

Working together

in two and three-tier areas



Final report on the IDeA/OPM
two and three-tier support programme

July 2009



Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)

The IDeA supports improvement and innovation in local government, focusing on the issues that are important to councils and using tried and tested ways of working. We work with councils in developing good practice, supporting them in their partnerships. We do this through networks, online communities of practice and web resources, and through the support and challenge provided by councillor and officer peers. We also help develop councillors in key positions through our leadership programmes. Regional Associates work closely with councils in their areas and support the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs).

www.idea.gov.uk



Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	8
The context for two and three-tier working	8
About the IDeA/OPM two and three-tier support programme	8
Further details about our case study areas	10
Two and three-tier working: progress and challenges	13
Overview of progress	13
Partnership challenges in two or three-tier areas	13
The two and three-tier partnership journey	18
What helps: messages for local areas	20
What helps: how IDeA can support enhanced two and three-tier working	29



Executive summary



About the IDeA/OPM two and three-tier support programme

Now, more than ever, it is critical for the different tiers of local government to collaborate with each other. Financial pressures, requirements to deliver seamless customer service and a new focus on outcomes mean that local authorities need to find ways to work together productively.

However, despite this growing necessity to work together and the development of new vehicles for collaboration such as local area agreements (LAAs), evidence suggests that joint working can be much more challenging in two or three-tier areas.

In April 2008, the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) commissioned OPM (the Office for Public Management) to devise a new programme to support two and three-tier areas to work more effectively together. The aim was to create a programme that was tailored to the specific needs of two/three-tier areas. In particular, the programme sought to:

- help a small number of two or three-tier areas to move forward on a partnership issue or range of issues that were important to them
- through this process, add to the knowledge base about the challenges and opportunities of two and three-tier working
- share findings and learning points across the sector.

The programme consisted of support activities in four areas: Lancashire, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire and Surrey. Each strand of work involved a small number of interviews and/or preparatory meetings, a partnership event, and post-event interviews to gather feedback and determine how ideas for joint working might be taken forward. Each of the four strands of activity has been written up as a case study for the IDeA's online partnerships and places library¹.

Two and three-tier areas: progress and challenges

The programme highlighted a number of overarching messages about progress and challenges in collaborating across local authority boundaries to achieve shared objectives.

Encouragingly, most participants reported a growing awareness of the importance of the partnership agenda and a clearer overall vision for joint working. LAAs were seen to have played an important part in putting partnership working on to a more mature footing, as have other developments such as comprehensive area assessment (CAA). District council officers and members involved in the programme appreciated the additional effort that county councils have put into developing more inclusive processes for the most recent LAA negotiations.

Despite these positive developments, it is clear that partnership working between authorities within a county area remains challenging. Challenges seem to be clustered around three sets of issues:

- **size and complexity:** partnership working is complex in any context. However, the degree of complexity involved is considerably greater in a two or three-tier area. This stems not only from the different layers of local government, but from the multiple partnership structures that spring up around this
- **functions and perspectives:** tackling cross-cutting issues – such as reducing alcohol harm – requires joint working between local authorities and their partners. However, authorities in two/three-tier areas may have different perspectives on an issue or problem and different approaches to tackling it. They can also have different understandings of 'place' and, as a result, potentially conflicting agendas for the same locality
- **politics:** perhaps most importantly, political tensions within and between political parties and groups and between authorities (even where these are controlled by the same party) can pose challenges for joint working. Pressure on resources can act either as a block or a lever for change in these circumstances. Lack of awareness and skills among elected members (especially backbench members) and insufficient support can also hamper progress.

While these three sets of challenges may all be present simultaneously, learning from this programme suggests that as two-/three-tier areas move from planning to delivery, the nature of the challenges they face when working in partnership tend to shift and change.

1 The IDeA's partnerships and places library



In the early stages, challenges often relate to size and complexity. They may involve identifying who needs to be engaged in joint working, understanding what activity is already going on across a county area, and mapping the resources that are being spent on different activities. As joint working progresses and the partners begin to consider what new activities and services might be required, differences in their perspectives on the issue may become more apparent. As plans progress and conversations shift to commissioning and resourcing new initiatives (or, which is often more difficult, decommissioning others), tricky issues relating to organisational or party politics tend to reveal themselves more strongly.

What helps: messages for local areas

This programme has identified a number of messages for two or three-tier areas that want to enhance collaboration between the different local authorities in their county.

To help address issues of size and complexity, the programme has identified some simple steps that councils can take, including:

- developing protocols and job descriptions for partnership representatives. These should set out how they will canvass views before partnership meetings and how they will cascade down information about the discussions and decisions made
- changing induction procedures to help new members and officers to be inducted into an 'area' as well as an organisation.

To address issues relating to different functions and perspectives, the programme has found that it helps to:

- focus on developing effective processes for joint working that build trust and facilitate good quality thinking, and which are appropriate for the issue and the partnership's stage of development
- involve people with operational knowledge, strategic insight and access to resources from each of the tiers of local government
- consider investing in shared approaches to mapping and planning activity
- use performance management as a tool to enhance joint working
- try to approach the two/three-tier system as a 'laboratory for change', deliberately piloting different approaches and sharing learning between and across the tiers of local government.

To tackle challenges arising from political differences, it can help to:

- acknowledge history and differences and work to develop shared values
- focus on constructing 'win-win' scenarios, especially in the short term when it is important to build trust and confidence
- invest in leadership skills and encourage more effective leadership from senior members
- create spaces where members from across the tiers can meet, discuss their roles and build positive relationships
- design area-based arrangements that involve members from across the tiers working together on practical problems and issues, alongside local people.

What helps: how IDeA can support enhanced two and three-tier working

Finally, the experience of designing and delivering this programme has helped to identify a number of ways in which IDeA might support two and three-tier areas in the future. While some of these support offers are 'managerial' in nature, perhaps the most important suggestions are focused on the politics of two/three-tier working. It is in this latter area that we think the IDeA could add particular value.

Size and complexity

- 1 Support in-depth research in localities to map activities that contribute to a particular outcome or to improving a particular small area; capture evaluation and performance data on their impact; and identify resource costs. This can provide a basis for discussions about what programmes and activities are needed in the future.

Different functions and perspectives

- 2 Continue to design and facilitate 'whole system' events, bringing together local partners involved in delivering particular LAA objectives or other shared priorities to: develop a common understanding of the problem/issue; review existing activity; design new programmes or initiatives; agree roles in delivering, funding and supporting these activities; and encourage networking and relationship building.

- 3 Draw on the recent publication *Achieving Better Outcomes: a Practitioner's Guide* to promote understanding of the range of mapping and planning tools and techniques available to support partnership working, and how these can be successfully deployed in a two or three-tier setting.

- 4 Help local areas to review existing mechanisms for consultation and engagement with the public across the tiers and to map the costs involved. Develop and agree options for the future which minimise overlap and duplication, are more cost effective and are less confusing to the public. In doing so, find ways to harness the particular contribution of parish councils, which are sometimes an overlooked resource.

- 5 Develop a select number of longer-term practice exchange or action learning networks focused on different aspects of two/three-tier collaboration. These networks could provide a vehicle for some targeted benchmarking of the costs involved in different models and approaches.

- 6 Commission targeted case studies and guidance for other areas from participants in these networks, and publish these online at the IDeA's partnerships and places library.

- 7 Encourage those members involved in practice exchange or action learning to take part in 'whole systems' events to share learning with other areas.

Politics

8 Continue to deliver high quality awareness-raising sessions aimed at backbench councillors. These should be designed to help them understand the drivers and potential benefits of joint working between the tiers and with other partners; partnership structures, remits and activities; and ways of influencing and shaping partnership activity to meet local people's needs. These sessions could be offered within the context of CAA and the changes to overview and scrutiny.

9 Continue to promote the role of the IDeA's peer support service in brokering conversations between leaders of different authorities in a county area. This can be used to help them acknowledge historic differences in a safe environment; clarify 'no-go' areas; identify the potential for joint working; address blockages; agree a common line on critical communications issues; discuss how work in political groups can be used to support effective joint working; and discuss appropriate leadership styles and approaches. Continue to offer similar sessions targeted at chief executives and senior officer teams using the IDeA's officer peers.

10 Provide opportunities for members to come together across the tiers on both a geographic and thematic basis to discuss their agendas and priorities; identify common objectives; consider the roles of members across the different tiers; and agree ways of working together productively. Ensure that parish council members are involved in this work.

