

Appendix 3



LEICESTERSHIRE TOGETHER

Findings of the peer challenge

Draft report

April 2006

Background

Peer Challenge is a constructive and mutually supportive process that helps Local Strategic Partnerships to look at how they are performing, at their strengths and areas for improvement. This peer challenge model has been developed through a partnership between SOLACE Enterprises (SOLACE), Warwick University Business School Local Government Centre (WBS) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). It draws on the WBS Local Authorities Research Consortium peer review tool and the SOLACE Enterprises peer challenge model.

Methodology and approach

The peer challenge is carried out against a quality benchmark, set out under seven main headings:

- Vision and strategy
- Leadership
- Governance and management
- Relationships
- Performance management
- Achievements and impact
- Learning and development

The benchmark is sufficiently flexible to address single tier and two tier local government situations and rural and urban contexts. Details of the full benchmark can be found in Appendix A.

The team do not act as inspectors but “critical friends”, and adopt a flexible approach to suit the circumstances of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) being assessed. They also develop a dialogue with the LSP to make sure that the findings are owned and shared.

Leicestershire Together Peer Challenge

In October 2005 Leicestershire County Council on behalf of Leicestershire Together, the Local Strategic Partnership, commissioned a peer challenge of the LSP. As the County Council and LSP were heavily involved in development of the Local Area Agreement (LAA), it was agreed to carry out the peer challenge once the LAA was completed and signed.

The peer challenge took place on 30 & 31 March 2006. It was carried out by a team made up of:

- Celia Bahrami (Director, Shropshire Partnership)
- Councillor Phil Davis (Telford and Wrekin Borough Council)
- Maggie Rust (facilitator) (Warwick Business School)
- Supt Gordon Scobbie (West Midlands Police)
- Richard Quallington (Chief Executive, Community First Herefordshire & Worcestershire)

The team gathered information through:

- Relevant reading including Leicestershire Together (LT) Board information and reports; community strategy and review document; LAA; LT's self-assessment against the quality benchmark; citizens' jury reports; other strategies and plans
- Presentation from LSP support officers
- Interviews and focus group discussions with LSP representatives and support officers e.g. chair; Board members including district LSP representatives, statutory sector, voluntary sector, faith and business partners; county and district councillors and chief executives; support officers
- Interviews and focus group discussions with a wider group of stakeholders e.g. Government office, voluntary and community sector representatives, service managers, citizens' jury facilitators and members
- Demonstrations of joint projects and discussions with users e.g. LSORA – on-line information and research atlas, the Jitty - young people's website and Change Picture Bank – an access system for people with learning difficulties.

This report sets out the results of the peer challenge of Leicestershire Together, based on the information gathered during the two-day visit. It gives a summary and more detailed findings under the headings of the benchmark; and some recommendations and suggestions for next steps to be taken by the LSP.

Leicestershire Together

Leicestershire Together is the Local Strategic Partnership for the county of Leicestershire. It was set up in 2002 to improve the quality of life of everyone in the county; and to improve the quality and co-ordination of public services. The Board is made up of 25 members from public, private, voluntary and community organisations representing key partnerships, district LSPs, communities of interest, voluntary and public bodies. It is chaired by the Leader of Leicestershire County Council and supported by the council's policy team. There are no formal sub-groups but task and finish groups deal with specific tasks; such as the production of the community strategy and development of the Local Area Agreement (LAA).

LT agreed and published the five-year Leicestershire Community Strategy in July 2003. It sets out a vision, guiding principles and actions to tackle community priorities and achieve the vision. The strategy was reviewed and revised in 2005 and progress on new priority actions is reported to the Board's quarterly meetings. LT also supports a number of projects and has overseen the development of the LAA which was signed in March 2006.

