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## Introduction

**This article explores the question: is it possible to have successful partnerships between local authorities and local agencies?**

This article focuses on what happens in England, although the drivers for partnership working and the barriers to success are common across all of the UK. Because of devolution of government powers to these areas, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all now have slightly different public sector partnerships.

There are large numbers and a wide variety of partnerships in the public sector in England but I will focus on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), which carry the main responsibility for collective strategic planning, delivery and performance management of public services in local authority areas in England.

There are a number of obvious themes to any discussion of public sector partnerships. These include; the local and national context, vision and strategy; structure and governance, relationships and trust, and; delivery of added value and performance management.

## National and local context

In order to understand the main challenges for LSPs it is necessary to understand the complexities of local government structures in England. Historically, English local government was organised into counties and boroughs. As a result of a number of phases of inconsistent re-organisation since 1974, English local government now operates at different levels. Upper tier authorities include county councils, which operate in mainly rural areas, and unitary authorities, which operate in mainly urban areas.

Each county council has a number of district councils within its area. District councils are independent bodies with their own elected councillors. They are responsible for a number of local services, such as housing, planning of new buildings, sports and leisure and waste collection. County councils are responsible for a range of services including; some roads, social care, services for children, libraries and waste disposal. This means that county councils and district councils need to work together to provide a joined-up services for local residents. In some areas, county and district councils work well together while, in other areas, there are rivalries and relationships are not so good. It can be argued that the complexity of relationships between county and district councils sometimes impedes the development of effective partnerships. Unitary authorities are responsible for all local authority services so they do not have to deal with these issues.

Every area in England has an LSP, which brings together councils and local partners such as the police, health services, fire services, employment services and local business and voluntary and community groups to improve quality of life and services in the local area. They often have an executive board which acts for the whole partnership. Upper tier LSPs also usually include one or more district councils. There are also subsidiary groups, which focus on key themes, such as children and young people, health and older people, community safety and community cohesion and economic regeneration. These large partnerships were established under the Local Government Act of 2000. Further requirements were added through the Local Government and Public and Patient

involvement in Health Act of 2007, including giving key local agencies a 'duty to co-operate' as active members of the LSP.

## **Vision and strategy**

All LSPs are required to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS), setting out a vision for the area and establishing local priorities. To finalise priorities for the SCS, LSPs are required to engage local people about what improvements in services and quality of life would be most important to them. Despite this, some members of local councils think that they alone should be able to identify priorities because they feel they know what is best for the communities they represent and are the only group involved in the LSP which is democratically elected. In many areas, engagement with the public is not inclusive or effective. As a result, most local residents will know nothing about, and have had no say in, choosing the local priorities for their areas. In order to address so many of the key social challenges in England today, such as low educational attainment or anti-social behaviour, local people need to change their behaviour, take more responsibility for themselves and their families and make a bigger contribution to achieving collective social goals. If the priorities in the SCS are not the ones which are most important to local people, it is unlikely that the LSP will be successful in involving and empowering local people to deliver change.

## **Delivery and performance management**

As well as creating strategic plans influencing the way LSPs act collectively and as individual agencies, the partnerships are involved in other areas or work.

Each upper tier LSP is required to produce a Local Area Agreement (LAA)<sup>1</sup>. This is an agreement between local areas and central government describing how local priorities will be met. LAAs are based on the priorities set out in an area's SCS and, in the case of county councils, the priorities of each district. (District council LSPs do not produce LAAs). However, in many areas, the SCS is out of date and so it is not acting as a useful guide for the priorities in the LAA. Although many LSPs are now rushing to update their SCSs, some are confused about what their strategic priorities for the area should be or do not have enough evidence on which to base their choice of LAA targets.

Although the system of LAAs is relatively new and some have only recently been agreed, last year the government decided to introduce a new framework which will come into effect in April this year. The LAA consists of a number of agreed actions to meet a selection of appropriate and relevant targets. Central government has regional Government Offices (GOs), where representatives of each central department are based. The GOs have responsibility for agreeing the final list of targets with LSPs. Up to 35 targets are being chosen by each LSP from a menu of 198 national indicators on issues ranging from the tidiness of streets to the care of older people in their own homes<sup>2</sup>. LSPs will also have some mandatory targets (16) relating to services for children and young people. Local targets can also be chosen, but unlike on other targets, performance on those targets will not be monitored by central government. Under the previous system, it was possible to earn additional funding by performing well on particular targets – knows

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<sup>1</sup>Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities – Statutory Guidance: Draft for Consultation November 2007 [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Development of the new LAA framework – operational guidance 2007

as 'stretch' targets. These targets will automatically be carried forward into the new agreements.

The introduction of the new framework is a major change from the previous system, where LSPs had many more targets. The performance of LSPs will be judged on how well they achieve outcomes against their chosen national indicators. A new system of evaluation called Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) is being introduced by the government in 2009, through the Audit Commission, who audit and inspect local government. CAA will look at performance in achieving the priorities and also ask local people what they think about services and the quality of life in the areas where they live.

