

Governance, bridging the gap between professionals and non professionals.

This workshop was based on information that was gathered as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded study '**Value added by community involvement in governance in local strategic partnerships**' which was undertaken by Future Perspectives Co-operative Ltd in partnership with the Institute of Public Policy Research. The project has looked at widening engagement in governance structures and processes. LSPs were chosen as the arena for this study because they were seen to have been brought about specifically with this aim in mind.

What rapidly became apparent to researchers was that one of the steepest learning curves experienced by partners was that the attitudes, assumptions, goals and even the language of other sectors were often very different from those in their own. Many found that through working together partners were developing mutual understandings about both problems and opportunities and as a result trust and respect were enhanced.

This workshop was designed to explore gaps in understanding, particularly between the statutory and community perspectives. By exploring ways to build bridges between these different approaches we hope also to gain new perspectives on our own. The presentations were assembled from the actual words of a range of people working with and within Local Strategic Partnerships across England. They are followed by the contributions of the workshop participants who were asked to identify the gaps in the perspectives and to imagine ways they could be bridged.

"Good governance is about creating workable systems of accountability, influence and control."

Stuart Etherington: Chief Executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations:
keynote speech at the South West Governance Conference: Bodmin October 2005.

A community activist perspective.

Kath Maguire

There is a **lot of energy** brought into Local Strategic Partnerships by the voluntary and community sector.

We have **fought very hard** to be involved more fully and represented at the table. Some of us are there because we're **passionate about our communities** and the sector, getting a better deal and getting more involved, better represented.

We want to make the decisions and the way things are done reflect a more **people-centred and bottom-up** way of working.

My **priorities are different** from those from public services because basically **I don't get paid**. I am not there representing an authority like for the education, health, whatever.

Our priorities are from our **grass roots** and what our members have asked us to be involved in and we are kind of led by what happens, what is happening in the area. Whereas they would have to go with **whoever it was they were working for**, that's their remit. So we are more free and easy, and they are more kind of constrained.

Because we are not being paid we **don't have to worry** that what we say will put our **careers at risk** – we can say things that other people at the table can't say in public, **ask the questions that public services couldn't possibly ask**. This is sometimes very useful for them, giving them a way in to raising, and maybe even tackling difficult issues, we might even get tipped off privately what would be an interesting aspect to ask about.

On the other hand, some of the major issues, which are affecting vast numbers of people in the area, just do not find their way onto the agenda because of the **agenda setting**, and **who has the power** to do that. It has been really difficult for us to bring any issues to the table.

The only time I remember that we have **forced something onto the agenda**, the proposed redevelopment of a school, there was a problem with the venue and the meeting was cancelled at the last minute. By the time the next meeting was held the developer had pulled out, I think and the issue was dropped.

Some things have been getting better, we have mountains of paperwork to read through, but at least we do get it well in advance of the meetings now. Once we were asked to agree a **fifty page document** that had implications for several million pounds worth of spending and it was had just been plonked down on the table in front of us.

The stink I had to make to ensure we got it at the **least ten days before**, just forget it - how can you make any meaningful decisions otherwise.

Now we have also a really good **community empowerment network officer** who helps us by scanning all the documents for what has been **missed out or slipped in** and he comes to meetings and passes us little notes about what is going on below the waterline as it were, in case we have missed the implications of what is being said.

I had **sessions with him** where he would actually take me through and say – ‘Well the reason they’re saying that is because of that, and because of that and because of that. Unless you get somebody else to support you on that, it’s unlikely that it will succeed’.

You do end up **adopting tactics** – I don’t think that’s insincere, when they’ve got budgets of millions, and you’re sitting there with a hand written note hoping it’s got the information on that you need, there’s no real comparison – it’s like the old trade union stuff, solidarity, unity is strength and all that stuff. As a friend of mine puts it ‘never argue amongst yourselves in front of the opposition’.

It has been very **confrontational sometimes**. I even had a phone call from a leading member of the council telling me to ‘**watch my back**’ because he didn’t like some of the issues we were trying to raise. People who are **dependent on council funding** are at a real disadvantage when that sort of thing is going on.

Because of the **nature of high-ranking officials** in statutory organisations, particularly in health and such like, people **change jobs so quickly** that you rarely see the same person at more than two or three meetings so it can be difficult getting any continuity.