Summary of findings of the peer challenge

	Strengths	Areas for development
Vision and strategy	<p>Well articulated vision and community strategy, based on consultation; and recently reviewed</p> <p>Beginning to connect district and county community strategy priorities</p> <p>LAA used as an opportunity to re-affirm shared priorities and partnership commitment.</p>	<p>Better alignment of partner strategies with community strategy</p> <p>More ownership of community strategy by front line staff</p> <p>More explicit connection between LAA and LSP</p> <p>Develop joint consultation and engagement strategies</p> <p>Equality and diversity should be more integrated into core activities</p>
Leadership	<p>Commitment to LSP and LAA at senior levels in partner organisations</p> <p>County demonstrates community leadership role</p> <p>LT seen as mature partnership that 'gets the business done'</p> <p>Champions for priority areas</p>	<p>Develop more inclusive partnership model and re-visit shared partnership values, behaviour and trust</p> <p>Take a stronger lead in tackling some of the difficult issues facing the county</p> <p>Greater clarity about role of champions</p> <p>Better representation of diversity of V&CS, particularly at Board level</p>
Governance and management	<p>Role of county council in supporting LT is valued</p> <p>Good and effective support staff</p> <p>All key players involved, with consistent attendance</p> <p>Job descriptions – roles and responsibilities for Board members</p>	<p>Review LT structures and operation e.g. consider executive group; options for chairing Board; introduce different ways of working as a Board</p> <p>Clarify relationship with theme partnerships</p> <p>Clarify and formalise LAA decision-making processes</p>

	V&CS played strong role in development of LAA	Work with V&CS to strengthen their capacity Strengthen links with under-represented groups and sectors e.g. via standing conference linked to Board
Relationships	LT valued as networking opportunity Mature partnership with some good relationships Information and data sharing protocols Citizens' juries well run and used to broaden engagement	Develop more inclusive mechanisms for developing LT work, taking decisions, and engaging wider group of stakeholders Improve relationships between county and district partners BME citizen jury – develop a follow up strategy
Performance management	Commitment to develop performance management system Good data and intelligence projects Partnership assessment tool	Clarity on LAA performance management and accountability arrangements Integrate LAA and community strategy performance management systems
Achievements and impact	Good examples of joint activity and projects Examples of added value of networking	Link projects more closely with LT e.g. via project group; more partner buy-in to projects Use LAA to influence neighbourhood delivery
Learning and development	Induction pack and V&CS briefing Looking at best practice elsewhere	Better sharing, learning and communication across the partnership More systematic use of performance assessment Promote partnership working skills

Findings of the peer challenge

The main findings of the peer challenge are set out below under the headings of the benchmark.

1. Vision and strategy

Strengths

The county and its partners spent time and effort setting up the LSP in 2002 and getting the 'right people' around the table. Leicestershire Together (LT) is valued by partners as a network of networks; a comprehensive county network and information exchange that can bring senior players together. It is seen as an influencing rather than a doing body that would "*have to be invented if it didn't exist*".

LT has developed a well-articulated vision and community strategy. The community strategy, arrived at through a significant amount of consultation, was published in July 2003. The LSP's recent review of the community strategy updates priorities and provides a sharper focus.

LT board members in particular have been keen to make sure that it does not become a 'talking shop'. The work programme includes a number of activities and projects whose progress is regularly reported to the Board.

LT has taken a high-profile role in overseeing the development of the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The arrival of the LAA has acted as a catalyst to sharpen the focus of the partnership, develop the vision, and build wider partner involvement. For example, the economic strand was described as a positive move forward in engaging the business sector more firmly with the LSP. The LAA is seen as an opportunity to give LT a more tangible and realistic role and improved access to funding. LAA development has also been used to begin to connect district and county community strategy priorities more closely and re-affirm shared priorities.

Areas for development

The county council has lined up its corporate strategy and medium term planning processes with the community strategy, but there is little evidence that others partners have done the same. There is some concern that the community strategy does not give enough direction and that LT can still appear unfocused, particularly to those who are not regularly involved.

We picked up a patchy understanding and ownership of the community strategy by front line staff in the council and partner organisations; and limited connection in terms of their contribution to its vision and priorities.