The framework for LAAs is the same for county councils and unitary councils and for widely disparate areas, from the very rural and sparsely populated to the very urban and densely populated. There is a risk that using a single approach for diverse areas could be a factor which militates against success. However, the ability to choose targets which are relevant to local priorities should help to mitigate this risk – that is unless the GOs choose to disagree with the choice of local targets. It could also be argued that LSPs do not really have much room for manoeuvre and that the framework is not sufficiently flexible to adapt to local need. If that is right – it is another factor which will militate against success

As well as working on LAAs, LSPs are also working on individual projects, such as combating obesity or poverty in their area and working to improve service delivery in other ways. In many cases, the local authority and local agencies, such as health, will commission services from other providers, in the private or voluntary sectors, rather than deliver the service themselves. This is opening up new markets, particularly in areas such as adult social care. It is now possible for partner organisation to pool their funding to commission services or other interventions to achieve common goals. Targeted funding can be used to lever change in mainstream services. Pooling of budgets is just one way in which partners can align resources. Although there are some barriers to pooling budgets they are cultural and organisational rather than technical, so can be overcome.

An LSP can also gain information to help them decide whether a particular services or way of working should be 'mainstreamed' or extended to the whole area by trying out new approaches in a limited way.

The ability of LSPs to deliver on their strategic objectives, and especially to influence mainstream services, depends not only on strong leadership and capacity to deliver on the front line, but also on middle management in LSP partners.

Although LSPs have been established in England for some years, they still find it difficult to evaluate their own progress and manage their performance. Some have effective performance management systems and share data effectively. Others are not so well organised. However, in order to be successful, LSPs have to be able to ensure that change is implemented and outcomes delivered by having effective performance management systems.

The national evaluation published in 2006<sup>3</sup> highlighted the difficulty of demonstrating the value that LSPs are adding. Many LSPs are able to identify process outcomes, such as the development of shared policies, information sharing, and community engagement. There is therefore some evidence that LSPs are starting to produce outcomes in terms of

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<sup>3</sup> Report on the 2006 Survey of all English LSPs [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

improvements in governance such as enhanced strategic capacity and greater community legitimacy.

However, few LPS are able to point to specific impacts in terms of improved services and tangible improvements in social, economic or environmental outcomes for local people. This is partly because it is very difficult to unravel chains of causality, and partly because many LSPs are at an early stage in their development and have not yet had sufficient time to make an impact on the ground. The evaluation suggested that, at that time, too much should not be expected of LSPs too soon. However, central government's expectations of upper tier LSPs have continued to rise.

## Relationships and trust

It can be argued that successful partnerships in England between local authorities and local agencies require the effective management of the interface between control and influence. Before exploring further the 'horizontal' relationships between local service providers working together in partnership, it is first necessary to understand the 'vertical' relationships between central government and local agencies. It is in these vertical relationships that many of the paradoxes and dilemmas of LSPs have their roots.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local authorities were in control of most local services – health, education, water and sanitation and many others. In 1948, the National Health Service was created and control passed from local to central government. Over the years other key services were either centralised or privatised. Local government's span of control has gradually become smaller.

Each main local service provider – local authorities, fire service, police and health organisations has control of some resources. Their ability to decide how to spend their resources will often be constrained by central government, directly or indirectly. Each of the main central government departments exercises control over local providers – the Department of Health over health organisations, the Home Office over the police, and to a lesser extent, the Department of Communities and Local Government over local government. This control may come from statutes, regulations and guidance. However formal or informal the control, central government can always bring pressure to bear to conform through its inspectorates, such as the Audit Commission. If local services do not play by central government's rules, they could eventually face a number of sanctions. In the worst-case scenario, their organisation may be managed by appointees of central government, they may lose funding, be the focus of condemnation through the media and senior managers may lose their jobs – perhaps never to work again.

Central government does not always exert its control in a way which supports or rewards strong horizontal relationships and partnerships between local services. Each central government department may ask its local agencies or councils to focus on a different national policy issue – regardless of whether that is an issue for local people. Central government departments do not always co-ordinate their messages well, so local agencies may be pulling in different directions. Nevertheless – central government demands that local government should bring local agencies together, along with representatives of voluntary sector organisations and local businesses to agree coherent local priorities.

The horizontal relationships between local agencies, the voluntary sector and business have developed in a number of different ways. One of the key factors which shaped partnerships after the Local Government Act of 2000, was whether or not they had any

additional funding. Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF)<sup>4</sup> was given to the most deprived areas of the country, to support regeneration. One of the pre-requisites of NRF money was that the local authority should form a partnership with other local agencies, also involving members of the community, to oversee the regeneration and decide how the money should be spent. Partnerships in areas which had NRF were constituted more formally, to fulfil central's government's requirements, than those in non-NRF areas. This led to a wide variety of governance arrangements. The culture of partnership also varied, depending on who the key players were.

