

A new regeneration agenda?

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The implications of local strategic partnerships

THIS LOCAL WORK IS INSPIRED BY what is being dubbed 'the new regeneration agenda'. Recent policy initiatives and directions such as the *Urban White Paper (DETR 2000)*¹, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) guidance (*DETR, 2001*) and the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (Social Exclusion Unit 2001)* mean we are seeing a considerable reshaping of regeneration and regeneration policy. This new agenda requires some reflection, particularly from the local perspective, so I am drawing on the unique 'local' insight my work with CLES gives and considering, in particular, LSPs and their development to date and pinpointing the effect that LSPs and the wider regeneration agenda will have for local regeneration and local governance.

Local strategic partnerships

LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS (LSPs) are the latest in the government's wider reform to improve the quality and responsiveness of public services. They are a product of the government's desire to join up policy and increase effective working across policy areas. Emerging from a regeneration agenda but having a much wider remit, LSPs are to be key non-statutory bodies designed to

'bring together at the local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together' (*DETR, March 2001, 4*). LSPs are to be accredited according to their ability to demonstrate that they are 'effective, representative and capable of playing a key strategic role in the locality' (*DETR, March 2001, 63*)². It is envisaged that LSPs will operate at a level in which strategic decisions can be taken and will involve local authorities more heavily than has been the case up until now. The LSPs are to have four core responsibilities:

- prepare and implement a community strategy for the area
- develop and deliver a local neighbourhood renewal strategy to tackle deprivation
- coordinate local plans, partnerships and initiatives and provide a forum for local councils, the police, health services, central government and other agencies
- work with local councils to develop local public service agreements.

In developing LSPs central government has committed itself to supporting them:

- by facilitating the involvement of local agencies which deliver central government services into the LSPs
- through the Government Offices which will be assisting community and voluntary sector involvement

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■ through the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit which will implement the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan and ensure 'joined up' working with central government.

One of the key challenges facing LSPs is the extent to which they will operate as 'local' strategic bodies and not merely emerge as another layer of partnership. By strategic, the emphasis is on the LSP operating in a holistic way, operating across and through a range of policy areas. For this local strategic role to emerge it is clear that two broad issues need to be addressed.

Partnership and partner involvement

IT IS EVIDENT IN WORK ON LOCAL authorities³ and LSPs recently carried out by CLES, and from experience gained in other locations around the country, that LSPs are viewed positively by local authorities. They are seen as a welcome rationalisation to the messy plethora of regeneration partnership and the 'patchwork quilt of partnership'. Indeed, work conducted by the Local Government Association (LGA) found that 83 per cent of local authorities surveyed expected the LSPs to become an important delivery vehicle for economic regeneration (*Urban Environment*, 2001, p24). But questions remain about the extent of local authority control within LSPs. Too much control and the LSP may become dominated by the local authority, with little synergy emerging from the local authority's relationship with the other public, private and community and voluntary sectors involved. In this instance a coordinated comprehension of existing partnership activity may take place but its ability to be creative, break down institutional barriers and create resource flexibility is limited. Too little control and the ability to rationalise across service departments may be limited.

Vital to the success of the LSP is how it can develop a strategic view of the

local authority departments' various responsibilities, the roles of the other partner organisations and the other areas the LSP serves. For this to happen the central executive/partnership board must have a range of representatives, of relevant seniority, who can make local strategic decisions and commitments about their organisations/departments within the LSP. And the key to achieving a local strategic perspective is the extent to which trust, mutuality of benefit and a shared sense of responsibility between LSP members are present. These elements are very much part of an institutional culture and, for them to develop, they must be nurtured and supported. The local authority has a clear role in this process and must be prepared to facilitate interaction and enable cooperation as well as allowing these elements to build and grow as the LSP matures. In my experience, the emerging LSPs are all beginning to think strategically but more may need to be done to build up trust and working relationships so that the individual representatives are willing to act strategically.

In the guidance it is also clear that, for the LSP to fulfil its neighbourhood agenda role, it is going to have to embrace and assist the involvement of the wider community. For the community and voluntary sector, big questions remain, in particular there are questions surrounding the means by which you can make this sector think and work strategically.

From our experience it seems that, in many instances, community and voluntary sector involvement is at present limited and token, with the LSP being viewed by community representatives as yet another meeting to attend in an already crowded schedule of partnership meetings and other demands placed on them. But for some emerging LSPs, community involvement is about building on successful regeneration capacity building initiatives and involving a range of connections and networks via community fora and so on. Obviously, the support of the Government Offices and the Community Empowerment Funds earmarked for the community and voluntary sector will assist their involvement. However, raising the level of their involvement also needs

new approaches and levels of understanding from the other sectors and may require involvement and capacity building techniques directed at the public and private sectors.