During interviews it was clear that the LAA has galvanised partnership activity, and is seen to give more meaning and focus to partnership working in Leicestershire. Some interviewees, however, could see very little linkage, and

even disconnection, between the LSP and LAA. There is a danger that the LAA will over-ride all LSP activity. Partners need to recognise the importance of a strong LSP in delivering LAA outcomes as well as continuing to track progress on those community strategy priorities which are not identified in the LAA.

A clear communication strategy setting out the relationship between the community strategy and LAA, and between the LAA and LSP, would build wider ownership and help staff in all partner organisations understand their contribution to these activities.

Focus groups, citizens' panel surveys, and citizens' juries have been used to identify local priorities, gain feedback and consult on specific issues. Most of these activities have been carried out by the county council and we found little evidence of joint consultation or community involvement initiatives. The LSP should explore ways in which partners can work together to avoid duplication and maximise their resources; as well as continue to develop a range of consultation and engagement methods to reach a broad cross-section of Leicestershire communities.

We heard about some good examples of engaging with communities who are often traditionally not heard by public agencies. There is a danger, however, that these activities remain on the margins of LT's work. The partnership needs to actively integrate equality and diversity matters more firmly into its core activities.

2. Leadership

Strengths

There is significant commitment to the LSP at senior levels in the county council and in partner organisations. The county council has played a strong role in developing and steering LT and is seen by many as providing a positive 'honest broker' role at the heart of the process. The county council recognises its community leadership function in bringing together major players "to deliver seamless service for the benefit of local people". LT is seen as a mature partnership that operates in a way that gets the business done. The LAA structures also benefit from strong support from councillors, chief executives and senior officers in partner agencies.

Several partners gave examples of championing LT and partnership working in their own organisation. For example, the fire service has produced its own internal partnership policy and toolkit.

LT has also developed the notion of champions for priority areas in the community strategy and LAA; people able to champion these areas in their organisations and wider arenas.

Areas for development

The LSP needs to address some issues around the balance of power and inclusion. LT Board can appear too cumbersome and formal in the way it works to allow all members to contribute fully. LT works well as a network for many elected members and statutory partners, who feel more at ease with its ethos and way of operating, but it is recognised that it may work less well for voluntary and community sector (V&CS) representatives. Partners, particularly those on the edge of LT, often find it hard to distinguish between the county council and the LSP. Decisions can appear to be taken behind the scenes, with partners brought in afterwards. Although the county council's community leadership role is widely acknowledged, further work is needed to develop a more inclusive partnership model and re-visit shared partnership values, behaviour and trust.

LSPs in two-tier areas bring particular challenges. District LSP involvement in LT needs further discussion. Chairs of District LSPs are represented on LT and in most instances the leader of the district council plays this role. District chief executives also attend LT. The large number of councillors and chief executives on LT can lead to the perception of a council committee with 'politicking' sometimes getting in the way of business and acting as a barrier to other stakeholders. County and district representatives need to find ways to work better together to achieve shared and mutually beneficial objectives.

In spite of strong commitment and leadership across partner organisations, there is a view that LT, as a major strategic body, should now take a stronger and more explicit lead in tackling some of the difficult issues facing the county.

The idea of champions is positive, but we picked up a lack of clarity about the role. In order to make the most of their champions, LT should re-visit the role, using the experience of current champions, and develop a brief to explain where they fit in the structure and expectations of the job.

In all areas, but particularly in a large two-tier area, LSPs need to consider carefully the diversity of the voluntary and community sector and implications for representation on the partnership. There are a number of V&CS infrastructure organisations in the county. It is recognised that this can lead to difficulties in achieving more coherent county-wide engagement in the LSP. LT could usefully take a leadership role in helping to resolve this situation through closer working with the V&CS infrastructure consortium.

Although LT documents state that parish plans have been taken into account in development of the community strategy and LAA, there appears to be a lack of parish involvement or fit with LT activity. The team were not able to get a feel for how much LT links into the parish planning processes or uses information at parish level to help inform its strategies and activities.