11 Work with two and three-tier areas to develop joint scrutiny arrangements based on good practice and considering the different ways of working, as well as the structures required to effectively scrutinise partnership activity.

12 Continue to build on the IDeA's national mentoring scheme (which has now been devolved to the regions) to provide coaching and mentoring support for leaders and other members. Extend this support to chief executives and other senior officers.

13 Involve members from different county areas in practice exchange or action learning networks on different aspects of two/three-tier collaboration.

14 Encourage members who are already doing excellent work across local authority boundaries to communicate their experiences to other members through case studies on the IDeA website and participation in regional and national learning events.

The IDeA will ensure that the peer clearing house includes a sufficient pool of experienced members from two or three-tier areas. Ideally these members should be profiled separately, making it easier for those trying to access their assistance. It would also help to ensure that political group mentoring, facilitation and other training for peer advisers adequately covers two and three-tier issues.



The context for two and three-tier working

Now, more than ever, it is critical for the different tiers of local government in two and three-tier areas to find ways to work together productively. Delivering outcomes that matter to local people requires collaboration between the tiers and with other partners. Good quality, seamless customer service also requires effective joint working. Evidence suggests that most local people neither understand nor care which council in a two-tier setting is responsible for a particular service: they just want things to work. The current pressure on public finances raises the stakes and strengthens the case for collaboration. While multi-tier arrangements can create opportunities to reflect local identity and engage more closely with communities, democratic responsiveness needs to be balanced with renewed efforts to cut duplication and waste and find more efficient ways of delivering public services.

New local area agreements (LAAs) provide an opportunity for county, district, town and parish councils to come together to share long-term visions for their local areas and set out how they will coordinate activity and spending to achieve common objectives. The development of comprehensive area assessment (CAA) strengthens and reinforces expectations of joint working by moving towards assessment of what is achieved by agencies and organisations working together.

Despite the growing necessity to work together and the development of new vehicles for collaboration, evidence from research (including the national evaluation of LAAs) and from capacity building work across the country suggests that joint working can be much more challenging in two/three-tier areas¹. The creation of nine new unitary authorities in April 2009, along with the development of two-tier pathfinder arrangements in four county areas, provide further opportunities to explore the relative benefits of different structural arrangements for local government and their impact on the delivery of joint outcomes².

About the IDeA/OPM two and three-tier support programme

The purpose of the programme

In April 2008, the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) commissioned OPM (the Office of Public Management) to devise a new programme to help local authorities in two and three-tier areas work more effectively together. The aim was to create a programme

that was specifically tailored to the particular needs of two and three-tier areas. In particular, the programme sought to:

- help a small number of two or three-tier areas to move forward on an issue or range of issues that were important to them
- through this process, add to the knowledge base about the challenges and opportunities of two and three-tier working
- share findings and learning points across the sector.

Programme strands and activities

The development of the programme began with a consultation workshop with county and district colleagues, supported by the County Councils Network. This was designed to explore the specific challenges involved in partnership working in two/three-tier areas and the type of support that that would be useful. Following this event, two and three-tier areas were invited to submit individual requests for assistance. The IDeA and OPM then put together a balanced programme of support involving activity in four different areas: Lancashire, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire and Surrey. In each area the aim was to address a different kind of two/three-tier partnership issue.

1 'A Process Evaluation of the Negotiation of Pilot Local Area Agreements', Office of Public Management, University of the West of England, University of Warwick, for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005; 'Local Area Agreements Research: Round 2' 'Negotiations and Early Progress in Round 1', OPM for the Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006.

2 For more information on the evaluation of the new unitaries and pathfinder arrangements.



In **Lancashire**, the programme focused on how partners needed to work together across the tiers of local government to deliver a small cluster of LAA outcomes around reducing alcohol-related harm. It also explored the potential of OpenStrategy as a technique for mapping and planning partnership activities across a two/three-tier area.

In **Gloucestershire**, the programme focused on the 2012 Olympics, exploring how the tiers of local government and their partners could use this event as a lever to drive change on a broad range of LAA outcomes around tourism, public health, community involvement and leisure and culture.

In **Hertfordshire**, partners used the programme to explore how they could work together across the tiers to improve quality of life in one small area, looking in particular at families with the most complex needs.

In **Surrey**, the programme provided an opportunity to bring together elected members from across the tiers of local government to discuss how they might work together more effectively to meet the needs of the communities they represent.

OPM designed and managed support activities in each of the four areas, working alongside IDeA consultants. Each strand of work involved between eight and 12 scoping interviews and/or some preparatory meetings, a partnership event, and post-event interviews to gather feedback and determine how ideas for joint working might be taken forward.

OPM used interviews and scoping meetings to explore some of the broader two or three-tier dynamics in each area that might impact on the effectiveness of collaborative working and the implementation of any changes. However, these were short-term pieces of work focused on a particular set of issues, and we did not necessarily explore the full range of developments in two/three-tier working in each county area.

Programme outputs and this report

Each of the four strands of activity has been written up as a case study for the IDeA's online partnerships and places library³. This report highlights some of the overarching messages emerging from the programme as a whole, and suggests some ways in which collaborative working

in two/three-tier areas might be strengthened and supported in future. Chapter two provides a brief overview of progress in partnership working, and highlights some of the particular challenges that the four areas have experienced in working across the tiers of local government.

Chapter three draws on the findings from the programme to set out some ideas for how local areas might strengthen collaboration across the tiers in the future.

Chapter four identifies some lessons for external agencies that want to support two or three-tier areas, and highlights some particular support offers that IDeA would be well placed to provide.

³ The IDeA's partnerships and places library

Further details about the case study areas

The boxes below set out some background information on each of the four participating areas, along with further details of the support provided by OPM.

1 Lancashire: working together to reduce the harm caused by alcohol misuse

Lancashire County Council is the fourth largest local authority in England and Wales. The council was Labour controlled during the support programme (it passed to Conservative control in June 2009). Lancashire has 12 district councils: eight are Conservative controlled, one Liberal Democrat and three have no over control. There are more than 200 parish and town councils. Two unitary authorities, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen (both created in 1998), adjoin the county council area and form part of the wider sub-region.

Partners in Lancashire chose to use the programme to focus on combating the harm caused by alcohol misuse, an issue that is one of the main public health challenges in the county. There has been a rising trend in alcohol-related hospital admission rates across all Lancashire districts and age groups over the last few years. Comparative data suggests that most districts

in Lancashire have admissions rates above both regional and national averages⁴. Alcohol misuse is associated with reduced life expectancy, poorer health and a reduction in economic activity, and with higher rates of suicide, crime and anti-social behaviour, accidents and teenage pregnancy.

In Lancashire, a complex set of arrangements is in place to coordinate partnership activity relating to alcohol misuse. These include a northwest regional alcohol group, a Cumbria and Lancashire alcohol network and an LAA alcohol project board at county level. District-level crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRPs) also play an important role, each having their own alcohol harm reduction strategies.

The Lancashire Partnership oversees all partnership working in the county. It comprises a conference (for consultation and feedback), a partnership board (providing direction, authorisation and approval), a partnership executive (to manage executive action on behalf of the partnership and make recommendations to the board) and a performance group (to monitor the impact of the Lancashire sustainable community strategy and the LAA).

⁴ Source: North West Public Health Observatory, cited in Lancashire's proposal document for inclusion of a target on alcohol-related harm hospital admission in its LAA.

Seven thematic partnerships lead on the development and delivery of indicators and priorities within the LAA, each of which are represented on the partnership board.

Scoping interviews with partners across Lancashire were used to inform the design of a partnership event facilitated by OPM in October 2008. The event provided an opportunity to discuss the challenges involved in combating the harm caused by alcohol in a complex two-tier setting. It was also used to test out the potential for employing the OpenStrategy methodology to help partners map activities, understand the links between the work of different organisations, and design and deliver better services and programmes.

2 Gloucestershire: working together to maximise the 2012 legacy

Gloucestershire has a population of 582,500. The county's age profile, income and employment levels are higher than the national average. In a predominantly rural county, Gloucester and Cheltenham are more urban in character and provide the hub for much of the county's commercial activity. The county council has a Conservative administration, as do three of the six districts. Two districts have no overall control and one is controlled by the Liberal Democrats. Parish and town councils exist across most of the county.

