

# **New roles for old**



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**Local authority members and partnership working**

**Mick Wilkinson and Gary Craig**

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# 1 Policy context

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## Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), to explore the role of councillors in partnership working. As the original brief for the research observed, decisions about who should represent the authority on which partnerships appeared to be taken in an ad hoc manner with little consistency between and within authorities. At a time when external partnerships are proliferating, the sponsors of the study felt it would be timely both to explore the experience of members and to identify ways in which they might be supported in the new roles which partnership working was requiring of them. Among the key questions explored here are:

- how local authorities decide on the mix of member and officer representation in partnership working
- what factors influence these choices
- what needs members might have for support
- how this support might be provided.

It was anticipated that the study would reveal some difficult tensions between the traditional role of councillors as community leaders, within one conception of local democratic life and political accountability, and their involvement as – in theory at least – equal partners in a range of new broadly-based local governance mechanisms. This, as the report shows, has proved to be the case. As well as producing this final report of the study, the intention was to involve councillors in the

formation of guidance for local authorities. This has been done and the guidance note will be published at the same time as this report. It is important to stress how fast the partnership agenda is developing and there will doubtless be a need for regular updates of this guidance.

## The partnership boom

Since the election of the first New Labour government in 1997, partnership working has become the organisational strategy most strongly espoused by government for a wide range of policy initiatives, including regeneration, public health, child care, education and anti-poverty policy. Although there has been a thirty-year history of joint working between policy organisations aimed at combating poverty or fostering regeneration at the local level (Alcock *et al.*, 1998; Taylor, 2000), and an almost equally long history of inter-agency relationships between health and social services, the pace at which partnership working has developed has accelerated in the past few years.

The Inner City Partnerships of 1978 onwards were the first formal expression of local–central government partnership working, but by 2001 virtually every major government social policy initiative was predicated on partnership working and the language of local governance is now also strongly influenced by this concept (Scottish Office, 1996; DETR, 1997). Initiatives, many of them area-based (LGA, 1999), such as New Start, Best Value, Health Action Zones and Better Government for Older People, all emphasised the need for inter-agency partnerships as a basis for tackling important

local social and economic issues. A report from the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) listed 32 government-inspired area-based initiatives since which further major initiatives have emerged such as Connexions and the Children's Fund. Recently, local authorities were encouraged to create (and possibly lead) Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs – dubbed by some as 'a partnership of partnerships') to co-ordinate – and, as many hoped, reduce – the disparate range of partnerships and initiatives in each area (LGA, 2001a).

The delivery of effective, efficient and equitable services in any area, and the development of a healthy local democracy, increasingly is thus seen to depend on strong and appropriately defined relationships between different combinations of local actors (Rao, 2000; Glendinning *et al.*, 2002). One example is the relationships between local authorities, other locally focused public agencies and the voluntary and community sectors, finding expression through the development of local 'compacts' – frameworks of principles and values (Craig *et al.*, 2002a).

The role proposed for local government in recent White Papers and legislation confirms its potential, through funding and regulatory responsibilities, to ensure publicly accountable, equitable and quality-consistent services. Councils are also required to maintain a strategic overview of local provision through concern for the social, economic and environmental well-being of local people. This overview should ensure that the efforts of different partners/actors contribute to the overall benefit of the locality. The goals of partnership working and the perceived benefits of any particular partnership will however vary.

Recent research (Glendinning *et al.*, 2002) suggests that the costs of partnership working can be as great as, or even greater than, its benefits and that the performance of partnerships is highly variable. Despite obvious government enthusiasm, given evidence that partnership working has not always succeeded in delivering on its goals in the past (e.g. Hudson and Hardy, 2002), it should not be presumed that partnership working is a universal good, a perspective echoed in many of the comments made to us in the course of this study.

Important questions need to be explored in relation to the role of different partners in the local governance arena and the tensions these illustrate – tensions which are explored within this study. For example, thinking of the involvement of voluntary and community organisations in partnerships, these organisations have historically been associated with choice, flexibility and the capacity to release new resources (public donations, volunteers, mutual aid and self-help). They also have the capacity to reach the most marginalised groups in society, giving them a public voice (Craig *et al.*, 2002b). However, many councillors express concern about the increasing role of bodies which have no obvious forms of public accountability. In return, voluntary and community sector organisations argue that they represent a different and wider form of democratic accountability, one based on participative democracy (*ibid.*).

Similarly, differing forms of partnership can bring different potential gains and, for local authorities, some forms of partnership are inherently more attractive than others. Partnerships, particularly those involving larger



public agencies with substantial resources, have particular goals which include improving inter-agency co-operation, where this has been found to be wanting (such as working across the health and social care 'divide'); bringing a range of different resources and kinds of expertise to bear on complex multidimensional problems (as for example in local strategic anti-poverty partnerships) (Alcock *et al.*, 1995; Pearson *et al.*, 1997; Alcock *et al.*, 1999); or, more simply, increasing the volume of resources which can be brought to bear on persistently difficult issues or those cross-cutting issues characterised as 'wicked'. The drive for partnership working has thus come from differing political and policy imperatives and partnership working has taken different forms: some strategic generic partnerships, others focused on specific, perhaps short-term service issues.

Partnerships based around particular projects clearly have fewer long-term implications for funding, for organisational relationships between partners or for the role of members – the focus of this report. Amongst the recent wave of partnerships, some have significant financial implications, some are authority-wide; others are much more modest and geographically focused (DETR, 2000); all have differing ramifications for members' involvement. The IDeA guide for councillors (2002) asserts that 'there is an increasing recognition that [councillors'] developing role in community governance and community leadership will founder without effective partnership working'. A review of the ways in which local authorities are grappling with the tensions inherent in partnership working suggests that although most authorities are keen to take on the role of 'community leader', many

felt inadequately resourced or prepared to manage its demands, findings echoed in this report. This view applied as much to members as to officers (LGA, 2001b) and still leaves unanswered questions about how members can maintain accountability within partnership working.

### Changing roles

Until relatively recently, when health and social care partnerships developed more strongly, the major explicit government arena for partnership working was in the widening context of urban regeneration (Skelcher *et al.*, 1996; Carley *et al.*, 2000). This broadening approach, including support for local partnership activity and community development, reflected a changing policy that has focused attention on issues of social exclusion and social integration rather than solely on physical and economic development, reflected in New Labour's social policy initiatives (SEU, 1998). For local government, the more recent focus on social inclusion has meant renewed emphasis on ensuring that regeneration and its own anti-poverty activity achieves maximum benefits for poor communities and focuses on the social and community contexts of development work. The parallel focus on 'joined-up action' as a key policy response to social inclusion means a greater emphasis on working across the boundaries of local government's own departments, as well as with other local agencies. Attention has also shifted back towards the greater involvement of local communities (through local organisations), not merely as recipients of central or local government action, but also as key partners in

the development of strategic responses to poverty and exclusion in their own right. Partnership working, it has been asserted (though still rarely on the basis of firm evidence), through the 'interconnectedness' of service providers, also provides a better chance of success in delivering services which are both relevant and of high quality (NAO, 2001).

For local government, initiatives such as Best Value (the duty of 'best value' requires that authorities commission local services according to quality, value for money and local need [DETR, 1998a]) also imply a strong role for partnership working (DETR, 1999a; DETR, 1999b) as does the government demand for developing local democracy (DETR, 1998b, 1998c). The implicit policy target, in theory at least, for many partnerships is for partners not only to maintain a role in project implementation, but also to influence policy development and direction. This may have profound – and potentially conflicting – implications for the role of members in shaping policy, offering new opportunities to harness a broader range of experience and expertise, whilst at the same time limiting their capacity to take unilateral decisions in line with their perceived political mandate.

Some policy-oriented studies (LGMB, 1994, 1995) suggest that local authorities should pursue more effective and deeper alliances with various non-local authority partners for a range of reasons. The most relevant of these is perhaps the shift in thinking about local government towards a more 'enabling' role (Wilson and Game, 1994), leading to an authority which uses 'all the means at its disposal to meet the needs of those who live within the area' (Clarke and Stewart, 1997). This view clearly implies a move

towards the engagement of the local authority with all relevant partners. The notion of partnership, however, continues to be a vague one, a term described as 'overused, ambiguous and politicised' (Hastings, 1996) and the lack of clarity about its precise meaning has certainly contributed to tensions between potential partners. These tensions are reflected in the responses of those interviewed for this study. One cynical view is that partnership working is simply 'mutual loathing suspended in the pursuit of funding': that is, that the stick of statutory partnership enforcement is made less painful by the carrot of additional resources. Another, barely less sceptical, view is that partnership is 'a slippery concept' (Audit Commission, 1998).

Although there has been a growing literature (e.g. Mackintosh, 1992; Hastings, 1996; Craig and Taylor, 2000; Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Glendinning *et al.*, 2002) examining the meaning of partnership and exploring the goals of differing types of partnership, there has been very little discussion of how different partners negotiate their roles, and certainly little discussion of the pressures on local authority members, faced with working within an arena where various partnership representatives call on widely differing forms of legitimacy. Indeed, the presumption has tended to be that local authorities have been represented by officials. These concerns are however becoming explicit. A recent study on the development of local compacts has shown how individual members, from their experience of working with the voluntary and community sectors (VCS), can come to act as champions for them (Craig *et al.*, 1999; see also e.g. WLGA, 1997 for a Welsh view). Conversely, local voluntary sector

organisations can be seen as a threat to the role of councillors who feel undermined by the ability of such organisations to call on a large but diffuse constituency of support (LGA, 2002). The lack of analysis of the impact of partnership working on elected members is quite remarkable given that the involvement of local authorities in partnership working has considerable implications for the role of members at a time when their role is under question as a result of a number of further central government initiatives. These include the broad local government modernisation programme of New Labour; the development of cabinet government, the emergence of directly elected mayors, the proposal for a further key community leadership role in relation to the Local Strategic Partnerships proposed in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 2000), an enhanced role in neighbourhood management (Burgess, Hall *et al.*, 2001; LGA, 2001c; Sullivan, Root *et al.*, 2001), and the development of regional bodies.

Clear implications for members include:

- understanding the basis on which members should be or are involved in partnership working as opposed to or as well as officers (and whether there are particular policy arenas which are felt to be of significance in this choice)
- the need for a wider range of expertise in working and negotiating with external partners
- the considerable additional commitments in terms of time because of the demands of partnership working outside the core local government structure

- the impact of cabinet government on partnership working more generally
- the erosion of traditional forms of democratic accountability exercised through local government (which were already perceived to be undermined during the 1980s as a result of the creation of organisations such as Urban Development Corporations dominated by private sector interests [Lawless, 1996])
- a potential dilution of their power and influence, as partnership working requires a sharing of influence over decision-making and policy formation amongst a wider range of actors.