Certainly there are issues about the statutory sector and how far those chief executives at the table can permeate their staff or layers of their staff and the same in the voluntary sector. There is an issue about **peeling back the layers** and getting everyone from front line workers to middle managers and senior managers on board. The ‘middle men’ can be very resistant to new ideas.

Their seat at the table, the public service people, also **comes with the job** – so they can usually send a deputy when they can’t make a meeting and the next in post gets the job automatically if they leave. We had a real battle to be able to nominate a **deputy for the community representatives** who could vote in their absence – but that is in place now.

Of course the public service people are **paid to be there**, at the meetings – sometimes I work out how much we are paying to have them at a meeting –

it might work out at **four and a half thousand pounds** for five of them to attend one meeting - and they are getting my time for free.

But on the whole my **respect for the public service people has grown**, I appreciate and understanding their problems more now. Not quite all of them, there's one or two who I haven't, but by and large...

They have **started to trust** us more too, The police-they used to split the Community Safety meeting so that the crime statistics and other things that **they didn't feel were appropriate** for the community sector and the voluntary and private sector to know about were discussed, if you like, behind closed doors. I thought "I don't think so." So it was changed.

People from the public sector are usually there because of their job – that is **hardly democratic** – why are the voluntary and community reps always the ones who are challenged as undemocratic?

If you're a community activist who's giving their time voluntarily, your **accountability is you've got to walk the streets** where you live, and go to the forums where people will be pretty strong with you if you have not done what you said you were going to do.

When new **VCS members** join the LSP there is a handbook **induction** period but I'm thinking, OK we had information about the LSP which is run on public sector lines, **but what about the public sector?** Did they have an introduction and induction about the community and voluntary sector, do they know what it is like running a small business? – that's my point.

I feel that the **public sector knowledge is very limited** about other sectors, to be open and learn more is, I think, the challenge for them. I do think that people who are councillors and people with responsibilities to the public – they do need to get out of their castles, travel on the bus and hear what people in their area are really saying.

I often feel like **I have to justify my legitimacy** on the LSP and my presence. I feel this is a tick-box thing, **which of their boxes can be ticked** by talking to me.

The LSP can sometimes appear like a very insular school-boy network.

They can be very **naïve about how volunteering works** – I have had a phone call asking me to get half a dozen members of the community to a meeting at 9am Monday morning to be consulted – well, no. It just doesn't work like that.

You can't get a meaningful consultation by herding people off the street into a minibus and shipping them to a meeting – just to tick the how many

community people were consulted box. You have to **engage with people on their own terms**.

Sometimes it feels that the local authority **only has us on board** because they have to get the **NRF money**.

If they were really **serious about engaging** with the public then when a McDonalds ad comes on the tv alongside that should be one saying **what the council are doing** and what they want from the people sitting in the armchairs.

When a community meeting is held, in an area which is **threatened by something**, you get people attending– when they're threatened. But most of the time **people don't know that they're being threatened** or what they could do about it.

It can **take years** to get members of the community to come forward to be part of the strategy because **partnerships are people and people take time**, people have to come to understand what the point of it all is.

If you don't then **show them that they are making a difference** when they do get involved they will stop coming and it will be even harder to get them along in the future.

There have been some real surprises come out of this partnership working – if you had told me at the outset that our best ally would turn out to be the police – well, you could knock me down ...

A statutory perspective.

Frances Truscott

Firstly, we need to understand what the **government agenda** is, and that's constantly changing.

Quite clearly the police have got **very clear instructions** from the Home Office about the collaborative nature of their work now. Increasingly the health service are getting that message.

I mean, the council's got a **wider remit**. It's got its well-being powers and it's got **a licence to interfere** in a wide range of areas, but there's no reason why the police shouldn't be concerned about housing conditions; there's no reason why the police shouldn't be concerned about health conditions.

Every member of the partnership has their own set of priorities. The challenge is to align those and **identify what the shared priorities are**. There are some people there that it's almost a part of their normal day-to-day job to be involved.

You can sense there is a real well-spring of people trying to deliver things **against successes that they can show**. But with the changing personnel, and the way we've been going – sometimes it feels like it loses a little focus. What ought to come out of it is some **easily identifiable kind of outcomes**.