Gloucestershire Strategic Partnership, the county's local strategic partnership (LSP), brings together representatives from all thematic, sectoral and local strategic partnerships to develop a long-term vision for the county. The accountable bodies group comprises elected and non-elected leaders of major partner organisations from across the county. It provides collective decision making and allocates resources. The community strategy executive board (CSEB) is made up of chief executives and lead officers from the conference's major constituent organisations and key partnerships, and its role is to commission activities and monitor progress.

Team Gloucestershire is one of seven county-level groups which form Team South West, a network seeking to ensure that the London 2012 Olympics deliver benefits to the region. It recently produced a 2012 legacy action plan which has been adopted by Gloucestershire CSEB on behalf of the Gloucestershire Strategic Partnership.

Following a series of scoping interviews, OPM held an event in Gloucestershire in December 2008 to explore how the tiers of local government and their partners could work together to deliver the county's legacy action plan and use 2012 as a lever to drive change on a broad range of connected LAA outcomes. Participants worked together to explore what the different organisations could contribute under each of the action plan headings (business development, tourism, participation in sport and physical activity, cultural celebration and community engagement). They were also encouraged to reflect on the problems and dilemmas that were likely to arise in planning delivery between the tiers of local government and with partners, and how these could be resolved.

3 Hertfordshire: working together to meet the needs of small areas and families with complex needs

The county of Hertfordshire has 10 district councils and 128 civil parishes. The county council is Conservative controlled, as are six of the districts; three are controlled by the Liberal Democrats and one by Labour.

Hertfordshire has one of the strongest economies in the UK and residents generally enjoy high standards of living, with unemployment lower than the national average. However, this overall picture masks some significant pockets of deprivation. Partners in Hertfordshire chose to use consultancy support from the programme to focus on how they could work together to tackle the needs of residents in one of the county's most deprived areas, Cowley Hill in Borehamwood, Hertsmere. In particular they wanted to focus on how they could collaborate to break the cycle of inter-generational negative repetitive behaviours, which they believed were acting as a barrier to improving the life chances of some families.

A whole host of local partnership arrangements are active in Cowley Hill including the Hertsmere children's trust partnership, a multi-agency support team, a substance misuse group, a targeted intervention group and a joint agency group.

Overseeing partnership working at county level is Hertfordshire Forward, which is responsible for driving the work programme for the new LAA. The LSP network acts as a communication link between district local strategic partnerships and Hertfordshire Forward.

Following scoping interviews, OPM held a partnership event in January 2009 for staff and elected members from across Hertfordshire with an interest in Cowley Hill and/or small area working in general. The event provided an opportunity to build up a picture of Cowley Hill and its families, drawing on the perspectives and experiences of different partners. It was also used to map current services and initiatives and explore new approaches that may be needed, looking at how these could be taken forward through existing partnership structures. Representatives from Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council were invited to share learning from their experience of community development work designed to raise the aspirations of families on the Tibbington Estate⁵.

⁵ More details about Sandwell's work on the Tibbington Estate can be found in the IDeA's partnerships and places library.

4 Surrey: bringing elected members together across the tiers

Surrey is the most urbanised shire county in England and its economy is the most successful outside central London. On the whole its residents are relatively well educated, computer literate, healthy and financially well off. Yet some of Surrey's communities face significant levels of deprivation and lower life expectancy. High house prices and a higher-than-average cost of living make life even more difficult for these communities.

Surrey County Council is Conservative controlled, as are 10 of the 11 district councils. The other is controlled by a residents' association. In three districts the Conservatives have only a small majority over the Liberal Democrats. Eight districts have civil parishes.

Partnership working at a county level is focused around the Surrey Strategic Partnership, which includes a leadership group bringing together the leaders of major partner organisations (including district council leaders and all county council executive members). It also includes five thematic partnerships and a delivery management group of senior officers drawn from different partner organisations.

Surrey chose to use the programme to explore how members from the three tiers of local government could work together to help achieve important economic and social outcomes for the people they represent. Scoping interviews and meetings were held with members and officers from across Surrey to identify current opportunities for joint working and barriers impeding closer collaboration. OPM then facilitated an event in January 2009 which brought together executive and non-executive members and officers from all three tiers of local government. Three local case studies were presented, each setting out a different model of joint working between members across the tiers (see chapter three). Participants were given an opportunity to consider the learning from these case studies and how successful initiatives might be rolled out more widely across the county area.

Two and three-tier working: progress and challenges

Overview of progress

Back in 2005, the evaluation report on the pilot local area agreement (LAA) negotiations concluded that ‘there is no doubt that the process was much more difficult in two-tier areas’⁶. In a unitary area, the development of an LAA involves ‘horizontal’ integration between partners with different remits and responsibilities. However, the report identified that in a two-tier area it also requires coordination and re-allocation of resources between agencies performing the same or similar functions. For some partners in two-tier areas, therefore, LAAs were associated with ‘centralisation and loss of local autonomy’ rather than devolution, and in some places the process revealed deep underlying tensions between district and county councils.

In this context, the evaluation report concluded that good consultation was vital for the development of an LAA. However, it found that while some counties worked hard throughout the process to build awareness and communicate effectively with partners, others did not put sufficient time into this at an early enough stage. In many cases these difficulties were exacerbated by the lack of existing county-wide forums for some thematic issues.

The IDeA/OPM support programme did not attempt to explore the full range of developments in two or three-tier working since 2005. However, discussions with local government officers and members, along with representatives from partner agencies in each of the four areas, suggested that there has been some positive change over the last few years.

Many of the district-level officers and members who took part in this programme acknowledged and appreciated the additional effort that county councils have put into developing more inclusive processes for the most recent LAA negotiations. Most of those we spoke to reported a growing awareness of the importance of the partnership agenda and a clearer overall vision for joint working. LAAs were seen to have played an important role in putting partnership working on to a more mature footing, as had other developments such as comprehensive area assessment (CAA). Having an agreed list of national indicators was also thought to have been helpful in providing a framework for local discussions about priorities.

“I think that the LAA has forced a dialogue on what’s important to [the county area], and in relation to that some very good work has been done⁷.”

“It [the LAA process] was naturally complex and time consuming, and we had fewer resources than the county to engage in this, but overall the county did well.”

“Before the LAA, we didn’t really have great partnership working in [the county]. However, the LAA has helped those partners who were always on the fringes to become major players.”

“Compared to what we used to have there are much clearer roles and responsibilities, which has helped us develop relationships between partners; it feels like there’s more give and take.”

6 ‘A Process Evaluation of the Negotiation of Pilot Local Area Agreements’, ODPM, 2005.

7 Highlighted quotations in this chapter are from interviews with participants in the IDeA / OPM two and three-tier support programme.

Interviewees and participants at the four events were also able to point to some examples of positive joint working between the tiers of local government and with other partners, some of which had been stimulated by the LAA process. However, many of these examples were fairly small-scale collaborations, often between frontline staff who knew each other well. Most interviewees reported that changing mainstream delivery within their organisations and agencies to better reflect shared priorities and targets remained challenging. As one person put it:

“We know it’s time to make omelettes, but we don’t want to be the first one to break the eggs.”

Partnership challenges in two or three-tier areas

The experience of delivering this programme suggests that there are three main clusters of challenges which two or three-tier areas face when engaging in partnership working. These are the sheer size and complexity of multi-tier systems; the host of different functions and perspectives at play; and the politics involved.

Size and complexity: navigating complex systems

Partnership working is complex in any context as it involves bringing together a large number of very different organisations. However, the degree of complexity involved is considerably greater in a two/three-tier area. It is not just the additional layer of local government that creates greater

complexity, but also the multiple partnership structures that spring up around this. In Lancashire, for example, in addition to county-wide partnership arrangements, each of the 12 districts has a local strategic partnership (LSP) with its own community strategy and thematic sub-groups. The structural arrangements of other agencies in the partnership system add further complexity. In Lancashire there are three primary care trusts (PCTs), each of which has its own set of relationships with the councils in the county area.

Given this complexity, it is perhaps not surprising that awareness and understanding of the partnership agenda, partnership structures and shared objectives do not seem to be permeating all parts of the system, despite some reported progress in the last few years.

“From my perspective, it’s all a bit distant and confusing, all the different layers of LSPs...”

In this context, a few individuals in each area are playing a critical and much-needed role in raising awareness of partnership working by acting as conduits into partner agencies, facilitating conversations and putting people in touch.

“If I want to know something or find out what’s going on, I just call [X].”

Figure 1: snapshot of progress in case study areas



Agreement on high level vision and outcomes – LAA2
“a much more reasonable process”

Challenges of changing mainstream delivery

Good examples of ‘on the ground’ collaboration – often small scale, known individuals

“I would commend the officers, especially [X], who has a good way of engaging with the partners.”

