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Evaluating Public Partnerships

**A Review of Current Practices,
Approaches and Toolkits**

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1. Introduction

This working paper provides an overview of current issues in the evaluation of public partnerships. Before we turn to focus on evaluation, the paper begins with an overview, a brief rehearsal of the concept ‘partnership’ as applied to public services. In the immediate future public partnerships will be the typical approach to providing and managing publicly funded services, so why are they topical and who is involved in them? We then turn to consider ways in which public partnerships are evaluated, with a key focus on evaluation toolkits.

2. What is a partnership? – “a rather woolly concept”

There is no consensus on a definition of partnership, and hence no consistency in use. Several alternative terms are used in government documents and journal papers which encompass the partnership discourse:

Cross organisational working
Cross sectoral working
Inter agency working
Integrated delivery
Alliance
Collaboration
Co-operation
Networking
Joint working
Joined up government
Coordination and seamless services
Compacts

The Audit Commission describes partnerships as: *the involvement of two agents or agencies with some common interest of inter dependencies*

- ◆ *They are otherwise independent bodies*
- ◆ *They agree to cooperate to achieve a common goal*
- ◆ *They create a new organisational structure or process to achieve this goal*
- ◆ *They plan and implement a joint programme*
- ◆ *They share relevant information, risks and rewards.*

Another way of describing the phenomena is to see partnerships as part of a political and organisational shift from hierarchy (the top down implementation model) to a looser horizontal networking model.

As there is no common definition of the term ‘partnership’ in use there have been several attempts to summarise the phenomena. For example, Dowling et al (2004) list a number of the more interesting ones: *the indefinable in pursuit of the unachievable; a humpty dumpty term; a word in search of ways of giving it effective meaning in practice*. In one government document partnership is described as *a rhetorical invocation of a vague idea*, the Audit Commission describes it as *a slippery concept that is difficult to define precisely* (AC 1998:16). All this imprecision is summed up as *methodological anarchy and definitional chaos* by Ling (2000:82). This issue of definition may seem trivial, but if we are to have meaningful evidence based policy then it has to be clear that the evidence is comparing like with like.

3. Why partnership organisation?

Since 1997 the ‘New Labour’ government has encouraged the development of a partnership culture as part of its ‘third way’ approach to policy and governance. This is a political attempt to create a new agenda for public service delivery that is distinctive from the old command and control model of centralised bureaucracy of past Labour administrations and the market model of the Conservatives. The new discourse attempts to move on from the old contract culture to a new partnership collaborative culture.

Three models which describe the criteria or rationale for partnership are:

- ◆ **Synergy or added value model**

Where the aim is of increasing added value by a combination of the assets and powers of the separate organisations

- ◆ **Transformation model**

Here the purpose is to change the aims and cultures of the partner organisations.

- ◆ **Budget enlargement**

This is where a pooled budget can bring benefits to a welfare or policy problem (Mackintosh 1992; Hastings 1996)

The Audit Commission (1998:13-14) suggest other rationales for partnership:

- ◆ To deliver coordinated services
- ◆ To tackle ‘wicked issues’ (multi-faceted issues which defy simple solutions and cannot be soled in traditional ways [Clarke & Stewart 1997]) or interconnected problems
- ◆ To reduce the impact of organisational fragmentation and minimise the impact of any perverse incentives that result from it
- ◆ To bid for or gain access to new resources
- ◆ To meet a statutory requirement.

Partnerships can be: *voluntary, mandatory, or quasi network*. There is no one common model. Every partnership is different and hence each one has to be described in its own time and context to make assessment meaningful.

4. Who is involved in public sector driven partnerships?

Partnerships can involve anyone and everyone who has an interest in a particular issue. Some partnerships involve inter-organisational contractual collaboration, such as the PFI initiatives in the NHS, through which the private sector contracts with the public sector to build or provide public service goods. Other examples are inter-professional partnerships, such as between social services departments in local authorities and primary care organisations in the health service.

Typically partnerships can involve the statutory, private and commercial, voluntary and informal services providers and members of the community.

Some of the current government sponsored area based partnerships for which M·E·L Research and Service Development has undertaken research and consultancy are:

- ◆ Children’s Fund
- ◆ Connexions
- ◆ Local strategic partnerships

- ◆ New Deal for Communities
- ◆ Sure Start Local Programmes.

5. Evaluation of partnerships

A commonly used definition of evaluation is:

The concept of evaluation entails, on the one hand, a description of the performance of the entity being evaluated, and on the other, some standards or criteria for judging that performance (Rossi et al 2004: 16).

