

Local Strategic Partnerships: lessons from the experience of the New Commitment to Regeneration

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are the Government's favoured vehicle for bringing together the key sectors and agencies to deliver better towns, cities and rural areas. New Commitment to Regeneration (NCR) pathfinders sought to improve their regeneration work through partnership working at a strategic level. This evaluation found the pathfinders' experience had timely and relevant lessons for LSPs about what makes for effective strategic partnership, its implications for partner organisations and the role of government. The study found that:

- f** NCR raised the profile of regeneration, provided a catalyst for joint strategies and extended the scope of joint working.
- f** The process of building the basis of trust amongst partners was very lengthy but also essential for developing the necessary ownership and confidence.
- f** A dedicated staff team was essential for sustaining partnership momentum and networking across sectoral, organisational and professional boundaries.
- f** Moving from action planning to delivery was challenging; it required a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities plus new arrangements, procedures and protocols for joint working.
- f** NCR 'raised the game' of partnership. It made new demands, challenged traditional ways of thinking and working and signalled the need for partner organisations to undertake whole systems change to equip themselves for strategic partnership.
- f** Pathfinders met real constraints on, as well as continuing resistance to, modifying main programmes and budgets to meet collective priorities.
- f** Pathfinders were disappointed that central government did not deliver the freedoms and flexibilities to allow them to tailor national policies to local circumstances. Local players also wanted performance management systems more conducive to partnership working and effective outcome delivery.
- f** An outstanding challenge was for NCR pathfinders to measure their impact, to give an account of their activity and what value they added; and to explore new mechanisms and structures for local stakeholders and communities to hold them to account.

Background

The New Commitment to Regeneration was developed by the Local Government Association with government support as a new approach to tackling regeneration through partnership at a strategic level. It was distinctive in involving:

- whole local authority areas or combinations of local authorities;
- the mainstream programmes and budgets of all public sector agencies in the area;
- national government as partner;
- the exploration of freedoms and flexibilities in implementing national programmes.

As the pathfinders piloting NCR were in very diverse urban and rural areas, they tested the approach in a range of different local circumstances.

The timing of the study meant that most of the emerging messages concerned process issues. These are highly relevant to LSPs as they embark on the same formative and developmental phases.

A development framework

The evaluation identified the following key elements for a framework for partners seeking to put together a strategic partnership:

- strong leadership;
- trust amongst partners;
- an independent staff team;
- a common understanding/knowledge base;
- capacity to focus on overarching priorities;
- co-ordinated planning processes;
- integrated action plans across partners;
- integrated community consultation, development and participation strategies;
- increased synergy in accessing and deploying resources;
- mechanisms for review and evaluation;
- scope for innovation;
- parallel processes to build capacity within member organisations.

The pathfinders' experience

The experience of NCR pathfinders supported the principles of strategic partnership and underlined its potential. At the same time, however, it revealed the massive challenges partnership presents to traditional ways of thinking and working.

For pathfinders, NCR:

- raised the profile of regeneration activities;
- gave partnership a clearer focus because pathfinders established a collective vision for the area;
- fostered a more integrated approach to tackling priorities;
- provided a catalyst for joint strategies;

- was an impetus to joint working;
- enabled earlier and more responses to policy consultations and developments;
- gave a strategic framework for guiding decision-making in individual organisations;
- encouraged greater consistency with sub-regional and regional strategies;
- forced partners to focus more on outcomes and less on individual agency outputs;
- enhanced the prospects of leveraging in competitive funding;
- pushed partners to look more closely at what they can achieve with their mainstream budgets.

Lessons for Local Strategic Partnerships

A new order of strategy making

NCR expanded the concept of regeneration to encompass economic, social and environmental goals, to integrate it with mainstream activity and make sustainability the rationale for managing the area.

LSPs will be working to a similarly wide brief in which they will have to balance different roles and pressures. Factors such as the pattern of local government and institutional boundaries and their relationship to labour and housing markets and economic development opportunities will affect what can best be done at different levels. The evaluation identified key questions to be asked (see Table 1).

Forming strategic partnerships

It took time to develop the basis of trust on which to build partnerships especially when their ambitions, role and remit had such profound implications for partner organisations. The process of winning ownership and confidence could not be rushed.

The breadth of membership had to match the partnership's strategic goals without being so cumbersome that it degenerated into a talking shop. Policy-making processes needed to marry inclusivity and focus. Partnership structures therefore had to combine capacity for decision-making and executive action with extending the reach of the partnership, increasing its links with member organisations and giving a range of opportunities for involvement. They also needed to be fit for purpose at different stages of the partnership's evolution.

Although parity of partnership was a goal, leadership was also critical. Given their range of responsibilities and resources and their democratic accountability, local authorities were usually expected to lead, but had to walk a fine line between leadership and dominance.

Partnerships needed to find ways of very disparate organisations working together while accommodating and exploiting their differences in order to maximise the synergy from their combined perspectives, expertise and agency roles.

Table 1: Key questions for strategic partnerships

Stage 1 Clarifying the purpose of the partnership

- why have it?
- what added value it can bring?

Stage 2 Examining the internal and external operational environment

- what are the local needs and opportunities?
- what are the relevant policy developments and trends?
- what is the partnership able to deliver collectively and via its members?

