

when the talking has to stop

a review of structures and decision-making
arrangements for a Local Strategic Partnership

The Horsham District Community Partnership originally commissioned this paper, to provide evidence to support a review of the structure and arrangements of the partnership and its thematic groups. The work was funded by Progress through Partnership (PtP) as part of its support programme for local strategic partnerships.

This guide is a modified version of the report to the Horsham District Community Partnership – edited to share the findings with a wider audience.

The interviews and research for this project was undertaken over four days in June 2009 by Kevin Ambrose, a freelance consultant regularly used in PtP assignments. The findings were reported to the Partnership's task group, and later the full strategic partnership board, in July.

The paper draws on findings from national studies by bodies such as the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA) and the Audit Commission and illustrates these through case studies and examples from partnerships in the southeast region. It does not claim, however, to be an exhaustive study of arrangements across the whole region.

From these findings, the paper suggests a model of governance for strategic partnerships and their associated thematic groups.

Contents

Methodology	1
Key findings from national studies.....	1
Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA).....	1
Audit Commission.....	1
Some case studies from the south east	2
Lewes and East Sussex.....	2
Oxfordshire county-wide	3
Key learning points from case studies in the south east region.....	4
Experience in West Sussex	4
West Sussex county-wide	4
Crawley	5
Chichester	5
Worthing	6
Mid Sussex	6
Horsham.....	7
Key learning points from West Sussex practice.....	7
Summary of research	8
Acknowledgements.....	9

Methodology

The research for this paper was undertaken through telephone interviews, desktop research (including examination of material from major partners in Horsham) as well as information and experience from partnership working elsewhere. Its main aim is to identify a range of considerations for partnership decision-makers and stimulate debate among partnership bodies.

Key findings from national studies

This section looks at some relevant examples of current thinking elsewhere – both nationally and at local level – regarding the arrangements for effective partnership working.

IMPROVEMENT & DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (IDeA)



The IDeA provides support and advice nationally to local government and its partners. It stresses the importance of agreeing roles and accountabilities between local partnerships:

It is helpful if local strategic partnerships (LSPs) and the various other partnerships working locally can collectively agree a set of arrangements that makes clear their respective roles and remit. Otherwise partnership effort can be wasted and diffused, and key partners may lose interest. Clearly defined roles, remits, and responsibilities can help all concerned. The more these can be communicated to the public, the better people will understand how the challenges facing their areas are being addressed. There are few fixed rules about how local partnerships should work together as a family. So arrangements will need to respect the history of partnership working in the area along with any local sensitivities, including those in two-tier areas.

Thematic partnerships may wish to lead on particular outcomes and targets in the LAA, such as crime reduction, or reducing worklessness. The LSP and local authority may be happy to delegate such activity almost entirely to an active and successful partnership body.

The IDeA also picks up the particular role elected members should play in strengthening the democratic accountability of partnerships:

Executive members in particular have a vital role in leading LSPs through the negotiation and definition of priorities and in overseeing delivery. Councillors also play an important leadership role in thematic partnerships.

The duty to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) rests with the local authority. In fulfilling this duty they should seek to achieve collective consensus through the LSP on a shared set of priorities.

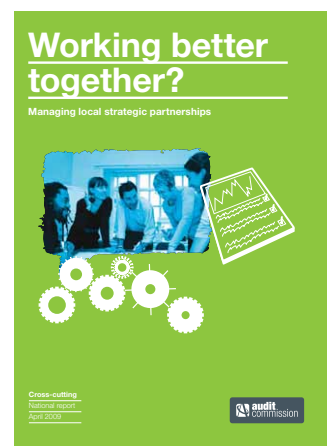
AUDIT COMMISSION

The Audit Commission, in its recent report “Working Better Together” recognises that LSPs are developing and each has its own unique history and challenges. There is no one model that will guarantee future success. Its key message is that:

LSPs have different histories and experiences – they are each on a unique improvement journey, but there are important lessons to learn from one another. LSPs are voluntary, unincorporated, associations, but they must recognise their strategic, executive, and operational roles and organise themselves appropriately. LSP success depends on the cooperation of partners with different interests, resources, and responsibilities. LSPs do not control local public service resources; they have to influence partners’ mainstream spending and activity. LSPs need to develop strong partnership cultures to achieve shared goals. LSPs in multi-tier areas face greater challenges than those in single tiers.