However, it seems that some of the people who are centrally involved in thematic and strategic partnerships are not yet doing as much as they need to do to ensure that frontline staff and members are kept sufficiently informed about partnership activity. And some partners are still finding it hard to know who to speak to when they have a query about joint working or decisions that have been made around the partnership table.

“After those meetings, you need to communicate what’s been decided to the rest of the organisation. It’s important to alert colleagues – you wonder if that happens when people go back to their organisations.”

Mapping activities and spend

In each of the four localities, partners are still experiencing challenges in mapping or identifying the full range of existing activity underway in partner agencies across the county area in relation to particular outcomes or themes. The mapping of resources and spend on a thematic or geographic basis appears to be at an even earlier stage, despite the fact that this is an important foundation for partnership discussions about making the most of available resources.

Conversations with participants have revealed differences of opinion about the value of mapping and appropriate ways of carrying this out. Some people feel strongly that comprehensive mapping of existing activities is necessary before partners begin to think about the new initiatives that may be required. Without this they fear duplication of work, wasted resources, and that partners will miss out on opportunities to build on best practice. For others, comprehensive mapping in a two/three-tier system is just not possible or will be too costly or time-consuming. They favour a more selective and pragmatic approach.

Different functions and perspectives

While some local government functions (such as children’s and adults’ services) are the clear preserve of one particular tier of local government, others (such as leisure) are the responsibility of two tiers. This means that activity needs to be coordinated and negotiated to cut out duplication, make the most of resources and avoid confusing the public. Councils in a county area also need to join up to achieve improvements in outcomes and tackle cross-cutting issues – raising the aspirations of particular families, for example (as in Hertfordshire).

Different theories of change

Partnership working to deliver outcomes or improve performance on cross-cutting issues always involves bringing people together who have different ideas about an issue or

problem. These opinions are often linked to organisational remits and to objectives and targets set by central government. For example, reducing the harm caused by alcohol requires efforts on the part of a wide range of partners who have an interest from a prevention, treatment or enforcement perspective. What seems to make joint working more difficult in a two or three-tier setting is that while different agencies may have the same or a similar remit, each has its own perspective on an issue or problem and its own ‘theory of change’ or approach to tackling it. If these ‘theories’ or perspectives are not shared and discussed, they have the potential to disrupt joint working.

Different notions of place

Authorities in two/three-tier areas may also have different understandings of ‘place’. As a result they may have different or conflicting agendas for the same locality. This might be because of political priorities and choices, but it can also stem from the different geographical scale at which authorities are operating.

“[Our district] is relatively affluent but we have significant pockets of deprivation. As a district we are concerned about these pockets of deprivation, but obviously the county is worried about the county-wide pockets of deprivation. Due to our overall levels of

affluence we're not often on their radar. We need to somehow make sure that our priorities get into county-wide strategies and plans."

Speaking to partners

Local authorities have an important role to play as 'first among equals' in a partnership setting, encouraging other partners to the table and lining up priorities and objectives. However, the sheer range of different perspectives between councils in a single county area can make it more difficult to speak to partners with a 'single voice' and can leave partners (and the public) feeling confused. The absence of coordinated processes for engaging with partners and the local community can exacerbate this issue. Although it may be necessary for different types of authorities to develop their own approaches and structures for consultation with partners and with the public (as the issues they are dealing with may be very different), excessive duplication or overlap can be unhelpful, leaving partners and the public with 'consultation fatigue' and making it more difficult to forge a common take on a local issue.

Combining operational knowledge and strategic insight

Delivering effective services and improving outcomes will always require an approach that combines operational knowledge with strategic insight and access to resources. Partnerships in all settings can struggle to bring these two perspectives together in a fruitful way. For example, senior partners around an LSP table may bring strategic skills

and perspective; yet they may lack detailed understanding of how a shared problem is being tackled on the ground. Staff at the front line may have a clear understanding of the problem and know what changes to current provision are needed, but they may be unaware of (or unable to access) partnership resources to bring these changes about.

It can be even more challenging to bring these perspectives together in a two/three-tier setting because of the number of strategic and frontline personnel involved across all the tiers. Difficulties also arise from faulty assumptions that town, parish and district councils only focus on operational matters while the county is focused on strategy. In reality, operational and strategic activity takes place at each of the tiers, and partnership activity needs to reflect this.

Politics

Lastly, there is a cluster of connected challenges concerned with the politics of two or three-tier working. It is often here that the real brake on joint working is applied, but where the opportunities for achieving change may be greatest.

Party and group politics

Not surprisingly, it can be difficult to forge successful collaborative working between authorities that are controlled by different political parties and have differing agendas and priorities for a particular local area.

"There will be tensions ... if you try to get members from across the parties together."

"The [other party] are very lazy... We're not like that... we're more visible to local people."

Participants in the programme suggested that the competitive nature of the political world meant that members were often driven more by an imperative to 'beat each other to the photocall' than a desire to work together. They highlighted that there can be a reluctance to share the credit for initiatives that have been jointly achieved. Even where productive coalitions are constructed, good work is often disrupted at election time.

In addition to competition between groups, competition within groups can also present challenges for collaborative working. Painstaking negotiations and agreements struck between leaders within a two-tier area, for example, can fall by the wayside if they are unable to bring their group members with them, or can be put at risk if rival factions adopt a different position in relation to joint working.

Organisational politics

It is evident from our interviews that the challenges of two/three-tier working can relate as much to organisational politics as to party or group politics. Collaboration can be difficult even where councils are controlled by members of the same political party.

Despite some good examples of collaboration and improving relationships, there was still a sense in some areas of a 'mutual lack

of appreciation' between district and county councils. Officers and members from district councils sometimes felt that their counterparts at the county council lacked understanding of the realities on the ground. Those at county hall felt that district, town and parish councils did not always appreciate the 'bigger picture'. Tensions are often exacerbated by an unhelpful sense of hierarchy between the tiers of local government: participants felt that the use of terms such as 'upper tier' and 'lower tier' were particularly unhelpful in this context.

In contrast to the challenges associated with district/county collaborations, joint working between groups of districts and between councils and their other statutory partners often seems to be easier, as this form of partnership working lacks the sense of hierarchy – 'one organisation is not seen as a sub-set of the other'. Instead, partners are able to meet on a more equal footing.

Struggles over funding

Conceptions or misconceptions about the way that the different tiers are funded and make use of their resources also seem to be impeding progress – although some districts and district-level LSPs do seem to be facing genuine difficulties with capacity.

“The county council has all the money – we don't have any of it.”

“From a district perspective, our issue is around resource. We have one person dealing with something. For example, we have one community safety officer, but the county have a whole team. We find that we are often responding to the county council's agenda rather than our own needs. It can be difficult to feel that we are influencing.”

Although most participants in the programme identified the pressure on public finances as an important driver for enhanced collaboration between the tiers and with partners, these pressures were also thought to be acting as a block in some localities. In some cases this seems to be because approaches to the current financial situation are coloured by historic relationships, with partnership working constructed as 'giving our money away' rather than activity that has the potential to be mutually beneficial.

Twin hatters

There were 'twin-hatted' members in some of our case study areas: councillors who were members of both the district and county council. Some participants in the programme felt that this helped to facilitate joint working and develop a shared understanding of priorities and constraints across the tiers of local government. Others disagreed and felt that it made it

more difficult to 'read the politics' and predict how partnership working might turn out.

“Most twin-hatted members were district members first and wanted to get into county to get their roads resurfaced and so on. Their allegiance is still with the district.”

Some members involved in this programme felt that having so many twin-hatted councillors in their area made collaborative working more difficult for those members who were only on one council. They suggested that twin-hatters tend to engage in a kind of 'mental shorthand', sometimes failing to share appropriate and relevant information from their experiences with the other tier of local government.

Personalities, awareness and skills

Despite these challenges, some members do seem to be managing to engage very successfully with opposition members and with members from the same party but from different councils. This suggests that personalities, awareness and skills are also significant factors in two-tier collaborations.

“Of course, partnership working and relationships cannot be separated from the different personalities involved.”

This programme confirms that despite the stronger role that some leading members are now taking in joint working and in LAA processes, for many backbench members the partnership agenda still feels remote. Partnerships are perceived by some to exclude frontline district councillors, and, in particular, town councillors.

“We hear all these partnership names, but we don’t understand this that much. I haven’t really got a clue about it all.”