I do think everybody's got the right intentions, even the private sector, but they do definitely have their own agendas. You have the private sector who are interested in **making money**, you have the community and voluntary sector, who are about **finding money** to keep their voluntary and community groups going, and the public sector, that's only interested in **keeping government happy**. So you do have very difficult agendas, and when all three come together, you can imagine, there can be a bit of a battle

Really, the LSP can **consult and get feedback** from the local community till it's blue in the face, but until there are direct elections to the LSP board, the **authority of the LSP**, in my view, can only come from having the **blessing of the local authority**. Talking to people in the LGA, on the governors group there, they just can't conceive that you can run a successful LSP without being the one that drives it or controls it.

But as well as the LSP **board**, which is supposed to make decisions, we've got the **executive** team, whose role also seems to be making decisions, and the **Chairs group**, which is supposed to make decisions as well.

The executive group are still finding their feet, but they should be managing how we **consult**, what **systems** we've got in place, **performance management**, all of the boring stuff, if you like, and the LSP board are actually about **bright ideas** and steering things and helping prioritise using those systems that the executive group has created.

And dearly as I love the community representatives, they're not particularly going to want to take part in a discussion which says 'is there a more efficient way we can **recruit clerical staff**?'

I think that some people are on the board because they see an opportunity to **hold public bodies to account**, to scrutinise the work of the police, that kind of thing, which isn't something which we would necessarily want from people.

The **public services board**, on the other hand, which is just the chief executives of public service providers, that deals with **operational things**. Things that are tedious and boring, and require a great deal of sensitivity. If you are going to – say, move people from one building to another, or stuff like that. Those sort of **difficult discussions**, could cause havoc. I mean you don't want to have public debates about that because actually you might never do it.

We've got people who are trying to create wealth in the city and all those things and they see far **too much resource going into neighbourhoods**. There was a conversation that several of us had as to whether it was actually worth having the NRF for the grief that it caused.

The whole point of the Neighbourhood Renewal part is to actually **get out into the community** and mobilise them as to how we can work together. We produced Local Neighbourhood Action Plans. In the top 5 areas, only 3 of them produced Local Neighbourhood Action Plans. It was about **getting the community together**, saying what are your key 3 priorities, **what can we do**, and trying to do that planning event.

The learning process was that this **wasn't just another pot** for the voluntary organisations to get their hands on and beef up the holes in their core funding – in fact everybody came to the table with a view to trying to **get their hands on some of the money** – so that kind of distorted the way the partnership worked for a while – this was about using money to deliver very specific objectives that related to the floor targets and there was a huge amount of angst around that.

The biggest thing about the **performance management system** is that we can't tell if we're making a difference at the moment. There are some effective decisions that get made – the bit that's lacking is the **middle-management** co-ordination underneath it.

The fact that we've managed to get the performance management project up and running and nearly complete, is going to be so amazing, to take to the board and say 'look, that target we haven't met, and look, we might need a resource here', because **we've got nothing to debate with at the moment**, we've got nothing to say why we might need extra resources.

In a sense, we are **trying to make that connection** between the **strategic vision** and what's actually coming out of the end of the **sausage machine**, that's where for me there's been a slight mismatch, shall we say, because in the normal course of events, you would have expected the strategic vision to drive the activity and **to deliver the quantified outputs**. It's back to the idea of governance – you can't do good governance unless you're fully aware of the strategy you're committing to and what you're monitoring progress against.

The other aspect of the issue is around **people's behaviours**, and we are looking at an explicit piece of work to think about what behaviours are helpful, what might be unhelpful. One of the difficulties that you've got in partnership is how you deal with the **potential for conflict**, broadly speaking. You can manage that by just having one proposition people can react to. If you have two propositions and people are in disagreement – how are you going to get your decision?

We **need to be supportive** of community and voluntary sector reps, who have a difficult task. But something that the majority do extremely well is participate in discussion, and **put a different view** to statutory organisations, who have a tendency to just carry on doing what they're doing. And we have helped to build that capacity whereas maybe 20 years ago, public organisations like us might have spent their time keeping them out.

I am really pleased to be in our society at a time when the Treasury wants to **see the public get service delivered to them**. But we have to communicate our vision to the community so that they know where they're travelling to as well, so that they can see which part they play in that journey – that's the bit about communicating it down to the **lower levels**.

