

3 Getting frontline councillors involved in LAAs

Introduction

The inclusion of both executive and frontline councillors is central to any successful Local Area Agreement (LAA).

It seems, however, that in many councils, even those where the political leadership has vigorously driven and championed the LAA that this has not extended to frontline or non executive elected members. Sometimes, but not always, this stems from or is compounded by their lack of involvement with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) itself.

This briefing note provides some guidance on how to ensure that frontline councillors are as involved as your strategic and community partners in drawing up the LAA.

It can be relatively easy to involve the leader in the process leading to agreement of the LAA, less easy to involve the cabinet and even harder to engage frontline or non-executive elected members.

Frontline councillors have had a common experience in finding it difficult to get involved in LAAs. This has meant that LAAs have not been as linked to local issues as they could have been and may be less successful as a result.

Frontline councillors play a very important community leadership role – for instance: championing community needs and preferences for inclusion in the LAA, scrutinizing LAA outcomes and ensuring that the LAA delivers the best for local people. These roles are of vital importance, and many councils fear that until there are recognised and substantive roles for elected ward councillors, LAAs may continue to struggle to get cross-party support.¹ However there are practical steps that can be taken now as many councils are proving. (See case study examples - link)

Why should councillors be actively involved in LAAs?

The role of councillors is crucial. Some frontline or non-executive councillors might see LAAs as a threat, because they see the council decisions about priorities and resources being made by the LSP, Crime Reduction Partnership etc. However, LAAs can actually give councillors added leverage and influence over a wider range of public spending than they've ever had before.

¹ Local Agreements Network Lead Officers' Event: Governance Arrangements in Local Area Agreements Outcome Paper Jan 2006, Birmingham

There is a lot to be gained from greater councillor involvement in the LSP, and ensuring they are involved in the setting up, agreement and delivery of the LAA. In summary these benefits include:

- including and widening democratic legitimacy
- links with the local community and acting as community champions
- connecting with their local wards and giving a geographic focus
- links with scrutiny and extending it to partnerships
- sourcing local knowledge
- links with the local voluntary and community sector and helping find new partners
- boosting communication with all these groups and local politics
- helping build consensus.

Any weaknesses in your LSP can be exacerbated by the way you develop your LAA, or the LAA is an opportunity to widen involvement and strengthen the LSP's accountabilities.

How do councillors get involved?

Getting beyond 'traditional' roles for councillors

There are some examples of traditional good practice. A national evaluation of LSPs found that some had councillors present on a range of LSP bodies. In one the leader of the district council chairs the LSP, the deputy leader chairs the Children and Families Group and other cabinet members and a few non-executive members are involved in some of the implementation groups. However, cabinet members dominated the examples they found, and this had resulted in the marginalisation of non-executive members - a feature of member representation in all case study areas.² If your area does not yet involve ward councillors in the LSP, then the LAA process will need to find a way to involve them separately.

Councillors involvement beyond chairing or attending meetings

Councillors can play a far greater role than bringing their expertise to formal meetings. They can engage with the community networks in their patches and bring that into the discussion. Think through the elected members' role in the different policy areas the LAA is targeting and discuss this with the leader or the lead member for the LAA. Think about how this input can be managed without necessarily creating another meeting to attend. Remember government advice from the local:vision document *Vibrant Local Leadership*: "this leadership role within individual areas should be central to what every non-executive councillor does.

² LSP Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme 2002–2005 University of Warwick ODPM/DFT P59

Giving councillors a clear stake in what happens in the area that elects them and emphasising their personal role in making things happen there has the potential to benefit both that area and more formal political processes, such as voting”.³

Councillors will already have played a part in developing the community strategy, which underpins the LAA. But if your community strategy is not up to date, then more consultation may be needed, and councillors can ensure that the views of local people and community groups are fed in.

Beyond representation on the LSP Board

The LGA believes, and has suggested this to ODPM, that the evolution of LSPs should “ultimately lead to locally elected representatives taking on accountability for the actions and choices of the local strategic partnership. This is a natural reflection of the community leadership role of local government. It is also a principle the public can understand, in answer to the Audit Commission’s question of ‘who’s in charge’ of partnership activities.”⁴

This is based on embedding democratically accountable political leadership in the partnership structure, moving it on from being a quango to having some democratic legitimacy from the top table, through thematic task groups to leadership in communities.

Councillors as community champions and advocates in the LSP

This is not just an argument for cabinet members to be involved in the structures. There is an important role for backbenchers as ward councillors, as community champions in their local areas and acting in a scrutiny role in the council structures. The LGA also argues that backbench councillors could benefit in their scrutiny role from the assistance of partners and community, especially as scrutiny evolves from just looking at council services to looking at services provided by partnerships and by partners.

In summary, as the locally elected representatives, “ward councillors should be the voice of the neighbourhood, and can act as community champions engaging with and advocating on behalf of their ward and providing links between the local community and the LSP.”