Among the findings of its research, it found that LSPs work best where they have effective leadership, culture, and relationship management. The Commission recognised that partnership working is more complicated in multi-tier areas where there is often less experience of collaboration. It recommends that local authorities and their partners should:

- Monitor and review local achievements against a regularly updated Sustainable Community Strategy and the LAA



- Test their current arrangements
 - Ensure that local arrangements support the strategic, executive, and operational layers of joint working
 - Strategic: oversight, vision, and direction setting;
 - Executive: resource allocation and performance management; and
 - Operational: service management and delivery.
 - Review progress, make decisions and challenge one another based on performance and resource information
 - Engage elected members – including in partnership scrutiny.
- Key learning points from review of national studies:
- Consider the key role Thematic Partnerships can play in shaping local community strategies and area agreements and, after agreement, in monitoring implementation of their proposals
 - Ensure that the appropriate portfolio holder of the Council's Cabinet is involved with the relevant thematic group
 - Distinguish between strategic, executive, and operational roles of the various elements comprising the partnership
 - Ensure that there is a process for checking and challenging the activities of the partnerships (by, for example, regular performance monitoring and through the use of the Council's scrutiny powers).

Some case studies from the south east

Two case studies, with particular relevance to the issues facing Horsham were examined. These were Lewes (East Sussex), which had built up effective district-wide partnership by building up from established local area initiatives, and Oxfordshire, which recently undertook a radical rethink of its governance arrangements.

LEWES AND EAST SUSSEX

Lewes District Local Strategic Partnership supports five Area Partnerships, which work closely with local communities to identify issues and develop projects and other actions. The purpose of the area partnerships is to link community needs and actions to the wider themes in the Sustainable Community Strategy – very much a 'grass roots' approach. These Area Partnerships cover each of the diverse localities in the District - Rural Voice, Rural Choices (covering the rural parishes), Newhaven, REGEN (covering Peacehaven and Telscombe towns), Lewes Town and Seaford. The Area Partnerships in Lewes District were originally supported and co-ordinated through three Area Partnership Development Workers based at South Downs Council for Voluntary Service and funded by second home council tax receipts. However, the funding and these posts have now ceased.

The East Sussex Sustainable Community Strategy itself is a rare example of county/district cooperation as the single strategy was jointly produced by all the LSPs in the county.

The area based approach links to, and informs, the four thematic partnerships in Lewes District (health improvement, environmental action, crime reduction and local facilities). The full LSP includes the chairs of all area partnerships and the thematic groups.

The key to the success of the various partnership groups (area and thematic) is, according to the former chair of the LSP, to make the meetings interesting and action orientated.



OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY-WIDE

In February 2008 the Oxfordshire Partnership's Public Service Board commissioned a review of all the major partnerships in Oxfordshire. The aim of the audit was to identify the strengths of partnerships as well as areas for improvement. The audit resulted in changes in the structure of the partnership and in the membership of the various partner groups. The revised framework of the Oxfordshire Partnerships includes:

The Oxfordshire Partnership Board – driving the vision for the county;

The Public Service Board – driving delivery and performance overall;

Thematic Partnerships – responsible for the following areas of focus and reporting to the Public Service Board on partnership targets:

- Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Partnership
- Environment and Waste Partnership
- Children's Trust
- Health and Well Being Partnership
- Safer Communities Partnership
- Oxfordshire Economic Partnership
- Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Partnership – this develops the existing role of the Oxfordshire Voluntary Sector Development Partnership as an independent strategic partnership for the voluntary, community and faith sectors

Under Oxfordshire's new arrangements, thematic partnerships can set up delivery groups to undertake the work required to meet the targets for which they are responsible.

As partnership working has become more central to the way in which the county council works, the Council's Cabinet agreed to include a report on current developments in the partnerships to each full Council meeting. This gives an opportunity for all elected members to put questions to members of the Cabinet about the work of the strategic partnerships.

The Oxfordshire Partnership for a number of years ran an annual conference but in the future the partnership will move to organising regular briefing sessions where the work of the partnership will be showcased. The Partnership has also developed a communications strategy which identifies the key stakeholders and methods of communication e.g. the Oxfordshire Partnership website and the quarterly partnership newsletters.

The county and district partnerships across Oxfordshire have undertaken a considerable amount of joint work, largely facilitated by the LSPs pooling some of their PtP Central Fund to fund joint activities. For example, the Oxfordshire Partnership has developed a learning and development plan and, as part of this, has run a number of successful events in partnership with the five district LSPs, which have been funded from the PtP Central Fund. To date, these have include workshops on performance management and communication, and there are plans to run an event at the end of September 2009, aimed at improving joint working between the LSPs and the countywide thematic partnerships.

Further information on the Oxfordshire Partnership can be accessed from the website:

www.oxfordshirepartnership.org.uk.