It would be **amazing** if our citizens were able to say 'hold on a minute, I know what the public sector are trying to do here.' That would be **amazing** because that is when you get people's behaviour changing and that sort of stuff. So it is a very challenging thing **to take a complex society like we have and make things work in it**.

What are the gaps in understanding between these two approaches?

- There is often a lack of agreed purpose, not only for community participation but for the whole partnership and the strategies being developed. This can result in significant opportunity costs.
- There are mixed messages coming from different government departments, and even from different parts of the same departments, about the value, type and function of engagement with communities. This can cause confusion and miscommunication throughout the system.
- Professionals are sometimes feeling unreasonably pressured to enable bottom-up participation in strategy while legally obliged to deliver 'top-down' targets.
- There are insufficient measures of the real impact of participation and engagement. Does it help effect real change?
- Language, and particularly the use of jargon that may facilitate communication within 'silos' was identified as a barrier to those outside.
- There is an inequality in the access professionals and non professionals have to information, administrative support and other resources that are often embedded in organisations.
- Non-professionals often do not appreciate constraints and processes faced by professionals, leading to unrealistic expectations of the timescales in which projects can be achieved.
- There is often a very different experience of services from the perspective of 'life' and the professional perspective of processes.
- Community representatives are vulnerable to being held personally responsible for the impact of partnership decisions in their own communities.
- Because of their availability within the community this can intrude on their private life in a way that is unreasonable and unacceptable.
- There are different cultures of decision making. The private sector are used to decisions being made and implemented rapidly whereas the public sector is used to working within a slower system of checks and balances.
- A lack of understanding of other perspectives often leads to suspicions about 'feet dragging' and self interest which in turn case a deepening lack of trust.

- There is often a lack of clarity about the roles of individuals as 'representatives' of organisations/sectors and the level of support they have within them. Do they have widespread backing within their community or organisation or are they a 'lone voice' needing support from the partnership to effect change.
- With this comes a lack of clarity about their ability to deliver on partnership decisions within their organisations/communities. In particular representatives of public sector organisations are often assumed to have the power to commit resources which may not be in their gift.
- There is often insufficient distinction made between large, well organised voluntary sector organisations and the often smaller and more ad-hoc community groups that have less access to infrastructure organisations.

How can they be bridged?

- Clear 'vision statement' of the purpose of participation and partnership.
- Developing understanding that enabling others to act does not necessarily diminish ones own power. There is potential in partnerships for everyone to make gains.
- Explicit 'buy in' to partnership working from senior political leaders and top management signals the value of the processes throughout the system. Though this is insufficient on its own it does lend support to those working towards the identified goals throughout groups and organisations.
- Clearly assigned co-ordination role and support for research, communication and administration. This needs to be of a high quality and therefore has a significant cost. This means that partners need to understand the need and value these services.
- Intelligent use of performance management – setting strategic outcomes building in feed back and reflective space to examine the value that is added, including unexpected outcomes.
- Meetings and events held in places where people naturally go (supermarkets, leisure centres, schools, work places, bus/train stations etc.) – not expecting them to make the effort to engage, giving clear and unambiguous information about options, opportunities, costs and timescales.

- Celebration of achievements. Even small wins can help people see how to build on what is effective.
- Improved opportunities for informal networking, 'getting to know' events.
- More formal opportunities to work together. Job shadowing, secondments, joint training, mentoring etc. that can lead to a more creative and imaginative joint utilisation of each other's resources, including strengths, knowledge and different forms of legitimacy.
- 'Do stuff' – both formal and informal contact between members of partner groups and organisations at all levels help to build links and foster good working relationships. Building empathy and understanding between people in different groups and organisations can be a very cost effective way of improving relationships and services.
- Avoid being led by new initiatives – new opportunities do not need to signal the creation of new partnerships. Existing partnerships need to be flexible enough to configure themselves in a variety of ways in order to deliver what is needed in different circumstances, but still to keep hold of the kernel of their purpose.
- Networking between partnerships in different sorts of areas so that different learning and approaches can be shared.
- Sharing of what hasn't worked and analysis of why is as important as sharing what has worked, perhaps even more so. It is vital to develop learning that is non-judgemental of individuals and groups who may have failed to achieve expected outcomes and that is able to assimilate the unexpected lessons.

Glossary

LGA	Local Government Association
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
NRF	Neighbourhood Renewal Fund
NRU	Neighbourhood Renewal Unit
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector