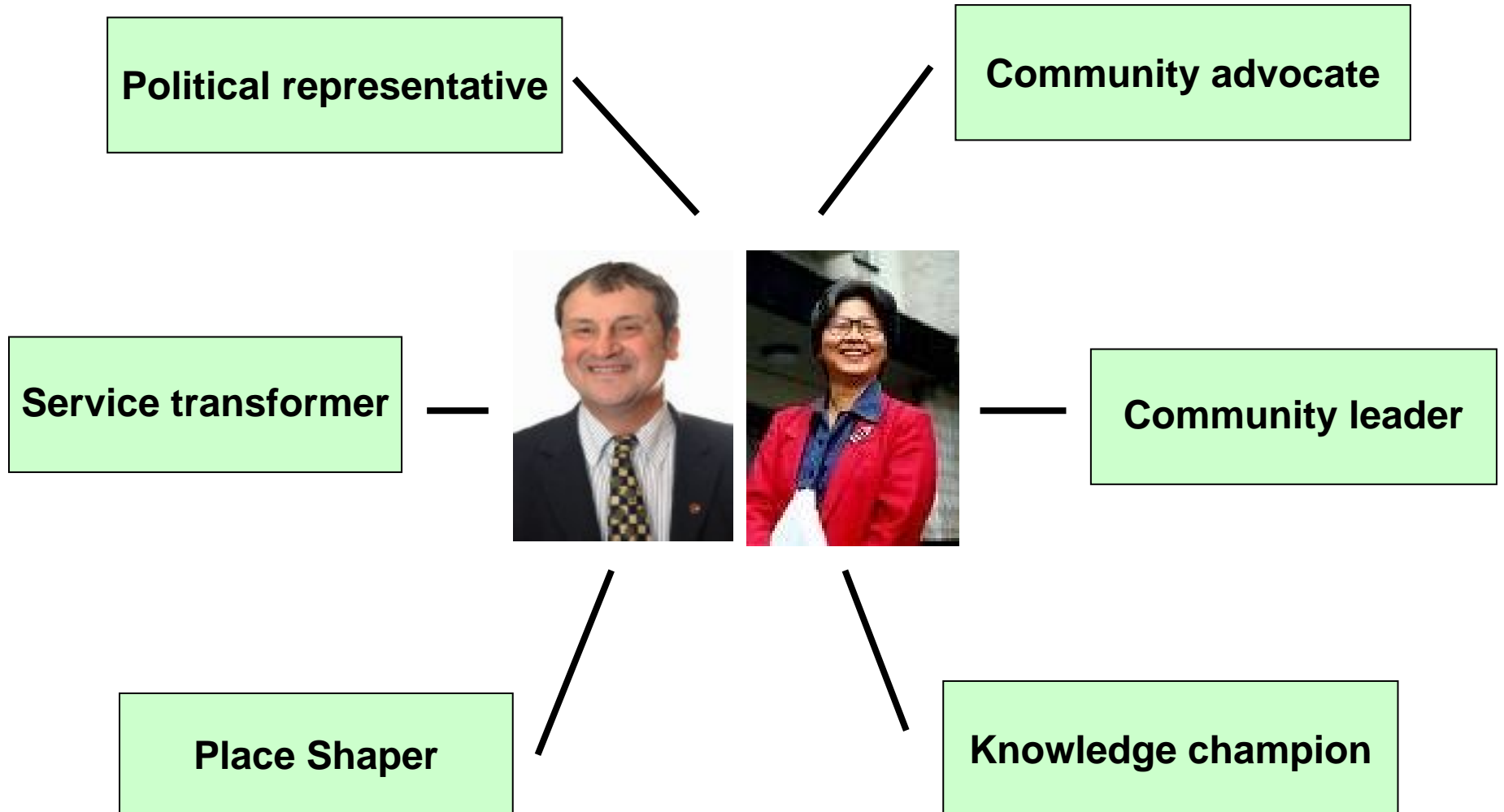


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# Culture of locality working