Key learning points from case studies in the south east region

- Consider how the voice of rural and town communities can be accommodated most effectively across the range of partnership bodies;
- Ensure that thematic and other sub partnership groups are action-orientated to maintain momentum and interest of all partners;
- Allow discretion to thematic and other groups to develop their own methods of working and member composition – focus on outcomes, not the means of getting there;
- Adopt the procedure of regular formal reports from the LSP to the authority's full Council meeting and the equivalent meeting of the main partnership members. This will allow all councillors to have an opportunity to learn about the activities and achievements of the partnership (and its sub groups) and to ask questions;
- Consider use of ad-hoc “delivery groups” or “task and finish groups” to assist the formal partnership meetings (Board, Task Group and thematic groups); and
- Ensure that a Partnership Conference appeals to the range of stakeholder participants, and do not get overly fixated on the need to stick rigidly to one per year.

Experience in West Sussex

Partnership arrangements can be informed by structures and arrangements elsewhere in the county or sub-region. Desktop research, using the websites of various local partnerships, has uncovered some useful lessons.

WEST SUSSEX COUNTY-WIDE

Whereas in East Sussex there is a single community strategy covering county, districts and towns within districts, in West Sussex the pattern has been for a strategy for each of the districts and a separate countywide strategy.

However, there are clear synergies between them. For example, the four goals in Horsham's emerging sustainable community strategy are based on the four pointers for action in the Community Strategy for West Sussex (revised in October 2008). The revised countywide local area agreement (May 2008) also identified similar priorities.

The essential point here is that mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that what are, in effect, shared priorities are pursued collectively.



CRAWLEY

Recently the Crawley Together LSP restructured the way it operates. This is part of a process intended to find more effective ways for organisations and sectors to work together to implement the aims and objectives set out in the new Sustainable Community Strategy for Crawley.

Under the new structure an Executive has replaced the former LSP Board. There are ten members with representatives of the public, private and community and voluntary sectors and there will be a conference in the autumn to review the Sustainable Community Strategy for Crawley.



CHICHESTER

The LSP structure is made up of four elements: the Core Group, the wider LSP, six area-based Community Forums and nine Thematic Forums. This one of relatively few LSPs to have incorporated an area, as well as a thematic, dimension to its partnership structure.



WORTHING

Worthing Together has evolved as a 'partnership of partnerships'. There are twelve local partnerships linked to the LSP including a number of 'thematic' partnerships. In addition there are some sub groups (covering the LAA, communications and a think tank). The Worthing Together partnership has decided to produce its revised sustainable community strategy jointly with its neighbouring LSP, Adur in Partnership.



MID SUSSEX

The Mid Sussex Partnership (MSP) revised its Sustainable Communities Strategy in 2008. However, once the strategy was agreed, MSP Board members were concerned about their capacity to do this effectively, given the size of the programme involved. With the help of an external facilitator, the Partnership held a workshop, funded by PtP Central Fund, to identify where its efforts were most needed by identifying those objectives of the new Strategy which were at greatest risk of failure. A consensus was achieved and the Sustainable Community Strategy is now colour coded (red amber green), identifying the level of risk associated with each area of activity. The top three risks for each of the four themes have been identified, indicating where the MSP most needs to challenge and monitor progress. (See PtP Guide 7 www.progressthroughpartnership.org.uk/mid_sussex_partnership_-_risk_assessing_the_sustainable_communities_strategy_ptp_case_study_april_2009.pdf)



Key learning points from West Sussex practice

- Ensure that the work plans and monitoring arrangements at district level include relevant provisions of county wide plans and agreements, and that the representation on each partnership body includes someone who can speak authoritatively on county wide developments;
- Consider holding occasional joint meetings on matters of shared concern with the equivalent body (whether Board, Executive or Thematic Group) in neighbouring districts and with county partnerships (including thematic groups). A valuable guide on such an approach has recently been published by the IDeA where the topic was alcohol-harm related matters, on which a joint county-district-PCT-police approach was adopted. Details can be found at www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageld=11014366;
- Consider organising forums for areas with shared interests or concerns (e.g. rural areas or market towns) to relate the partnership structure to localities as well as priority themes. The Association of Local Councils and Community & Voluntary Services Council could play a valuable role here; and
- Consider including a risk-assessment of emerging Sustainable Community Strategy proposals, through a workshop of partnership members.

HORSHAM

The Horsham District Community Partnership considered the original version of this paper at various meetings during July 2009 and has now agreed to streamline its working arrangements, notably reducing the number of theme groups from ten to four.



Summary of research

So what does this trawl through practice elsewhere suggest regarding partnership governance? The next section summarises some key themes emerging.

The overall approach is based on the principle that decisions and actions should be devolved to the most appropriate level and that notions of hierarchy should not over-rule this.