Stage 3 Agreeing a vision and making strategic choices

- what should be the vision?
- whose vision should it be?
- what are the main routes for arriving at it?
- how will we know we are going in the right direction?

Stage 4 Translating the strategy into an action plan

- what activities will take place under each strategic objective?
- who will be responsible for planning?
- who will be responsible for delivery?
- what targets and milestones should be met?
- who will monitor and evaluate?
- what steps are individual organisations taking to build their capacity for partnership and joint working?

Stage 5 Squaring the circle

- what will the accountability mechanisms be?
- how will the partnership review its activities to inform its future policy?
- how will it review its partnership structures and mechanisms to ensure they remain appropriate?
- how will good practice lessons be disseminated?

Executive teams

A critical factor in the progress of pathfinders was the amount of dedicated staff time given to sustaining their momentum. A team was essential to:

- give the partnership its own identity;
- service the partnership;
- maintain an overview of strategy and progress;
- network across sectoral, organisational and professional boundaries encompassing the roles of broker, mediator, advocate and interpreter.

Joined-up delivery

After two years, most if not all NCR pathfinders were still in transition from action planning to delivery. The complexity of the policy context made the process more difficult.

Many individual member organisations were in the throes of reorganisation in response to new policy pressures such as modernising local government. The increase of new initiatives and multiplicity of area-based and thematic partnerships also diverted staff time and attention and complicated the quest for strategic integration. Nevertheless, pathfinders had started to institute a range of joint arrangements:

- co-location of staff;
- joint appointments;
- joint staff development/training;
- data exchange;
- joint monitoring/impact assessment;
- community consultation and surveys

Some were using initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities to road test new models and derive good practice lessons to be rolled out more widely on the basis of what works.

Strategic partnerships themselves could not deliver everything. Their strategic role also depended upon identifying lead organisations to take responsibility for implementation and meeting targets and milestones. They needed to be aware of the dynamics of organisational behaviour and establish procedures, protocols and service level agreements that could smooth the way to joint working.

Making partnership mainstream practice

Pathfinders' experience showed that there was resistance to modifying main programmes and budgets to meet collective priorities. It was a very complex task. Very often organisations had little discretion or spare resource to move beyond their statutory responsibilities or change the ways they carried them out.

Pathfinders were disappointed that central government did not deliver the freedoms and flexibilities to allow them to tailor national policies to local circumstances. They felt that this discouraged pathfinders from exploring areas of change that might already be open to them.

Key tasks for LSPs

The experience of NCR pathfinders underlined some key challenges that LSPs will also face and tasks that they will have to undertake:

Developing their vision and strategy

- analysing needs and opportunities;
- determining appropriate steps towards desired change;
- developing inclusive planning processes;
- creating a strategic framework that ensures a fit of plans across agencies and neighbourhoods and consistency with sub-regional, regional and national policy targets.

Achieving whole systems change

- tackling all the dimensions of change to equip organisations for partnership working: shared values, style, structure, systems, strategy, skills and staff.

Engaging private sector partners

- making a 'business case' for involvement whilst having realistic expectations about the private sector role;
- developing a menu of ways for companies and business organisations to participate – strategically, thematically and at different levels.

Developing community involvement strategies which encompass:

- auditing organisations, skills and needs;
- capacity building individuals, community groups and networks and the public sector organisations that work with them;
- building voluntary and community sector infrastructure;
- protocols for community engagement against which partners can measure levels of local engagement;
- monitoring and benchmarking community participation in the partnership.

Measuring the partnership's added value

- establishing indicators to track progress towards the strategic vision for the area;
- benchmarking the partnership's capacity in terms of its leadership, management, performance, local standing and influence;
- feeding the findings of evaluation into policy.

Accountability mechanisms

- giving an account of the partnership's activities to stakeholders, including information about outcomes: changes in the area's socio-economic position and in service delivery performance;
- developing new mechanisms for stakeholders, including the general public, to hold the partnership to account.

Central-local partnership

Local players were looking for more explicit acknowledgement of the diversity of their areas and opportunities. They wanted greater autonomy to plan, agree priorities and deploy resources in response to local needs and opportunities. This would entail a different relationship with central government, recognising what can best be done at different levels of government and renegotiating the limits on the local discretion and flexibility imposed by national programmes and funding frameworks.

The evaluation concluded that – to achieve this – the following action is necessary at national or regional level:

- recognising the role of macro-economic and regional policies, and the quality and scope of public services in creating conditions that will maximise local players' chances of success;
- clarifying expectations of local government and LSPs and ensuring that central government's corporate approach is consistent with these expectations;
- ensuring capacity at regional level, especially in GORs, to support and monitor LSPs and develop appropriate support, monitoring and accreditation mechanisms;
- adapting administrative procedures and performance management systems to encourage rather than inhibit partnership.

About the project

These findings are based on research led by Hilary Russell of the European Institute for Urban Affairs, Liverpool John Moores University. The study was jointly commissioned by the Local Government Association, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions.

How to get further information

The full report, **Local strategic partnerships: Lessons from New Commitment to Regeneration** by Hilary Russell, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 861 34 370 1, price £13.95).