- Distance of some councillors from local engagement:
  - some members are clearly more comfortable with very local working
  - others prefer more strategic activities.
- Observed in every local authority

# Dimensions of the future councillor role



# Future role: skills and attributes

## **Political representative**

- Ability to connect with all parts of the community and represent everyone fairly

## **Community Advocate**

- Advocate for everyone – including people with different backgrounds, cultures, values
- Have the confidence to speak freely and challenge the executive

## **Community Leader**

- Be a community development worker – support and promoting local initiatives
- Be a good communicator – explain what political decisions and structures mean
- Be sensitive to difference and issues of diversity and equality
- Have knowledge and skill to engage people in a variety of ways (not just meetings)
- Be a confident broker

# Future role: skills and attributes

## Service Transformer

- Understand the complex business of local government and service provision
- Confidence and ability to challenge the executive and hold service providers to account
- Ability to understand local problems and use this knowledge tactically and strategically

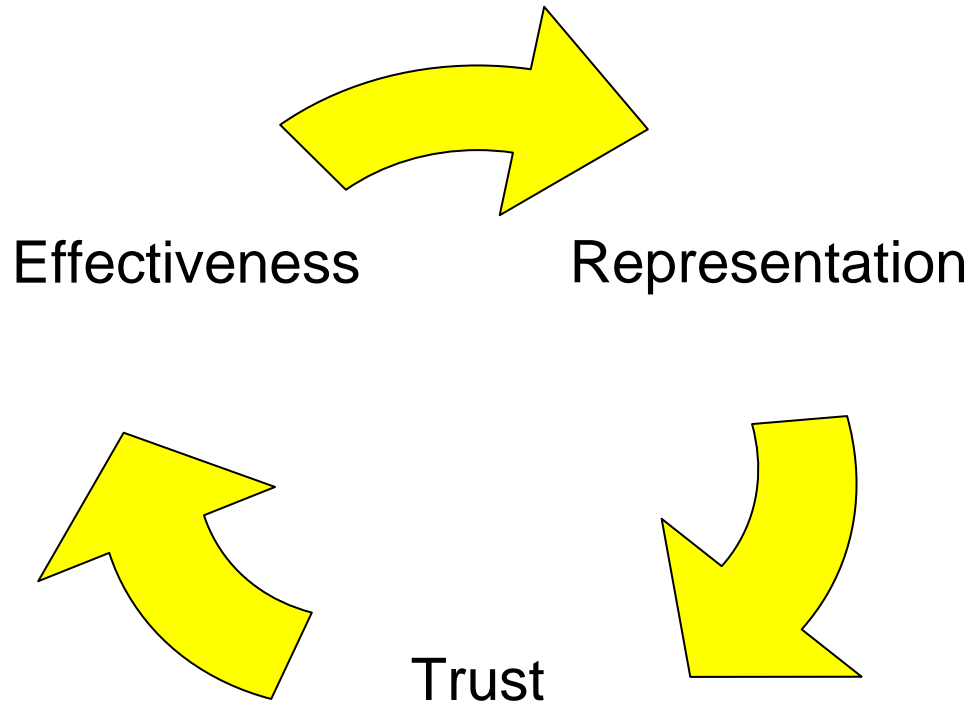
## Place Shaper

- Be able to shape the very local environment - ability to identify local priorities, work with officers and service providers, manage locality budgets

## Knowledge Champion

- Be the primary source of local intelligence – flowing between community and the council and working closely with officers
- Have skills and ability to collect and analyse local information and use it to benefit the community