Councillors as advocates

The Young Foundation has built on this concept of community advocates in response to the disengagement many backbench councillors felt in the new political arrangements of cabinets and directly elected mayors. They stress that there will be

³ Vibrant Local Leadership – local:vision/ODPM P13

⁴ LGA LSP Consultation response to ODPM

some suspicion about the neighbourhoods agenda “in the light of their recent experience of disempowerment”⁵.

The Young Foundation points to the suggestion in ODPM’s Vibrant Local Leadership paper that suggests councillors should be:

- acting as the main focus for community advocacy and democratic voice
- coordinating the activity of a wide range of local partners
- allocating small budgets⁶

They add “To be successful, councillor-advocates would be likely to require a web of relationships of a more horizontal than vertical character: with neighbourhood officer support webs, with local scrutiny arrangements such as neighbourhood inquiries, and with broad processes of neighbourhood participation. Councillors could also specialise in local scrutiny functions, or sit on neighbourhood councils”⁷.

Frontline councillor involvement from the start of the LAA process can avoid misunderstandings

As well as the benefits that will accrue from harnessing the local knowledge and democratic mandate of local councillors, there is also an opportunity to avoid the negative effects of non-involvement. Researchers found that where councillors were not involved in their LSPs there was suspicion. “This attitude of suspicion was clearly demonstrated in an LSP where councillors are not really engaged in the LSP, do not promote it nor support its linking to local authority structures.”⁸

An evaluation of leadership in LSPs reporting in 2005 found that some had recognised the tensions existing between executive and frontline benchers and the concerns many of the latter have around LSPs. In the more successful LSPs there is considerable effort made by executive councillors to achieve frontline councillor engagement.⁹

Councillor involvement in Bedfordshire’s LAA development took place through tailored workshops, presentations to and discussions with committees, briefings to cabinet members and representation at stakeholder conferences. This might be viewed as a ‘traditional’ level of involvement.

When should councillors be involved?

⁵ The Young Foundation – Transforming Neighbourhoods Neighbourhood arrangements: the evolving landscape of governance options P12

⁶ Vibrant Local Leadership - ODPM

⁷ The Young Foundation – Transforming Neighbourhoods Neighbourhood arrangements: the evolving landscape of governance options P13

⁸ LSP Formative Evaluation and Action Research Programme 2002–2005 University of Warwick ODPM/DFT P59





⁹ National evaluation of LSPs – Leadership issues paper ODPM P14

Councillors should be involved throughout the LAA process – that means in the preparatory stages, in negotiating and communicating with partners, in setting up structures, in delivery and in scrutiny.

On the next page is a timeline, which identifies some of the things elected members should be thinking about and when. This could form the basis of the councillor involvement during the development of the LAA.

There will, no doubt, be other activities to include in this – main issues already covered include councillors briefing on the whole process and what it means, using them as communicators and advocates, liaison with the community and VCS, scrutinising and challenging the preparation process, and briefing them on how the LAA will impact on their current and future council work.

Councillor involvement timeline

<i>Time</i>		<i>LAA activity</i>	<i>Councillor involvement</i>
April to June		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparatory work • Engage with the relevant stakeholders about priorities • Engage local people • Draw on all relevant plans and strategies, especially the Community Strategy • Draft outcomes framework • Preparation of LAA Project Plan showing when and how councillors will be involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillor workshops to bring them up to speed • Involvement in project ideas • Councillors engaging local people and groups – identify new partners • Involvement in selecting the outcome framework • Involvement in accountability and governance discussions
June to Sept		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First draft of the LAA. • Identified funding streams, enabling measures, partners; how the community/VCS is involved and how partnership will work. • First drafts with the GO end Sept • GOs provide assessment of the LSP's 'readiness and capacity' to deliver the LAA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors informed of progress – including drafts and GO feedback • Councillors involved in discussions about any issues of readiness/capacity and involvement that the GO may have identified
Sept to Dec		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GOs consult with central Government to refine agreement to near final draft • GO's recommendations include statement on work needed to address readiness and capacity issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors involved in liaising with partnerships • Address requirements about accountability and scrutiny • Ongoing communication with community/VCS
January to March		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During Jan GOs consult with Govt/ work with local areas. Final recommendations to Ministers in Feb. Includes review of issues of readiness and capacity to meet the sign-off requirements. • Final agreements cleared by Ministers, signed by Minister and Leader of the Local Authority and Chair of the LSP • LAAs are agreements - all need to be happy before they can be concluded. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors informed on progress of structures, how they will be involved in governance, delivery and scrutiny • Councillors informed on mainstreaming and how LAA fits with their council based work and budget plans
April onwards		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up and delivery of the LAA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillors engaged in management, scrutiny and linkages with the LSP