IDeA (2002) has begun to address the issues facing councillors within partnership working, suggesting, for example, that they need new or enhanced skills such as listening, consensus and trust-building, diplomacy and handling conflict, and a more subtle understanding of local governance (see e.g. Rhodes, 1997; IDeA, 2002).

At the same time, much of the literature on partnership working still points to the local authority as the dominant partner in terms of resources and power, exercising a disproportionate influence within partnership working (Alcock *et al.*, 1998; Craig and Taylor, 2000; NCVO, 2000a; Craig and Taylor, 2002). This might suggest that members, anxious about a dilution of their own powers or an undermining of their representative role, have little to fear. It has not been clear whether local authorities have effectively addressed the tensions and contradictions raised by these issues, for example, through training for members, establishing mechanisms for supporting or

debriefing members, or by strategic thinking about the structures and mechanisms by which members are involved – or not involved – in partnerships. In short, the involvement of members in partnership working at present has been ad hoc and inconsistent between and within authorities. There has also been little knowledge of whether members have different understandings of the value, constraints and opportunities of partnership, see them politically within a differing perspective, or experience an impact on their own roles and powers, in ways different from local authority officers. This gap in our knowledge forms the focus for this report which, it is hoped, with the associated guidance note to be published by the Local Government Association, will contribute to clarifying the role that members might play in partnership working and the support they need to carry out this role.

### Methodology

The study was carried out through a literature review, a postal questionnaire to all English and Welsh local authorities, and detailed fieldwork. This involved individual interviews and discussion groups in three case study areas (a unitary authority – called U for the purposes of this study; a metropolitan district – M; and a two-tier county / district council area, respectively C and D) and two discussion groups with local authority members (referred to as DG1 and DG2). A more detailed account of the methodology is given in Appendix 1.

In the next chapter we review members' experiences of partnership working as reported in the postal questionnaire, the case study interviews and the discussion groups.

## 2 Elected members' experience of partnership working

### The scope of partnership working

In each of the case study sites visited, there was strong consensus that partnership working was both on the increase and inevitable, seen as a government expectation or requirement as well as, in a more positive sense, offering new possibilities for local governance. Partnership was in any case permeating all levels of local governance. This was reflected in the postal survey of local authorities, which requested a range of information on member/officer involvement in 19 different partnerships. The survey had a response rate of 40 per cent with 166 authorities completing all sections of the questionnaire. Most of the data in this chapter draws on the survey.

The extent of partnership involvement by members could be broadly categorised as high, medium and low (but almost always at lower levels than that of officers). By far the highest level of engagement for both elected members and officers was in Crime and Disorder partnerships: elected member involvement was 69 per cent of all respondents, still far lower however than officer involvement (97 per cent). The significance of crime can also be gauged by the relatively high level of cabinet/lead member (LM) involvement (44 per cent) and of chief

officer involvement (71 per cent).

Of course, the nature and statutory basis of these partnerships vary enormously and this will have affected levels of participation. Thus, only a few areas have had HAZ or Employment Action Zones (EAZ) status, Sure Start or Better Government for Older People (the last has now effectively ended); all will soon have to have Connexions (which has only just started), Crime and Disorder and Local Strategic Partnerships. The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) was a bidding process where priorities have changed over time and authorities could decide whether or not to involve themselves in particular successive rounds of bidding.

There was however, and hardly surprisingly given New Labour's emphasis on partnership working, a very wide range of partnership forms across England and Wales. Some 27 per cent and 26 per cent respectively of authorities had member or officer involvement in at least one partnership other than those below, some citing up to nine other partnerships. These ranged from major strategic partnerships (European Partnership, Regeneration Zone or a Sub-Regional Strategic Partnership) to localised neighbourhood area partnerships, environmental forums, a Consortium on Asylum Seekers, a

**Table 1 Partnerships generating the highest involvement levels (% of all respondents) (n=166 in all tables)**

	Member	Cabinet/LM	Officer	Chief officer
Crime and Disorder	69	44	97	71
Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)	63	48	72	67
SRB Programmes	59	30	74	38
LA21/Sustainability	58	34	82	24
Health Improvement (HIPs)	40	25	73	38

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**Table 2 Partnerships generating medium to low involvement levels (%)**

	Member	Cabinet/LM	Officer	Chief officer
Community Legal Services	23	12	74	26
Sure Start	19	7	48	15
Learning and Skills Council	18	13	44	26
Lifelong Learning Partnership	15	10	50	26
Connexions	14	10	40	22
Health Action Zones	13	8	26	16
Education Action Zones	13	8	20	10
Better Government for Older People	12	6	25	8
Drug and Alcohol Teams	12	8	69	33
New Deal for Communities	11	6	18	6
Youth Offending Teams	9	7	49	21
New Commitment to Regeneration	7	4	13	7
New Start	1	1	6	2
Employment Action Zones	1	1	6	2

Travellers' Forum, even an archaeological partnership. One respondent noted: 'Council has officer/ member involvement in 100+ partnerships and organisations'.

In every one of the 19 partnerships listed in the survey, officer involvement was higher – sometime substantially so – than that of elected members. Elected member involvement appeared relatively limited and primarily focused on key strategic areas of policy (SRB programmes, LSPs), and what members universally saw as the high-profile issue of Crime and Disorder. Even on those key partnerships (see Table 1), however, less than 50 per cent of member representation was at cabinet/lead member level. Outside the 'top five' partnerships, only one other partnership had over 20 per cent of authorities with member representation, and only one of those partnerships had more than one-eighth of all authorities engaged via cabinet/lead member participation.

This is a rapidly changing environment and there are signs that the role of members on partnerships is on the increase, that mechanisms are being established to ensure the provision of training to facilitate their engagement, and that greater thought is being given to the need for more formal systems of accountability. The metropolitan districts and English unitaries were leading the way in terms both of member and of cabinet/lead member representation. Welsh unitaries appeared to be lagging well behind; however, some of the 19 partnerships listed in the survey were not applicable to Wales

**Table 3 Percentage of authorities involving members in partnership working**

Metropolitan district	46
English unitary	38
County councils	29
London boroughs	26
District councils	19
Welsh unitary	12

and there was, perhaps as a consequence, a relatively low response rate from Welsh authorities to the survey.

Taking the whole range of 19 possible partnerships outlined in the survey, metropolitan districts were the type of authority showing the greatest amount of involvement for members in partnership working.

Only five of the partnerships named had member involvement in significantly over 20 per cent of all authorities. Table 4 shows the amount and level of member involvement by type of authority, while Table 5 shows the percentage of cabinet/lead member involvement.

### Representation on partnerships: how authorities decide

Although a wide variety of decision-making mechanisms was apparent, the dominant criteria mentioned were: the implications of a particular partnership for the authority, the issues being addressed by the individual partnership concerned, and decision on a case-by-case basis. Key factors included whether it was of strategic import, a local delivery vehicle, or an operational issue, and where the partnership fitted into corporate priorities:

*'What is it that the outside organisation is doing? Do they have financial ramifications? Do the decisions of those organisations have a bearing on some of the systems or policies that we are trying to develop as an authority? If the answers*

**Table 4 Percentage of member involvement**

	LSPs	SRB	LA21	HIPs	Crime and Disorder
Metropolitan district	100	100	67	22	78
English unitary	80	80	65	45	75
District councils	57	51	56	40	74
County councils	77	77	54	61	54
London boroughs	70	80	60	40	50
Welsh unitary	25	0	50	25	37

**Table 5 Percentage of cabinet/lead member involvement**

	LSPs	SRB	LA21	HIPs	Crime and Disorder
Metropolitan district	89	56	67	11	78
English unitary	55	45	40	35	55
District councils	42	26	30	22	41
County councils	69	31	38	26	38
London boroughs	70	40	40	30	50
Welsh unitary	12	0	12	12	12

## New roles for old

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*to those questions are yes I suspect that it is important for members to be involved. If it is a case of just keeping a watching brief and providing advice and support then it might not be important for a member to go along.'*

(Executive member, C/D)

Other factors cited were: the level of member interest in a partnership; specific requests from other partners for officer or member representation; the seniority of representation from other partners; and the need to take account of relevant guidance on specific partnerships (some positions are governed by legislation) or of the constitution of the particular partnership organisation.

### A corporate approach

The survey findings suggested little evidence of a corporate approach to partnership working; in fact they implied that members could act more or less as they wished. However, in the case study sites, some attempt was made to maintain a corporate overview, in one by the council's deputy leader and the Chief Executive, in another by the deputy leader and the Director of Community Planning, in the third by the Head of Corporate Strategy. In all three areas, the LSP was increasingly seen as the key mechanism for co-ordinating other partnerships across the locality. It was also felt that the existence of so many statutory plans and targets facilitated a corporate approach:

*'People do cross reference, you've got to do them so we may as well as do some joined up work. Most of the work is done by officers but at each key point it's taken to members.'*

(Senior council officer, U)

Meanwhile members and officers endeavoured to ensure that they sang from the same hymn sheet on individual partnership bodies:

*'we know what our line is if you like and we will have had our words in closed rooms before that and we go in with a common way forward.'*

(Senior council officer, U)

This might not always be the case: the IDeA guide for councillors (IDeA, 2002) suggests that there may be tensions, particularly for officers, when they take part in partnership meetings with members who may, they felt, be looking closely at their performance, perhaps to ensure they did not give any hostages to fortune.

### Procedures for deciding who should represent the council

In general, the decision-making procedures were not directed by written policy but often appeared to be the result of ad hoc deliberations between a variety of players and via a variety of mechanisms: variously, the Chief Executive, chief officers, senior managers, the leader, the portfolio holder, the political groups and the cabinet. Processes varied from the formal to the very informal, with a mixture of the two in some instances. Decisions were made on a case-by-case basis dependent on the characteristics, purpose and profile of each partnership and on the skills/experience of the officer/member concerned, or their having a local role in relation to the site of the partnership.

It is clear that people think very differently about partnerships, about their purpose, importance and value, and to some degree that is reflected in the ad hoc nature of the decision-



making process. So for some what matters is the amount of money on the table; for others it is the power of the other people in the room, or whether the remit is strategic to their locality or area; for others the policy or service issue is the key factor.

Member / officer relationships on partnerships were said to be different but complementary – the members are there in a leadership capacity whilst officers act as a 'critical friend' in relation to partners and, at times, to members. Officers facilitate and 'take the action away'. One elected member summed up the general position:

*'the role of the officer is to support me and if I'm not sure about something I expect the officer to be slightly better informed about things – so they bring some expertise but we bring the political sense of where we think we should be on a partnership.'*

(Backbencher, C/D)

Whilst officers focus on representing the council alone, members feel they represent both the council and their electors:

*'so members have that other role always at the back of their mind, they have to think what people on the street are going to think about certain issues and proposals.'*

(Executive member, C/D)

The choice of officer / member representation was linked to these different perceptions of roles, and was also dependent on the strategic significance of the partnership to the council in relation to other priorities. Members would be involved in strategic partnerships; senior members (cabinet / executive) on key partnerships – defined variously as the

Community Plan, police, housing, health. Political priority, direction, sensitivity and political interest were also key factors, as one survey respondent summarised: 'officers – managerially. Members – politically'. Thus, typically, it was officers who tended to be favoured when technical issues were to be discussed and members when representational factors came into play.