Neighbourhood renewal strategy and the Community Plan

SUCCESSFUL LSPs WILL NEED TO get to grips with and play a core role in developing the neighbourhood strategy and the Community Plan. For some emerging LSPs, the Community Plan is closely wedded to the everyday business of the LSP and the LSP will have a hands on role in drafting and shaping the Community Plan. For others, it seems that the Community Plan is to be largely constructed by the local authority, with the LSP merely having responsibility for signing it off. Evidence to date suggests that where the Community Plan is securely wedded to the work of the LSP, there is a much greater level of rationalisation and sense of purpose within the LSP itself.

On developing a neighbourhood renewal strategy, it seems the situation is broadly similar to that around the Community Plan. But, for most LSPs, the local authority at this stage is leading on identification, developing baselines and so on.

The types of LSP emerging

IN MY VIEW, IT IS CLEAR THAT A spectrum of LSPs is emerging – from a small newly formed LSP in an area with very few existing partnerships, at one end, to a pre-existing LSP which has been working for a number of years in an area, at the other. The variation in type, I believe, will eventually be as broad as the number of local authority areas with each LSP displaying local characteristics according to local institutional identity, culture, history and the type

and level of previous regeneration funding. However this spectrum does display some common typologies and five types of LSP are emerging.

1. No previous LSP

This type is emerging in predominantly affluent rural/semi rural areas, where there has been no regeneration activity and very little partnership activity. Any existing partnership may be centred around some limited form of public/private partnership based on a local place marketing strategy. There may be strong levels of trust between some partners, assisted by the size of organisations involved and the concomitant close institutional geography.

2. No previous LSP, but some limited pre-existing partnership activity

This type is emerging in those areas which have been subject to a regeneration initiative and so have a pre-existing partnership such as an SRB partnership board. In some instances, the existing partnership is at arm's length from the local authority and may be a separate company administering the day to day activities of the programme. However, in most cases the existing initiative is run and controlled by the local authority and the partnership board merely oversees the work. In this type of area, either the existing partnership is being beefed up to conform to the LSP criteria, bringing in partners where necessary, or a completely new partnership is being set up, reflecting the need for a fresh start and new impetus to partnership within the location.

3. No previous LSP, but a range of pre-existing partnerships at work

In this type there may be a few SRB regeneration partnerships and perhaps an Education Action Zone or a Health Action Zone. However, these partnerships will have tended to work autonomously with some core administrative function. But there is no central coordinating focus other than the ad hoc networks created via partner involvement in the various partnerships. In this type, either an LSP is being set up from an existing partnership or a completely new

partnership arrangement is being created drawing on the relevant best practice and personnel involved elsewhere within the locality.

4. Building on existing process of rationalisation

Strongly led by the local authority, this type involves a pre-existing body which combines best practice from existing partnerships while delivering a degree of local coordination. LSP development is centred around rationalisation of existing capacity which provides the LSP with a focus via the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (NRS) and the Community Plan.

5. Creating a new body from existing rationalisation

In this type there has already been some existing rationalisation in response to the range of partnership in the area. But this LSP differs to type four in that it views the LSP agenda as needing a completely new approach to partnership which involves new structures and mechanisms for involvement. In many instances, this LSP involves a clearly mapped and sophisticated web of partnership which feeds into a central coordinating body. This type of partnership has been called a 'federation of partnerships' or 'congress of partnerships' and more often than not has started from first principles and instigated an LSP conference identifying themes to be reflected in the Community Plan and NRS.

Of these types it is clear that, in those locations which have been targeted for Neighbourhood Renewal Funds (NRF), the most common type is type three, with some inner urban areas displaying some of the characteristics of four and five. In other non NRF funded areas it is likely that type one or two are the most frequent.

Do LSPs offer rationalisation and coordination?

The simple answer is that they should do, but there is a balance to be struck. The rash of partnerships not only reflects the type of funding but also the growing recognition that some problems need agencies to work together. While recognising the patchwork quilt of partnerships and

the need to rationalise this confusion, the important role that partnership plays should not be forgotten. Partnerships allow for degrees of flexibility and understanding which afford social issues and delivering services. So any process of rationalisation should not hinder this creativity.

