

Responding to the economic downturn - the role and potential of partnerships

Outbreak paper from 18th November 2009 held in Milton Keynes

Introduction

The changed economic landscape means that more than ever we need to make the most of the resources we have available, both to minimise the impact of the downturn, and to make sure we are ready to take advantage of any recovery. Stakeholders are already considering these issues in their local areas, often using the LSP as a forum for debate. As a result of interest generated, Progress through Partnership (PtP) hosted the event; Responding to the economic downturn – the role and potential of partnerships on the 18th November 2009 at the Chrysalis Theatre, Camphill, Milton Keynes.

Sam Crooks, The Leader of Milton Keynes Council and the LSP Executive chair opened the event by setting out the challenges faced by many Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's) in today's economic environment before introducing the first of the three speakers.

Panel of presentations exploring different perspective:

Sarah Stevens, the Regional Lead for Economic Development and Environment with the Audit Commission, focused on the Audit Commission's report, "When it comes to the crunch" published on the 12th August 2009. Focusing on how local authorities are responding to the 2008/09 recession the report finds that the local and national governments have responded well, though it does warn of worsening social impacts. The report can found at:
<http://www.auditcommission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/Pages/whenitcomestothecrunch12aug2009.aspx>

Following Sarah, Geoff Snelson, Corporate Director, Strategy and Partnerships at Milton Keynes Council, delivered a presentation on the work of the Economic Task Group (ETG). Geoff began with an overview of Milton Keynes economic situation and a comparison of employment figures with the rest of the South East and England. He demonstrated the spread of unemployment in urban areas compared to rural areas and showed a sharp rise in unemployment amongst young people. He then discussed possible reasons why unemployment had increased faster in Milton Keynes than across the rest of the region. Geoff ended his presentation by showing action plans put together by the ETG in order to assist the region to respond to the recession with the help of the future jobs fund.

The presentations concluded with David Livermore, the Deputy Director of Milton Keynes Council of Voluntary Organisations. David began by identifying the issues affecting Milton Keynes through the Milton Keynes Community Local Infrastructure Partnerships (MKCLIP). It gave the voluntary sector a snapshot review of early sector issues from December 2008. David detailed the "Kitchen Report" from January to February 2009, presenting the effects of the current economic situation on the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes. Engaging 100 plus groups from January to April 2009, individual and community action plans were put together to raise awareness and 1400 independent



The support programme for Local Strategic Partnerships in the south east

organisations were discovered. David finished by highlighting ways of maximising the benefits of partnership working and how to make the most out of our opportunities.

All of the presentations from the event are posted on the website.

Q and A session with the panel

Key questions and answers that were presented on the day are detailed below.

Q: Why is a complete tier of local government in the form of Parish councils not represented at this event and within our recession strategy?

A:

Geoff Snelson – Parish councils can offer a lot to our recession response particularly around delivery, I feel there is a lot more we could do with them.

David Livermore – A lot more to learn, nothing is perfect but there is a lot we could learn from Parish Councils on community engagement

Sarah Stevens – The Audit Commission report does say that Parish Councils have a vital role to play in Government and local level support.

Q: What does the panel perceive to be the role of small businesses and the private sector? What is the business need?

A:

David Livermore – VCS organisations can also be businesses – the key question is how can funding streams be diversified and how can existing resources be met?

Sarah Stevens – The Audit commission research shows that a one size solution does not fit all during a recession hence local agencies and stakeholders are vital to meet local need.

Q: Has the time delay in government support being received had an impact on responses to the recession?

A:

David Livermore – Yes clearly it will but we need to play a role in negotiating where support will go (prioritise this) i.e. think about Capacity builders – this was swift. Locally we need to consider decision time frames and the use of 'good will' to get resources out quickly.

Q: How do you understand capacity in the VCS?

A:

David Livermore – We conducted a survey on what was delivered by the VCS, a lot of the data on delivery was sparse and the evidence anecdotal – it led us to undertake in depth research with services.

The support programme for Local Strategic Partnerships in the south east

The recession can provide a push to get to know the customer more as a VCS organisation, the data you can obtain during this period can inform your service plans for the next 3 years.

First round table discussion session

This discussion session focused on the current situation. PtP asked “**What is being done in your local area?**” Some of the points raised from the facilitated group discussions included; Job clubs, specifically in Bicester and Banbury, improved Third Sector working together, Bicester Vision that generates 4.5 million visitors a year, increased funds for the local voluntary services in order to meet demand and Food Bank crisis parcel’s to give to families in need.

PtP asked “**What are the highlights and key successes?**” Some of the points raised included; Bicester Village, Aylesbury Waterside development, the job clubs focused on different skill types and based in different areas, Co-operative working across sectors, interagency working across the VCS/MKCLIP as well as building links with the private sectors.

“**How have partners worked to support people during the recession?**” was covered in this section and the response varied from allowing Farmers Markets to sell local produce ‘locally’ to the CAB and task force providing enhanced advocacy to offer support and information to those in need. Some comments noted also wanted to express that the recession had kick started some relationship benefits that may have not been there before.

“**What are the challenges in working to address the recession?**” was asked in the first round table discussion session. Some of the views raised were that there can be a miss match of communication, attracting new business in the Milton Keynes area, being able to engage small businesses in Milton Keynes, tackling barriers between organisations, policy and regional levels, challenges surrounding the culture of an organisation were also discussed as well as being able to maintain the ‘skill levels’ of citizens. Understanding the current situation and fear for the future were also elements that had arisen from this discussion.

Second Round table discussion session

The second session of round table discussion points began after lunch and focused on the next few years and beyond. The two topics for discussion were; “**How can partnerships and collaborations add value in addressing issues relating to the recession?**” and “**What else would you like to do and what support would be useful from PtP or other partnership organisations?**”

Responses from the first of the two questions included; partnerships add expertise and resource outside scope of any single organisation and that they can provide entrance to partners, resources and communities (especially the ones that had been hard to reach previously). Partnerships and collaborations can help to coordinate and derive economies of scale, focus on issues (rather than partnership working) and enables working together to pull resources and knowledge. There was a recurring theme around the need for partnerships to use and show examples of best practice so that others can follow.



The support programme for Local Strategic Partnerships in the south east

Responses from the second question included; the need for education and training for elected members, that knowing what other Districts are doing would be of great benefit and would offer examples of best practise for the rest of the partners, we need to improve communication and promote activity to encourage wider learning across the partnerships.

With response to the final part of the second question, "What support would be useful from PtP or other partnership organisations?" there was a joint consensus that more regional workshops specific around relevant issues would inspire better joint networking and best practise.

Overall summary and closing remarks

The event was concluded with a closing speech from Geoff Snelson who summarised the day and left us with some suggestions around the impact partnerships will have in the future, and some reflections on what partnerships are doing particularly well now.