

Developing a commissioning approach to partnership work, UK¹

Description of the approach

The Local Strategic Partnership of Coventry developed this approach to increase the funding opportunities for their work. The aim of this work was to:

- Provide a more sustainable approach to partnership work
- Produce greater impact from the work
- Involve and engage more partners in the work of the Strategic Partnership

An initial budget of GBP 5 Million (EUR 7.4 Million) per annum for 3 years was available as a one off amount to support the improvement in services within deprived communities within Coventry, West Midlands region of the UK.

Why this approach? Coventry's Local Strategic Partnership was charged with the role of allocating this funding. Previously, funding had been allocated by the Partnership using a bidding process. This resulted in:

- A large number of small projects with little measurable impact;
- Activities with little relationship to the city's strategic plan and priorities;
- Unsustainable activities receiving funding for another short period;
- An unhealthy "beauty contest" between poor communities vying for money; and,
- An exclusive process whereby a small number of people spent long periods of time selecting projects which they had little knowledge of and no contact with.

The "Commissioning" Approach

The Workshop: a workshop was held with the Partnership's Strategic Board which consisted of representatives from public, private, voluntary and community organisations.

Officers of the Partnership provided participants with statistical information drawn from government sources along with the results of a survey of residents' views that indicated which issues were the most important to tackle (e.g. unemployment, crime, health etc). The issues were drawn from those in the city's strategic plan.

Having received this information, participants were then asked to discuss the issues in groups and then "vote" for the 3 issues that they believed to be the most important. This was done by each participant marking the issues displayed on the walls of the room with up to 3 coloured dots. Following this exercise, the "votes" were counted and 6 priority issues were selected.

The Specification: A specification was drawn up for each priority by relevant sub-groups of the Partnership which included the following key points:

- An outcome-based description e.g. "The activity will provide services to unemployed people in the target neighbourhood which will enable them to gain employment and help them to strengthen their social networks." The description avoided output descriptions (number of people attending courses) wherever possible.
- A description of the outcome in the city's strategic plan that the activity should address.
- A requirement that the activity should measure its success against performance indicators drawn from the strategic plan (e.g. number of benefit claimants in the city, extent to which residents think their community is a good place to live).

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.

- A requirement that the service should be delivered through a partnership in order that a range of services could be offered and that duplication of activity was avoided.
- A requirement that one organisation acted as leader and took responsibility for finances, evaluation and partnership support.
- Confirmation that discussions had taken place with the client group and representatives from the client group had places on the main project steering group.
- An indication of the maximum allocation of funding for this priority.
- A requirement that the proposals must demonstrate how the activity will be evaluated.
- A requirement from a public sector sponsor that, if the activity is successful in tackling the priority, it will be considered for future and ongoing funding through the mainstream budgetary planning cycle of the organisation.

The last point was developed with the finance officers of the public sector organisations in the partnership in order to make them aware of this potential commitment and to ensure that their planning cycles and procedures were geared up to cater for these new activities.

The specifications were then sent out to the Partnership's mailing list within the city.

The Selection Panels: Each sub-group identified a selection panel consisting of people who were "experts" in dealing with the priority and members of the voluntary and community sectors who understood the needs of the particular client group.

Those offering proposals were then invited to meet with the panels to discuss their ideas. Each meeting took around 1 ½ hours.

Each panel was particularly concerned that the proposals had ways of measuring success against the strategic outcome, a rigorous evaluation strategy and a clear public sector commitment to sustain the activity if it was successful.

The Decisions: Each panel considered the proposals carefully and often asked the proposers to consider involving agencies from other proposals in their work in order to add value and to secure activities that would not succeed in order weaker proposals.

Some also spent time talking to organisations which appeared to be competing with each other in delivering very similar services and persuading them to work together.

Concluding the procedures, final decisions were made and contracts agreed upon with the lead organisations. The Partnership's sub-groups then took over the monitoring of the activities, provided them with strategic support where required and ensured that the public sector sponsor was kept fully involved in the activity.

Why the approach is relevant?

Still nowadays, many of the activities that partnerships are delivering are on short-term funding and as such are unsustainable. This approach could help closer working between community organisations and the public sector. It could further help to identify new ways of working that could be adopted by public sector organisations.

Reasons for the success of the approach

There are a number of strengths that made the approach a success.

- Relationships were developed between Finance Officers from the partner organisations who were willing to share ways in which activities could be considered through the mainstream planning cycles of the public sector organisations.
- Community involvement within the decision-making process gave a more accurate feel for whether the proposed activities were likely to address local needs.

- The focus on outcomes rather than outputs and the insistence of delivery through partnerships helped to generate more integrated packages of activities which reflected the multiple needs of many of the client groups.
- The linkage between the outcomes in the city's strategic plan and the activities helped the Partnership to maintain a strategic view of the city's needs.
- The insistence that the activities should measure themselves against the performance indicators that were attached to the priority outcomes helped to focus the providers on their contribution to "the big picture".

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

Obstacle: Concern from Health agencies that realised their priorities were not included within the final group.

Response: The Partnership agreed that the Health priority should be a cross-cutting issue i.e. it should be addressed by every proposal.

Obstacle: There was concern from the monitoring team that there should be more focus on outputs in order that they could monitor the activities effectively.

Response: A compromise was agreed that the proposal should contain some key milestones and outputs. This did, however, detract from the overall focus on outcomes.

Obstacle: Some public sector agencies could not sustain the whole of their new activities.

Response: It was agreed that it was acceptable agencies to adopt successful approaches drawn from the activities rather than the specific activity. This in some circumstances helped to improve mainstream services.

Considerations for adoption of this kind of approach

- Locally or regionally or nationally a range of key outcomes should be agreed and used to focus local activities.
- Training should be made available through external advisers for partnerships, practitioners and regional government on (i) the use of outcomes; (ii) how to plan and project manage activities; and, (iii) ways of securing agreement on strategic priorities.
- Each locality should produce a strategic plan based upon local data and resident surveys which can then direct the activities within the area.
- Pump-priming funding should be made available to attract partners and kick start activities. The funding should be made available only if the agreed activities are sustainable.

Contact details and website for further information

Mr David Galliers
Partnership Manager
Coventry Local Strategic Partnership
E-Mail: david@galliers.net
Website: www.coventrypartnership.com