# Councillor / activist relationships in Lewisham



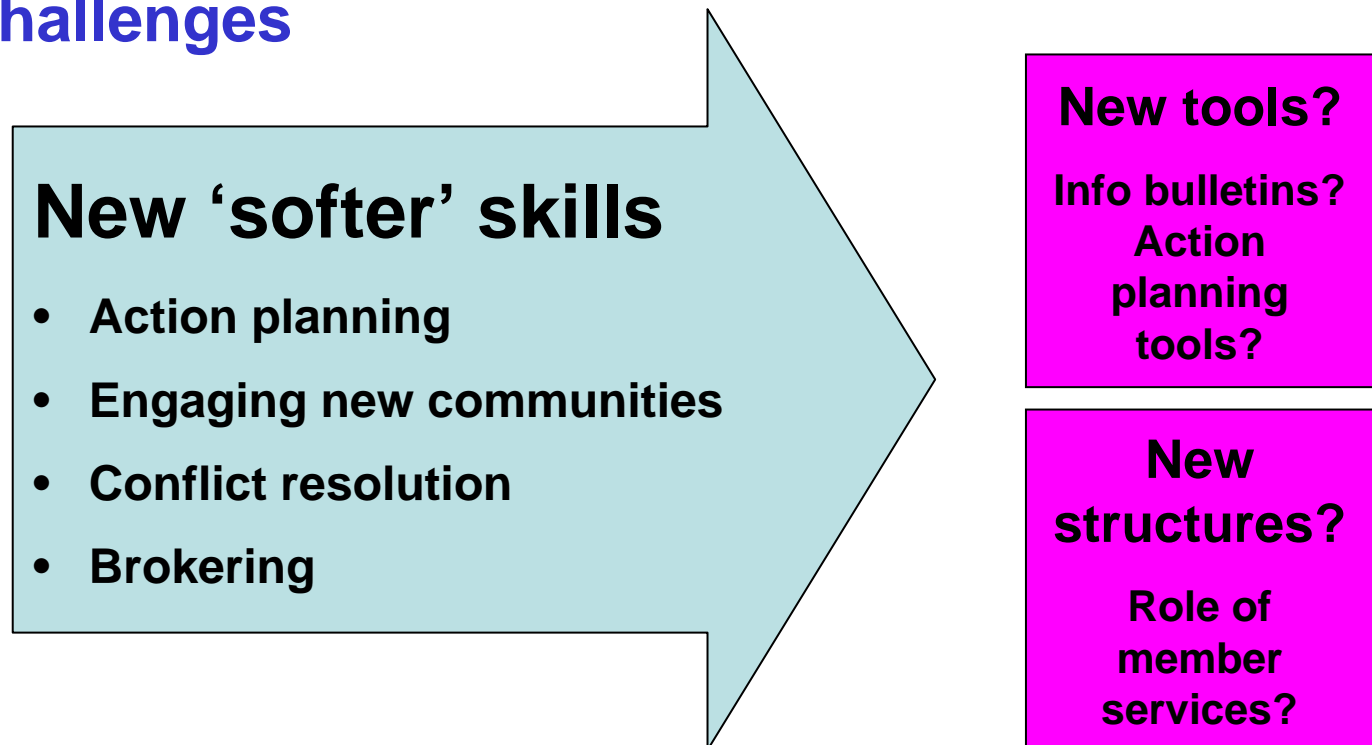
- These three concepts were used repeatedly by activists and councillors to describe problems in their relationships at local level
- Often these themes formed the basis of crude stereotypes

# Councillor skill sets in Haringey

## The starting point

- Borough wide Neighbourhood Management rolled out recently
- Diversity and cohesion issues make local working complicated

## Future challenges



# Officer role and skills



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# Common themes

- Challenge of **partnership working**, especially in context of place shaping
  - Most effective partnership working down to individual relationship building
  - Challenge of working across agencies
- Some officers '**thrown in at the deep end**' at public meetings without training
  - Is there a need for a core set of competencies and support / training before officer represent the council at public meetings?
- Sometimes a lack of recognition that members and officers do **different jobs** at the neighbourhood level
- **Cultural and emotional factors** should not be underestimated:
  - fear of change, reluctance to abandon established 'comfort zones', relying on entrenched stereotypes all be common factors amongst local authority officers, the third sector, other public services and neighbourhood groups.
- Neighbourhood **constantly changing**. Working within them made more difficult by:
  - transience of population
  - range of models and new ways of working
  - culture of avoiding risk – *accountability vs flexibility to innovate*