3. Governance and management

Strengths

Partners value the role played by the county in supporting LT and highlighted the effectiveness of a good support team. There is a regular flow of information to Board members, effective support for meetings, and for development of LSP activities.

Getting the key people around the table able to commit resources, and with a consistently high attendance, was highlighted as one of the strengths of the partnership. LT has also developed job descriptions setting out roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for its Board members.

Presentations by partners on specific strategies and topics of interest have begun to introduce a more participative element to Board meetings and acted as a springboard to develop wider partnership involvement in a number of initiatives.

The V&CS played a strong role in development of the LAA – leading on the stronger communities block and playing a part in other theme areas linked to specific outcomes.

Areas for development

LT should use the opportunity of the LAA to redefine its strategy and governance arrangements, and review its focus and delivery. There is some confusion over the LAA decision-making processes and their relationship to the LSP. These should be clarified and formalised. The status and role of the strategic senior officer group should also be reviewed with the objective of promoting transparency.

Although the county has been careful to be seen as not dictating the agenda, interviewees saw the value of a non-local authority chair which might promote LT as being more than an arm of the county council. The relatively mature relationships between key partners would help the LSP to make any changes in this direction.

As identified above, the size and structure of LT Board can make it difficult to act as a focused decision-making body or to encourage a spirit of participation, debate and ownership across the membership. LT should:

- review the need for a smaller executive body, alongside discussions about the role of the LAA strategic senior officer group
- consider options for chairing the Board e.g. independent chair; rotating the chair/vice-chair between different sectors etc.
- continue to introduce different ways of working e.g. themed meetings; small group discussions; topic workshops (for the Board and wider partnership)
- continue to develop ideas for agenda management and how people outside the council can place items on LT agenda.

LT does not have specific theme groups but tries to work through existing theme partnerships. There does, however, appear to be some ambiguity over the roles and relationships between theme partnerships and LT. Most partnerships appear to work independently of LT. If, as described, LT is seen as a 'partnership of partnerships' with LT as the umbrella body, there needs to be a more explicit relationship between the various parts. This is particularly important with theme partnerships now taking on responsibility for specific LAA priority themes/areas. A review of these relationships should also look at the relationship between theme partnerships and district LSPs. This is essential to avoid duplication of effort at different levels.

An updated partnership assessment tool could be used more systematically across all main theme partnerships and district LSPs to assist such a review and also help clarify the fit between LAA arrangements and LT.

Although LT does not have formal sub-groups, it does run a number of task and finish groups. These could be used to encourage more in-depth participation by a wider group of partners.

Greater participation and engagement of V&CS with the LSP, particularly at Board level, has been identified earlier in this report. LT needs to work with the V&CS to strengthen their capacity to engage effectively. This should cover skills and knowledge of those currently involved; methods for wider engagement (structures and communication); and financial resources.

LT should also strengthen its links with marginalised and excluded groups by building on the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and other citizens' jury work. A standing conference of local people involved with these projects, linked to the Board, may be an effective way for LT partners to continue to listen to and engage with different views and experiences. A standing conference or similar may also be useful for engaging with other under-represented sectors such as the V&CS or businesses.

At the same time as strengthening participation and capacity of V&CS, BME and faith representatives, LT needs to discuss how it can use the existing range of skills and expertise of these representatives more effectively in the partnership. There is evidence that some members of LT feel they are able, and willing, to contribute more to its activities.

4. Relationships

Strengths

LT is a mature partnership with good relationships between partners, particularly in the larger statutory organisations. These relationships are seen as improving and moving in the right direction, helped by LAA arrangements. LT information and data sharing protocols have also been developed to support partnership activity.

Partners are positive about opportunities the LSP provides for networking and making new contacts. We were given several examples where these contacts have led to more effective joint activity.

Citizens' juries are well-run and used effectively to broaden engagement with people who are often excluded from consultation and involvement processes.

