

PARTNERSHIPS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER, 2006

REVIEW OF EAST DURHAM LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE, JOY BRINDLE, ASSISTANT CHIEF EXECUTIVE, DISTRICT OF EASINGTON COUNCIL - THE COUNTY DURHAM LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

The Chair welcomed the Assistant Chief Executive who was in attendance to discuss the links between the East Durham Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreements.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that she was part of the project team responsible for developing Local Area Agreements (LAA). Her role in particular was to look at the governance and how the LAA operated.

The Assistant Chief Executive advised that there was a number of pieces of legislation that had come out of Government which had a general theme about local vision and getting closer to the locality.

Five key messages had come out of the legislation:

- * The Government wanted a new delivery framework based on the local county areas.
- * Neighbourhoods and communities must be seen as increasingly important.
- * There was an increased role for LSP's.
- * Councils were community leaders and needed to develop this role further.
- * Outcomes for citizens were what was important.

A new delivery framework was required so that Local Government could make sense of a multiplicity of schemes at grass roots level.

Local Area Agreements were the Government's ten year strategy, seen as core to how Government devolved power to local areas in the White Paper. They were a negotiated contract between Central and Local Government and needed to be interfaced between National and Local priorities. The LAA had been developed through negotiation and was based on 40 outcomes and targets over a 3 year period. There would be a single amount of agreed funding and engagement must take place between LSP's, communities, District, Parish and Town Councils and other stakeholders.

Local Area Agreements began with pilots in 2004/5 with 66 further agreements in 2005/6 and the whole country by 2006/7.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that priorities, outcomes and targets were developed around four blocks:-

- Safer and Stronger communities
- Healthier communities and older people
- Children and young people
- Economic Development

The LAA gave the District Council a chance to improve partnership working across the County and to find new ways of working to deliver shared aims. This would increase capacity through joint working and simplify funding streams and reduce bureaucracy in managing them.

The LAA would deliver national outcomes through local solutions to local problems. This was not entirely working yet as Central Government was still instructing Local Authorities to carry things out 'their way'.

The LAA gave the opportunity to move away from a centralised "one size fits all" ethos, devolve decision making and use a more flexible use of resources.

There was potential to reduce the existing number of public sector targets. The Local Government White Paper had stated that there would be less targets although the LAA had a lot of targets at present.

The LAA process began in Autumn 2005 with an outcomes event and consultation. Agreement was then reached on how to deliver each block in the LAA as a whole and targets, freedoms, flexibility and funding streams were included. The final agreement was signed by the end of March 2006.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that the LAA was based on Communities and Strategies from the whole of County Durham and was widely consulted through organisations including LSP's and a countywide stakeholder event. There were 43 outcomes which covered some key issues but not all.

An example of an outcome that had been agreed was around children and young people. All children needed to eat healthily and be regularly involved in physical activity inside and outside schools. Parents and Carers needed to have skills and support to be effective parents. Children and young people were to be protected from homelessness and failing tenancies and the attainment levels for all children and young people were improved with gaps between groups reduced.

In the expression of interest to become a LAA area, two sets of existing principles had been worked with.

- * County Durham Compact which promoted and supported partnership between the voluntary and community sector, Local Authorities and NHS agencies in County Durham.
- * Durham Accord which was a set of behaviours designed by Local Authorities in County Durham in 2004 to govern their working together.

The LAA governance principles were as follows:-

- Decision making should be devolved to the lowest level consistent with efficient use of resources and achievement of outcomes
- Commissioning of services should be done at a county wide level where that was indicated by logic/economies of scale and at a local level where the agenda suggested that this was the most effective approach.
- Entering into the agreement did not preclude any partner or group of partners from strategic actions outside the County with other partners, for example, in relation to the City Regions agenda.

It was decided that a good model would be a catalyst for change and lead to new and improved partnership working in County Durham. Public Services must be improved and the local variation must be taken into account. Community engagement needed to be facilitated and there needed to be real impact on narrowing the gap. The LAA needed to be efficient and effective and not waste resources and empower partners to do things differently.

The accountable body was Durham County Council. Accountability was spread through different parts of the model so that decision making was shared and not 'top down'. The structure was dependent upon active participation and ownership of outcomes and targets through all parts of the model.

Roles of the LAA Board included:-

- Deciding strategic outcomes (not actions or programmes)
- Agreeing which funding streams go into the LAA
- Commissioning programmes of work to deliver the outcomes
- Deciding where geographically and across blocks the money went
- Ensuring local LSP's were fully engaged at all levels of decision making
- Shared accountability linked to accountable body role
- Power of veto if programmes proposed were implausible or ineffective
- High level performance management

The roles of the block co-ordinating groups were:-

- Designing a programme to deliver agreed outcomes taking into account geographical variation in negotiation with local LSP's
- Commissioning individual service improvements at the county wide or local level as appropriate
- Building funding proposals into the programme for specific organisations/partnerships to deliver the projects
- Accountability for ensuring that the service improvements were plausible
- Detailed performance management

The roles of the LSP's were to provide expertise to make up the co-ordinating groups for each block, and negotiating the development of programmes with the co-ordinating group for each block to make sure the needs of the locality were met. They needed to ensure that the specific needs of the locality were represented in the agreed programmes particularly with reference to narrowing the deprivation gap. The LSP had to monitor the impact of LAA on localities.

With regard to funding, many funding streams were now coming into the area through the LAA. The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund would come through the LAA from the next financial year. The LAA governance needed to pick up the role which Government has had in the past. Funding at present was allocated to blocks but the Local Government White Paper indicated that it would be a 'single pot' and there would be a lot more freedom of how to channel funding.

The LAA was signed in April 2006 and had established a strong interim board and governance arrangements. The Performance Management Framework

had been developed and a detailed risk assessment undertaken. The LAA had delivered a successful neighbourhood management event and established a mechanism for rural assessment, sustainability proofing and a system for sharing national, regional and local information.

Government Office North East had assessed the LAA in November 2006 and assessed the 'direction of travel' as green although in terms of performance only scored amber.

A Member referred to Pathfinder Boards and queried if they had a specific role to play in the LAA. Would services be expected to be mainstreamed through funding from the LAA.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that it was always a principle that organisations should try to mainstream services. The LAA was only for three years but she felt it would be extended if it was proven to be effective. Original guidance had pooled funding and aligning funding. At the moment no funding was pooled, it was all being aligned. Aligning funding took a mature partnership and a lot of trust. The Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder had been asked to set up a workshop and discuss how they could be built into the LAA.

The Chair asked what formal mechanisms existed within the Council for performance managing the LAA.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that outcomes and targets in the LAA belonged to the District Council for example, litter and detritus BVPI 199, this was a target that was owned by the District Council and was built into the Performance Management Framework and was reported quarterly. Targets owned by the LSP were called Neighbourhood Renewal Floor Targets and were much more broad things, for example, life expectancy and were also in the Local Area Agreement. Work was currently ongoing on a revised version of the Corporate Plan to try to identify which of the District Council targets were LAA targets.

The Chair explained that the recent Local Government White Paper referred to an enhanced role for scrutiny in respect of the relationships between Local Strategic Partnerships, LAA's and Local Councils and asked for her views on this.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that at present there was no political scrutiny of the LAA. Scrutiny of the LAA happened through GONE and performance reports to the LAA Board. She felt that the Local Government White Paper would give direction on how to introduce a political dimension into the LAA. A session would be held with the LSP members to explain their role in the LAA.