

## Local authority members and partnership working

The government has chosen partnership working as a key means through which much of its policy programme is to be delivered at a local level. Local government is now engaged in a very wide range of partnership working. This study, by Mick Wilkinson and Gary Craig of Hull University, explored the role of councillors in partnerships with a view to identifying ways in which they might be supported in the new roles which partnership working requires of them. The study found that:

- f** Partnership working was becoming central to the work of local authorities. It was increasingly bringing public, private and voluntary sectors together. External partners perceived and welcomed a new transparency in the local decision-making process and paid tribute to the positive input of executive members to partnerships.
- f** Partnerships were facilitating a qualitative difference on the ground, improving service provision and reinvigorating community activity.
- f** There remained, however, concerns relating to the relative costs and efficacy of partnerships. Members asserted that partnerships should not be "the only game in town".
- f** Elected members and council officers felt that partnerships could undermine the key democratic role of local government.
- f** Non-executive members were not engaging with strategic partnership working. Some saw grass roots partnerships as a threat to their traditional community leadership role.
- f** There was a dearth of appropriate support and training for elected members engaged in partnership working.
- f** Elected members would like training and development assistance to be made available to them via a range of providers. They thought it should be user-friendly, by taking various forms, to flexible timescales, and by means of differing, perhaps more inventive, methods.
- f** The researchers concluded that elected members felt that if they were to fulfil their potential in partnership working, the government must:
  - 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 local political agendas and to innovate to meet the particular needs of their communities;
  - review the levels of remuneration for both executive and backbench members to ensure these better reflect increasing workloads and responsibilities.

## Background

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. Recently, local authorities were encouraged to create (and possibly lead) local strategic partnerships to co-ordinate – and, as many hoped, reduce – the disparate range of partnerships and initiatives in each area.

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. Local government is also expected to provide a strategic overview of local provision through its concern for the social, economic and environmental well-being of local people.

However, despite obvious government enthusiasm, it should not be presumed that partnership working is a universal good. There is evidence that partnership working has not always succeeded in delivering on its goals in the past. Neither has it been clear whether local authorities have effectively addressed the tensions and contradictions arising through partnership working, 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.

At a time when external partnerships are proliferating, this study sought 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.

## The process and substance of partnership working

This study found that elected members accepted the need for partnership working. There were government requirements and expectations and it was acknowledged that council provision alone had not always been effective.

External partners hailed a new transparency in the decision-making process and praised the input of executive members, who brought personal commitment, enthusiasm and ability, political acumen and gravitas to partnerships. They were committed to genuine partnership working but would often provide a positive steer, taking on the

role of first among equals, which the vast majority of external partners both expected of them and welcomed.

Partnership working had facilitated a qualitative difference on the ground, drawing down greater resources, improving service provision, facilitating joint working and the sharing of resources, improving relationships and generating trust. In some areas it had reinvigorated community activity, empowering and re-engaging a plethora of social and cultural groups. Members also recognised that the potential for future benefits was enormous:

**"that (partnership working) 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."**  
(executive member)

## Key issues

### *Reasserting the democratic imperative*

Elected members, both executive and backbench, ruling group and opposition, felt they had ceded too much power of decision to external bodies. The emphasis on partnership working and the growth of quangos was seen to have downgraded the role of local authorities. They wished to see a reassertion of that essential democratic/political role:

**"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."** (elected member)

There were particular concerns expressed around the lack of accountability of other partners on external bodies, that public-private partnerships both local and regional were weighted in favour of unelected, private-sector participants, and that voluntary and community sector organisations were setting up alternative democratic processes.

### *The need for more appropriate engagement of backbench members*

The move to cabinet structures had marginalised non-executive members, a process exacerbated by the

growth of partnership structures. Councils were struggling with the key questions of how to engage backbenchers in partnerships and the scrutiny of partnerships, how best to balance their community leadership role with that of other community representatives, and how to connect that community leadership role to executive decision-making.