Relationships between LT and regional agencies, for example Government Office for the East Midlands, appear good and strengthened through the LAA process.

Areas for development

There is a sense in which the LSP offers many benefits for those who see themselves 'within the loop'; but to others it can appear to be a rather exclusive 'club'. There are some good relationships to build on, but LT needs to avoid the 'club' label to allow the non-statutory sector in particular to feel comfortable and equal partners. More inclusive mechanisms for developing LT work and taking decisions would help to improve all relationships.

An away-day in June, focusing on the LAA, was highlighted as an achievement in attracting a large number of participants. An annual conference or similar, planned by a number of LT partners, would also improve relationships and engage a wider group of stakeholders.

Relationships and links between district LSPs and LT is variable; some are seen as, and feel, well integrated but others less so. Much of this appears to depend on historical relationships between the district and county councils. There is evidence that the districts are developing stronger relationships with each other and this may help with improving district and county LSP links.

The relationship between different partnerships is a concern for some partners. For example, the need for greater clarity of role, function and linkage between Leicestershire Rural Partnership and LT was highlighted by several interviewees.

Communication tends to be seen as one-way and top down from LT, and the county council in particular. LT county and district partners should consider ways to encourage more two-way communication and build on and use some of the good front-line relationships that exist.

There is considerable enthusiasm about the work of the BME citizens' jury. The process has given communities a voice but a strategy needs to be developed to continue engagement and follow up. This may be through a standing conference as identified above but also through involvement with other partnership initiatives. This could also support the work of existing LT BME representatives.

5. Performance management

Strengths

Although performance management has not been high on the partnership's agenda so far, progress reports on community strategy targets are taken to quarterly Board meetings. Development of the LAA has led to a firm commitment to establish a more robust performance management and monitoring system; and to introduce TEN software already used by several districts.

Several projects, and Leicestershire On-line Research Atlas (LSORA) in particular, offer specific techniques for improving intelligence and data which can support the performance management framework and provide valuable baseline information.

LT has carried out its own partnership assessment, followed up by an action plan. This partnership assessment tool has also been offered to other partnerships.

Areas for development

As identified above, LAA performance management arrangements need to be clarified. This includes:

- defining the accountability framework and respective roles of theme groups, strategic senior officer group, and LT Board
- role of district LSPs in the performance management framework
- use of the TEN system to integrate LAA and community strategy performance management systems.

The LSP should also consider better use of partnership resources to support delivery of its objectives. The LAA gives an opportunity for different ways of working and shifting allocation of resources and budgets.

6. Achievements and impact

Strengths

LT acts as a key network and forum for action and aims to promote tangible partnership projects. There are good examples of joint activity. LSORA offers a comprehensive data-gathering and mapping tool which can contribute to better understanding of community needs and development of neighbourhood strategies.

The added value of the partnership so far appears to be improvements in processes such as better networking and strengthened relationships. Like many other LSPs, improvements in outcomes as a result of these processes may take longer to achieve. The LAA, however, seems to be moving the partnership in the right direction.

Areas for development

LSORA needs to link more effectively to LT/LAA. It is unclear how far it is being used by the LSP or partner organisations to assist policy development. LT should champion and use LSORA better as an intelligence resource and a tool to target and improve service delivery.

We also heard about a number of other valuable projects and developments, for example the Jitty, Connect, Funding toolkit. It is not clear how some of these fit with the LSP, despite meeting a number of community strategy objectives at both county and district levels; or how well links have been made with partners. The wider LSP network should be used to champion these activities in their own organisations. These projects also need to be better integrated into the LSP either through a new LT project group(s) and/or via theme partnerships or other appropriate mechanisms. The LSP support officers' group (county and district LSPs) could also be used to support project implementation and gain more ownership and involvement of district partners.

Citizens' Juries are more connected to the LSP, but LT partners need to support project workers and champion implementation of actions across their organisations.