But LSPs should be wary of creating yet another layer and another obstacle in the way of community involvement. They must embrace the community sector more fully than has been the case up until now, by building capacity and allowing multiple points and sites of participation and involvement. For LSPs to be successful, they will have to emerge as an active corporate process or a framework which enables and cajoles rather than be a static board, committee or group. This suggests that a successful LSP will become a powerful facet of local governance. In so doing, the LSP will operate in a way which raises questions surrounding the level of power it has and the extent to which it is locally accountable.

A new local governance?

IN THE 1980'S THE SHIFT FROM local government to governance was well recorded (Notably by Harvey 1989, Stoker 1993) and it became broadly accepted that local government was no longer the direct service provider and implementer of policies. Within this new system of governance there emerged a range of various formal and informal partnerships and liaisons within which policy decisions are made. However, today the new regeneration agenda bound up with the broader modernisation of local government, arguably offers a further shift and distancing from traditional local government. Many local authorities see the National Strategy and LSPs as intrinsic components of the modernisation process, working alongside the new powers and the best value process. What we are seeing being forged is a new local governance, in which LSPs in particular, are to play a key role,

through the community planning process and as the strategic partnership body for the local authority area. In effect, LSPs are the core means by which the many facets of local governance are to be joined up and connected locally.

However, the advent of LSPs could be seen as yet another step in the movement from a representative system of democracy based around elected members to a situation in which we have more of a participative democracy, based on a wide range of agencies and individuals participating in a plethora of partnerships. A pertinent question arises: how is this new partnership to feed back to existing democratic structures and how is accountability to be maintained?

Accountability at present has three main strands. First, accountability is to be ensured via the performance indicators and measurable aspects of LSP activity. Second, accountability is ensured via the individual agency representatives involved, who are accountable in various ways to their respective organisations, be it board, shareholders etc. Third, we have democratic accountability. In LSPs this is achieved via elected member representation on the LSP board. However, this route for democratic accountability is limited, as the elected members only hold a minority of positions on the board, perhaps only three to five seats on a board comprising 15–20.

Does this all matter as long as the LSP works and delivers? From a regeneration perspective, it is now generally accepted that successful regeneration needs local empowerment and resident participation. This is why the guidance for LSPs puts great emphasis on community involvement, and the NRS provides funds for engaging the community (Community Empowerment Funds). I would also argue that successful regeneration needs to maintain a strong and accountable democratic process. Empowerment and involvement are all very well for some members of the local community but many residents do not have the time or inclination to become involved and they have a retained faith in their local councillor to represent their views. For those members of the local community, the

questions of accountability and transparency are key, rather than participation. So perhaps we should be thinking much more creatively about the blend of representative and participative democracy and query the long term affects of this rise in participative democracy, which the LSP reflects.

It has been clear for some time now that a deep malaise lies at the heart of local democracy. Existing turnout figures for local elections represent a population which is increasingly disillusioned or at best uninspired by local elections. The reasons for this are myriad but clearly, in those areas which have been subject to regeneration initiatives, the development of local partnerships plays its part. For local residents, the perceived extraordinary funds represented by a five year SRB, for example, can mean more than the mainstream funds entering the area (despite the latter exceeding the former). As such, the local attention given to mainstream local authority funds can be reduced, and concomitantly the perceived importance of the local councillor diminishes. In addition, this situation is likely to increase as the LSP becomes more involved in taking a holistic view of local neighbourhood services and some bending of mainstream service resources occurs.

Clearly the local councillors must, wherever possible, become involved and play an active part in a neighbourhood's regeneration partnership. But the long term future of local accountability and transparency in a representation sense is not truly addressed in this way. At present, some solutions have been attempted. Community and neighbourhood fora have been set up, which in some cases involve elections. However, these have suffered from similar problems to those faced by council elections. In short, the need for local representative democracy is not going to go away and the need for LSPs to accommodate this is likely to grow in significance as the LSPs mature.

Conclusions

This *Local Work* is largely prospective in that it attempts to imagine or foresee the implications that the 'new regeneration agenda' and in particular LSPs will have on local regeneration and local governance. Outlining LSPs and raising some points surrounding the LSPs and local governance, I have tried to highlight some issues which may arise in the future as LSPs develop. What is clear is that there is a growing importance in the new regeneration agenda for the local, be it local neighbourhoods, local community, local authorities or local agencies. The challenge is to ensure that local understandings and solutions are fed back to and influence national policy debate and implementation.

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- Local Government Association (2001): *Urban Environment*, 12 April 2001, p3

Notes

1. The Urban White Paper was a focus for a *Local Work* (March 2001)
2. Full guidance details are to be provided by DETR in the summer
3. *Assessment of partnerships activity in the North West*. Commissioned by Government Office for the North West