

Audit Commission’s “Working better together? Managing LSPs” – Summary paper and thoughts on how the OSP is performing

Introduction

Published by the Audit Commission in 2009; ‘Working better together? Managing Local Strategic Partnerships’, reviews arrangements for performance, resource management and governance in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The study carries recommendations for local authorities and partners, and suggests that central government should produce further guidance and allow for greater local flexibility in financial management and reporting frameworks.

Whilst much of the report has been taken over by the change of Government and potential changes and guidance on partnerships and partnership working many of the issues covered are relevant to the ethos of continued partnership working. The future of LSPs and Sustainable Community Strategies may become clearer after the publication of the Localism and Decentralisation Bill later this year.

Content of the Report

The report is broken into five sections as below:

- **Evolving Collaboration**
Outlining how joint working has evolved. While LSPs are voluntary and there are no legal relationships between councils, LSPs or LSP partners, the previous government had required some joint working. Funding arrangements and Local Area Agreements (LAA) negotiations made it almost impossible for an area not to have an LSP; legal relationships are created by LAAs. In two-tier areas the need to develop a Sustainable Community Strategy has driven the development of LSPs.

However, since the change in Government we await the development of new partnership guidance and legislation

- **Can organisations work together?**
Introduces a whole systems framework for assessing local partnership working. The public sector 7S framework (Sustainable Community Strategy, Staff and Skills, Style, Synergies, Steering, Standards, and Systems) balances aspects of joint working, with the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) at the heart of the framework. It recommends that the long term Sustainable Community Strategy objectives should be established through an evidence-based approach

Our SCS, flagship issue action plans (particularly the Regeneration Framework) are evidence based. The working practices of the OSP fit the good practice outlined in the 7S framework

- **LSP progress – transformational factors**

The study explores the three transformational elements of the 7S framework (staff, style and synergies), noting that they provide perspectives on the ways that LSP partners can collaborate to improve local services and deliver outcomes. The studies findings included:

- Staff and LSP leadership culture: confident leadership is critical to joint working success
- The choice of chair can send positive or negative messages to stakeholders. LSPs are democratically accountable to local people through councillors' roles.
- Local authority chief executives play a crucial role in the strategic and executive levels of management and governance.
- Partners' senior level of commitment is vital to making an impact across their objectives – the long term vision should underpin this.
- Willingness to challenge is a sign of trust and partnership maturity.
- There must be honest and challenging discussions about money.
- Management and role of meetings, and approach to joint working can create a positive working style and avoid unintentional messages.
- LSPs should review the style of meetings and other arrangements that may support or hinder joint working.
- Over-emphasis on the details of performance in strategic meetings can deter private and voluntary sector partners.
- Multi-tier LSPs face added challenges when developing a style.
- There are benefits of joint working; the LSPs contribution to local outcomes should be greater than members' separate activities

*The OSP is well led and well managed and has the right balance between honest and challenging discussion and performance management
Is the OSP's contribution to local outcomes greater than members' separate activities? Yes, I would argue it is especially in areas such as the Regeneration Framework, Low Carbon Oxford and the Affordable Housing Select Committee.*

- LSP Progress – transactional factors
Applies the three transactional elements of the 7S framework (steering, systems, standards) to LSPs and suggests they need to adapt these elements to the particular needs of collaborative working. The studies findings included:
 - Managing the partnership: strong mechanisms can influence partners' allocation of resources for achieving objectives
 - LSPs are more likely to steer performance than resources, but should think about arrangements for doing both.
 - Influencing and steering partners' mainstream funding is a challenge and LSPs should develop mechanisms for doing this, starting with knowledge on available resources.
 - Overview and scrutiny enables councils to hold LSPs to account for local action and public spending.
 - Shared performance information and performance reporting can contribute to giving an upwards account and help partners recognise and assess their own contributions to joint working.

- Partners should remain accountable to their own stakeholders and have to allow for CDRPs and children's trust arrangements.
- Shared data and common approaches to performance help to join-up activity.
- Most LSPs do not know how much their support team costs. Knowing costs allows informed decisions about value for money.
- A number of arrangements for joining up resources exist. However, there are some constraints on pooled budgets that reflect different government department's rules.
- Statutory LAAs will create a stronger incentive for resource alignment.

There appears a leaning here towards LSPs that are in unitary areas or just in the upper tier and this is not the case for the OSP, so direct reference to the LAA is not necessarily appropriate or relevant.

However, shared OSP vision (e.g. Regeneration Framework) has led / is leading to shared resource through the LAA Reward Money and staff resource being aligned to delivering the Regeneration Framework Action Plan

- Looking forward – the future of LSPs
The Audit Commission want councils and partners to use this report to help them to work better together. They believe that the 7S framework can help councils and partners build on LSP strengths and identify and deal with weaknesses.
They believe Comprehensive Area Inspection will prompt LSPs to improve standards by focussing on locally agreed outcomes delivered by partners, therefore joint inspection should stimulate area-based improvement.

The ethos appears correct, but clearly the thinking around the CAA is now out of date as the CAA has been abolished. As stated earlier, the future of LSPs and the SCS will become clearer when the Government makes clear its thinking.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the OSP appears to be operating and delivering in a positive way and addressing many of the issues the report raises. Challenging areas of performance management and leadership have been addressed in part by the appointment of Champions and also by the development of the action plans.

It should be noted that Chris Farthing, Locality Manager, GOSE when asked about his experience of working with other LSP's and what they do well at the June OSP meeting, responded that he felt that the level of debate and organisation of priorities in Oxford is more advanced than many other LSP's.

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