Evaluation uses the whole spectrum of research methods to systematically investigate a topic or service. The purpose of evaluation is different from applied research because of the value judgements that are made. As this definition shows, the concepts of standards and performance are central. In this context the data produced from evaluation should be used for decision making, known as evaluation utilisation. Rossi et al assert that evaluation has two arms, only one of which is engaged in data gathering, the other arm collects, clarifies and verifies relevant values and standards (2004:17).

In evaluation studies the methodological framework and assumptions are usually stated. Some authors provide an analytical framework around which to carry out a partnership evaluation study. For example, Glendinning (2001) offers a conceptual model which compares the wider academic evaluation approach with the core objectives of public policy. Box 1 shows the criteria Glendinning (2001) suggests for evaluating the outcome of a partnership.

Box 1: Differing evaluation frameworks

| Academic concerns | Public policy concerns |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Context and generalisability | Effectiveness |
| Stakeholders and success criteria | Efficiency |
| Timescales | Equity |
| Causality and attribution | Acceptability |
| Political considerations | Accessibility |

The very nature of partnerships implies complexity of problems:

- ◆ Partnerships are integrated programme designs in which people are expected to act in partnerships and networks, so that they tackle various aspects of a problem simultaneously
- ◆ Complex programmes aim at creating synergies that produce results that simple initiatives would not have brought about in isolation
- ◆ Typically a community programme encompasses social, economic, health and education components as well as crime and public participation
- ◆ There are many implementers, different lead bodies (public, private, not for profit sector) different beneficiaries, different activities.

These complexities mean that evaluation itself can be difficult. Most partnership evaluations will involve a whole range of research methods such as documentary review of systems, Board minutes and partnership meetings; output measurement, interviews and surveys. The generic toolkits, which are reviewed in the following section, are an additional aid to understanding the working of the partnership itself.

6. Off-the-shelf toolkits for partnership evaluation

A large number of standard assessment toolkits have been developed to help evaluate public partnerships. The Communities Scotland and the Community Planning Taskforce Assessment of Partnership Toolkits lists seventeen toolkits (Rocket Science 2003). The Health Development Agency produced *Partnership Working a Guide to Consumer Resources*. This is a manual of published tools relevant to health and social care (Markwell 2003). The manual contains 25 resources; there are 9 examples of Toolkits, 8 examples of Audit, 8 examples of Guides. The *Partnership Working* resource is available as both a printed and web based resource.

The stakeholder focus of the evaluation varies. Tools have been developed for a community perspective, or, from a professional managerial perspective. Some tools were developed primarily as management tools to help identify obstacles which hinder progress, others to monitor the process of delivering the objectives of partnership. Toolkits may alternatively be described as service audit tool, or service appraisal tool. This section presents a sample of three of the more readily available toolkits from local government, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Health Development Agency.

All toolkits can be used individually or in a team context.

The toolkit can be used in one of three ways:

- ◆ As an audit , a form of check or monitoring of the effectiveness of the partnership working
- ◆ As a practical tool and method for sustaining and developing a partnership
- ◆ As a guide offering instructions or direction in the process of partnership working.

6. a) Johnstone's LGPartnership Developing Skills for Partnership Working – making the most of partnership working (www.lgpartnership.co.uk).

This toolkit is sponsored by the Employers' Organisation for local government. The target user group is those involved in local authority partnerships at strategic level, although it is also useful for those at operational level. It is freely accessible from the Internet site. There are also case studies available showing how the resource has been used in practice. Box 2 summarises the format.

The Toolkit consists of four key principles:

- ◆ Leadership,
- ◆ Trust,
- ◆ Learning
- ◆ Managing for performance

There is a checklist of 5 or 6 statements for each principle.

Scoring

The scoring is by three dimensions of current progress:

- ◆ No- action is needed
- ◆ No, but action is in hand
- ◆ Yes, but needs improving.

Box 2: LGPartnership model

| Principles | Number of statements for each principle | Scoring options (3) |
|------------|---|---|
| Leadership | 5 | No - action is needed, No - but action is in hand, Yes - but needs improving. |
| Trust | 6 | No - action is needed, No - but action is in hand, |

| | | |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| | | Yes - but needs improving. |
| Learning | 5 | No - action is needed, No - but action is in hand, Yes - but needs improving. |
| Managing for performance | 5 | No - action is needed, No - but action is in hand, Yes - but needs improving. |

There is no key to help analyse the results after scoring.

