

Inter-agency working in practice

The traditional, monolithic model of local government is not well suited to the challenges now facing local authorities according to a study by Robin Hambleton, Sue Essex, Liz Mills and Konica Razzaque. The study shows how local authorities have responded to these challenges by developing new ways of collaborating with other agencies. Drawing on case studies in community care, strategic planning, environmental policy and transport planning the study examines current approaches and identifies lessons for future practice. The researchers found:

- f** There is a strong trend towards the diversification of the agencies delivering local services, notwithstanding the creation of unitary authorities in substantial parts of the country. This is increasing the need for collaborative working, both within the public sector and between the public, private and voluntary sectors.
- f** Local authorities are developing innovative approaches to inter-agency working in a range of policy arenas but these efforts have had little publicity or official recognition.
- f** There are, however, substantial barriers to effective collaboration, including vested interests, short-term thinking, the sheer complexity of some tasks, and divergent professional and organisational cultures.
- f** As collaborative working grows, problems in establishing and maintaining accountability are emerging. Political responsibilities need to be thought through so that elected members can develop a clear and useful role within the collaborative arrangements.
- f** Joint arrangements can bring excluded voices into the decision-making process. For example, service users now play a vital role in community care initiatives.
- f** The researchers conclude that to be successful collaborative working must:
 - balance two key requirements - effective delivery of function and adequate arrangements for accountability;
 - be viewed as more than an 'add-on' to on-going activities. It requires participants to identify shared objectives; to question established approaches and welcome innovation; to commit time, energy and resources; to establish clear reporting mechanisms; to create mechanisms for regular review of the whole approach to collaboration.

The need for collaboration

Many local authorities are questioning long-established organisational assumptions and are beginning to recognise that, while direct provision may often continue to be the best strategy for meeting local needs, there can be significant advantages in working with and through other agencies. Changes in both the policy, financial and institutional environment are spurring local authorities to shift their focus from an exclusive concern with direct service provision towards new forms of working in partnership.

In some areas of policy-making - for example, strategic land-use planning and transport planning - the importance of inter-agency working is long-established. In recent years, however, it has been recognised throughout local government that a growing number of emerging, multi-faceted problems cry out for co-ordinated, multi-sectoral responses. In areas as diverse as urban regeneration, community care and environmental policy, local authorities are urged by central government to work more closely and effectively, not just with other levels of government, but also with other arms of government, with the voluntary sector and with the private sector.

There is a strong trend towards the diversification of the agencies delivering local services, some due to changes imposed by central government, others from local choice, for example:

- The transfer of functions from local authorities to other agencies - for example, housing associations.
- The creation of agency arrangements to manage specialised functions - for example, economic development and business advice services.
- The introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) which has heightened the role of private agencies and 'arm's-length' direct labour organisations in providing services.
- The decentralisation of power to local service delivery units (for example, schools) or other bodies (for example, residents' groups).

In response to these various changes, local authorities are experimenting with a variety of approaches to inter-agency working in a range of policy arenas.

Making new connections

Debates about approaches to policy-making and management often take place in relatively sealed 'policy communities'. This study juxtaposed experience in a range of policy settings where inter-agency collaboration is taking place. It looked at case studies illustrating a range of collaborative models (from formal through to very informal) and a range of levels of decision-making (from sub-regional strategy to specific projects in particular cities):

- *Community care* - investigating joint planning between local authorities, health authorities, voluntary bodies and others to meet the needs of people with learning difficulties.
- *Strategic planning* - assessing how local authorities collaborate at sub-regional and regional levels to prepare strategic land-use plans.
- *Corporate environmental policy* - examining ways in which local authorities, voluntary bodies and others work together to pursue 'greening' initiatives at local level.
- *Transport planning* - examining how councils work with other agencies to prepare bids for transport supplementary grant.

Key challenges in collaboration

Whilst the research uncovered a good deal of enthusiasm for collaborative working it also identified substantial barriers, notably vested interests, short-term thinking, the sheer complexity of some tasks, and divergent professional and organisational cultures. Successful examples of collaborative working balanced two key requirements: effective delivery of function and adequate arrangements for accountability. In joint working there can be a tension between these two requirements. Much, however, depends on what the inter-agency collaboration is designed to achieve.

Evaluating collaboration

Drawing on the experience from the case studies, the researchers developed an analytical framework for appraising inter-agency working which can be used as a checklist for performance evaluation by practitioners. The key headings are as follows:

The effectiveness of collaboration

- **Objectives** - what are the reasons for having the inter-agency arrangement? Is it designed to:
 - make policy
 - influence policy
 - make decisions about the use of public resources
 - focus on a practical outcome or implement a project
 - share information and expertise?
- **Value for money** - Does the expenditure of effort and resources on inter-agency collaboration represent good value for money?
- **Responsiveness** - How responsive are the joint arrangements to the needs of different participants?
- **Stability and flexibility** - How resilient are the arrangements in the face of changing circumstances?

Accountability of collaboration

- **Relating to the public** - How can citizens hold those engaged in inter-agency collaboration to account? How can citizens be more directly involved?
- **Political accountability** - How do elected politicians hold those engaged in inter-agency working to account? Is responsibility for decision-making clear?
- **Financial accountability** - In inter-agency arrangements where decisions on spending are made, how is financial accountability maintained?

The case study evidence suggests that the degree to which participants identify with a given arrangement can be crucial. Moreover inter-agency working can play an important role in staff development, organisational learning and the promotion of innovation.

Improving effectiveness in joint working

A key finding is that joint arrangements should be 'fit for the purpose' intended. Rather than looking for joint working models which can be adopted 'off the shelf', local authorities need first to clarify the overall purpose of the partnership and the aims of each participating agency and those affected by services.

In some of the case study examples co-ordination

between agencies worked best whilst in others a market model involving trading of resources was more effective. In many situations, however, inter-agency working acted as a form of networking which can open up new communication channels cutting across lines of formal responsibility. This approach can enable participants to develop a shared outlook which, in turn, can allow the pooling of resources to achieve a common purpose.

Lessons on effectiveness from the case studies include:

- **Incentives** Central and regional levels of government can stimulate collaboration by requiring strong evidence of joint working as a condition of grant.
- **Leadership** Local authorities are very well placed to exercise an important leadership role but entrenched departmental and professional attitudes need to be challenged if this leadership is to be successful.
- **Commitment** Successful collaboration requires those involved to view joint working as more than an 'add-on' to their ongoing activities.
- **Excluded voices** Effective inter-agency working needs to draw in the voices of service users, the voluntary sector and the private sector. The public sector has a vital contribution but needs to reach out to engage the interest and enthusiasm of other parties.
- **Cultural realignment** Effective collaboration is a way of managing change. Established ways of doing things will often need to be challenged if significant progress is to be made.
- **Network roles** Much collaborative working can be sustained by practitioners carrying inter-agency working alongside other responsibilities. However, in a situation where collaboration needs to be pushed forward quickly it can be very useful to identify individuals to play roles which span networks or organisations. These individuals can be seconded into multi-agency teams which may operate out of separate offices.

Ensuring accountability in joint working

The research shows that inter-agency working can dilute or obscure the process of accountability. The public may be unclear about where responsibility lies and find it difficult to get their views represented

within the inter-agency arrangement.

Lessons on accountability from the case studies include:

- **The interested public** It may be helpful to distinguish the 'interested' public from the public at large. Where attention is focused on groups with a clear interest (for example, service users in community care planning or local environmental activists) the energy and enthusiasm can be impressive.
- **Political accountability** Whilst many aspects of inter-agency working can be delegated to officers the adequacy of the arrangements for reporting back to elected politicians deserves further consideration. Mechanisms, such as joint member steering groups, may be in place but they are not always successful in ensuring accountability.
- **Member roles** Councillors need better support in executing their role in inter-agency working. This includes clarification of members' responsibilities, the strengthening of reporting procedures, and better briefing.
- **Review mechanisms** Inter-agency mechanisms need to be subject to policy and performance review so that parent bodies can monitor progress against objectives.

About the study

The research was based on in-depth interviews with over 60 people involved in inter-agency working in different policy settings. While 54 per cent of the respondents were from local authorities the remainder were from other agencies including voluntary and private sector organisations.

For further information about this study contact either Professor Robin Hambleton, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of the West of England, Bristol, Frenchay Campus, Bristol BS16 1QY, Tel: 0117 9763953, Fax: 0117 9763950 or Ms Sue

Essex, Department of City and Regional Planning, University of Wales, Cardiff, PO Box 906, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF1 3YN. Tel: 01222 874882 Fax: 01222 874845.

Further information

The full report, *The collaborative council: a study of inter-agency working in practice* by Robin Hambleton, Sue Essex, Liz Mills and Konica Razzaque, is published by LGC Communications in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £11.50).

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 30** The governance gap: quangos and accountability (Sept 94)
- 35** The membership of local appointed bodies (May 95)
- 37** The working of joint arrangements (July 95)
- 38** Local authority experience of compulsory competitive tendering (Aug 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



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