“Without members you can’t deliver the LAA. Lead members understand and get it and know it is important, but the majority haven’t been brought on board.”

Communication with and support for elected members

Some backbench councillors have suggested that they receive little communication from members who participate directly in partnership arrangements. Councillors involved in this programme have also questioned how effective political group meetings are at informing them about the partnership agenda and the implications of this for their roles. In addition, senior members do not consistently seem to be encouraging their backbench colleagues to meet with members of other councils representing the same patch, and this

seems to be a missed opportunity to iron out difficulties and agree ways of working together productively.

Differing levels of officer support available to members can also make collaborative working more difficult. Town, parish and district councillors in particular are reporting that they lack the support to enable them to work productively across boundaries.

Some participants in this programme have suggested that members need more training from their own officers to help them with the partnership agenda. Others argued that while efforts had been made to give briefings to frontline councillors about partnership working, the LAA and what this means for their local area and role, councillors have not expressed much interest.

“The amount of interest members take in the LAA depends on their interests. We have tried to give sufficient briefings about what the LAA is and what it means for our district, but it is really up to each person as to how much interest they take.”

Participants have also suggested that receiving adequate day-to-day support from officers in other councils is important if members are to exercise their community leadership role in a particular patch. It is common, for example, for members to receive

queries from the public that relate to the responsibilities of a different council. It can be frustrating if they find it hard to get a response from officers at another council or are treated in the same way as members of the public who have a query.

The two or three-tier partnership journey

The four streams of work carried out as part of this programme were all very different. Work in Lancashire and Gloucestershire focused on how specific outcomes or clusters of outcomes could be improved by partnership working across the tiers. In Hertfordshire the work focused on improving a small area, and in Surrey on building stronger relationships between members representing the same patch. Joint working was also at different stages of development in each of the four areas. In Lancashire, for example, considerable progress had already been made in tackling alcohol-related harm, while in Gloucestershire the 2012 action plan had only just been adopted. Together, these four pieces of work provide useful insight into the different types of two or three-tier challenges that tend to arise at different stages of the partnership journey.

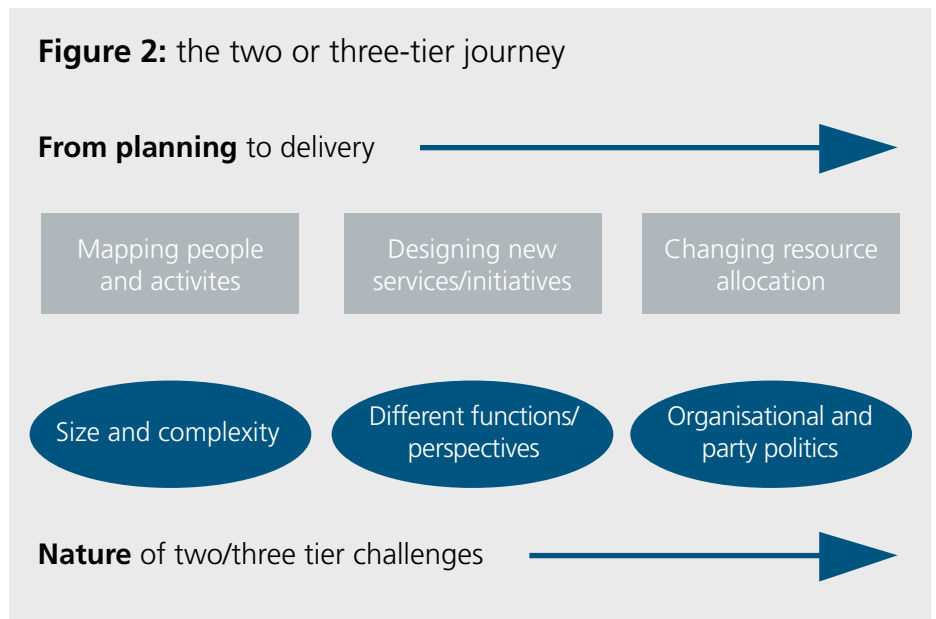
The findings from the programme suggest that, when the different tiers of local government come together to consider how they can improve a particular outcome or outcomes, they are likely to first encounter a set of challenges around size and complexity.

At this stage, the main challenges will be to identify who needs to be involved in joint working, try to understand what activity is already going on across a county area, and begin to map the resources that are being used in these activities. It will be important to ensure that those people who need to be involved in joint working fully understand the importance of collaboration, the objectives that they need to achieve and the structures through which joint working needs to take place.

As joint working progresses, the partners will engage in conversations about whether (and to what extent) current programmes of activity lead to improved outcomes. They will begin to consider what new activities and services may be required. At this stage, differences in their perspectives on the issue will become more apparent. It will be important to create processes and spaces in which these differences can be explored in a productive way.

As plans progress and conversations shift to commissioning and resourcing new initiatives (or, what is often more difficult, decommissioning others), tricky issues around organisational and party politics tend to feature more strongly. Building relationships and trust between senior managers, leaders and other senior members can help to ensure that when these issues arise, as they inevitably will, they can be resolved in as positive and swift a way as possible.

Figure 2: the two or three-tier journey



Clearly, where the purpose of coming together across the tiers is to resolve political tensions (or, as in Surrey, to agree how members might work together in a particular patch), organisational, party and group politics will be centre stage – right from the start.

The political dynamics (with both a big and a small 'p') are also likely to be more prominent in those situations where collaboration is 'top down' rather than 'bottom up'. For example, where councils are developing plans for joint working on 'big ticket' issues (such as the formation of a shared services company), organisational and party leaders will be involved in creating the conditions in which joint working can take place – and political differences are likely to emerge from the very beginning.

Where collaboration is more 'bottom up', requiring joint working between frontline staff and middle managers, political differences may not be very evident in the early stages of work.

What helps messages for local areas

This programme has identified a number of messages for those areas that want to enhance collaboration between the two or three tiers of local government. In this chapter, these are broadly grouped into solutions that relate to the challenges of size and complexity, different functions and perspectives, and politics.

Size and complexity

Clarify roles and improve communication

Clearly, not everyone can sit on partnership structures and attend partnership meetings, and there is likely to be a particular reliance on representatives in two or three-tier areas. It is therefore important that those people understand their representative function and carry this out effectively, canvassing views before meetings and feeding back afterwards. This is not to argue that those who sit on partnership structures should act purely as delegates; they have responsibilities to act in the best interests of the partnership as a whole. However, it is important that they should do this from an informed position and give others who are not present at meetings a chance to understand any decisions that a partnership has taken. Job descriptions for those who are involved in partnership structures and protocols covering communication (how frontline staff can feed issues up to partnerships and how information will cascade down) might be two ways of encouraging appropriate behaviour.

Improve induction

Navigating the partnership environment seems to be particularly challenging for staff and members who are new in post. Partners need to think about how they can induct people into an area, not just into an organisation. Some very simple things might help, such as including diagrams of relevant partnership structures and lists of key contacts in other organisations in induction packs; posting this information around council buildings; offering joint training and development sessions; and creating a 'buddying' system linking new staff or members to counterparts in other councils or partner organisations.

Different functions and perspectives

Focus on good process rather than structures

Each of the local areas we have worked with have restructured partnerships and reviewed membership in preparation for their first or second local area agreement (LAA). Of course, some structural change may be necessary – for example, to strip out unnecessary duplication resulting from the piecemeal, historic development of partnership arrangements. However, participants in this programme have issued a strong health warning about the limits of structural change. As one person put it:

“If people start talking about reshaping structures, forget it. We have a structure that works. Let's go out and deliver the stuff, not get stuck talking about our structure again.”

Rather than focusing too much on structure, this programme suggests that it is important for local government and partners to invest in developing effective processes for joint working (and establishing and sustaining political will). Critically, partners need to select processes that are appropriate for the issue they are trying to address; are suitable for the stage of development of partnership activity; build trust and facilitate good quality thinking; and are as efficient as possible. See the box below for some positive benefits that have already materialised from the events run as part of this programme.

Where partnership activity is just getting underway, inclusive, interactive processes might be necessary to build trust and raise awareness, secure buy-in and generate enthusiasm for joint working. Where the evidence for a particular course of action is not yet available or is not conclusive, longer-term detailed investigation and research might be required, perhaps involving a small team of partners working closely together. Different processes are required to open up debate and generate creative ideas and to close down conversations and agree a shared way forward.