6. b) Assessing Strategic Partnership, The Partnership Assessment Tool (The ODPM Assessment Tool for local government) (Hardy et al ODPM 2003).

This toolkit can be used for routine audit, helping established partnerships to take stock, or diagnostic for those experiencing difficulties. The evaluators can assess the partnership at different stakeholder levels, such as the elected members or board, senior and middle management level, or front line staff.

The tool can be repeated at different levels within the partnership so it allows the user to compare, contrast and take action where it is needed. Repeating over time allows the partnership to chart its own progress in tackling problems or achieving goals.

Box 3 summarises the format. The tool is set out based on 6 core principles, which are:

- ◆ Recognise and accept the need for partnership
- ◆ Develop clarity and realism of purpose
- ◆ Ensure commitment and ownership
- ◆ Develop and maintain trust
- ◆ Create clear and robust partnership arrangements
- ◆ Monitor measure and learn.

The substance behind each principle is detailed in the toolkit.

Scoring

The evaluation has three stages:

- ◆ Stage 1: Seven principle tables of statements, scoring by strongly agree (4) agree (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1) plus a column for comments (Box 3)

- ◆ Stage 2: In a table the marks are weighted by each person in terms of the current significance to the partnership in the local context or nature of partnership and stage of development (Box 4)
- ◆ Stage 3: Asks the participant to score ‘how well do you think your partnership is doing to achieve its aims and objectives’?
- ◆ A key to scoring outcomes is provided with the toolkit.

Box 3: The ODPM toolkit stage one, example of principle, statements and scoring

| <i>To what extent do you agree with the following six statements in respect of the partnership which is subject of this assessment exercise as whole?</i> | <i>Strongly agree (4)</i> | <i>Agree (3)</i> | <i>Disagree (2)</i> | <i>Strongly disagree (1)</i> | <i>Comments</i> |
|--|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| The partnership has clear success criteria in terms of both service goals and the partnership itself | | | | | |
| The partnership has clear arrangements effectively to monitor | | | | | |

Stage 2:

This stage allows individuals to weight the six principles in terms of their current significance to the partnership, given its nature and stage of development. So the participant indicates with a cross the level of current significance.

Box 4: How do you rate the current significance of each principle to your partnership?

| | |
|---|------------------|
| More significant | Less significant |
| Principle 1 | |
| Recognise and accept the need for partnership | |
|X..... | |
| Principle 2 | |
| Develop clarity and realism of purpose | |
|X..... | |
| Principle 3 | |
| Ensure commitment and ownership | |
|X..... | |
| Principle 4 | |

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Develop and maintain trust |x..... |
| Principle 5 | |
| Create clear and robust partnership arrangements |x..... |
| Principle 6 | |
| Monitor, measure and learn | ...x..... |

The results of this exercise are then collated in a circular presentation, to show the extent of consensus on progress.

6. c. The Health Development Agency *The Working Partnership*

This is a freely available internet or boxed package resource, containing three books. Book 1 Introduction, Book 2 Short Assessment, Book 3 In-Depth and Continuous Assessment with a supplementary set of worksheets.

This toolkit was first developed at a WHO Investment for Health Initiative at Verona in 1998, hence it was originally known as the Verona Benchmark. It combines evidence, theory and practice from three areas:

- ◆ Business performance (EFQM)
- ◆ Community involvement
- ◆ Partnership dynamics

Administering the *Working Partnership* tool

As with the other tools described in this paper, the HDA tool can be used as an internal self assessment, so partners can develop self awareness and take an honest approach to their strengths and weaknesses. It can also be used in a whole group exercise. An external facilitator may be involved to co-ordinate the assessment process. Partners may complete the short assessment and then focus on those aspects which need attention. The partners then need to develop an action plan with identified responsibilities, resources, milestones and timescales.

Box 5 summarises the format. The six key principles of an effective partnership in this tool are:

- ◆ Leadership
- ◆ Organisation
- ◆ Strategy

- ◆ Learning
- ◆ Resources
- ◆ Programmes

Then each of the key elements has sub sections as shown in box 5. Book 2 contains a detailed description explaining each theme.

Scoring

The short assessment principle, Organisation, has eight statements, box 5 shows one of them. The participant scores by noting whether action has been undertaken, where the options are *None, Limited, Satisfactory*. The second column, Action Planning, requires comments and date for action planning.

