

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (EXTERNAL)

4TH OCTOBER 2007

PRESENT	Councillor Mrs. Lee (Chair) Councillors Anderson, Buckham, Mrs. Seabury, Mrs. Todd and Ward
APOLOGIES	Cllr. V. Shuttleworth
ADVISERS	R. Bowman, Scrutiny Manager and Mary Hall, LSP Manager

05. INTERVIEW WITH THE LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP (LSP) MANAGER ON THE SUBJECT OF THE DURHAM LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

The LSP Manager attended the meeting to answer the following questions on the Local Area Agreement (LAA):

Q1. How would you describe the LAA?

Bureaucratic and top-down.

Q2. Why does it exist?

The theory behind the LAA was brilliant. The idea was to improve quality by reducing duplication, to enable the targeting of services to specific localities. It was also a government requirement that LAAs be formed. The idea was to improve services and make them more accountable. Although that wasn't the case at the minute, hopefully next year would bring a better, more key role for the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). This improvement rests on what the government meant by 'targeting', especially how Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) is to be targeted.

The question of whether all partners take the LAA equally seriously was raised. The answer was no; there are partners who should be present at the LAA meetings who are not. Wear Valley District Council (WVDC) has been particularly active in trying to promote the involvement of the voluntary sector. Many have taken the view that the LAA isn't working well and have backed away from it. Senior ranking individuals have increasingly sent deputies, so there have been reductions both in consistency and in the seniority of those attending. Levels of communication between the LAA Board and the separate blocks of the LAA needed improvement.

Q3. What accountability mechanisms are in place?

Currently the different theme blocks are accountable to the LAA Board. Reports are issued to the Board describing how LAA funded projects are developing.

Q4. What is your role in the LAA?

Wear Valley District Council and the Wear Valley LSP disseminate information on the activities of the LAA locally and bring the partners together to deliver against outcomes. They also make sure that funds are managed correctly for area-based funds.

Q5. What input does Wear Valley District Council have on the LAA? How can the council's input be improved?

There are council members on the LAA Board. The Leader of the Council attended in his capacity as the Chair of the Wear Valley LSP. The Chief Executive of Wear Valley District Council also attended as a representative. There were also representatives on the economic block. Representation on all of the blocks of the LAA would improve the input of the council. There is the need for a stronger voice on the project team. One of the key issues highlighted was the lack of capacity in the South of the County. Members queried whether the issue was attributable to the larger authorities' ability to donate more staff. The LSP Manager stated that this was true, and as a consequence some staff had become embedded. It was queried who sits on the LAA Board; the LSP Manager informed the Members that all the district councils and LSPs of County Durham are represented. Others on the Board included the Chamber of Commerce, the police, the Primary Care Trust (PCT), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Fire and Rescue Service, who currently Chair the LAA. Government Office North East (GONE) attends as a critical friend.

The LAA was supposed to be driven by the LSPs, although it was perceived that currently that wasn't the situation. There was a problem with targets, in that they could be essentially meaningless for parts of the County. This was because different neighbourhoods have different priorities, whereas LAA targets are county-wide in their scope.

Q6. Do the council's strategies feed into the objectives of the LAA? How successful are they in doing so?

It depended upon how well the authority looked at different levels of needs and services in the districts. The authority needed more people around the table at the LAA Board on the blocks and greater influence on the project team.

Q7. What are the financial implications arising from the LAA for Wear Valley District Council?

There was ever increasing funding handed down through the LAA. In a lot of cases the future of the funding was unsure, which negatively affected financial planning. Members asked whether there was a risk in money that was no longer ringfenced being diverted to other areas which would be more statistically significant. It was stated by the LSP Manager that there was a risk. The financial impact on Wear Valley District Council was then queried. In response the LSP Manager highlighted the number of posts within the authority created using LAA funding. In this respect the financial impact on the authority could be great. The LSP Manager described how there was a lack of distinction made between voluntary sector organisations involved in service provision and those involved in infrastructure support; this added to the problem of empowering the sector.

Q8. Has the LAA facilitated or negated partnership working in Wear Valley? Can you describe why?

The LSP Manager described how it has negated partnership working in Wear Valley by taking away the freedom to use funding in more flexible ways. She expressed regret that the system of allocating funding to pre-determined blocks still persisted. It was questioned whether the LAA has taken partners away from bodies such as the LSP. The response was affirmative, as the LAA was seen as a bureaucratic entity which shifted focus towards county level and the LAA at the expense of localities and LSPs. There are other LAAs that have managed to orient their efforts to the needs of small localities in their geographic area.

Q9. How does “Mrs. Smith from 42 West Street” benefit from what the LAA delivers?

It was described as highly dependent on where Mrs. Smith lives. Certain priority areas in need of extra help (worst 10% Super Output Areas) will receive more benefit from what the LAA delivers. There is also an issue in the focus of the LAA, which tends to look at services from a service point of view, rather than a peoples’ needs point of view. There may have been other benefits from County held initiatives, but we do not know.

Q.10 What do Members, officers and the general public need to know about the LAA?

How to influence the LAA, when opportunities to do so arise, and what processes are at work in it.

Q.12 How will the local government reorganisation affect the LAA?

There is the risk that it will reduce the already low amount of local interest in the LAA.

The Chair thanked the LSP Manager for her very informative contribution to the LAA review.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 6:40 pm

DRAFT