As part of a major research project which ran from 2003 to 2006<sup>5</sup>, OPM facilitated a number of action learning workshops. One of these workshops explored the different types of partnerships which were emerging. They described four broad types, which have very different horizontal relationships; 'advisory', 'commissioning', 'laboratory' and 'community empowerment'. Advisory LSPs were described as acting as a consultation and discussion forum focused on consensus building, having no independent power to act and drawing its accountability and legitimacy entirely from member organisations, particularly the local authority. Commissioning LSPs have their own staff and some executive power to act, are able to implement decisions and commission projects, and therefore have to create their own forms of accountability and legitimacy. The prime focus of laboratory LSPs is on generating new ideas and new ways of designing local services, drawing on the combined thinking of senior managers and community leaders LSPs focusing on community empowerment concentrate on creating strong networks within the community rather than on the key public agencies.

It can be argued that in order to be effective, an LSP should be able to combine different ways of working from each of the models. In upper tier areas, the requirement to have LAAs has resulted in a move towards the more strategic commissioning model. Advisory and laboratory activity usually takes place at the subsidiary or thematic group level. District LSPs have tended to be closer to the advisory or community empowerment models than the commissioning model. The report of the national evaluation, concluded that LSPs are progressing from strategy to implementation, but this is often a slow process. Action and delivery planning often still lie, by default, at the level of thematic partnerships or individual partner agencies.

The variety of models does highlight the risk that expectations between partners about the purpose of the LSP will vary considerably. This will have consequences for the level of commitment and investment which partners are prepared to make. Clarity and agreement about the primary purposes of LSPs is consequently very important<sup>6</sup>. However, there is a risk that too strict governance arrangements or rules, could restrict LSPs' ability to develop and to act flexibly. The important pre-requisites of successful LSPs, building understanding and trust between very different organisations and individuals, and building consensus around shared action, could be seriously jeopardised by a bureaucratic preoccupation with paperwork, terms of reference, constitutions, legal rules and protocols.

## **Structure and governance**

LSPs do pose some interesting governance challenges. For example, how should the democratic structures of local authorities relate to LSPs? Does having the Leader of the

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<sup>4</sup> [www.neighbourhood.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of LSPs Interim Report 2004

<sup>6</sup> Governing Partnerships Audit Commission 2006 [audit-commission.gov.uk](http://audit-commission.gov.uk)

Council as chair of the LSP lend democratic legitimacy to the LSP? It could be argued that LSPs are ultimately 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. It is difficult to find evidence to support this theory. Indeed, it could be argued that while the policy priorities of central government departments shape the agendas of their local agencies and while GO have the final say in the targets in the LAA, any democratic legitimacy conferred on the LSP by the involvement or leadership of the local authority will be continually undermined.

Another key question is: how can members of the community be involved in the LSPs? There is a risk that self-appointed activists or people only interested in a single issue may put themselves forward as 'representatives' of their local community. To ensure that community representatives on LSPs truly represent their communities, it may be thought necessary to establish voting systems by which they can be chosen, or support mechanisms to enable them to hear from and report back to their communities. Similar issues arise in the case of business; there may be tensions within the business sector and issues of conflict of interest. Questions of legitimacy and accountability also apply to other public agencies on LSPs, and to the voluntary sector and representatives of different faith or ethnic groups in the local area.

One way to avoid creating elaborate alternative representative systems is for members of LSPs to agree that not everyone on an LSP is or should be a 'representative'. LSPs need to find ways to honour and learn from people's perspectives and experiences, without expecting them necessarily to 'speak for' whole communities. The representation of certain groups on an LSP does not absolve the LSP or the council from consulting and learning from those groups, nor does the individual have to necessarily 'carry' responsibility for reaching the wider group.

## Conclusion

In the longer term, the success of LSPs will be demonstrated by the extent to which they provide a robust and sustainable local context within which the key challenges facing localities can be managed, and within which initial successes create a virtuous cycle of improved outcomes for partners and communities.

Some people working in the public sector embrace the idea of partnership while some view it with deep distrust. Local government has developed many small-scale partnerships of its own, bringing other local agencies together to address local issues, so it is not partnership itself that is the key problem for many in local government, rather it is the idea of a form of partnership which is dictated and imposed by central government which they object to. Many agree with the principle but resist putting those principles into practice if they think that partnership working will challenge or erode their political, personal and professional power and influence. I work with a wide variety of partnerships and I am always impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm with which any local partners approach the work of their LSP. That commitment often helps to overcome all the barriers to effective partnerships and enables LSP to function very well. Two things are clear to both the enthusiasts and the resisters – central government insists that local agencies work together and also, the really big social issues – poverty, poor housing, crime and anti-social behaviour, low aspirations and poor health – cannot be remedied by local authorities or local agencies working alone.