One cabinet member asserted that the council was careful:

*'not to kind of swamp bodies, partnerships, forums and panels, with elected members because people ... can get suspicious about our motives.'*

(Executive member, U)

whilst another explained that the key is to set parameters and then know when to delegate responsibility and defer to specialist knowledge:

*'The important thing is to be there at the outset. Then once things are going, to move backwards and let other people in, who know what they're doing, the professionals and the managers.'*

(Executive member, U)

The type of involvement also depended on statutory requirements / relevant government guidance.

The clearest conclusion however was that there was no clear pattern. Thus, four survey respondents stated that the preferred choice was member representation wherever possible, another, conversely, that 'all current partnerships have officer involvement' and seven that wherever possible both officers and members were represented on every partnership.

### Member selection

By far the largest number of respondents, some 49 per cent, pointed to portfolio responsibility / status as the major criterion for selection.

Another 17 per cent cited committee responsibility (a sizeable number of authorities had not yet moved to cabinet structures at the time of the survey): 'usually more senior members, on the basis that they actually know what they are going to do and that they can speak for the LA'. The second most cited route, by about some 34 per cent of respondents, was where a member had expressed an interest / had a special interest / had enthusiasm / had commitment. Slightly less favoured, with some 33 per cent of respondents, was professional experience, previous knowledge or skills. Local representation of wards for area-based initiatives was also significant, cited by 17 per cent of all respondents: 'Members' links to local area as in the case of LSPs at district level', 'in a Ward included in SRB', as were party political issues, e.g. political nomination / balance / proportionality, also cited by 17 per cent of respondents.

There was again no clear pattern and not all elected members were happy with the choices made. This was also reflected in one of the case study sites, where an elected member explained:

*'Often there's no rhyme or reason as to why some people are on certain partnerships and we've said for a long time that what we want is a register of people's skills and interests and that is about to be pulled together but we haven't had it yet.'*

(Backbencher, C/D)

There are some partnerships, such as big economic regeneration partnerships, where the

leader has got to attend because if he or she is not there 'the other partners think you are not treating them with appropriate respect' (Executive member, M). The vast majority of authorities have the council leader as chair of the LSP, though some have deliberately avoided that in order to give the chair a neutral position, or, for instance, have chosen a prominent local businessman in order to attract the business community.

In C/D, elected members in two district councils had jealously guarded their powers on partnerships, in one by overturning a Chief Executive's decision to send an officer rather than a member to a Primary Care Trust (PCT) board – 'there was uproar across the political spectrum – that this was a nice cherry that members should have, not officers. So we've had to withdraw that and that will now be a member' (Executive member) – and in the other by ousting the leader of the ruling group in order to 'regain control' of the LSP from the council's Chief Executive Officer and external bodies.

### Systems of member accountability

Councils either used a single system or combination of systems to ensure members on partnership bodies gave account of their activities or were held to account by the council. The approach used was dependent on the nature of the partnership concerned.

The most cited systems of accountability were either through the relevant committee (24 per cent of respondents) or through members being held to account by cabinet (20 per cent). Scrutiny / overview committees were cited by 13 per cent. Reporting to council meetings or to

members was also mentioned by 13 per cent of respondents. Reporting back (but not indicating in what fashion) was cited by a few respondents and other less common methods of ensuring accountability included through a code of conduct, ensuring that financial and ethical frameworks were in place, through written reports or briefings, or through the Best Value procedure.

There was a clear distinction to be drawn between members giving account (reporting back) and being held to account (scrutiny). Although there may be systems for giving account there is very seldom a system for holding to account. Some 17 per cent of respondents indicated that there were no formal procedures, structures or mechanisms in place to hold members to account; some of those respondents stated that systems of accountability were inadequate. Just over half of these (barely 9 per cent of all respondents) suggested that their council was considering reporting arrangements or that it was soon going to implement such procedures, some through scrutiny processes.

Experience in the case study sites reflected the ad hoc nature of accountability:

*'apart from the fact that usually quite regularly there are briefings where members are informed what's going on and how the LSP is operating and everything ... to be honest we don't have any specific mechanisms.'*

(Executive member, U)

In C/D, all county council members produced quarterly reports and details of any partnership working appeared within them, but accountability was 'only partial for partnerships at the moment' (Executive member, C/D).

Neither of the two district councils studied had consistent systems of accountability, though in one the LSP was seen as the umbrella for all local partnership working and members there reported directly back to cabinet. In the other, in acknowledgment of the deficit, the council was planning to formalise accountability through scrutiny procedures:

*'we have had various ways of members feeding back into the authority – writing reports, giving verbal reports, and none of them has worked, so it's currently done on an ad hoc basis – if they want help they ask and some are very good at that, others are less good, but it is definitely a problem area and we haven't solved it.'*

(Executive member, C/D)

Indeed, there were times when members would tend to represent the partnership to council instead of council to the partnership – 'going native' – but that was considered an understandable situation and usually the council or party group held sway: 'when decisions are being taken you feed those back and then it is checks and balances all the time – so you can't go native for long' (Senior member, C/D).

In M, there were more serious concerns about lack of accountability to the wider public:

*'the concern of people on the ground, and I think this is why people no longer bother to vote, is that they can talk to someone that can affect things or influence how things come out, and at the moment that is so remote and so convoluted to achieve – it takes such a long time scale – that confidence has been lost in the democratic process.'*

(Backbencher, M)

Accountability was obviously a widespread problem – one member who had conducted his own research explained: ‘What I’m not aware of in any council I’ve visited or seen in the papers is anything where it says “Report back from partnership meetings”’ (DG1).

It was clear that the move to the cabinet model had not increased the amount of accountability from partnerships. There was simply no designated appropriate place to raise the issue. It was not appropriate to raise it in full council, it was not necessarily an issue a member would wish to lobby a cabinet member about, nor was it necessarily appropriate to raise it in a Best Value review or on a scrutiny committee.

All the members interviewed for this study considered it vital that local authorities develop effective mechanisms for reporting back from partnerships and most felt that there should be a coherent link to the scrutiny process.

### The process and substance of partnership working

#### A commitment to partnership working

Our exploration suggests a general acceptance amongst elected members of the need to engage in partnership working: there were government requirements and there was an acknowledgement that council provision had not always been effective. One executive member explained: ‘Residential children’s homes. We look after them. The record of local government (here) is appalling ... We must be doing something wrong’ (U).

There is also a commitment to *genuine* partnership working as one of a range of stakeholders. An external partner commented:

*‘the council are very genuine about it [the LSP]... they didn’t want to bang out a Community Strategy in six weeks, they wanted to spend more time consulting with people, tackling some of the difficult issues before we get to that stage. I think it is very genuine.’*

(U)

In all three case study sites, virtually all external partners interviewed praised the input of executive members to partnerships – they brought personal commitment, enthusiasm and ability, political acumen, *gravitas* and ‘an ability to ask the right question at the right time and move the situation on ... to see the “bigger picture”’. They were held to be well-briefed, experienced and knowledgeable, open to alternative viewpoints and advice from external partners and from their own officers. Their local knowledge and past experience were invaluable. As a key health official in one study site explained:

*‘One of the important things they bring is a grounding in reality in that they are a conduit out there to the local... and the other thing is that they are more aware of the causes of ill-health – they are living with it – what we want is the input from the person that actually lives in [the locality]. So in many ways they are critical to us making the change in the way that we address health.’*

(C/D)

Again:

*‘Most of the elected members have lived in the town all their lives, many of them are in their 50s or 60s so they have got a lot of knowledge and experience about what’s happened, what’s worked and what hasn’t worked.’*

(Manager, LSP, U)

Members themselves felt they also brought 'democratic legitimacy' to partnerships:

*'Members have to face people out there in the elections so they want to bring the voice and the wishes of the community to a partnership.'*

(Executive member, U)

All executive members interviewed for this study found that partnership working had been made easier by the fact that the cabinet system was less cumbersome than the committee system: it was easier to make decisions, less time was spent in town hall meetings, which in turn freed up more time – almost always the most valuable resource for members – for community and partnership work. It had also facilitated a more holistic approach. An executive member explained:

*'The Executive model has enabled me to focus more on who is receiving a particular service, whether they have a diverse range of service providers, the LA being one, how do you then make the strategic link, bringing them together? It has enabled us to make that decision.'*

(M)

### **Different settings: new problems**

There were, nonetheless, problems. Different cultural settings call for different skills and at times members found the going tough. So for instance one executive member explained that Health was 'a completely different culture' and that:

*'to be dropped into it straight away is a very big source of misunderstandings and some people will obviously find that misunderstanding so challenging that they will back off and they won't want to get involved any more.'*

(DG2)

This difficulty was reflected back by a health professional who felt members had little insight into the workings of the health system. He also voiced his frustration at the lack of political space for members to act autonomously, underlining the tensions present for members who had a political constituency to which they felt accountable:

*'Many elected members are utterly useless because they never speak for themselves, they always feel as if they've got to represent someone else and at times their ability to participate is non-existent because they have to act on behalf of and they can never change their mind on the strength of the issues.'*

### **Key dissenters**

In two of the case study sites voluntary sector representatives were also somewhat less enthusiastic than other partners about the role of members. In M, although there was 'a genuine commitment to partnership working' on the strategic-level partnerships, the council had introduced a framework of community involvement committees, chaired by members, and some chairs were cherry-picking which members of the voluntary and community sector sat on those 'partnerships'; they were 'not wishing to engage in true partnership working'. Backbench members responded negatively to alternative forms of democratic expression:

*'Some councillors have felt that we are trying to set up an alternative democracy and that they are the elected representatives of the community and what right have we got to set up an alternative structure?'*

In C/D, the voluntary sector had several grievances. At the county council level elected members would dominate partnership meetings and 'come along and just un-write it all and say no, no, no.' A senior councillor acknowledged the problem: 'I've seen councillors walk in to meetings and sort of I am the big I am, and I know best.' However, the problem had been at its most corrosive at the level of the district councils. In one, members accused the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) of attempting to establish an alternative democratic base. Veiled threats followed: 'really quite serious stuff, personally vindictive comments'. In the other district the sector was patently in no position to engage on equal terms in partnership as the leader of the council pointed out:

*'they're reliant on us for grant aid so it's not a level playing field in that they are desperate for money and we are desperate for them to do what we want rather than what they want! I told the assistant CEO the other day to send an e-mail to the Chief Executive of the CVS with just two words on it: piper and tune.'*

However, in the third case study site, key representatives of the voluntary sector asserted that the growth of partnership working was engaging them far more at all levels of the local policy process and they considered themselves to be an equal voice around the table. The changing role of backbench members in particular was seen as very much a positive step: 'It used to be normal for LA members to want to hijack meetings, it's not normal now, it's unusual' (U).<sup>1</sup>

Relationships between the voluntary and community sectors and local government and other local public agencies are now usually

framed within the context of local compacts (Craig *et al.*, 2002a) but whilst these have been felt by many local voluntary sectors to be a helpful step forward, they do not fully address the fundamental issue of power and resources within partnership working at a local level. This view is supported by the Commission on Local Governance (CLG, 2002) which argued that it is the joint responsibility of central and local government to ensure that voluntary and community sectors are resourced adequately to allow them to manage increased organisational and financial requirements placed on them by partnership working. This is obviously still a major challenge to many local authorities.