Although the county council is acknowledged as the major funder for LT, there appears to be an over reliance on the county to resource activities. LT could build a more rounded partnership by looking at ways for LSP partners, other than the county council, to buy into and fund these projects. For example, a charge could be made for use of LSORA data and for use of the Jitty to consult with young people. This would also guard against criticism, expressed by some people during the peer challenge, of the county badging some of their existing activities as LT.

There is little evidence so far of organisations linking their activities to LSP objectives or changing service delivery as a result of involvement in the LSP. LT partners need to make sure that LAA implementation, with some of its focus on neighbourhood activities, develops a more hands-on role at district level in delivering these aspirations. Some of the current differences in approach need to be ironed out in order to develop flexibility within an agreed and shared neighbourhood management framework.

7. Learning and development

Strengths

The induction pack and V&CS briefing demonstrate some of the efforts made by LT to prepare its members for their role on the partnership. The LSP has been open to learning from others and looking at best practice elsewhere, for example from round 1 LAA pilots.

Areas for development

The peer challenge has highlighted some potential learning and development activities that could help strengthen the LSP:

- Better sharing of good practice, successes and difficulties across the partnership and learning from this activity
- More systematic use of performance assessment framework by main theme partnerships followed by a development programme
- Promote partnership working skills more widely: including style, values, behaviour and trust that supports good partnership relationships - how we do the business; understanding different needs etc. The county council change management programme also gives an opportunity for partnership skills' development
- Revisit induction, provide more clarity about champions and support mechanisms
- Wider communication about LT to staff in councils and all partner organisations
- Closer dialogue with Leicester City Council about diversity issues
- The conference in June gave an opportunity outside the formal meeting for wider debate and participation. Similar events and opportunities should continue in the future, and LT could also explore the possibility of linking with other partnership events e.g. ENABLE conference.

Conclusions

Leicestershire Together is a mature partnership with commitment from all the main public agencies. It gives partners a valuable network and information exchange. The LAA has galvanised partnership activity and has the potential to develop a more effective LSP focused on delivering tangible results.

There are some good relationships to build on but LT needs to avoid the appearance of a comfortable club and develop a more inclusive approach. The LSP needs to pay attention to improved representation of the diverse V&CS; better relationships between district and county partners; and developing engagement of marginalised communities.

LT supports a number of strong projects and should begin to use these initiatives better to build an intelligence base, direct service improvements, and gain wider partner involvement.

The LSP is at the crossroads. Clarifying governance, accountability arrangements, and relationships between the LAA and LSP; and making some changes to its structures and ways of working will help LT move on to the next phase.

Recommendations and next steps

The peer challenge has identified a number of areas where there is scope for further development. We have summarised below some next steps that can support the LSP in taking a strategic overview and in delivering the LAA:

1. Review LT structures: consider need for executive group; review options for chairing board; clarify relationship with theme/other partnerships
2. Review LT operation: introduce more variety into meetings to encourage greater participation; develop agenda management arrangements; clarify role of champions
3. Clarify and formalise LAA decision-making processes in relation to LSP; review status and role of strategic senior officer group, linked to discussions about an LSP executive group
4. Review V&CS representation on LT and work with V&CS infrastructure consortium to develop capacity building activities
5. Strengthen engagement with, and involvement of, marginalised groups by building on citizen jury work and develop link to Board e.g. via standing conference
6. Link projects, such as the Jitty, LSORA, CONNECT, Funding toolkit, more closely with LT and mainstream partner organisations; possibly via a technical group which can support and identify further ways of using these projects. Identify ways for partners to contribute resources to these projects
7. Organise a programme of events and partnership development skills linked to a communication strategy
8. Begin discussions to improve district /county LSP relationships, possibly using existing forums and/or specific meetings as appropriate.

The team would like to thank all the people we met during the peer challenge process. We were struck by their open and honest approach and willingness to look at some of the more difficult areas as well as the successes. We would like to thank in particular the support staff for the warmth of their welcome and for the excellent organisation during our visit.