Scottish Community Safety Network

Title: Governing Partnerships: Bridging the Accountability Gap
Author: Audit Commission
Date published: October 2005
Funding body: Audit Commission
Document available to download at: http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/communitysafety/Pages/governingpartnerships _copy.aspx (accessed September 2011)

SCS topic headings: Partnership Working; Evaluation and Monitoring

This document is a REVIEW of effective intervention practice.

Summary of the intervention's aim
Through highlighting a full range of partnership working aspects, this report urges local public bodies to closely examine whether the partnerships they are involved in are delivering. It outlines the principles of 'good partnership governance' and how this can help local public bodies to deal with the growing challenges. It also contains a checklist of key questions to help those engaged in partnerships to assess how well they are equipped to meet these challenges.

The Audit Commission undertook the research review as new government policies and legislation (at the time) frequently involved partnership working through involving local authorities and a variety of partners at different levels.
 The authors consider this report valid for those responsible for the governance of organisations that plan, commission and deliver local public services through partnerships. The report has relevance to all public sector chief executives and executive directors, executive and non-executive elected members, non-executive directors and community representatives, as well as middle and senior managers who are responsible for the operational delivery of services within partnerships. The report also contains messages for central government policymakers; and for all regulators as they seek to bridge the regulatory gap in partnership working.

This report defines a partnership broadly as 'an agreement between two or more independent bodies to work collectively to achieve an objective'. However, it does not address all forms of partnership e.g. procurement partnerships or partnerships of registered social landlords.

Outcomes

Partnerships are a significant feature of public service delivery and can bring significant benefits. They are a response to the complex and multifaceted problems that face society, and that cannot be tackled effectively by any individual body working alone. Partnerships often attract additional resources and this is sometimes a strong incentive for collaborative working. Nationally, the policy impetus for partnerships comes from:

- the perceived failure of separately defined and run services to meet adequately the expectations of users and of the public; especially those of vulnerable groups, such as children, older people and those with mental health problems

- the need to base planning and provision on holistic themes affecting whole communities, such as community safety; the physical and economic environment and health

- the desire to enhance community engagement and civic renewal, especially through local authorities' community leadership role.

There is no one size fits all model of governing partnerships: governance arrangements should be proportionate to the risks involved. They can provide flexibility, innovation and additional financial and human capital resources to help solve problems. These are powerful incentives for organisations to work with others and now all local public bodies work in partnerships to different degrees. The distinction between statutory and voluntary partnerships has, in effect, become blurred.

But partnerships also bring risks. Working across organisational boundaries brings complexity and ambiguity that can generate confusion and weaken accountability. The principle of accountability for public money applies as much to partnerships as to corporate bodies. The public needs assurance that public money is spent wisely in partnerships and it should be confident that its quality of life will improve as a result of this form of working. Local public bodies should be much more constructively critical about this form of working: it may not be the best solution in every case.

Evidence that partnership working brings real benefits exists, but it is mainly qualitative and local. Partnership working takes up a lot of time and other resources. It can therefore extract value as well as add to it, but remarkably there is very little hard information about its impact. Not all organisations even know how many partnerships they are involved in.

However, there is little doubt that closer working relationships can generate better understanding of partners' objectives, greater openness in sharing knowledge and information and more trust. These in turn can generate tangible benefits, such as:

- joint resourcing of partnerships through financial contributions, staff secondments, facilities, services, joint posts and training, and some pooling of resources;

- joint community consultation strategies;
- increased flexibility towards the different needs of different partners; and
- joint working, mutual support and devolved decision making, along with the need for clear succession planning.

To assess partnership working, the report provides a series of questions for public bodies about their internal arrangements for partnership working, and a series of questions about specific partnerships for public bodies to consider both individually and collectively with their partners.

Case studies are used to illustrate effective and/or efficient practice across the different aspects of partnership working, monitoring, and evaluation. Sub-topics include:

- Do public bodies need to govern their partnerships?
- The importance of partnership agreements
- What good governance means (with case study examples)
- Partnerships and value for money- the costs and benefits
- Mapping and evaluating partnerships
- Using resources effectively
- What benefits do partnerships bring?
- Governing partnerships for better
- Mechanisms for accountability
- Partnership culture
- Communicating effectively with the public
- Systems and processes
- Risk management
- Performance management
- Financial management
- The challenge of integration (including pooled budgets).

Before partnerships can provide effective external accountability to the public, they face the challenge of ensuring that effective accountability exists within the partnership. The principles of good corporate governance apply with equal force in partnerships, but there are particular governance challenges in achieving effective internal and external accountability. In order to improve communication, it is important to develop formal protocols on the sharing of information and knowledge within and between partner organisations.

There are four ways to enhance partnership governance and accountability:
- Audited and inspected bodies should:
    - bring clarity to partnership roles and responsibilities;
    - use corporate governance arrangements to support partnerships; and
    - communicate effectively with the public.

- Regulators and central government should:
  - collaborate to bridge the regulatory gap: ensure that they champion the needs of service users and the wider public in all inspection, audit and investigatory activity in order to secure the greatest possible accountability in partnership working.

The Audit Commission has produced several audit diagnostic tools that address partnership risks. The toolkits comprise an eight-stage process that public bodies can use to review the corporate approach to partnership working and their management of specific partnerships (see figure 14, p. 66).

Summary of evaluation conclusions

Local partnerships exist to provide better services and quality of life for local people. Service users and the wider public have the same rights to hold partnerships to account and to obtain redress as they do with individual service providers; they have the right to expect partnerships to use public money to best effect. Strong corporate governance is needed to support partnerships effectively, and to create a clear and shared focus on users and on value for money.

A key message of this report is that a one-size-fits-all approach to governance is inappropriate for partnership working. Governance arrangements must be proportionate to the risks involved. Public bodies need to strike the right balance between protecting the public pound and ensuring value for money. At the same time, they need to manage the risks of innovation without inhibiting the innovative potential that emerges when organisations collaborate.

Central government must become clearer about the role of local partnerships: how individual local partnerships relate to each other, and the scope for local discretion over priority setting. This will help to ensure that local partnerships become more effective. It must assess the capacity of the local public sector and its partners to deliver all the improvements required through partnership working and take steps to improve it where necessary.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

The report draws on three principal data sources:

- Forty-three audit reports on various aspects of partnership working, from 2001–04. Many of these reports addressed the practice in local authorities as they set up and developed partnerships.

- Forty-one interviews and 17 focus group discussions with public and voluntary sector representatives working in different partnerships in 47 locations (Appendix 1). The focus of the fieldwork was on how local public bodies addressed cross-cutting issues such as strategic development and regeneration, health and social care and crime through partnerships.

- The annual Auditor Survey for 2003/04 – data on the 388 local authorities; 303 PCTs; 271 acute and mental health trusts; 28 strategic health authorities (SHAs); 69 police and fire authorities and 38 probation services, for which the Audit Commission is responsible.

A list of participating authorities is provided in Appendix 1, detailing local authorities, NHS bodies, criminal justice agencies, fire and rescue, and others.

Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org.uk

Date added to the SCS website: 2011 (DH)