Participants in this programme have also highlighted a need for those embarking on joint working to avoid regarding funding as a necessary first step to doing anything. Instead, they should allow time for the partners to discuss objectives and come up with creative ideas before focusing on what is affordable.

Involve the right people

This programme has highlighted the importance of involving the right people in joint working. Our experience suggests that you need to involve a mix of those with operational expertise (who understand the nature of the problem being addressed and the solutions that will work) and those with a strategic overview and influence over resources – from all tiers of local government. This suggests that those designing processes for joint working need to focus on constructing appropriate ‘cross-sectional slice groups’ in different thematic areas.

It also seems to be useful to provide opportunities for partners to come together both in mixed partnership groups (to identify areas where they can work better across organisational boundaries) and in ‘home’ groups, where they can discuss the implications of joint working and shared commitments on mainstream delivery and activity within their own organisation.

1 The benefits of bringing partners together across the tiers of local government

This programme has demonstrated the real benefits of bringing together members and officers from across the different tiers of local government, with their partners, as part of a well-designed partnership process. A number of positive developments have emerged from these events.

In Hertfordshire, participants identified a ‘quick win’ to improve the lives of local people in Cowley Hill, the ward that was the focus of the OPM event. The housing association agreed to work in partnership with the local district councillor, district council officers, the police and residents to carry out regular ‘visual audits’ of estates to identify where repairs were needed, spot signs of criminality and highlight additional housing-related needs. These audits are now going ahead.

“I’m not saying these things would not have happened without the event, but the event helped people make the links, network, realise each other were approachable. Without the event the ideas may have taken longer to embed and happen.”

In addition, evidence prepared for the event and discussions on the day are helping to support funding applications for various programmes

designed to improve quality of life in the area; inform decisions about how to allocate performance reward grant from the first LAA; shape a new regeneration strategy at district level; and inform ongoing thinking about how to identify and target families with the most complex needs, across the county.

The power of just getting people together to explore different issues and perspectives was also evident at the event held in Surrey. It was the first time that many councillors had been in the same room with members from other tiers of local government representing the same geographical patch. Participants felt that having the opportunity to network and get to know one another would increase willingness to cooperate in future, and some began to act on this during the course of the event itself.

Explore common approaches to mapping and planning partnership activity

Having a common approach to mapping and planning activity across councils and with other partners can help to oil the wheels of joint working. The potential usefulness of the OpenStrategy approach (see box below) was tested as part of the Lancashire event. Participants found the approach particularly helpful in creating both a common language in which to discuss the various stages of partnership activity, and a common basis from which to identify strengths and weaknesses in current partnership activity.

Given the complexity involved in collaborating in two/three-tier areas, councils and their partners might wish to explore whether adopting such an approach might prove useful. As some investment of time and resource will inevitably be required to ensure that all partners are up to speed with a new approach, it might be best to run a pilot focusing on a particular outcome or cluster of outcomes in the first instance.

2 OpenStrategy: an approach to mapping and planning partnership activity

Most partnerships are accustomed to developing action plans that identify activities (projects) and outputs (results). Less attention is often given to understanding how these outputs are accessed and used by individuals and communities (uses) or the way in which these lead to outcomes (benefits).

The OpenStrategy (OS) methodology provides a systematic, common framework through which partners can map projects, results, uses and benefits and develop multi-agency strategies (and sub-strategies) for partnership activity. The OS information structure helps partners to understand how partnership activities knit together and the interdependencies between the contributions to shared outcomes of different agencies. A simple version of OS can be used as a framework for discussions between partners at a workshop or in a team setting. There is also a full, technology-enabled version in which partners have access to a shared database and can upload details of their own projects, identify links between activities and create strategies and sub-strategies.

Benefits of OpenStrategy

The potential usefulness of the OS approach was tested as part of the Lancashire event. The approach was thought to be particularly helpful in drawing partners' attention to the way that activities are taken up and used by communities, and how partnership activity does (or does not) result in improved outcomes. Working with the OS structure helped participants to realise that they sometimes made assumptions about how activities and outputs lead to outcomes that are not borne out by evidence. OS also helped participants to recognise that in some cases there was insufficient community involvement in identifying and checking the benefits of services provided. This prompted some partners to think about how to improve their planning and review activities to ensure that the community is involved at the appropriate stages.

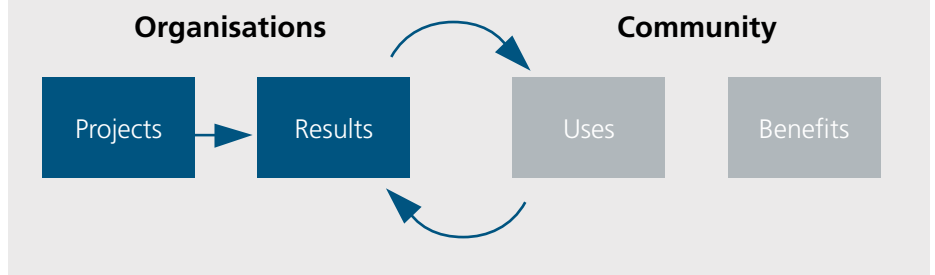
OS exercises undertaken on the day called into question the usefulness of a number of existing projects designed to combat alcohol-related harm. These included some information provision, research and campaigns where it was not clear who in the community was engaged through these methods or what impact they were having. By encouraging this sort of reflection, participants felt that OpenStrategy could make a contribution to efficiency and effectiveness, help to identify potential duplication and make the case for decommissioning activities which were deemed to be ineffective.

Limitations of OpenStrategy

Despite these benefits, participants expressed some concerns about the OS methodology and highlighted some perceived limitations with it. Some felt that attempting to map all partnership activities using the OS framework would be a potentially massive task. They also felt that partners would struggle to handle the conceptual complexity involved in linking such a wide range of activities. Others had concerns that while OS required participation of all partners to deliver its full potential, they were likely to encounter problems in securing buy-in and support from all who needed to be involved. A few felt that it would be difficult to marry the OS structure with existing targets, which are often focused on outputs.

Finally, OS was regarded as a 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' solution to some of the challenges of two/three-tier working. It was viewed to have limited usefulness in tackling some of the wider issues and challenges with partnership working (for example, questions about who has a right to sit around the partnership table and who should lead particular initiatives and areas of work). Partners in Lancashire felt these were important issues that needed to be resolved through other means.

Figure 3: OpenStrategy information structure



Develop robust data and effective performance management

Effective and appropriate performance management of activity can help to give direction to staff activity, as well as providing valuable information for those in management and governance roles to check progress and reappraise their strategies. All councils (and other agencies) will have their own systems for performance management, as well as measuring progress against the national indicator set and their LAA. Breaking up targets and data at district and small-area level can help ensure that local variation is reflected across county areas. This can also help to capture the contribution of parish, town and district councils to county-wide strategies and plans, including the LAA. Developing county-wide data 'observatories' – a trusted, shared source of data on local needs, priorities and outcomes – can help to provide a common platform for joint working.

Try to approach the county area as a 'laboratory for change'

In the words of one participant: 'We all need to give more thought to implementation – there's not much

talk about that. In some partnerships people spend weeks deciding on the wording for a particular target, but two minutes on how to implement it.'

It seems from this programme that some of the potential advantages of a two/three-tier system in relation to implementation are not yet being fully exploited. These areas could fashion themselves as 'laboratories for change' – deliberately trying out different approaches in different areas, sharing practice and learning about what works. Yet participants in this study have told us that they don't always get to hear about the good work that is already going on across a county area. The events we have run as part of this project have provided welcome opportunities for people to share practice and exchange ideas. More deliberate and organised piloting of different approaches, along with sharing of learning between and across the tiers of local government in a county area, would seem to be a great opportunity to improve outcomes.

3 Hertfordshire: achieving greater local focus in a two or three-tier area

A two or three-tier system of local government can create opportunities to reflect local distinctiveness and engage more closely with communities. At the Hertfordshire event, some participants chose to explore how new approaches to funding and budgeting could help achieve a greater focus on the specific challenges faced by families in the Cowley Hill area.

Some participants supported the idea of local budgets for elected members from each of the three tiers. In their vision for the future, councillors would engage residents in discussions about their local priorities and involve them in deciding how local budgets should be spent, within the overall parameters of the community strategy. There would be opportunities for members from across the tiers to pool or align their budgets in support of shared priorities.