### The locus of power

On key strategic partnerships, members in all three case study sites provided 'a very active policy steer'; they were seen very much as *primus inter pares*, which the vast majority of external partners both expected of them and welcomed, choosing to defer to their community leadership role.

There were, however, partnerships in which elected members did not lead: 'If we are looking at the health-led partnerships around the HIPs and so on then that is much more in the hands of the NHS still' (Senior officer, Health Authority). Some members were phlegmatic about that; it was only to be expected because:

*'there might be an imbalance of ability or certainly an imbalance of strategic grasp. You would expect a CEO of a PCT to have a rather better strategic grasp than most elected members just because it's their job and they're doing it full time.'*

(DG1)

Similarly on Crime and Disorder partnerships, the police would often take the lead. Essentially, in these instances it was seen as appropriate that the power within a partnership should reside within the organisation with expertise.

### A qualitative difference on the ground

In all three case study sites, clear benefits had been identified from partnership working:

*'You can see clear examples of where they're working – the Sure Start, EAZs, SRBs, you can see practical changes and the benefits that have happened in the communities. You go around any community where these bids have been successful and the people will tell you very tangible things that have come out of them.'*

(Executive member, U)

*'there have been significant initiatives ... of importance to local people. Crime for example, the police secured nearly a million pounds over the best part of three years for ... one police officer in each of the 14 neighbourhood renewal areas.'*

(Manager of LSP, U)

In C, the scrutiny chair explained:

*'We've led from the front on a lot of work to do with elderly people and we now have Health, DC and County involvement in actually producing what I think is one of the best services for elderly people in the country – the partnership working has been fantastic.'*

In M, the potential benefits were also said to be enormous. Speaking of a forthcoming regeneration scheme an executive member explained:

*'that would change the social landscape of one of our most deprived multi-cultural areas of the City ... you can imagine land values, you can imagine the private sector, you can imagine housing, you can imagine what that will do to the morale and opportunities of people living locally.'*

Other examples were cited by elected members in the discussion groups:

*'Making differences on the ground in intermediate care – freeing up hospital beds and providing more appropriate and timely care out in the community as a range of service providers across Health and Social Services work together – physiotherapists, nursing, occupational therapists, all coming together. That is partnership working.'*

(DG2)

However, despite evidence of change on the ground, many of those interviewed were keen to stress that real change took time. A senior council officer:

*'It is early days though because when you think about what we are trying to achieve through the development of a Community Strategy, we are establishing a long term vision of what we want the town to be like in 20, 30, 40 years time, so by definition a lot of our influence is going to be over the longer term.'*

(U)

### Generating trust

In all three case study sites, external partners largely felt that partnership working had made the council's policy-making process more transparent and had given them greater ownership of it. Partnership was increasingly bringing public, private and voluntary sectors together. Better relationships had ensued, as had

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the cross-pollination of ideas. There was genuine trust, a belief that people would honour commitments and share resources.

In one site the LSP had undertaken an accreditation process in which partners identified specific 'strengths':

*'We have a good interface; we actively seek the views of our communities; the Partnership is broadly representative; we are beginning to move towards a shared vision; our monitoring processes are clear and understood; together as a Partnership we are contributing more than merely as individuals; the commitment of partners is visibly very good; the Partnership is making a difference; we have at times been very creative; conflict management is well-handled; we are strong advocates of the Partnership.'*

(Internal LSP document, U)

In another site, relationships were said to be increasingly harmonious:

*'Our relationship with the police is ten times better than it was since the partnership, it is much better with Health ... a housing partnership bringing together the Housing Department and the various registered social landlords... and there's the partnerships that we have established with the FE colleges ... it is starting to make a difference.'*

(Senior council officer, M)

### The catalyst for community activity

In the discussion groups, members also flagged up other benefits of partnership working.<sup>2</sup> It had been, for example, of particular import in revitalising community activity in local market towns, empowering and re-engaging a plethora of local social and cultural groups with the district councils. Elected members observed:

*'they've realised the power that they individually have – the small villages realise if they would only get together and get somebody else to put 5 bob in the pot along with their 5 bob then they've got more than 10 bob at the end of the day.'*

*'We have re-engaged the lost geographical communities in the isolated rural areas. To re-engage with the system, that is what partnership working, even in its present form, has done.'*

(DG2)

## The concerns of elected members

### Failure to engage backbenchers

One major problem flagged up throughout the study was the fact that backbenchers were becoming disillusioned with the new political structures and their own uncertain role. One chair of scrutiny explained:

*'there's been a lot of criticism about who now makes policy and a lot of backbenchers are just getting disheartened by it all and feel that they have absolutely nothing to contribute.'*

(C/D)

Members argued that they had lost their *raison d'être*, and this sense, combined with a broken flow of information to backbenchers with the demise of the committee system was leaving some of them 'very disgruntled and very disappointed'. This was adversely affecting partnership working on the ground:

*'They go to the partnership meetings and they listen to what the community says and they listen to the points of view and they try to gain a consensus with which they can move it forward, but it's when it comes to actually moving it forward that there is a big bridge between the*



*cabinet's policy-making and the views of their particular partnership or community and there is a big void there.'*

(DG2)

There was a signal failure to engage backbenchers in more strategic partnerships:

*'Since going over to the Executive model there has been an over-concentration of cabinet members; whereas it might have been spread more widely before that, it is now more likely that the cabinet member who has that brief will get involved on a particular partnership.'*

(Executive member, U)

In one study site the manager of the LSP had found it difficult to interest backbench members in a training seminar on the partnership 'so a big opportunity was missed to at least begin to understand more' (M).

Backbenchers were not always utilising the opportunities to engage via the scrutiny process and there appeared to be very little understanding of how that might link into partnership working. Indeed, there had been only very limited attempts in the study site areas to link partnership working into council scrutiny procedures; both executive and backbench members in all three case study sites felt this to be a crucial deficit.

### Difficulties in community leadership

There were similar difficulties for some backbenchers in relation to their community leadership role. It was the intention of the White Paper on the modernisation of local government that backbenchers, freed from their role in policy making, would become refocused on 'bringing the views of their neighbourhoods and local people to bear on the council's decision-taking

process' (DETR, 1998b, p. 7). In February 2001 an LGA discussion paper described the non-executive councillor local champion role thus:

*it can be argued that the councillor's representative role has often been one of representing the council to the community ... [to] defend the council and its decisions to local communities and partners ... The Local Government Act 2000 provides an opportunity to refocus this role and 'take the community into the town hall' ... to really speak up for those people who elect them.*

(LGA, 2001c)

However, some members, schooled as they were in very bureaucratic, committee-bound cultures, were finding the new emphasis on community leadership a heavy burden:

*'members in the past have seen their main role as being in the town hall doing their representative role through committee work and the like. They are ... finding it very difficult to get to grips with the new community engagement role.'*

(DG1)

*'Some of the old guard are wanting to leave because they are saying there's too many community meetings. I'm out every night they say ... When you go to a partnership meeting in the City centre, it's middle class politeness, you might get the odd nasty comment, but when you go out to the community they're coming for your jugular and you'd better be prepared.'*

(Executive member, M)

There were particular problems for members who, with their public finance responsibilities, often had to point out the harsh realities of balancing budgets to local partnerships:

*'very often in partnerships people find it very hard to understand why the council can't just give them a cheque and say get on with it ... and it's often the councillor who has the responsibility of pointing that out and that can make them seem unhelpful, and I think that is a real difficulty for members.'*

(DG1)

The result of this could be:

*'if it's not carefully managed, a new generation of community champions will grow up, isolated from the local authority, and then the local authority will get once again into that cycle of defending itself from the community champions whereas the community champions should be the councillors.'*

(DG1)

In one case study area, backbenchers certainly felt that their traditional ward role was being squeezed, particularly by community councils, and not without good reason. The CVS agreed:

*'At one time you would be really concerned: "oh we'd better let the elected member know or otherwise they'll be up in arms," and it's still good practice to do that, to work with them and talk to them but ... at times we just forget to consult them, they're fairly invisible.'*

(U)

The manager of the LSP saw this as a widespread problem:

*'The role of the Executive members is very very clear but I think with the other elected members this, like many other councils, hasn't yet bottomed – how do we promote the representational role of elected members, how*

*can we help them to understand what that role is and how to help them to carry that out?'*

(U)

### **Managerialism/insufficient space for innovation**

In an early briefing on LSPs, the LGA stated that for them to work effectively, central government had to grant 'freedoms and flexibilities so that all public expenditure going into an area can be brought together and focused on locally-agreed priorities' (LGA, 2001d, p. 12). A separate note, on community leadership, stated: 'The new power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of communities should free councils from the legalistic and procedural constraints which have shackled their ability to innovate and respond to local needs' (LGA, 2001e, p. 1).

In all three study sites, however, there were clear tensions between the managerialist delivery agenda and the democratic renewal agenda, with members and officers complaining of being increasingly restricted to managing central diktat. This extended to the notion of partnership working as a principle. A senior county council officer commented:

*'because of the fear of getting it wrong, because of the punishments – and the carrots in the form of Beacon Status or these other ideas emanating from DEMOS ... How much local discretion have you got? You lose innovation, you lose risk-taking, you bore people to death – you take so much of the joy out of relating and pleasure in connecting with the outcomes of the work ... they're killing local government entrepreneurship.'*

(Senior council officer, C/D)

Similarly, an executive member commented:

*'there still has to be that freedom to allow us to deliver in various ways, and that could be partnership, it could be ... it shouldn't be the only game in town, or partnership for partnership's sake.'*

(U)

An executive member in the metropolitan authority concurred emphatically:

*'If I could ask you to highlight one point, that is that partnerships and the modernisation are premised on the distrust of local councillors. If you really want to add legitimacy to the voice of local democracy for God's sake break a few of the chains off in the partnerships and allow us and trust us to make sensible decisions on behalf of people who voted for us.'*

(M)

For many members these tensions have qualitatively changed the job for the worse. These are also concerns which have been raised more widely.<sup>3</sup>

### **Too many plans, quality requirements, targets and indicators**

In the same guidance note on LSPs, the LGA stated that for LSPs to work effectively there needed to be 'real progress on the rationalisation of plans' (LGA, 2001d, p. 12). Councils in all three case study sites were still overburdened by the number of central government-imposed plans:

*'an incredible number and you wonder how many of these are produced by groups of civil servants sitting in a particular department who think we'd better make sure local authorities are doing this*

*properly, so we'll get them to do a plan, and not realising that another department has asked for something very very similar, so it is about that lack of joined-up thinking in central government.'*  
(Senior council officer, U)

This was also a problem for external partners, which was affecting their ability to service partnerships adequately:

*'there's still an awful lot of separate initiatives and a constant narrow focus on waiting times and access targets ... so I think that sometimes we are not encouraged to work together.'*  
(Senior officer, Health Authority)<sup>4</sup>

### **No time to breathe**

Members and their external partners in all three sites also called for a period of consolidation, for fewer new initiatives:

*'We live on shifting sands the whole time – whether it's Education or Social Services, no matter what, an edict comes out, you're working to it and all of a sudden the whole baseline changes.'*  
(Backbencher, leader of opposition, C/D)

*'The difficulty that I have and I think perhaps most members have is that the pace of change has been so fast that it has been very difficult to absorb for most of us.'*  
(Senior member, Overseer of Scrutiny, U)

Linked to that was the issue of short-termism. Too many schemes were held to have too short a shelf-life. Some partnerships would make great leaps forward, only to have the funding curtailed four or five years later as resources were diverted to other initiatives. The good work stopped, effective workers were laid off and disillusionment followed.

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### Partnership/consultation fatigue

This was clearly a serious problem in all three sites. Cabinet members were being 'stretched to the limit'. A chair of scrutiny explained:

*'What we are doing is increasing it from what was perhaps a 50 hour week to perhaps a 60 or 70 hour week.*

(C/D)

Backbenchers felt similarly over-extended: 'When you consider my hours – 12 hours a day, 6 days a week' (C/D). This was a particular problem for those elected members who held down another job: 'there's only so long that you can do two jobs like this ... you are really unable to devote sufficient time to either job' (U). One backbencher was 'retiring this year, and that is part of the reason why I'm retiring – I just can't cope with the workload' (M). It also meant they were not always offering partnerships their brightest and best: 'you can see people who are now making choices about which partnerships they are turning up to and therefore sending a substitute who carries not so much weight for the organisation' (Backbencher, M).

### Insufficient resources

Some of those interviewed felt that partnerships were not fulfilling their potential, that insufficient resources were being committed. The leader of a borough council observed:

*'If all of the funding in the PCT is committed on government initiatives, which a lot of it will be, and all of our funding is committed on what we need to do, a little bit of money on top of that would produce a huge benefit for these things that are not covered by the money we're working on and there isn't that carrot there at the*

*moment, everything is going to have to be found from us.'*

(DG2)<sup>5</sup>

### Political dilution

Elected members felt in danger of losing their identity. They found it difficult to take credit for positive outcomes for fear of offending other parties to the partnership and yet their continuing popularity with the electorate depended upon that credit. At the same time the managerialist nature of much partnership working was tending to depoliticise the policy arena, which members found difficult to square with the fact that they were political animals with political goals and political responsibilities to their constituencies. An executive member commented:

*'our politics is conflictual, partnership is consensus ... There is a huge problem of political traditions and the processes of partnership working – that ability to argue and advocate things that you believe in. People still join the Party and want to change the world and I think that that room to be inspirational is limited by partnerships – you tend to be talking along tram lines really.'*

(M)

### Loss of power to external partners

There was some disquiet in all three case study sites and elsewhere that elected members had ceded too much power to external agencies and were losing control of the policy process:

*'for better or for worse it is replacing the role of the democratically-elected member – you don't need to have somebody who you vote in through the ballot box to voice local concerns – you've got*

*so many partnership outlets and voices that we are now obliged to listen to to tick the right boxes to access funding.'*  
(DG2)

### **The lack of accountability of external partners**

Members generally took a traditional view towards the issue of accountability. In one study site there was, not solely amongst backbenchers, an antipathy towards a local public-private partnership established to run core services. There was cross-party anger at the establishment of a City Academy which was considered to be usurping the traditional role of the local education authority. There were major concerns that the cabinet member for Education was the sole council representative on the board amongst five sponsor places comprising business representatives and charitable trusts. In another study site backbenchers questioned the legitimacy of partnerships *per se* because they were perceived as undermining democratic accountability:

*'It's even anti-democratic. There are people who are totally unrepresentative of anybody but themselves and they form the majority on those organisations. So there is a big question mark.'*  
(M)

*'look at the Health Service in terms of democratic accountability, it's a joke to understand it. The TECs and the LSCs – no democratic accountability at all.'*  
(M)

These views were expressed more widely:

*'If you look at some of the district LSPs the elected member element is very small compared to who is on it – you've got business, voluntary*

*sector, Health, the police. I'm not saying they shouldn't be on it but it does mean that the level of accountability is only through a very small section of that partnership.'*  
(Executive member, C/D)

and echoed in other feedback (DG1, DG2), the gist of which was that many of those on partnership boards represented no one but themselves.

### **The failure of external partners to make or meet commitments**

Members in all three case study sites pointed to other public bodies sending along to partnerships people with insufficient *gravitas* to be able to commit their organisation to reshaping corporate bodies or to bending budgets. Worse still were commitments made and not fulfilled. In some authorities the council and the business community felt the voluntary and community sectors were inhibiting progress, although this in reality reflected differing democratic traditions amongst partners. Ironically, the VCS was sometimes accused of being over-concerned with accountability:

*'The council and business community are saying let's get out there and get it done folks, and Health's on board, the police are on board, Connexions are on board, and the VCS are still fiddling about over who their representatives are going to be.'*  
(DG1)

### **The private sector**

Attitudes towards engaging business interests in partnerships were somewhat ambivalent. Executive members of all political complexions

tended to take a pragmatic approach, seeing the sector as, on occasions, a useful ally in regeneration. The sector had been an active participant in M and some big players were now assisting the council in its core regeneration strategies. On the other hand members tended to draw a line in the sand. A typical expression of this was the identifying and protecting of roles: 'I'm alright with businesses doing economic prosperity and investment but I don't want them telling me how to run Education and Social Services and so on' (Executive member, M).

In both U and C/D, there had been real difficulties in engaging the private sector; in the former, with unemployment levels in double figures, this was a great cause for concern to members and external partners, in the latter an executive member was disdainful:

*'They're not interested – when they did come they came for one meeting and when they found out there was nothing in the back pocket for them they disappeared and you never see anybody ... because these independents, these accountants, these solicitors, these business people, if there's nothing in it for them in their own back pocket, or for their firm they don't want to know. This is one of Blair's follies.'*

### Relationships between district and county councils

There appears to be little sense in two-tier local government areas that county councils are dominating LSPs. Instead, the general pattern is that district councils are themselves preparing their own models of the Community Strategy / LSP process, and the key issues emanating from those are mushrooming up to influence the county-wide strategy / LSP. There is much

sharing of ideas: 'we [the county] would ensure the highest possible level of representation on the District LSPs and invite the DC Leaders to join our LSP – all of them' (Executive member, C/D).

Neither does the fact that county and district councils may be of differing political complexions necessarily preclude their representatives from working together on partnerships; several members suggested that politics was best kept out of partnership working altogether.

However, problems have arisen. In the two-tier case study site county council / district council relationships varied from cordial to hostile. There were obviously deep wounds arising from the experience of local government reorganisation when many districts opted (unsuccessfully) to go for unitary status, arguing as they did so against the competence of counties (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999). There were petty rivalries and politically-driven alliances around which other partners were also having to negotiate. An executive county councillor commented:

*'there is tension still between the district and the county council ... they are still bringing baggage to partnerships, they come to partnerships with a lot of animosity. There has to be a lead from above to say enough is enough.'*

A voluntary sector representative:

*'the County really fought really hard against the City becoming a unitary authority. And there was a lot of bad blood really. Even now there are some real resentments simmering and people taking their bat home – sometimes the way they act in meetings you just think "shame on you".'*

Members in both discussion groups also flagged up these entrenched hostilities:

*'the district council see it as the enemy, they just can't get that view out of their head that the county council is big brother, the big guns, always trying to tell us what to do. Plus there was local government reorganisation.'*

(DG1)

These problems were exacerbated by real concerns about political survival, expressed by an executive member:

*'There is a survival question hanging over a lot of these partnerships' heads ... and it still creates animosity within both parties because at the moment you can't see if DCs will disappear, you can't see if the County will disappear, you can't see if both will disappear ... unless you're in the unitary situation there is an awful lot of tension about and that's got to be got rid of to work successfully in partnership.'*

(C/D)

### The regional and sub-regional dimension to partnership working

There were difficulties for members at the regional level. In the unitary authority one executive member experienced regional and sub-regional partnerships as 'largely talking shops', whilst a senior council officer bemoaned the lack of accountability:

*'The regional assembly structure which sits alongside the Regional Development Agency was originally a way of holding the RDA to account. I never see much of that taking place ... the real decisions are made in the regions in the RDA and the Government Office for the Region [GOR], so*

*it is very managerialist, it's appointed people that are making the decisions.'*

(U)

The RDA itself was perceived to be both business-orientated and divisive:

*'it's still clearly the case that the Government intended and still intends RDAs to be business-led, so that is another big culture shock for councillors to have to deal with ... The appointment effectively is made by the RDA Chair and when you've got a number of council leaders all of whom feel they ought to be on the Board and you've only got four seats it's inevitably divisive. We have got five local authorities in the sub-region, two of them are now on the board and three aren't. It doesn't help.'*

(U)

These views were also reflected in C/D, where an executive member explained that power imbalances at the sub-regional level were discouraging some district council members from engagement:

*'The RDA is geared to economic development and the social aspects of it are a bolt-on, add-on rather than being integral ... They've set up a management board for that and we wouldn't have a place on the management board so we're thinking of making that an officer representation rather than member.'*

Inter-authority conflicts were sometimes apparent to external partners:

*'when they come together they will say they have one agenda, which is [the regional agenda], when they go back to their local authority their agenda is about that local authority. So there is a lot of competition between them in terms of who gets*

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*the most resource, which you can understand, but it doesn't actually benefit the region.'*

(U)

A different external partner in the same authority felt that as the GOR and RDA devolved more powers downwards, those conflicts had become more evident, that the competing local authorities were: 'knocking hell out of each other ... publicly they are all getting on well together, pointing in the same direction, but of course privately old hatreds run deep!' (U).

### **The only game in town...?**

Executive members in U and M questioned whether partnership working was always the most efficient way forward:

*'There comes a point where you have to say how much resource is it taking up resourcing, managing the effort into this partnership for what return? What is the end product of it? We had a very small, tight-knit, corporate resource unit a couple of years ago and you see it now, it takes up a whole wing of the civic centre ... it's really resource-intensive and at the end of the day would you be better scrapping that partnership and just using all that resource to support the community?'*

(U)

This may be an extreme view of partnerships but it was voiced implicitly or explicitly by several respondents.



# 3 What do members need? Who should provide it?

## Support and training for members

### In-house training

In the postal survey, almost three-quarters of authorities signified that they offered support for members involved in partnership working but less than a third offered specific training. Provision was uneven and, surprisingly, none of the London boroughs or Welsh Unitaries appeared to provide any formal training at all.

### Form of support and training provided to members

Many local authorities had some form of standardised training for members overseen by the Head of Administration or the Head of Personnel, frequently administered by the Members' Support Section. In some local authorities this was complemented by training tailored to individual needs as those needs were identified. In a very few authorities, there was a specific member development training programme/strategy/working party/group, or even a member/officer group. But more often training or support was available only by offer or on request: 'Every Member offered a personal interview with County Council's Member

Training Officer to review skills and draw up a personal development plan', and 'one-to-one training and support provided on request'.

Officer support was the most cited form of assistance for members working in partnership – referred to in almost two-thirds of responses to the survey. This generally took the form of ad hoc briefing sessions and presentations on issues, legislation or government guidance, plus background information on individual partnerships: 'Training is provided generally on partnership roles and more specifically focused on the work of the organisations involved' and 'Members briefed by officers on relevant issues and current council policy prior to attendance'. Two in five authorities stated that training was generally undertaken by identified contact officers for each partnership (typically a senior officer, chief officer or lead officer on a particular issue within the relevant portfolio).

Support provided through dual officer/member representation on partnership was also cited by a few, which one respondent referred to as 'hand-holding in the early days of involvement'. Secretarial/administrative/committee-type support was also mentioned.

**Table 6 Training and support for members involved in partnership working**

	Specific support (%)	Specific training (%)
Metropolitan district	89	56
County councils	77	61
English unitary	75	35
London boroughs	70	0
District councils	64	30
Welsh unitary	62	0

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In the survey different focuses were specified for this training and support. These included:

- inductions
- practical skills training: on chairing meetings or consultation
- professional and technical advice, IT support
- training in legal/business aspects of responsibilities
- IDeA 'Modern Members' programme
- partnership working information and guidelines e.g. on governance
- pre-briefings in advance of meetings, debriefing after meetings
- officer preparation of reports and bulletins; specialist research from officers
- working parties/groups; seminars; workshops
- external training courses/away-days
- training provided by the partnerships
- ward support for local partnerships.

The picture from the three case study sites and the member discussion groups suggested that in principle support and training were taken seriously. Dedicated, ongoing officer support was considered to be essential by members and it was available for all partnerships. One council leader explained:

*'I would always encourage my members if they're going to a partnership meeting, whatever it happens to be ... to take an officer along with*

*them to the first meeting, just to hold their hand really ... just for that degree of moral support.'*

He explained that that presence might be expected to fade away fairly rapidly in smaller partnership groupings, but 'in bigger partnerships, the sub-regional regeneration forums, the LSPs I would expect there to be regular officer presence at a very senior level' (DG1).

Executive members were particularly keen to take advantage of training programmes and they praised the content and quality of the sessions. Each case study authority had induction days and a member development programme geared to individual needs.

There remained, however, a gap between acknowledged principle and operational practice. Member development programmes have only recently begun to address members' activities on particular partnerships and in none of the case study areas was there council-wide training specifically on partnership working, though one senior member did welcome the notion: 'It's a good idea – I'll pass that on!' (U).

One leading member who had undertaken his own survey into members on partnerships had found no good examples, but 'lots of bad examples' of support to members. He recounted a typical scenario:

*'Fred, you are going to go on to the partnership body working with the Health Authorities developing the HIMP [Health Improvement and Modernisation Programme], bye, have fun. No reporting back structure, no support network, all you've done is created an isolated member forming their own little silo.'*

He continued:

*'One of my big things as leader of the authority and I've been singularly unsuccessful in doing this, is trying to get the authority to support members in outside bodies and in their constituency work as brilliantly as they support them through their committee work. If we want anything at all in committee work we get it: if we want another report we get it, if we want a briefing from an officer we get it – but you go on a partnership do it all yourself ... not because they're thoughtless unkind people our officers, far from it, it's that they don't see it as their priority, they see their priority as making a machine run.'*  
(DG1)

Unfortunately not all members availed themselves of the services where they were provided:

*'We have a training scheme and it's not working – the people who don't need the training turn up regularly, the people who do need it you never see and then they moan that there isn't enough training! ... Attitudes to training are changing very slowly ... Many think that the very fact that they've been elected is enough and that is unshakable.'*  
(Executive member, C/D)

This may also be in part because some backbench members were dissatisfied with the mode of delivery and the competence of trainers:

*'They try to do full days ... A lot of members are employed so to give up a full day is really difficult.'*

*'I am involved in training professionally and I think a lot of the input is not adequate, just not up to the professional standard elsewhere – and the*

*delivery methods are very restricted, they tend to be seminars, there are no open learning mechanisms which I think a lot of us would really welcome.'*

(Backbenchers, M)

### Local external training provision

In one case study site members welcomed the offer of training by external partners. An external partner explained:

*'I have offered to meet on a quarterly basis to talk to them about what is happening within the Health Issue Group and within the PCT for that matter, so that they can feel more informed, like an active learning situation, they would learn more about the partnership through discussion around where we're going – and there was a positive response to that idea.'*

(C/D)

In another site the LSP and New Deal for Communities had provided mechanisms for training: 'you are invited to give presentations to the Board. So all partners around the table have presented about their organisation and that is very useful' (External partner, U). In the third case study site there was negligible training available for members from other partners or the partnership bodies:

*'We haven't really. We've had various discussions about it. We talked as a group of HAZs across [the region] about providing awareness-raising for elected members but when we actually tried to organise something a while ago we found out that although we targeted members in reality it tended to get delegated to the relevant officers who would already know it anyway, so we actually abandoned the idea for the moment! But*

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*certainly yes, there is some scope there to try and do more.'*

*(Senior officer, Health Authority, M)*

### National training provision

There was some criticism in all three case study sites that national training meetings on partnership working tended to be in held in London (a 200- to 500-mile round trip from any of these sites) and have often turned out to be less about providing guidance for members, and more about civil servants picking their brains to ascertain how partnerships were panning out at the grassroots level:

*'Most of the national training events tend to happen in London and it's a 7.00 am to 9.00 pm job to go to these training events and not all of them are particularly useful ... a lot of them tend to be more to find out what councillors think than to try to give councillors advice on how to work in their particular districts. It's they who are asking questions of councillors rather than councillors getting questions answered.'*

*(Executive member, C/D)*

There was also a dearth of skilled training providers: 'it's not an area which is growing to keep pace with the growth of LSPs for example' (Executive member, DG1).

Where training had been provided responses were mixed. Some members felt, for instance that training sessions by IDeA were lacking in guidance content:

*'I suppose we didn't know what we wanted because it was all new, it was all community and partnership, so we didn't know how to ask them and they certainly didn't seem to be able to tell us very much.'*

*(DG2)*

Although there was a sense that that was all well and good – 'I think they were quite correct in the sense that they said we can't tell you what is the proper way for you, we can only ask you to ask us questions and we'll try and help you with answers' – such techniques were time-consuming and members generally felt they had been thrown in at the deep end of modernisation without adequate back-up: 'we're supposed to have jumped in October or whenever it was from the old system to the new system like Batman with our wings and ready to go, with very very little help'. Members also felt there had been no consultation with them by government beforehand: 'we've very much been left to sink or swim' (DG2).

For their part, external trainers found a varied response from elected members; one councillor who was also an external trainer described 'incredibly good sessions, people really get stuck in, taking no prisoners ... very very challenging' (DG1). Others, however, spoke of elected members giving 'weird and wonderful reasons why they wouldn't come' or of elected members turning out to training sessions 'giving off the impression that they are there because they have to be, not attending with any sense of passion', of them having 'no sense at all about measuring their own competence because once they are elected then they are by definition competent', and of them being unable to 'get beyond the notion of there is only a single model of legitimacy – that being that people voted for them'. Again, external providers highlighted the fact that elected members often also have jobs as well as their public role: 'so they find it difficult to find the time to undertake training and development, particularly on areas that they may not find particularly interesting'.<sup>1</sup>

Government has been pressing for officers and members to be trained together; however, it was felt that this could lead to a blurring of roles and could again be perceived as part of a general process of depoliticisation. One backbench member did point to a potential danger of training programmes:

*'this question of managerialism, that in fact we are democratically elected representatives and the effect of training is to achieve a desired outcome and who decides what that desired outcome is or approach that you should have?'*  
(M)

### Developmental needs

Partnership working involves engaging with people from a range of very different cultures and very different organisational backgrounds, from the very rigid and hierarchical tradition of the NHS on the one hand to the very flexible and small-scale local focus of community groups on the other. It follows that elected members intending to engage fruitfully with, and in some cases being expected to broker a relationship between, such a broad range of groups and organisations will need to acquire a wide range of skills and abilities. In a recent survey of local authorities some 95 per cent signified that 'new skills and competencies would be needed for both officers and members if community leadership is to be successful' (LGA, 2001b, p. 18).

In our study, significant numbers of members interviewed felt they were poorly equipped to engage in partnership working: they did not know where to get support or even what support they needed. Though individual and group training packages were provided by

councils in all three case study sites, some members, particularly backbenchers, did not choose to use them. It was generally felt that a more proactive approach, offering flexible and better-targeted training packages, was required to encourage their participation.

### Basic skills

Several members, across all authority types, felt that new forms of partnership working, both at the strategic level and at ward level, called for members to acquire new skills: 'just basic training in certain things like being able to contribute effectively in meetings and chairing meetings, those kind of skills would be useful'; 'I've asked for training on public speaking for example' (Senior member, M).

### Protocols and conflicts of interest

None of the councils contacted in the study had written protocols specific to partnership working. Instead a few members referred to general protocols in relation to probity and the behaviour of members on public bodies. The onus remained on individual members to check out specific issues that might arise with their legal department. Members were held to have sufficient common sense to avoid or declare conflicts of interest: 'it's inbred into elected members be they cabinet or backbenchers, so they are cautious' (Senior council officer, M).

However, several leading members across the three case study sites felt that the increase in partnership working necessitated a more formal approach to conflicts of interest:

*'I think it's probably something where you could do with some kind of training or manual handbook or something to remind you of these issues because if you have got other sectors involved on*

*these meetings things could crop up that you wouldn't normally expect in a cabinet meeting.'*  
(Executive member, U)

One leading member explained:

*'About a fortnight ago I had to tell quite an experienced member that she should really leave the meeting before the next item because she had an interest and she said "oh I didn't realise that." So it is a problem.'*  
(Executive member, C/D)

In all three case study sites, most of the larger partnerships in which members were involved had as part of their partnership agreements some form of general protocol and terms of reference around principles such as 'trust', 'openness and honesty', 'respect for the position of others', 'commitment to the principles of subsidiarity' and working principles: 'no single agency will have control or primacy within the partnership'. It was not possible to explore what this meant in practice, however.

### **Training in the true nature of partnership**

There was clearly a dearth of training available for members on how to fulfil the new role in partnership and community advocacy. One executive member: 'there doesn't seem to be any available ... and I have trawled for it' (DG2). Another: 'I don't think anybody is properly trained in that' (DG2).

Several elected members and external partners felt they and others lacked sufficient understanding of or common ground on what partnership working actually entailed. A non-council member of an LSP suggested that 'the whole nature of partnership could merit from

being actually understood better because people have got entirely different understandings of that and I don't think we've ever spent the time' (U). A leading elected member pointed to tensions in working styles:

*'I've got a Manifesto, I stand for the Party, these are my beliefs, I'm going to bloody tell 'em and if they don't agree with me I'll give 'em some pasta. I mean that style of politics is still about, we are brought up on that tradition. I was a trades unionist for years and it's taken a lot for me to kind of reflect and decide how to handle things differently and why you do it and why you are patient, and Members don't get that kind of training or awareness.'*  
(M)

One commentator on the research team's advisory group summed it up in a less confronting manner: 'It is almost like a need for training in human relations.'

In C/D, both voluntary sector representatives and some leading politicians felt there could be few true partnerships unless elected members first understood the worth of the sector. A senior district council member called for

*'anything which emphasises not just community but does raise the profile of the voluntary sector as a sector which makes a big impact collectively to the welfare of the city. Anything that would flag that one up with the members and make it seem real.'*

### **Hands-on training within partnerships**

A deputy leader reported some useful training experience:

*'We've started to have half an hour of LSP time for breakdown workshops so that people can chip in and ask questions. We give people jobs to do by creating various working groups and sub-groups to get people more involved and give them confidence. We've also had a number of visioning days so we know where we want to be in say 10 or 20 years' time ... an inspirational speech or whatever and then sit them down with a number of prepared questions and it's amazing what you get out of that – we do it on a regular basis.'* (DG2)

This might include more direct training by organisations with whom they were expected to work in partnership, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Health bodies: 'why it is structurally set up in the way it is and things like that, knowing a little more about the people you're expected to work with. I think that's extremely important' (Executive member, C/D).

### **Collation and dissemination of good practice within and between authorities**

In one case study site, backbench members had come together in workshops on a regular basis to share their experience of local community partnership working. This had been a great success, helping them to avoid pitfalls and better prioritise future agendas. It was felt this 'could be replicated by other authorities' (Senior council officer, M). One council leader insisted that members attending training courses should feed back the key learning points to the rest of the council (DG1).

A general feeling emerged during the study that there were no experts in partnership working, that partnerships were individual and diverse and no blueprint existed on how to

engage: 'I don't think there is a solution out there at all, I think we are the ones that are going to have to work to make it work' (DG2). With this in mind, members sought a lateral approach – mutual learning between councils. Members in all three case study sites and in both discussion groups bemoaned the lack of knowledge or understanding of the extent or practicalities of partnership working in other localities, about what did and did not work. There was a specific need for guidance on how to operate the scrutiny process and bring partnership working within the scope of that process.

Labouring under their current workloads, executive members and their senior officers simply did not have the time, however, to put out such feelers. It was felt that this was a role that the Local Government Association, Local Government Information Unit or Improvement and Development Agency could take on:

*'The LGA shouldn't be saying they're all great, they should also be identifying where things don't work ... It doesn't have to be looking for someone to blame, just to say that this was tried and it didn't work, for this reason. So it is about information and pulling things together.'*

(Executive member, U)

### **Local/regional government initiatives**

As noted earlier, members wanted to see more regional and local rather than London-based training. There had been a vast and far-reaching organisational shift in how elected members and officers were expected to behave both internally and in relation to the new processes of partnership working and it was felt that central government could provide additional

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ring-fenced resources to fund further in-house and external training and organisational development. Several members also thought it

would be useful for a database of accredited trainers to be established which could easily be accessed.



## 4 Conclusions

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Feedback from the postal survey, from many of those interviewed in the case study sites and from the two round table discussions confirmed the view of those who originally proposed the study, that this investigation was most timely. Partnership working is becoming central to the work of many public bodies and agencies and an analysis of its scope and form was long overdue. Councillors, council officers and external partners all felt that a guidance note on members in partnership working would be of great value and this will be published separately from this report by the LGA, as an insert in the regular bulletin sent to members.

### **The need to reassert the key democratic role of local government**

The emphasis on partnership working and the growth of quangos had, in many respondents' view, downgraded the role of local authorities. Members, both executive and backbench, ruling group and opposition, in all three sites and in the discussion groups wanted to see a reassertion of the essential democratic/ political role they felt they were supposed to play. That was not to say that the political role was always the most appropriate role to play in partnerships but there are times when respondents felt it was absolutely appropriate and legitimate to be a politician. In the words of one senior elected member:

*'recognising the fact that there are only two elected bodies in the country and that is national government and local authorities. That is still the cornerstone of democracy. It doesn't matter what party you are, you're elected by the people for four years and you're there to protect and look*

*after their interests and that should be recognised.'*

(U)

### **The power to lead**

Members wished to see an end to the contradiction that the council had statutory duties to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the locality under Part I of the Local Government Act 2000, but had no concomitant powers to ensure that other partners acted in terms of budget bending/ resource allocation and felt that there were insufficient duties requiring other partners to engage effectively with these issues. A senior council officer commented:

*'Again and again local government gets the duty and it's hard to balance because the other partners can choose whether they want to do this or not and if you have an equal partnership, why isn't the responsibility equally distributed as well.'*

(U)

This was considered a key gap because if partnerships broke down there could be both financial penalties on the local authority with regard to future resources and penalties in relation to councillors' own electoral position, whilst other partners could walk away relatively unscathed. An executive member noted:

*'It will be interesting to see what happens when the first thing that an LSP has done does go pear-shaped and how long people hang around in a partnership that's going wrong.'*

(DG1)

Members would like to see 'clear legitimacy of leadership ... For God's sake let's not go

around with the begging bowls, I don't want to be the Stalinist, but if we are going to do consensus stuff at least let it be backed up by a little bit of power' (DG1).

This was a key issue in all three case study sites and obviously had resonance in authorities across the country:

*'I think you either reinvent local government and give it a certain amount of autonomy and creative licence and trust them more than you have and give them some more resources or you basically recognise that what you are trying to do is set up a centrally-run state and you have some of your minions on the ground and you might as well call them Government Office for the Region and why have local government? What is the added value that local government is bringing – and I think that is an unanswered question right now – what is our added value from the point of view of Government?'*

(Senior council officer, C/D)

The Commission on Local Governance, concluding at the time this report was being written, raised a number of issues which echo the key findings of this study. First amongst them was the view that 'without overburdening partners, parallel standards [of accountability, transparency and probity] should apply to partners as to local councils' (CLG, 2002, p. 35). It was also concerned with the question of whether other public agency partners should be compelled to join partnerships, reaching an agnostic view on this issue. The CLG evidence suggested that co-operation was felt to be better than coercion but that statutory partnerships provided 'strength, clarification and encouragement' (ibid., p. 37).

### Greater freedom of manoeuvre

In all three case study sites members and officers alike called for less direction from the centre. They laboured under too many plans, quality requirements, targets, indicators and financial straitjackets. They felt their commitment to the modernisation process in general and to partnership working in particular merited a quid pro quo relaxation of central government controls, allowing them the freedom of manoeuvre necessary to meet local needs and aspirations and rekindle their own motivation and commitment to both facilitating and shaping public services. In essence, they were arguing that the government should *trust* local authorities to get on with the job; whatever the government might say, it clearly did not trust local government.

### A time for consolidation/slowing the pace of change

Members and officers and their external partners have grown weary at the never-ending number and the pace of changes imposed by the centre. A time for consolidation is well-nigh. This includes damping down the 'Pavlovian' urge to create a new partnership to meet every eventuality. An exasperated chair of scrutiny complained:

*'We're being told all the time to make the links but when do we have the time to sit down and think where the links are because you're going from one partnership meeting to another to another and you're losing the thinking space.'*  
(C/D)

### **The need to resource partnership working**

For members to be at their most effective on partnerships additional, ring-fenced resources are required both for training and development around partnership working. Government needs to recognise the extra costs incurred by local authorities in partnership working, which were inhibiting both them and, not infrequently, some other partners from engaging wholeheartedly. Unless additional human and financial resources for the general servicing of partnership working are provided from the centre, some partnerships will not meet their full potential (see also the various accounts in Glendinning *et al.*, 2002).

### **A corporate approach to partnership working**

Councils will need to develop written protocols specific to partnership working, which should include formal guidance on the potential for conflicts of interest. It is clearly critical to proper accountability that local authorities develop coherent and effective mechanisms for 'giving account' – members reporting back from partnership working – and that the reportage be not simply in relation to future agendas or to when major changes in the structure of the partnership are to take place, but instead should cover ongoing substantive matters with policy ramifications for the local authority. It was also felt that those engaged in partnership working should be held to account by councils, that this should be integral to scrutiny processes and examined in relation to a series of criteria: for example, whether representatives on partnerships were the most appropriate;

whether they were fulfilling their responsibilities to the council; whether they were receiving the most appropriate training and support; whether the partnership was providing added value; what the partnership had achieved; and whether the benefits of partnership working were outweighing the costs.

### **Training and development for members**

The requirement that partnership working brings for the development of new skills amongst members was frequently rehearsed to us and again to the Commission on Local Governance, who argued (CLG, 2002) that a different set of skills was needed (and resources to address them). The role of the majority of members is now much more externally focused and carried out substantially away from council offices. Whilst the committee system is now fairly tightly managed and of central concern to fewer members, those on partnerships now have to understand much more about the world in which they are operating. There is no easy way of dealing with the tensions that elected members feel in partnerships, no quick-fix guide to partnership working. It is perhaps more a question of support and development, of their becoming sensitive to the very different processes of engagement required to undertake that role fruitfully, of being able to play appropriate roles in appropriate situations. There was a key need for training to provide members with a clearer sense of their own role on partnerships, how partnerships differ and why members were there. That would take time.

Members indicated that training and development assistance should be made available by a range of providers, local authorities, government regional offices, independent training organisations, partnership bodies themselves and external partners, and that information about the different sources should be widely available. It should be user-friendly, therefore it should take various forms, be offered to flexible timescales, and by means of differing, perhaps more inventive methods such as coaching, peer review, mentoring, exchanges, secondment, shadowing, etc. Training in itself was also a means of attaching explicit value to the role of members.

It should also be 'sold' to elected members in a positive and empowering manner and there should be specific training and advice on the potential conflicts of interests in partnership working. Government should give some thought to persuading employers to be more flexible with their demands on the diaries of elected members.

