Local Strategic Partnerships…the hidden choices

For some, the promise of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) is alive and well. Participants see it as a natural extension of previous joined up working, and expectations of what can be achieved have been kept alive by early engagement with the community, some quick wins and nifty footwork. For these partnerships there is now an opportunity to stretch their aspirations and move beyond performing to excellence.

But for many, initial excitement at the potential of LSPs is waning. Even the best are struggling to discover how they can add value in a setting suffering from overload and fragmentation. Outputs from Community Planning Processes offer familiar responses to complex social issues. Those whose commitment to the process is discretionary are finding it hard to sustain their enthusiasm.

Yet the case for inclusive community planning through Local Strategic Partnerships is a powerful and convincing one. And it appears that difficulties do not derive from resistance to change *in principle*. People are struggling because they are finding it hard to *change the way they engage with change.*

The leaders of LSPs struggle to acknowledge that partnerships are not organisations, and should not be approached as if they were. Many of the behaviours and patterns of talk that dominate partnerships are learned in organisations so it is not surprising they are hard to shift.

We are not arguing that it should be 'out with the old and in with the new'. It is more that if LSPs are aware of the choices that lie before them they are less likely to revert to familiar ways of doing things. They can consciously choose what they want to keep and what to replace with new ways of working in partnership. But this requires some clarity about the dominant ways of working that participants bring to LSPs and about alternatives that might allow them more effectively to realise the potential of LSPs.

We believe that it is particularly timely to review dominant patterns of partnership behaviour and to identify alternatives. The publication of the Comprehensive Performance Assessments for Unitary and County Councils provide a unique opportunity to stretch the boundaries of thinking and practice in Community Planning and Local Strategic Partnerships. In particular, the removal of constraints and increased flexibilities being awarded to the 'excellent' authorities create a favourable context where key actors might change the way they engage with change.

 We are not suggesting that all LSP's are the same, nor that they discard everything they currently 'know' and start again. Nor are we suggesting that LSP's have an entirely free hand in the matter; government expectations and monitoring have a strong influence. But by bringing these often hidden practices to light LSPs may make more conscious decisions about *how* they operate, and therefore get closer to realising their aspirations. What follows is an attempt to begin that process.

Principles and practices in LSPs

Guiding principle	Dominant practice (how it often is now)	Emergent practice (how it might be more often)
Organising principle	Institutional; LSP is founded on sectors and service agencies and structures are regarded as 'given'. The focus is on structural fit; how the various formal partnership groupings fit together 'in theory'.	Driven by citizens' life events and their 'burning issues'. Structures are provisional and constituted in the expectation they will change. The area influence is strong. The focus is on how power is *actually experienced* in the system.
Legitimising principle	Representation: people are expected to speak on behalf of others, (although they often lack a mandate to do so). Involvement is defined by 'membership'. The membership boundary is policed to keep the business manageable.	Participation: people speak both for themselves and (provisionally) for others, but recognise that there is diversity within groups as well as between them. Partnerships accept that different types of legitimacy operate in parallel. Involvement is not defined by 'membership'; boundaries are porous.
Accountability	Accountabilities are forged from the *current* mandate. They are held by the agencies who account *to* competing constituencies (communities, electorates, political institutions, professions, and central government).	Accountabilities derive from a process of whole community learning, which creates a new *authorisation* for public agencies to act on. Accountabilities are jointly held by communities *and* agencies, exercised *through* the different constituencies.
Leadership	Vision is an image of an ideal future. Councils want to share leadership but fear a leadership vacuum if they step back. Members see themselves as agents of change, not guardians of it. Leadership (by the agencies) is expected to generate followership (by the community) and is based on leading from the front.	Vision is more about seeing different potential in what exists here and now. Members see their role as stewards of change. Leadership inspires pragmatic acts of collaboration; the focus is on a different *relationship* between citizens and agencies, mobilising *all* the resources in the system - citizen's experience, skills and knowledge, as well as agency money and know-how.
Planning process	Determining priorities; a win/lose process. A comprehensive and linear planning system is deployed. Creates a sense of order even though unexpected events are likely to interfere with ability to stick with priorities.	Sharing passions; where there is energy and a will to innovate, people act together, opening up new ways of thinking. Planning is based on strategic opportunism. The desire for order and an agreed list of priorities is balanced by acting on things where partners can collaborate better *now*.

Form of talk	Debating through advocacy; the assumption is that one 'right' answer will emerge.	Dialogue through enquiry; the assumption is that truth is pluralistic, and there are many good answers.
Decision making	Consensus before action; the assumption is that explicit agreement is a pre-condition for action. Tendency for 'monumental' decision making is characterised alternately by conflict and passivity. The underlying philosophy is scarcity, so decision making is defensive but safe (for the agencies).	Trust, not consensus, is the basis for action. Difference and disagreement prompt learning rather than disputation and is accepted as an important part of the process. Decisions are provisional, based on the art of the possible. The underlying philosophy is abundance, so decision making is adventurous but within managed risks.
Images of LSPs	LSPs are imagined as 'umbrellas', overarching and hierarchical	LSPs are imagined as 'webs' or 'safety nets' …networks of influence and support.
Performance regime	Advance targets and close monitoring, which helps tracking but leads to a compliance mentality and can distort achievements by focussing on the parts at the expense of the whole	Indicators which recognise process gains as well as outcomes, unplanned as well as planned achievements, and value contributions to members' existing targets as much as LSP ones. Partnership development itself is an explicit goal.
Philosophy of change	Plan now for future change, in the belief that change is manageable.	Change *now* to plan better in the future, in the belief that the seeds of the future are already present.
Direction of engagement	Agencies attempt to engage citizens, mainly through formulaic surveys or formal set pieces. The advantage is that it's easy to account for.	Citizens' daily engagement with agencies is the locus for enquiry. From this stems multi-faceted engagement - by its nature more distributed, so harder to account for.

We would not claim to know the best mix between the dominant and emergent practices characterised in our two columns. Our instinct is that this must be for each partnership to decide, in the light of its journey thus far.

What we invite is some conscious and adventurous experimentation with different mixes in settings where there is already a climate of success and achievement. The aim is to help partnerships to change the way they engage with change. It often needs courage and imagination to challenge dominant practices and choose instead to choose the less familiar ones. However, the very evident depth of the problems with which LSP's are currently struggling, suggests that there is little to lose and much to be gained by raising awareness of the choices that often lie unnnoticed or unchallenged.

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March 2003