Other participants thought there might be potential to explore how the Hertfordshire pathfinder could be used to tackle some of the challenges faced by particular wards and neighbourhoods, including Cowley Hill. They felt that this could provide a framework for all three tiers of local government,

and their partners, to map the resources going into a small area; jointly review evidence about what works; and realign priorities, activities and responsibilities to achieve greater impact. While participants anticipated that this approach could present challenges (especially where different councils were controlled by different political parties), they thought it could be an effective way of engaging elected members and strengthening democracy by giving members and the community a greater say in how money is spent.

Politics

Acknowledge history and differences and work to develop shared values

Partnership working presents challenges in any setting. Indeed, issues of size and complexity and different perspectives and functions are also challenges for unitary authorities when working with partners, though perhaps to a different extent. It is the political and organisational complexities and sensitivities involved in two/three-tier working that often makes partnership working seem particularly difficult, but which also holds the key to successful joint working.

“I conclude that if you have political will to sign up to those relationships they’ll find a way to do it, regardless of the system.”

These sensitivities should not be underestimated. Historic tensions need to be acknowledged by leaders trying to forge new alliances. Some simple, symbolic gestures can be helpful in putting relationships on a new footing – such as holding partnership meetings in different places (not always in the county hall); issuing joint invitations to development sessions from the county, district and town/parish councils; and designing and facilitating workshops and meetings in such a way that all parties have an opportunity to present and debate the issues from their particular perspective.

Work to create shared values

Most organisations involved in partnerships will have their own values, and leaders are increasingly expected to lead from a ‘clear values’ base. Though it is now reasonably common for partnerships to set out their own values, it is less common for partners to explore in any depth what these actually mean in practice, or to review performance against them. Of course, the task of creating a common values base for partnership working is one faced by unitary areas too. However, in two/three-tier areas the large number of authorities involved and the nature of relationships makes this even more important.

Shared values provide a necessary basis for the types of behaviours that are needed to make partnership working effective in sensitive and complex environments. For example, the simple act of acknowledging someone else's position demonstrates listening and sensitivity that may be crucial in allowing progress to be made. Creating spaces in which to build a shared understanding of values and appropriate styles and behaviour (and to explore and resolve differences) is therefore essential. Meetings to discuss and agree values need to have a different format to typical council meetings – perhaps being more of a facilitated discussion than a formal committee.

Identify 'win-win' scenarios

If it is to be successful, partnership working between the tiers needs to focus, in the first instance, on those areas and issues where joint working will reap benefits for all parties and bring maximum community benefit.

In constructing terrain for joint working between the tiers, participants in this programme have told us that it is important for councils to be up front with each other about their 'no-go' areas and avoid wasting time on discussions about contentious issues that are not likely to lead anywhere. The current financial climate means that it is even more important for councils and their partners to focus on those issues where joint working can add the most value.

Over time, as joint working progresses and trust and confidence builds, it should be possible for partners to create a more enduring, reciprocal system. As this occurs, individual parties will be more willing to live with 'sub-optimal' solutions in the short term (situations where they contribute more than they gain from partnership working) in the expectation that they will gain from future interactions.

Building a leadership system

There is no single best solution to the question of which council should lead a particular joint working initiative. This is reflected in the diversity of practice across our case study areas and around the country. In some areas, district-level local strategic partnerships (LSPs) are managing local delivery across the LAA. In others they are providing county-wide leadership on particular themes or are involved in monitoring the local impact of the agreement.

Joint involvement in the collection and analysis of both soft and hard data can help to clarify who might be best placed to lead activity. However, solutions also need to be politically viable: it is not helpful if decisions are open to interpretation as a take-over by one particular council, whether that is the county or a district. A well-designed process can also do much to resolve these issues. What seems to be helpful is if partners see themselves as part of a 'leadership system' in which the leadership of those operating at county, district and parish/town levels is respected, and

partners come together to decide the most appropriate geographical scale at which different issues and problems can be addressed.

Developing leadership skills¹

In two or three-tier collaborations, as in other partnership work, political and organisational leaders are being asked to operate in new ways. This can involve influencing and shaping change across a whole system in conditions where they may sometimes lack formal authority or direct control. It puts more emphasis on personal style: in particular, the ability to behave in ways that build relationships and influence others. Collaborative working often takes place in situations where there is a lack of certainty about what works and in the absence of agreement about what it is best to do. In such situations there is not much to be gained by someone taking charge and trying to direct others. Rather, the central leadership role may be to create a safe space in which others feel able to explore a problem and in which solutions can emerge and evolve.

These situations require the type of skills associated with Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence². Emotionally intelligent people have the ability to read a situation accurately and make an informed choice about how to

¹ For more on developing leadership for partnerships see 'Partnerships: rhetoric or reality?', Paul Tarplett and Sue Goss in *The Public Leadership Challenge*, edited by Stephen Brookes and Keith Grint, Palgrave 2009.

² See Daniel Goleman's 'Working with Emotional Intelligence', Bloomsbury 1998.

intervene. This involves self-awareness about the impact they are making on others. It also involves an understanding of the consequences of different ways of intervening in situations, and how to respond appropriately to the needs of others. These skills may be closer to those employed in coaching or facilitation than in a more traditional leadership role.

If two or three-tier working is to be as effective as possible, local areas need to invest in the leadership skills of senior managers and members. Individual mentoring and coaching for those in leadership positions can be helpful. So can external support to facilitate meetings in which political and organisational leaders have an opportunity to reflect on and practice partnership skills, as well as doing routine business.

Brokering informal meetings between members from different tiers

This programme has demonstrated how helpful it can be to bring members together from across the three tiers of local government to discuss their mutual roles, identify common interests and agree productive ways of working together. There seem to be benefits in doing this on a geographic basis – providing all the councillors for a particular patch with an opportunity to come together to explore and agree what each can do to help improve outcomes for local people. It may also be helpful to bring members together on a thematic basis, giving them an opportunity to look across a county area and identify

common issues and specific challenges in particular localities where additional support may be needed.

Spaces need to be found which provide opportunities for members to develop the ‘softer’ skills required to manage some of the tensions outlined in the previous section. It is important that these spaces allow members from different parties and different tiers to get to know one other, identify areas of agreement and clarify where there are real differences. Key to success is the need for councillors to be open and realistic with each other about what is achievable, and not to promise things that cannot subsequently be delivered. It may be difficult and/or inappropriate for officers to broker these conversations; instead, external facilitation may help things move forward. Peer support from a councillor from a different local authority can be particularly successful.

More effective leadership from senior members

It is clear that there is more that senior members can do to ensure that backbenchers are up to speed with the partnership agenda, and that members have opportunities to meet and network with their counterparts from neighbouring councils. There are several ways in which this might be achieved.

Portfolio holders or their deputies from the county council could make occasional visits to local meetings (at a more local level than the district council) to use performance data as the basis for a discussion about what

works and what doesn’t. They can use this opportunity to explore what people’s concerns are and have honest conversations about what is achievable and what is not. Such meetings might provide a good opportunity to promote mutual understanding about the constraints within which everyone is working, and could help to dissipate some of the bubbling tensions between members at different levels.

It might also be possible for political groups to play a greater role in bringing members together. As has been acknowledged in the previous chapter, there are real obstacles that need to be managed for this to work. Nonetheless, well-run political party group meetings, involving members from across the tiers, could provide a forum for sharing information, building understanding of partnership working and reflecting on the different roles of members across the tiers. These meetings might also provide spaces for dialogue which exposes where the real political choices are and how groups can use partnership structures to further their goals. There seems to be a particular role for executive members in helping frontline councillors to make the links between local and strategic priorities and understand the potential leverage that this could give their patch.

Creating appropriate area-based arrangements for working with local people

Collaboration between members from different tiers of local government often works best when members are encouraged to focus on a tangible

issue of interest and benefit to local people. Area-based structures can provide a forum for councillors across the tiers to jointly engage in problem-solving activities – working, in some cases, directly alongside local people.

Some counties have chosen to set up their own area arrangements for community engagement, problem solving and delivery on district boundaries or on an area basis below this level. These arrangements are sometimes viewed with suspicion by districts, which may regard them as part of an attempt by counties to bypass district, town and parish councils. County councils reviewing new county structures for engagement and local working need to consider how they can dispel fears and concerns on the part of their districts and create arrangements which maximise opportunities for joint working across the tiers. For example, the county might routinely or periodically involve district and/or parish and town councillors in area meetings, running these meetings in different neighbourhoods or local venues on a rotating basis.

