

A review of strategic partnership working in Gloucestershire

Context

Increasing weight is being placed on local partnerships, including an enhanced role in relation to the negotiation and delivery of local area agreements. The dynamics of partnership working can be complex, particularly so in county areas.

Project Objectives

The challenge of negotiating a local area agreement (LAA) highlighted significant weaknesses in the partnership arrangements in Gloucestershire. It meant that ambiguities in governance and accountability arrangements had to be addressed, and it emphasised the need for a genuine jointly owned vision for the county.

In response to this, the Gloucestershire Local Government Association commissioned a review of partnerships in the county to ensure that they were fit for purpose for the delivery of the LAA.

In the event, however, the review - which was facilitated by the Tavistock Institute - focused as much on the underlying dynamics of partnership as on structures.

Results

Ambivalence about the role of politicians, particularly among councils' partners, was identified as a key issue, as was the gap between the Gloucestershire strategic partnership on the one hand and thematic partnerships and district level partnerships on the other hand.

As significant, however, was the fact that in many cases it was not clear what role or task a particular partnership was playing at any one point in time. That made it difficult for the members of those partnerships to understand what their role should be.

The core of a new approach to partnership working in Gloucestershire, which emerged from the review, was a cycle of partnership working: deliberation, authorisation, implementation and evaluation.

Deliberation has been conceived of as an inclusive process, shaping a strategic vision for the future development of the county and monitoring progress towards that vision. We recommended a reconstituted strategic partnership - as a partnership of partnerships - as the vehicle for that task.

Implementation and evaluation - reviewing progress and learning from it - are seen as being tasks for a community strategy implementation executive, which the review proposed should take over from a more narrowly focused but effective LAA project board.

A crucial issue in any partnership structure is how the key organisations authorise the action necessary to implement recommendations that emerge from the partnerships. One of the conclusions of our review was the creation of a new vehicle for collective decision making, bringing together the leaders of the county and district councils with the chairs of bodies such as the primary care trust and learning and skills council.

Two phrases reverberated throughout this review of partnership working: "the benefit of the doubt" and "give and take". In too many cases, partners have resisted giving others the benefit of the doubt, and have been more enthusiastic about taking than giving.

So it was clear from our work that these structural changes alone would not secure more effective partnerships. Two other things were necessary.

First, local government must display the partnership behaviour it wants its partners to mirror. In two-tier areas, that means councils being seen to work better as partners.

Second, whatever structures are in place, some important issues that span partnership boundaries, both geographical and thematic, will be important. Cross-boundary working is notoriously difficult and needs to be worked at and supported.

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