### Re-engaging backbench members

Given their general feelings of marginalisation as a result of the process of modernisation, there were key questions around how to attach value to the role of backbenchers and how to link them into partnerships and into the scrutiny process of partnerships. Backbenchers asked how their community leadership role could be made meaningful and how it could be connected to executive decision-making. Some authorities had begun to recognise the need for proactive measures to facilitate a re-engagement of non-executive members in the policy / partnership process and a few were beginning

to undertake steps. A deputy leader:

*'We've decided that everybody should be involved so unless you're a member of the cabinet, you are in a scrutiny committee, regardless, and we're giving them different roles and best value roles and trying to encourage them to go off and do little subsets and investigate and so on and so forth – we are trying to give them back something, and also to allow them to meet the officers and the officers to meet the members because the officers say we don't know the members any more, we have no feel.'*

(DG2)

### Support services for backbenchers

Along with the increasing levels of work had come greater complexity and mountains of paperwork. Members could be assisted with the former by more regular briefings by council officers and their colleagues on the executive, and by officers dedicated to follow up individual case enquiries from members of the public. The latter required dedicated secretarial support, for which resources would need to be found.

### Appropriate remuneration for members engaging in partnership work

Workloads for both executive members and committed backbenchers had increased and it was felt that this merited, indeed necessitated, due reward. A backbench member in M observed:

*'I think we've got to tackle this business of a nineteenth-century view of a councillor and the way he or she operates, which was essentially*

*voluntary and if you got any remuneration it was peanuts, and increasingly what is becoming a full-time workload ... I could earn exactly what I am doing as a Councillor stacking shelves at Tesco.'*

Executive members felt there should be due recognition of the significant responsibilities carried. At times they were taking decisions affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, disbursing millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. In so doing they often sat opposite people from other agencies and public bodies who were earning much more money but who often had far less responsibility in the context of partnership working:

*'at the end of the day you go in there on your lowly salary and you're talking to Chief Executives and people like that on £70,000 and you're giving your input as much as they are. You feel my God I am undervalued.'*  
(C/D)

At the same time the cabinet system was geared against supporting the backbench community leadership role. One executive member explained:

*'how do we reward those councillors who are good at working with their communities, we leave them playing with their communities and they have no progression and they have no reward, they have precious little acknowledgement except a few of us might say "oh Barry's really good at working in his community".'*

He continued:

*'We do reward this hierarchy of knowledge and control – we are saying the Leader and the Cabinet members have higher quality skills, higher level skills and therefore we should reward that and those that do the bread and butter work we don't reward at all except by giving them a general allowance and I think that is completely wrong, we should offer the same level of support to people in partnership working and in constituency work that we do to members on the cabinet.'*

(Executive member, DG1)

### It's good to talk

Finally, several elected members, of all political complexions, felt that there were gaps in understanding between the government/ ministers and their civil servants and advisers on the one hand, and local councillors on the other. Information may go to senior officers but still not reach members:

*'It would be helpful if central government actually consulted us a bit more. I say more but actually at the moment consultation is zero. They may send something to the Chief Executives or whatever but if it ever gets filtered down to the members is a different matter.'*

(Backbencher, leader of opposition, C/D)

## 5 Recommendations

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Given the complexities of partnership working, and the high-profile responsibilities which elected members have within partnerships and elsewhere, there was consensus amongst our study respondents that it is clearly time that executive members were granted the freedom of manoeuvre concomitant with their unique status as democratically-elected representatives, with local knowledge and considerable abilities. In addition the important, growing and increasingly complex front-line responsibilities of backbench members should be explicitly acknowledged and appropriately supported.

The researchers conclude that for elected members to fulfil their potential in partnership working:

### 1 Government should:

- more robustly support the stated role of local authorities to ensure publicly accountable, equitable and quality-consistent services as well as a strategic overview of local provision
- let go of the reins: allow members the space to follow political agendas and to innovate to meet the particular needs of their communities
- ensure that resources are made available to support training and development for members at all levels i.e. executive and backbench
- review the levels of remuneration for backbench members in relation to their current workloads and responsibilities.

### 2 Local councils should:

- review feedback and accountability mechanisms to ensure that structures are in place for officers and elected members to raise key issues arising from partnerships, and be held to account for decisions taken on behalf of the authority
- give particular consideration to the need to engage backbenchers in partnership and the scrutiny of partnerships
- ensure that training and support for elected members are made available via a range of providers, on a regional basis and in accessible formats with flexible timescales
- develop policy and guidance to assist in the consistent selection of appropriate representation on partnership bodies.

### 3 Local government umbrella and membership organisations should:

- undertake a strategic review of the balance of responsibilities and authority within major partnerships in order to provide guidance for councils and other partners on powers and transparency in decision making
- consider extending and improving the support offered to authorities on a regional basis, to maximise opportunities for member development
- develop mechanisms which enable authorities and councillors to share their skills and experience in partnership working.

# Notes

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## Chapter 2

- 1 These tendencies also have resonance in other recent studies. See LGA (2001b, pp. 5–21) and NCVO (2000b).
- 2 A recent study on the role of members in partnership working, obtained in one of the round table discussions and based on feedback from elected members themselves listed the following benefits: ‘Political: Shared decisions – shared ownership; Sharing the blame when something goes wrong; Increased awareness of community needs using different perspectives; More community interaction; Increased trust and understanding; Increased intellectual capital; More inclusive. Financial: Savings made by not duplicating effort; More likely to attract third party or matched funding; Economies of scale. Personal: Street cred.; Profile; Improving personal knowledge and understanding; Satisfaction of doing things right’ (IDeA/CEDC (2002).
- 3 This is a widespread problem recognised for some time: for example, ‘the mood of many councils that felt that the Government exercised “too much central prescription and financial control,” making the job of councillor worthless’ (DETR, 1999a, ch. 5, p. 14). Again, ‘Whitehall seems obsessed with the idea that local authorities cannot be trusted. This distrust ignores the panoply of controls and regulations under which councils operate’ (Chisholm, 2001). See also Chandler (2001) and DETR (2000, p. 3).

- 4 The government has realised that there are issues around the plethora of plans and partnership arrangements and acknowledged the need for more strategic thinking. The Regional Coordination Unit of the Cabinet Office has shown interest in rationalising partnerships and area-based initiatives.
- 5 That is all the more important when viewed in the light of a recent LGA study in which 36 per cent of local authorities cited lack of financial resources as the main barrier to fulfilling their duty/exercising their power of well-being (LGA, 2001b, p. 58). See also DETR (2000, p. 3, pt 9).

## Chapter 3

- 1 This point was made by the King’s Fund Independent Health Organisation which has been running an intensive training and development programme for elected members and other agencies working with PCTs (one-year programme demanding 15+ days participation, involving real-time work on a local HIP, shadowing an executive, etc.) since July 2001 entitled ‘Improving Health and Wellbeing in Local Communities’ (King’s Fund, 2002).

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## New roles for old

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# Appendix 1

## Methodology

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The research was undertaken by a team from the University of Hull, supported by an Advisory Group of interested parties, representing national and local government, the voluntary and community sectors, academic interests and think-tanks.

A literature review was undertaken which included collecting examples of government guidance on partnership working in Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Local Strategic Partnerships and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) initiatives which provide varying degrees of 'encouragement' for partnership working and in some cases (LSPs) explicitly require the involvement of members. Contacts were made with various national bodies suggested by the Advisory Group in order to ascertain national perspectives on partnership working, although it became clear that there is little printed guidance material on partnership working and that research into the role of elected members in partnerships has been very limited.

In April 2001 a postal survey was sent to all local authorities in England and Wales to ascertain the scope and extent of partnership working; this was circulated via the LGA mailing system with an accompanying letter. The response rate was 40 per cent. Fuller details of the postal questionnaire findings can be obtained by sending a large s.a.e. to the authors at Social Policy, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX. The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 2.

The main body of work was fieldwork, undertaken between November 2001 and March 2002, in three case study sites in England in three differing authorities: a metropolitan authority, a unitary authority, and a two-tier authority (effectively involving discussions at

both tiers of local government: county council plus two district councils). Other key variables which shaped the choice of case study area were:

- indications, either from Advisory Group members' knowledge or from responses to the postal survey, of 'best practice'
- authorities involved in a reasonable spread of partnerships
- authorities with differing regional contexts
- authorities with differing political histories
- a mix of rural and urban authorities (i.e. at least some rural presence)
- logistics and cost-effectiveness in relation to a research study with limited resources.

The case study work involved undertaking semi-structured interviews with both executive and non-executive elected members, council officers and a range of individuals who work with them in partnership, including the voluntary and community sector. The topic guides for the interviews with elected members were compiled and then amended by a panel of elected members recruited through the assistance of the LGA. The fieldwork also involved a discussion group with backbench elected members, of differing political complexions, in each site.

This was followed up with two discussion groups with elected members, one in the North, one in the South of England, to develop the key points emerging from the study.

# Appendix 2

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## Postal questionnaire

### MEMBERS AS PARTNERS

Joseph Rowntree Foundation-sponsored research study  
University of Hull

*Postal survey of all local authorities in England and Wales*

This form should be completed by the Chief Executive or nominated officer in conjunction, where appropriate, with relevant member(s). Individual responses will be anonymised in any published account of this study.

#### **The study**

The government has chosen partnership working as a key means through which much of its present policy programme is to be delivered at a local level. Local government is now engaged in a very wide range of partnership working. In many cases, local authorities are represented solely by officers.

This study, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and with the support of the LGA and IDeA, seeks to explore the role of members in partnership working. This postal survey, to all local authorities in England and Wales, will be followed by a number of detailed case studies together with discussion groups with members from selected authorities.

The final report, on the ways in which members can be involved in partnership working, will be available at the end of this year and will incorporate detailed guidance on the role of members published in conjunction with the LGA, IDeA and JRF.

In this survey, we are using a broad definition of partnership; but it is up to you to define what you consider to be partnership working. For example, under 'Other partnerships' you may wish to include regional partnerships.

*Please return this survey form when completed to: Dr M. Wilkinson (MP), Social Policy, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX.*

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## New roles for old

Name of partnership	Officer involvement? (tick if yes)	Level of officer involvement?	Member involvement? (tick if yes)	Level of member involvement?
Local Strategic Partnership				
Sure Start				
New Start				
Health Action Zone				
Education Action Zone				
Employment Action Zone				
Connexions Strategy				
Learning and Skills Council				
Community Legal Services				
Crime and Disorder Partnership				
New Deal for Communities				
Better government for older people				
New commitment to regeneration				
SRB programmes				
Health improvement programmes				
LA21/Sustainability Partnership				
Youth offending team				
Drug and alcohol teams				
Lifelong Learning Partnership				
Other (please specify)				
Other (please specify)				
Other (please specify)				

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- (i) support?                      yes ☐                  no ☐

- for members involved in partnership working.

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