

An action learning set on two-tier partnership working, UK¹

Description of the approach

In two tier local government areas in England, local strategic partnerships have been established at both county and district levels. This has created some uncertainty about the respective roles of county and district based LSPs, their relationships and the arrangements that might be needed to avoid overlap, duplication or competition. As a result, an action learning set was set up, facilitated and supported as part of an action research and evaluation programme sponsored by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The purpose of the action learning set (ALS) was to learn about existing practice, to understand and clarify the barriers to, and opportunities for, collaborative working, and to consider good practice in relation to two-tier working. Within these broad objectives, the ALS defined its own programme of work, focusing on the issues where members thought their efforts should be concentrated. Thus the agenda – and in particular the actions which might be taken – were set by LSPs themselves rather than being pre-determined by the research team or sponsors. The membership of the ALS was drawn from localities where the county and one district strategic partnership agreed to participate. The ALS met four times over the period of one year and did further work, in their pairs, between meetings. A background paper prepared by the research team helped to stimulate discussion at the first meeting. The programme of work involved sharing views on general issues concerning two-tier working, identifying issues (in pairs of LSPs), developing proposals for action and further developing those locally, sharing experience about progress and developing general lessons.

The action learning set identified the key issues confronting two-tier LSP working as:

- Clarity over the respective roles of LSP at county and district level and the ways in which value is added at each level.
- The appropriate geographical scale at which different activities can best be addressed and how LSPs can effectively relate inwards to the locality/neighbourhood and out to the region.
- Structures and forms of representation (and cross-representation) for both local government and non-local government partners.
- The processes and working arrangements between county and district LSPs (to avoid duplication, minimise bureaucracy and minimise transaction costs).

At the end of its work, the ALS identified a number of conclusions for policy and practice. These included:

- Strong representation of district LSPs (and not necessarily solely local authority representatives) on county LSPs gives greater legitimacy to that LSP to represent and lobby on behalf of county-wide interests.
- Agreeing respective strategic priorities for both County and District LSPs removes duplication and focuses on the issues that are most relevant to the level where they are positioned.
- Both county and district LSPs need to identify what can only be delivered at county level and what can add value to district based activity.
- Where there are complementary statutory processes (as in development planning for example), county LSPs should develop systems for aligning strategic/corporate planning and programming with the strategic priorities of district LSPs.
- County LSPs have a legitimate interest in identifying small-area priorities (for example, for regeneration, for neighbourhood renewal, for environmental safeguards, or for crime and disorder hot spots). Where they do so, interventions should be planned collaboratively with the relevant district LSP.

1. Source: Mike Geddes (2007), in: "Building Effective Local Partnerships: Organisational Challenges and Strategic Orientations". OECD LEED Trento Centre Capacity Building Local Governance and Partnerships.

- County LSPs should consider what resource support they could offer through partners to district LSPs, and district LSPs should consider what county LSP resources might be needed and how they might best be used.

Why the approach is relevant?

A similar action learning set could help to address issues about the relationship between partnership working at county and municipal levels.

Reasons for the success of the approach

The conclusions from the action learning set helped in the formulation of government advice to LSPs in two tier areas. However, inevitably, the participants in the ALS were drawn from areas where there was trust between the county and district, and consequently the conclusions presume a willingness to work together. Stronger government guidance may be necessary in areas where collaboration is not taking place.

The obstacles that were faced and the quality of the response taken

The effectiveness of an action learning process depends upon the initial identification of a suitable focus for the work. The task must be relevant and important to the participants and it must be possible to make progress on the issues within the time and resource constraints of the ALS. Considerable effort was thus given at the beginning of the process to identifying this focus through a national workshop.

Considerations for adoption of this kind of approach

The success of an action learning set depends on a number of factors. These include the quality of the participants and their willingness to undertake work for the set and also the availability of support and facilitation, in this case from the research team.

Contact details and website for further information

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