

Presence Or Partnership? - Voluntary And Private Sector Influence In Community Planning In Scotland

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This pilot project examined the respective influence and experiences of representatives of the voluntary and private sectors in a Community Planning Partnership. This summary highlights the main findings from the research and implications for practice.

Main Findings & Messages

- Community Planning (CP) partners were committed to partnership working and supportive of voluntary and private sector involvement in policy making and delivery. However, the transition from public government to local partnership governance required significant effort and the development of new working practices
- The project confirmed findings from similar studies of local partnerships: voluntary and private sector participants have more than mere presence but are junior partners in CPPs. Other partners' support for voluntary and private sector participation did not overcome significant differences in resources and power
- Public sector CP partners take an instrumental and outcome-focused orientation towards partnership working; voluntary and private sector participants must be regarded as professional and business-like to be effective within partnerships
- CPPs should accept that voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) must retain a distinctive orientation towards partnership policy making: VSOs face a difficult challenge in reconciling the respective demands of partnership working within CPPs and representing the wider voluntary sector
- There is a tension within CPPs between efficient decision making and participatory partnership processes. Maintaining voluntary sector issues as a standing agenda item on relevant CP groups could help ensure that VSO interests are considered

- Formal induction of new CP members may improve working practices and reduce potential confusion. The criteria for representation on CP sub-groups should be clear to and accepted by all CP partners
- Effective engagement with the local business community requires flexibility on the part of CPPs and maintaining a range of open communication channels

Introduction

The development and delivery of local services through partnerships involving representatives from the voluntary, community and private sectors has become a central feature of UK public policy in recent years. Examples of this shift from public sector government to partnership governance in the UK include Local Strategic Partnerships in England, Community Strategy Partnerships and the Communities First programme in Wales, and Local Strategy Partnerships in Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) represent this approach to local policy making. Community Planning (CP) raises important questions about local governance, such as -

- how effective working relationships are established between organisations from different sectors?
- which organisations are most influential within partnerships?
- what are the experiences of voluntary and private sector participants in local governance?

This pilot project explored the potentially challenging relationships which CP creates by examining the role and influence of voluntary and private representatives in a case study CPP. The objective of the project was to assess the extent of involvement and influence of voluntary and private sector representatives respectively within the CPP compared to other partners. Other issues explored in the project were:

- whether the CPP was a genuine executive decision-making body
- how open were agendas and decision making processes within the CPP
- whether there were any obstacles or limitations to partnership decision making
- whether CP had led to any reallocation of power or resources between partners, or to new ways of working
- how voluntary and private sector partners represented the diverse interests of their respective sectors

Methods

The project involve a documentary inventory of a single case study CPP, and interviews with a cross-section of senior figures in the main CP partner organisations, and with representatives from the local voluntary and private sectors not formally involved in the CPP. As a pilot project undertaken in a single case study CPP, there are potential limitations to how far findings may be generalised.

Principal Findings

There appeared to be a shared commitment to CP among partners, and voluntary sector representatives acknowledged the receptiveness of public sector CP partners to their participation and input. This commitment to partnership was in part a recognition of necessity: many local policy issues required co-operation between agencies. However, the CPP was still regarded as a separate entity from participants' own organisations.

As a result of CP, voluntary sector organisation (VSO) participants exercised greater influence over local policy than previously. The CPP had invested considerable resources to assist the development of local VSO capacity and enhance its contribution to CP. However, while CP was a more inclusive system of decision-making it did not entail a significant shift in power among local stakeholders.

The local authority were regarded as the most central member of the CPP, and other partners accepted the legitimacy of their community leadership role. CP was more of a core function for the local authority than for other partners.

Much of the development of CPP policy took place in groups below the main executive board level, and it was therefore important to be represented on these. Some VSOs representatives felt they had not been able to access these groups and exercise the appropriate influence on them. However this situation was not static - the participation and influence of some partners had altered over time, reflecting changes in their capacity and developments in joint working.

The degree of trust between some public sector partners was expressed by their use of informal relationships to accelerate decision making. However, a potential inadvertent consequence of this was the exclusion of other partners not 'in the loop'. Some VSO representatives suspected that their influence over some partnership decisions was restricted by such practices.

Voluntary and private sector CP partners had to be regarded by others as 'professional' and 'business-like' rather than adversarial to exercise influence and make an effective contribution to the CPP. Some participants contrasted the relative professionalism of VSO representatives with the more confrontational approach of some local community groups and activists. However in order to retain their distinctive identity and contribution to CP, VSO representatives must reconcile this demand for professionalism within the CPP with retaining their legitimacy among the wider voluntary sector.

Local business community organisations were less involved in CP than VSOs, and participated mainly through membership of the Local Economic Forum. Private sector organisations did not see CP as central to their interests, and acted more as an external lobbyist of the CPP than an integrated partner. The CPP and local business community were generally satisfied with this relationship.

Public sector CP partners in particular had a pragmatic and instrumental approach to CP. Partnership was valued to the extent that it contributed to improved performance outcomes. There is a potential tension between partnership decision making and administrative efficiency, as consensus policy making may require more consultation and therefore be slower. In practice, these conflicting demands were resolved by the

CPP focusing on policy outcomes rather than processes.

Respondents identified several examples of new working relationships attributable to CP. However, it was also generally agreed that the impact of these on service delivery improvements remained uncertain, and that converting reformed strategic functioning into improved local outcomes was the next major challenge for the CPP.

Recommendations

The case study CPP examined in this project was generally functioning well. Nevertheless, the study identified some reforms which could potentially enhance performance.

- Some CP partners were concerned about what they perceived to be a lack of clarity about decision making processes and limited transparency in how the CPP operated - articulating these procedures more clearly may reduce potential confusion and suspicion. In particular, more formal and detailed induction procedures and guidance information would benefit newer CP participants

- It should be recognised that voluntary, private and community sector organisations may require more time than public sector agencies to digest disseminate or decide upon some issues. If it is not possible to allow additional time for this on some occasions, retaining a standing agenda item for voluntary sector issues on CP bodies may be a suitable compromise
- Involving the business community in local governance is challenging. Effective and proportionate engagement with the local private sector requires flexibility and imagination on the part of CPPs. Frequent informal forms of networking and maintaining multiple channels of information exchange appear most effective.

Much of what is involved in effective CP is developed through practice and involves tacit knowledge and 'know how'. Ensuring that practitioners have opportunities to identify knowledge gaps and assets, articulate and exchange experiences and learn from one another are likely to be the most effective means to improve the performance of CPPs generally.