

## Learning to Deliver: how to make local partnerships more effective, UK<sup>1</sup>

### Description of the approach

"Learning to Deliver" is a regional support programme for Local Strategic Partnerships in the West Midlands region of UK. Its aims and objectives are:

- Through a collaborative and shared approach, to deliver a programme of practical support and activities that will help the 38 Local Strategic Partnerships improve their delivery of their plans and strategies.
- Map the current position of LSPs in the West Midlands in delivering key outcomes and test the impact of current support against delivery of these outcomes.
- Provide a framework through which the West Midlands Region can identify the strengths and weaknesses of LSPs in the region and rapidly provide support in a coordinated and efficient manner.

The programme is based upon the view that partnership practitioners are best able to improve the delivery of their partnerships when they work together to identify good practice and to solve common problems. Each partnership was asked to identify

1. one or two representatives who would:
  - Be responsible for the delivery of an Improvement Project designed to improve the working of the partnership
  - Attend an Action Learning Set<sup>2</sup> in order to share their progress with others and to work with others to solve problems and overcome barriers.
2. A Project Champion, who is a senior member of the partnership and whose role would be to provide strategic support to the project, identify major barriers to delivery, to overcome them and to report on progress to the partnership.

In return, each partnership would receive a grant for the year to help deliver the project along with other forms of support (see below).

Metropolitan and Unitary partnerships (single tier) receive GBP 19 600 (EUR 29 066) each, and County and District partnerships (Two tier) receive GBP 6 300 (EUR 9 345) each.

A condition of grant was placed on two tier partnerships that the **majority** of district partnerships in a county must submit projects which they have shared with other partnerships in their locality. If less than a majority submit projects then all the funding for the county and districts in that locality will be withdrawn and shared amongst other partnerships in the region. In the first year of the programme **all** two tier partnerships in the region participated.

### Self Assessment

The programme also insisted that each Improvement Project should be based upon either a joint Government/Partnership review of delivery – in the case of those partnerships delivering a Local Area Agreement<sup>3</sup> or a self assessment for those district partnerships that were not delivering a Local Area Agreement. A self assessment tool was developed in the region which partnerships were encouraged to use

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

2. An Action Learning Set is a process in which a group of people come together more or less regularly to help each other to learn from their experience. Action Learning was developed in the 1940s by Reg Bevans when he set up management development programmes for the National Coal Board.

3. A Local Area Agreement is an initiative developed by the UK government through which Local Strategic Partnerships develop a delivery plan (i.e. outcomes, performance indicators, targets and responsible officers) through which their strategic plan is driven. Some of the outcomes and indicators are negotiated with government based on national priorities and others are included to address particular local priorities.

and which was designed to enable each partnership to test themselves against a set of agreed competency statements. The Improvement Project was designed to improve one or two key improvements which were judged to be vital to more effective service delivery.

#### *Additional Support and Knowledge*

In order to ensure that partnerships and their participants have adequate support to deliver their projects and are able to prepare themselves for future emerging issues, additional support was provided.

A team of advisers was recruited to provide this additional support to the programme. They were selected with a competitive tender. Some had been accredited by central government as "Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers" i.e. people who were experienced in partnership and regeneration work. Each of the team has a specific area of activity (e.g. health, crime, housing, economic regeneration) which allows the programme manager to deploy specific skills where they are most needed.

The following is being offered:

#### *1 to 1 Support*

Each partnership is offered the equivalent of 1 day's individual support to help them deliver their Improvement Project. Counties and Districts (2 tier areas) were encouraged to join together to receive this support and to pool their "support days". This helps to maximise the time available and also encourages good communication and joint working.

#### *"How to" Workshops*

A series of workshops are also being offered using the external advisers but involving practitioners to demonstrate local good practice. The workshops are geared to the topics being addressed through the Improvement Projects e.g. performance management, governance and accountability, involving the voluntary sector, economic development, leadership of partnerships etc.