### *The power to lead*

Some external partners provided representatives of insufficient gravitas to commit their organisation to meaningful change. Members wished to see an end to the contradiction whereby councils had statutory duties to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their locality under Part I of the Local Government Act 2000 but had no concomitant powers to ensure that other partners engaged effectively with these issues.

### *A need for greater freedom of manoeuvre*

Members and officers were tired of what they saw as central direction, a managerialist culture and seemingly endless plans, quality requirements, targets, indicators and financial straitjackets. These were stifling innovation and depoliticising the policy arena. 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. One 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 [other arrangements] ... it shouldn't be the only game in town or partnership for partnership's sake."**

### *A time for consolidation: partnership fatigue*

The sheer pace of centrally directed change and the 'Pavlovian urge' to create a new partnership to meet every eventuality was seen as counterproductive:

**"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?" (elected member)**

Neither elected members nor their external partners could send their brightest and best to every

partnership. Both executive and non-executive members were becoming increasingly over-extended, or "stretched to the limit", in the words of one executive member.

There were also questions around whether partnership working was always the most appropriate 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?" (executive member)**

### *The need for enhanced training and support services*

Whilst most local authorities provided training and offered support to members involved in partnership working, in the main that training and support was only provided on request, taking the form of ad hoc briefing sessions and presentations on the issues. Member development programmes had only recently begun to address member activities on specific partnerships. Very few authorities indicated that they had council-wide training specifically on partnership working. Members all too often failed to take advantage of the support services provided. Some felt that was because both in-house and external training provision was inadequate and unimaginative.

Members indicated that training and development assistance should be made available by a range of providers: local authorities, partnership bodies themselves, government regional offices, independent training organisations, and external partners. They suggested that information about the different sources should be widely available and the training provided should be user-friendly. By this they meant it could take various forms, offered to flexible timescales, and by means of differing, perhaps more inventive methods such as coaching, peer review, mentoring, exchanges, secondment and shadowing.

Training was seen as a means of attaching explicit value to the role of members and should be 'sold' to elected members in a positive and empowering manner. Specific training and advice was requested on the potential conflicts of interest in

partnership working. Government should give some thought to persuading employers to be more flexible in supporting the roles and activities of elected members.

### *Appropriate remuneration*

Workloads for both executive members and committed backbenchers had increased in recent years and it was felt that this merited – indeed necessitated – due reward. Executives were taking decisions at times 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. Meanwhile, one backbencher observed: "I could earn exactly what I am doing as a councillor stacking shelves at Tesco."

### **The future**

Given the complexities of partnership working, and the high profile responsibilities which elected members have within strategic partnerships and elsewhere, elected members felt they should be granted the freedom of manoeuvre warranted by their unique status as democratically-elected representatives. It was equally held that for local partnerships to fulfil their potential the important, growing and increasingly complex frontline responsibilities of backbench members, their local knowledge and expertise, should be explicitly acknowledged and appropriately supported.

### **About the project**

The study was carried out between April 2001 and March 2002 by a research team from the University of Hull in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Improvement and Development Agency. The project was supported by an advisory group of individuals from national and local government, the voluntary and community sectors, academic interests and think-tanks.

A postal survey was sent to all local authorities in England and Wales to ascertain the scope and extent of partnership working. The response rate was 40 per cent. The main body of work was fieldwork, undertaken between November 2001 and March 2002, in three case study sites in England: 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). 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. 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.

### **How to get further information**

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 full report, **New roles for old: Local authority members and partnership working** by Mick Wilkinson and Gary Craig, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 109 8, price £13.95).

A guidance note has also been distributed, via the LGA, to all elected members in England and Wales.

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Community governance, community leadership and the new local government**, Jan 99 (Ref: 119)
- **Modernising local government**, Apr 99 (Ref: 419)
- **Policy transfer between local regeneration partnerships**, May 00 (Ref: 530)
- **Urban regeneration through partnership: a critical appraisal**, May 00 (Ref: 560)