Box 5: Example of HDA statements and scoring

| Participation | Action Undertaken | Action planning Date |
|---|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| Does the partnership monitor community and voluntary sector participation in its processes? | None Limited Satisfactory | |

Box 6: Working Partnerships - the key criteria for assessing partnerships

Leadership, effective leadership involves attention to:

Developing and communicating a **vision**

Embodying and promoting ownership of and **commitment** to the partnership and its goals

Being alert to factors and **relationships** in the external environment that might affect the partnership

Organisation, clear and effective systems are needed for:

Public **participation** in the partnership processes and decision making

Flexibility in working arrangements

Transparent and effective **management** of the partnership

Communication in ways and at times that can be easily understood, interpreted and acted on

Strategy, the partnership needs to implement its mission and vision via a clear strategy informed by local communities and other stakeholders which focus on:

Strategic development to agree priorities and define outcome targets

Sharing **information and evaluation** of progress and achievements

A continuous process of **action and review**

Learning, partner organisations need to attract, manage and develop people to release their full knowledge and potential by:

Valuing people as a primary resource

Development and application of knowledge and skills

Supporting innovation

Resources, the contribution and shared utilisation of resources, including

Building and strengthening **social capital**

Managing and pooling **financial resources**

Making **information** work

Using information and communication **technology** appropriately

Programmes, partners seek to develop coordinated programmes and integrated services that fit together well. This requires attention to:

Realising added value from joint **planning**

Focused **delivery**

Regular **monitoring** and review

6. d. Comparative summary of the three toolkits

1. The principles are relatively similar, there seems to be consensus that partnership principles are generic, applying to intra-organisational as well as inter-organisational and different organisational levels. But the wording of statements varies.

2. The method of scoring varies. The LGPartnership and HDA scoring is very similar. The ODPM scoring enables a quantitative assessment that is probably more robust when making comparison across time, across partnerships and between stakeholder groups.

Box 7: Summative comparison of the core principles from the three toolkits

| <i>LGPartnership</i> | <i>ODPM</i> | <i>HDA</i> |
|----------------------|---|--------------|
| Leadership | Recognise and accept the need for partnership | Leadership |
| Trust | Develop and maintain trust | Organisation |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|------------|
| | | |
| | Ensure commitment and ownership | Strategy |
| Managing for performance | Develop clarity and realism of purpose | Resources |
| | Create clear and robust partnership arrangements | Programmes |
| Learning | Monitor, measure and learn | Learning |

Box 8: Summative comparison of the scoring from the three toolkits

| <i>LGpartnership</i> | <i>ODPM</i> | <i>HDA</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| No - action is needed, | Strongly agree (4) | None |
| No - but action is in hand, | Agree (3) | Limited |
| Yes – but needs improving | Disagree (2) | Satisfactory |
| | Strongly disagree (1) | Action planning |
| | Comments | Date |

Strengths of toolkits

- ◆ They can assess which characteristics of which partnerships have worked better and why
- ◆ They can help you ask why you are doing what you are doing
- ◆ And what happens when you do it?
- ◆ They can help you identify what do you do best in co-ordination with other actors that you could not do alone
- ◆ The original tools, principles and statements, have been validated.

Limitations of toolkits

- ◆ They measure process, not outcome or outputs
- ◆ They have to be adapted to fit each partnership type – so you cannot pilot the statements first. This raises questions of validity.
- ◆ As a stand-alone tool they are not enough for an evaluation. You need other information, data and interviews
- ◆ They don' give the outsider any understanding of the specific context
- ◆ There is no insight into the meaning underlying respondent' s opinion

- ◆ It is difficult to analyse the results visually.

7. Case study examples using an off the shelf evaluation toolkit

There is a lack of published systematic empirical research evaluating the functioning and effectiveness of partnership evaluation toolkits (Rocket science 2003; Halliday et al 2004).

An evaluation of two Health Action Zones did use an adapted toolkit. The researchers discuss the key methodological limitations and stress the importance of understanding the context, along with the measurement of partnership effectiveness. They conclude that as a stand alone device toolkits are open to misinterpretation (Halliday et al 2004).

M·E·L adapted the LGPartnership toolkit to evaluate Sure Start Bradley and Whitefield partnership board and wider partners. The core principles were used, but the statements had to be adapted to the particular needs of a Sure Start context. The assessment was administered by post for self completion, together with a SWOT analysis. In addition, telephone interviews were held with key stakeholders to put the responses into context (Barton et al 2005).

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