More often than not in local government, the approach to area-based (and other) partnership working has been to create a patchwork of partnerships and structures and then decide what they should be responsible for and how they should operate. A more productive approach may be to decide what the issues are and then create appropriate structures to deal with them. The box below

sets out three different ways in which members from the three tiers of local government in Surrey are working with each other, and with members of the local community, on an area basis.

It may be entirely appropriate for different engagement and problem-solving arrangements to be put in place in various parts of a county area. These might reflect differences in local people's needs and preferences or different ways in which councillors want to work together. However, it would seem reasonable to suggest that members should be aware of the range of options for area-based working available to them, and the lessons from different parts of the county (and other counties) about what works where and why. It might be that members from across the tiers could work together to design structures that would work best in their locality and develop a vision for joint working, linked to broader council plans and strategies.

4 Surrey: three different approaches to joint working between members across the tiers

Councillors adding value to community-led initiatives: the Northbourne Action Group in Binscombe ward, Godalming, was formed in 2006 following disturbances on the estate and negative coverage of the area in the local press. Rather than waiting for statutory agencies to respond, local parents formed the action group as a vehicle for improving quality of life on the estate. The group has organised clean-up days, school holiday activities for children and community fetes, and has led on the redevelopment of the children's playground. The group is credited with having reduced anti-social behaviour by 30 per cent and crime to almost zero³. In September 2008, the group received the chief constable's commendation for outstanding contributions and a community group award for its role in reducing crime and fear of crime on the Northbourne estate.

The Northbourne Action Group was initiated by the community working with the police, but councillors from all three tiers of local government have since offered support. Members have helped the group to secure funds from both Godalming Town Council and Waverley District Council. The county has

³ For more details

also helped directly with funding through its local committees. The district and county councils jointly fund a community development worker. Councillors from across the tiers attend community meetings organised by the group to meet local people, listen to their concerns and offer support.

Councillors leading community engagement and action planning around local priorities: local community action planning (LCAP) is a systematic process of community engagement and action planning that can be rolled out across a local authority area. In Surrey it has been used in Horley and in other parts of the Reigate and Banstead borough⁴.

The idea behind the approach is that prioritisation and action planning should focus on those issues that the local community views as most important, rather than those that the professionals are concerned about. Supported by officers, the process brings together councillors from across the tiers to contribute to engagement activities, build consensus, negotiate agreed outcomes and drive implementation. In Reigate and Banstead, local budgets are

⁴ A step-by-step guide to local community action planning can be found in 'Win-Win Solutions: a Guide to Multi-Agency Community Engagement' produced by SOLACE Enterprises on behalf of the Surrey Improvement Partnership

allocated to each member (£1,000 for borough councillors and £11,000 for county councillors each year). This has proved to be very helpful in giving added impetus to the LCAP, enabling some 'quick wins' to be made and thereby building confidence in the process as a whole. Ongoing performance against the LCAP is monitored by a lead officer, who reports to Reigate and Banstead ward councillors and to a range of district-level forums. In turn, the process assists the council and its LSP to shape the wider framework of policies and strategies across the borough.

Councillors leading and shaping the collection of local intelligence: a key element of the Countryside Agency's market towns initiative is the 'health check' process. Communities can use the health check to identify their town's strengths and weaknesses and then develop a local quality of life action plan to respond to these issues, endorsed and supported by a regional partnership.

The health check process was first implemented in Cranleigh, Waverley, in 1998. The committee responsible for overseeing the health check brought together members from across the tiers of local government in Surrey, chaired by the county councillor for the area. Support from councillors across the tiers has been critical in driving the health check process

forward in Cranleigh. The process has helped to create a robust evidence base about local needs and lever in additional funding, for example from the South East England Development Agency, Surrey County Council and the local business community. This evidence continues to support funding applications for the delivery of local projects, and partnership working between the different tiers of local government in this area remains strong.

What helps how IDeA can support enhanced two and three-tier working

It seems likely that two and three-tier areas will continue to request support on a wide range of issues, from governance arrangements for joint working to performance management and developing shared approaches to engagement. However, in the section below we identify a number of particular ways in which IDeA might support two/three-tier areas that have been identified during the course of this programme. While some of these support offers are 'managerial' in nature, many are focused on the politics of two/three-tier working. It is in this latter area that we think the IDeA could add particular value.

In many cases the IDeA is already delivering support in these areas, and our suggestion is that this support is continued, scaled up or strengthened for the future.

Suggestions for IDeA support offers

Size and complexity

1 Support in-depth research in localities to map activities that contribute to a particular outcome or to improving a particular small area, capture evaluation and performance data on their impact and identify resource costs. Use this as a basis for discussions about what programmes and activities are needed in the future.

Different functions and perspectives

2 Continue to design and facilitate 'whole system' events, bringing together local partners involved in delivering particular local area agreement (LAA) objectives or other shared priorities, to: develop a common understanding of the problem/issue; review existing activity; design new programmes or initiatives; agree roles in delivering, funding and supporting these activities; and encourage networking and relationship building.

3 Drawing on the recent publication *Achieving Better Outcomes – a Practitioner's Guide*, promote understanding of the range of mapping and planning tools and techniques available to support partnership working – and of how these can be successfully deployed in a two/three-tier setting.

4 Help local areas to review existing mechanisms for consultation and engagement with the public across the tiers and map the costs involved. Develop and agree options for the future which minimise overlap and duplication, are more cost effective and are less confusing to the public. In doing so, find ways to harness the particular contribution of parish councils, which are sometimes an overlooked resource.

5 Develop a select number of longer-term practice exchange or action learning networks focused on different aspects of two or three-tier collaboration. These networks could provide a vehicle for some targeted benchmarking of the costs involved in different models and approaches.

6 Commission targeted case studies and guidance for other areas from participants in these networks, to be published in the IDeA's partnerships and places library.

7 Encourage those members involved in practice exchange or action learning to take part in whole-systems events to share learning with other areas.

Politics

Continue to deliver high quality awareness-raising sessions aimed at backbench members and designed to help them understand the drivers and potential benefits of joint working between the tiers and with other partners; partnership structures, remits and activities; and ways of influencing and shaping partnership activity to meet local people's needs. These sessions could be situated in the context of comprehensive area assessment (CAA) and the changes required to overview and scrutiny. Materials for these sessions have already been developed as part of previous OPM/IDeA collaborations.

8 Continue to promote the role of the IDeA's peer support service in brokering conversations between leaders of different authorities in a county area, to help them to: acknowledge historic differences in a safe environment; clarify 'no-go' areas; identify the potential for joint working; address blockages; agree a common line on critical communications issues; discuss how work in political groups can be used to support effective joint working; and discuss appropriate leadership styles and approaches. Continue to offer similar sessions targeted at chief executives and senior officer teams using the IDeA's officer peers.

9 Provide opportunities for members to come together across the tiers on both a geographic and thematic basis to discuss their agendas and priorities; identify common objectives; consider the roles of members across the different tiers; and agree ways of working together productively. Ensure that parish council members are involved in this work.

10 Work with two and three-tier areas to develop joint scrutiny arrangements based on good practice and including consideration of different ways of working, as well as the structures required to effectively scrutinise partnership activity.

11 Continue to build on the IDeA's national mentoring scheme (which has now been devolved to the regions) to provide coaching and mentoring support for leaders and other members. Extend this support to chief executives and senior officers.

12 Involve members from different county areas in practice exchange or action learning networks on different aspects of two/three-tier collaboration.

13 Encourage members who are already doing excellent work across local authority boundaries to communicate their experiences to other members through case studies on the IDeA website and participation in regional and national learning events.

The IDeA will ensure that the peer clearing house includes a sufficient pool of experienced members from two/three-tier areas and that these members are profiled separately, making it easier for those trying to access their assistance. It would also help to ensure that political group mentoring, facilitation and other training for peer advisers adequately covers two and three-tier issues.





The IDeA Partnerships and Places Library

It contains a growing number of case studies of good practice on what can be achieved through partnership working at the local level.

Further Information

For further information on this publication please contact the IDeA's Partnerships team:
partnerships@idea.gov.uk or

Rachel Litherland

National Adviser, Partnerships
rachel.litherland@idea.gov.uk

IDeA

Layden House
76-86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG

telephone 020 7296 6600

facsimile 020 7296 6666

email info@idea.gov.uk

www.idea.gov.uk



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

©IDeA – July 2009

Printed on 100 per cent recycled paper
using vegetable based ink.

For a copy in Braille, Welsh, larger print or audio,
please contact iHelp on 020 7296 6880.
We consider requests on an individual basis.

L09-483
Produced by Liberata Design and Print Studio



Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