#### *E-Briefings*

All participants, Project Champions and other members of the partnerships receive a regular bulletin about the development of the programme and a series of policy & practice e-briefings related to partnership work, new policy developments and useful case studies.

#### *Governance and Accountability*

The programme is accountable to a Regional Improvement Partnership which acts as an intermediary body standing between central government and local partnerships and is designed to support the improvement and efficiency of Local Authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships using funding devolved from central government. Membership of the Regional Improvement Partnership includes:

- Chief Executives of Single and Two Tier Authorities
- National support agencies
- The Local Government Association (the membership association for Local Governments)
- Regional Government

This body is currently being restructured to prepare for further devolution of funds from central government departments. The programme is delivered by a programme manager who is accountable to a Steering Group consisting of regional support agencies, regional government and partnership practitioners drawn from the region.

#### *Budget*

The core Learning to Deliver budget for 2007-8 is GBP 540 000 or approx. EUR 800 000 to support 38 partnerships. In addition, the Regional Economic Development Agency has contributed an additional GBP 70 000 or EUR 104 000 to deliver support on economic development issues.

Other delivery agencies are also beginning to contribute in-kind support realising that a co-ordinated approach to capacity building is both more easily accessed by partnerships and more efficient than working

in isolation.

#### *Evaluation*

All programme participants are asked to complete an on-line survey which aims to baseline the knowledge and understanding of participants, the perceived capacity of the partnerships and the amount of regional support received by the partnerships. This will be repeated at the end of the programme to see if there has been any improvement. Telephone interviews will also be conducted to gather qualitative data and a final evaluation report with recommendations for improvement will be produced at the end of the year.

#### **Why the approach is relevant?**

The benefits of this approach are:

- It is based on each partnership assessing its strengths and weaknesses in a consistent manner which allows national and regional support agencies to easily identify needs and develop strategic support plans;
- The approach is very much practitioner led which reflects the “grass root” development of several partnerships;
- A regional approach offers a cost effective way of providing support and offers the potential to join-up the often separate priorities of central government departments;
- The Action Learning approach allows each partnership to learn from others and thereby avoids each one “reinventing the wheel”;
- If government is involved in a joint assessment of partnerships it enables government officials to develop their own understanding of partnership work; and,
- The approach can be used across single and two tier localities.

#### **Reasons for the success of the approach**

The programme is showing signs of success because:

- It provides a co-ordinated “offer” to partnerships;
- It assures regional and central government that their resources are targeted effectively;
- It is managed by a group on which practitioners and regional government are represented;
- It is supported by both regional and central government through clear policies of devolution of funding, decision-making and responsibility for improvement of service delivery; and,
- It is flexible enough to add services and offers as needs are changing.

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

**Obstacle:** Poor communication between project deliverers and partnership Boards

**Response:** Identification of Project Champions to ensure links were made

**Obstacle:** Variety of support agencies currently delivering programmes of capacity building within the region.

**Response:** Delivery of regional seminars for agencies to help them become involved in the programme and to learn about the range of programmes currently on offer

**Obstacle:** Lack of access of regional support agencies to partnerships and their key contacts

**Response:** Establishment of database of key contacts and regular news bulletin sent via e-mail.

**Obstacle:** Difficulty in arranging meetings across a large geographic area.

**Response:** Use of new technology to encourage conference calls (e.g. [www.powwownow.co.uk](http://www.powwownow.co.uk) ) and on-line discussions (e.g. [www.basecampHQ.com](http://www.basecampHQ.com) )

**Considerations for adoption of this kind of approach**

- Gain the support of both partnerships and government;
- Develop the self assessment tool together;
- Provide financial support to assist the process;
- Be clear that the focus of the programme is collaborative learning;
- Structure the regional partnership to ensure good representation of partnerships;
- Build in strong evaluation systems at the beginning of the programme;
- Ensure effective marketing of the programme's success to build support and ownership; and,
- Use external facilitators initially to ensure there is no conflict of interest between partnerships or between regional agencies and that there are neutral arbiters at hand to help resolve tensions and problems.

**Contact details and website for further information**

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