The research suggested a number of principles upon which an LSP can develop effective working arrangements:

1. **Build on established practice and procedures** whilst ensuring that the structure is capable of progressing local priorities.
2. The **frequency of meetings** should be determined by need rather than habit. Broadly speaking this could mean:
 - a. A conference annually (depending on demand);
 - b. The full Board, in its strategic role only needing to meet two or three times a year to agree strategy, work programmes and review overall performance;
 - c. An Executive meeting much more frequently to maintain a link between the Board, Thematic Groups and executive/corporate management arrangements in the main partner bodies (around every two months);
 - d. Thematic Groups meeting regularly (at least quarterly) to monitor work programmes and performance on relevant LAA outcomes as well as specific inter-agency initiatives;
 - e. Ad hoc delivery or time-limited project teams meeting as necessary to progress key tasks.
3. The **composition of each layer in the structure** should reflect a balance between representation of organisations vital to the furtherance of the aims of the partnership and the need to ensure that meetings are action-orientated and business like. Generally speaking, the most effective partnership groups are relatively small – larger meetings are widely seen as no more than “talking shops” which rapidly alienate key organisations, particularly business and countywide and regional bodies. Symptoms of this are low attendance rates and an increase in substitutes/ more junior-level representation at meetings. It is also vital in two tier areas that council representation (at county, district and parish level) is incorporated to ensure that there is democratic accountability for partnership groups and strong links to the cabinets of both District and of the County Council. The level of representation could look something like this:

Partnership Body	Composition	Optimum Size
Conference (Engaging with communities)	Open invitation to stakeholders in public services, business, and community & voluntary sectors. This is an annual opportunity to engage with the wider community on the work of the partnership.	Unlimited unless there are venue and cost constraints
Board (Strategy)	Board/Cabinet level representation including Leader of District Council, cabinet member of County Council, member of Police and Fire & Rescue Authorities, board member of Primary care Trust, chairpersons of CVS, Chamber of Commerce and Association of Local Councils.	12 - 15
Executive	Chief Executive/Director/Area Commander level representation of county & district councils, PCT, Police. Council leader could chair.	8 - 10
Thematic Groups (Delivery)	<p>Chaired by senior and influential person in that theme (e.g. police or fire & rescue for ‘Safety’, PCT or appropriate voluntary group for ‘Well-being’, District Council portfolio holder for ‘Place’ & ‘Opportunities’).</p> <p>Membership to be governed by those who “bring something to the party” in terms of resources and powers of influence. District Thematic Groups often omit organisations with a regional locus from membership. You should include voluntary, academic and business sectors as appropriate. The Economic Development group should benefit from representation from the Higher/Further Education sector, business, Business Link, Learning & Skills Council & DWP. The ‘Better Place’ Group should consider regional bodies (Environment Agency, Government Office, House Builders Federation as well as one of the utility companies).</p>	8 - 10

4. The **optimum size**, suggested in the table above, is based on the review of strategic partnerships, particularly those that have recently had a fresh look at their structures and work effectiveness.
5. All representatives should have **designated deputies** who are equally familiar with the work of the partnership.
6. A Partnership should not rely just on meetings to progress business. It should also consider **regular use of other mechanisms for shared learning and forward planning**, such as workshops, presentations, visits etc. as well as greater use of electronic media and the emerging Web 2.0 networking media.
7. Partnerships should also consider, as a priority, the development of a **Communications Strategy** to ensure that vital information flows between Partnership bodies, the bodies that comprise the Partnership and, vitally, the communities that the Partnership has been established to serve.
8. More attention needs to be given to **information sharing**. It is not enough to be doing a good job – it needs to be seen to be done. Most LSPs throughout the country rarely update their websites. One LSP's home page, for example, still advertises events due to take place in 2005! The problem of resources is recognised, but this could be overcome with a more open approach in which partners share responsibility for content. See 'The public face of the LSP' in PtP News 7, March 2009, on the PtP website www.progressthroughpartnership.org.uk.
9. Many LSPs struggle with keeping the range of organisations in the business and voluntary/community/faith sectors engaged. It is not realistic to expect such organisations where members often have heavy commitments elsewhere to act in similar ways to public sector bodies. **Effective partnerships need a representative "umbrella body" to act as a conduit to the often disparate organisations in the private and third sectors** – and partnerships could usefully explore, perhaps on a joint funded basis, a support/ development/ administrative officer to facilitate coordination and communication across the business and voluntary sectors. The representatives of the business and voluntary sectors on Partnership Boards and Groups must see their role as such a conduit as well – acting as champion for their sector at Partnership meetings – and as champion of the Partnership in meetings with their constituent bodies.

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