

Public eye

Make your partnership work with style

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Too much of the debate about partnerships focuses on structures. Who should chair what? Do we need a local public service board and, if so, who should be on it? As important are the tone and style of partnership working. To quote the old Bananarama hit: "It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it ... that's what gets results."

This is particularly significant in areas with county and district councils. In common with many other counties, the challenge of negotiating a local area agreement (LAA) highlighted significant weaknesses in the partnership arrangements in Gloucestershire. It meant that ambiguities in governance and accountability arrangements had to be addressed, and it emphasised the need for a genuine jointly owned vision for the county.

In response to this, the Gloucestershire Local Government Association commissioned a review of partnerships in the county to ensure that they were fit for purpose for the delivery of the LAA.

In the event, however, the review - which was facilitated by the Tavistock Institute - focused as much on the underlying dynamics of partnership as on structures.

Ambivalence about the role of politicians, particularly among councils' partners, was identified as a key issue, as was the gap between the Gloucestershire strategic partnership on the one hand and thematic partnerships and district level partnerships on the other hand.

As significant, however, was the fact that in many cases it was not clear what role or task a particular partnership was playing at any one point in time. That made it difficult for the members of those partnerships to understand what their role should be.

The core of a new approach to partnership working in Gloucestershire, which is now out for consultation, is a cycle of partnership working: deliberation, authorisation, implementation and evaluation.

Deliberation has been conceived of as an inclusive process, shaping a strategic vision for the future development of the county and monitoring progress towards that vision. A reconstituted strategic partnership - as a partnership of partnerships - has been proposed as the vehicle for that task.

Implementation and evaluation - reviewing progress and learning from it - are seen as being tasks for a community strategy implementation executive, which we are proposing should take over from a more narrowly focused but effective LAA project board.

A crucial issue in any partnership structure is how the key organisations authorise the action necessary to implement recommendations that emerge from the partnerships. One approach that is now being considered in Gloucestershire is the creation of a new vehicle for collective decision making, bringing together the leaders of the county and district councils with the chairs of bodies such as the primary care trust and learning and skills council.

But these changes alone will not secure more effective partnerships. Two other things must happen.

First, local government must display the partnership behaviour it wants its partners to mirror. In two-tier areas, that means councils being seen to work better as partners. In Gloucestershire, this will be helped by the recent reaffirmation of the seven councils to improve two-tier working.

Second, whatever structures are in place, some important issues that span partnership boundaries, both geographical and thematic, will be important. Cross-boundary working is notoriously difficult and needs to be worked at and supported.

Two phrases have reverberated throughout this review of partnership working: "the benefit of the doubt" and "give and take". In too many cases, partners have resisted giving others the benefit of the doubt, and have been more enthusiastic about taking than giving.

It is all too easy for the partners in a county area to see the LAA as a county council responsibility. The county is the accountable body so, it could be said, the buck should stop there. In Gloucestershire, there is now a real desire to move forwards together.

The partners in Gloucestershire are now developing an implementation plan to take forward the outcome of the review. The real test of whether that plan is successful will be if the implementation of the LAA and the wider vision for the county are seen as shared responsibility.

One thing is for sure: if they aren't, Gloucestershire will not achieve anything like its full potential.

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