

CUMBRIA COUNTY OVERVIEW SCRUTINY GROUP

LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT/CSP/LSPS TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Report on the development of
a Local Area Agreement for Cumbria

for the attention of

The Chief Executives' Group
The Cumbria Local Authorities Strategic Board
The Cumbria Strategic Partnership Executive
Board

August 2006

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion:

Thematic partnerships (TPs) have evolved in different ways for a variety of reasons, each one from a different starting point, throughout the development of the Local Area Agreement. Further information concerning this together with a summary of the development and status of each partnership is shown at Appendix A. Some TPs do not have a membership that includes representatives from all of the Authorities in the County.

Recommendation 1:

It is suggested that all TPs should re-consider their membership to ensure the widest possible representation.

Conclusion:

As each TP usually has a Strategic group and a Working Group, it might become unmanageable if all Districts were on all groups.

Recommendation 2:

In order to ensure transparency and an inclusive membership from all Authorities in the County, it is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority either develops a mechanism whereby the most appropriate person for each theme is chosen from their Authority and is appointed to sit on that thematic group, reporting any developments back to their Authority or an alternative but effective approach to District representation is proposed. Process improvements might include effective pre and post meeting briefings.

Conclusion:

There is a need for individual Authorities to review the feedback mechanisms by which information regarding the Local Area Agreement and its current position is passed on to Members and Officers.

Recommendation 3:

In order to develop this process further it is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority explores the robustness of the feedback mechanism within their Authority and seeks to formalise and improve this. One element of this might be to have a formal agenda item at each Full Council Meeting to update Members.

Conclusion:

There is a need for individual Authorities' Overview and Scrutiny Committees to be involved with the scrutiny and monitoring of the LAA at a District Level.

Recommendation 4:

It is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority reports back to their respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and suggests that they may wish to consider scrutinising and monitoring the LAA at a District level with the support of their LSP co-ordinator.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

1.1 Recognising both the importance and the significance of the introduction of a Cumbria Local Area Agreement to both delivery partners and local communities, a task and finish group was commissioned by the Cumbria County Overview Scrutiny Group¹ in June of this year to consider scrutiny of the Agreement.

1.2 Given the timescales to which the project is working, it was recognised that an important role for joint scrutiny would be to challenge, in particular, the robustness of the processes being used in the development of the Agreement.

1.3 The recommendations made in this report are timed to coincide with the first consultation phase of the Local Area Agreement and arise from two meetings of the task and finish group in July and August of this year.

1.4 The Chair is grateful to senior officers of Cumbria County Council and the Cumbria Strategic Partnership for the evidence and support that they have given to the scrutiny process.

¹ Established in June 2005, the Cumbria County Overview Scrutiny Group of Chairs from each of the local authorities was set up to share experiences and consider areas of common interest and concern around the County.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“The primary objective of an LAA is to deliver genuinely sustainable communities through better outcomes for local people.” Department of Communities and Local Government.

“Good public scrutiny drives improvement in public services.” Centre for Public Scrutiny.

2.1 As illustrated above, the thinking behind a Local Area Agreement is consistent with one of the key functions of the scrutiny process. Members appear keen to see a successful implementation of the Local Area Agreement and their comments should be viewed in this context. They appreciate the challenges faced in implementing a Local Area Agreement in a two-tier authority area and in a County as diverse as Cumbria.

2.2 Members noted that a starting point for the development of the Agreement was consideration of the Community Strategies (or Plans) around the County, which are expected to have been subject to extensive community consultation.

This is consistent with Government Guidance on local area agreements:

“An LAA is a three year agreement, based on local Sustainable Community Strategies, that sets out the priorities for a local area. The agreement is made between Central Government, represented by the Government Office (GO), and a local area, represented by the lead local authority and other key partners through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs).”

2.3 From their own experience, however, Members are aware that the Community Strategies (or Plans) are at different stages of development around the County of Cumbria and are questioning whether the most current ‘local thinking’ is reflected in those documents to provide the solid evidence base which is sought.

Government guidance continues:

“We want to ensure that the Sustainable Community Strategy which sets out the vision and priorities for the area, is produced with the involvement of all parties, including citizens, voluntary sector and businesses and establishes a solid evidence base in order to develop and drive the effective delivery of their Local Area Agreement”

2.4 Members are, therefore, keen to see that there is extensive consultation at this first draft stage of the document to ensure the buy-in of all partners on whom the Local Area Agreement will depend for its successful implementation, that the diversity of the County is well-reflected and that communities are well-engaged. They have received assurances that effective consultation will be carried out.

2.5 Members have made their own enquiries with colleagues across the County and are uneasy about the level of understanding of what a Local Area Agreement is and the level of knowledge of the emerging content. Taking account of the above guidance, it would appear that the buy-in of all partners, including all local authorities, will be essential to effective delivery, acknowledged in the learning of Cornwall County Council in Phase 1 of Local Area Agreement development.

2.6 It is particularly relevant when, according to the evidence received from senior officers, some funding will be pooled (estimated at £30m in the first year) and that partners need to agree locally how non-pooled funds are aligned to support LAA outcomes (ie. how partners can focus existing funds towards the achievement of targets).

2.7 With this in mind, Members have examined the membership of the Thematic Working Partnerships, the 'advisory' bodies who are charged with preparing the draft content of the Local Area Agreement. They have noted that these working groups have 'evolved' over a period of time and have questioned whether there is sufficient representation from all partner organisations on whom delivery will be dependent, and agreed that

Recommendation 1:

It is suggested that all TPs should re-consider their membership to ensure the widest possible representation.

Recommendation 2:

In order to ensure transparency and an inclusive membership from all Authorities in the County, it is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority either develops a mechanism whereby the most appropriate person for each theme is chosen from their Authority and is appointed to sit on that thematic group, reporting any developments back to their Authority or an alternative but effective approach to District representation is proposed.

Process improvements might include effective pre and post meeting briefings.

In making these recommendations, Members noted the need for appropriate, effective and transparent representation, which recognises the importance of the work in hand.

2.8 In further considering the need for consultation and engagement, Members noted that communication would appear to be a continuing concern with respect to Partnership working in general. They acknowledge that timely and appropriate feedback is a key driver to the success of any partnership. There is a need for individual Authorities to review the feedback mechanisms by which information regarding the Local Area Agreement and its current position is passed on to Members and Officers. It was agreed that

Recommendation 3:

It is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority explores the robustness of the feedback mechanism within their Authority and seeks to formalise and improve this. One element of this might be to have a formal agenda item at each Full Council Meeting to update Members.

R3 contd. They also noted that this may well involve communication with and feedback to other local partner organisations.

THE NEXT STEPS FOR SCRUTINY

3.1 This joint task and finish group will continue to monitor the development process at this time and will meet again in early October.

3.2 A response to their recommendations, therefore, would be welcomed by Friday 22 September 2006.

3.3 It is expected that this group will also give consideration to a scrutiny model which would be appropriate to the monitoring of the Local Area Agreement after implementation, giving due regard to issues of accountability, local expectations, the need to avoid duplication and learning from other two-tier authority areas.

3.4 The group felt strongly that in addition to the joint scrutiny work that they are currently undertaking, District scrutiny of the LAA should start urgently with district LSP co-ordinators supporting this work.

Recommendation 4:

It is recommended that the Chief Executive of each Authority reports back to their respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and suggests that they may wish to consider scrutinising and monitoring the LAA at a District level with the support of their LSP co-ordinator.