



Partnership matters

A review of Wychavon District Council's partnership involvement



Report summary

Partnerships are essential to improving the quality of life for people in any local authority area. In fact nearly everything we do involves some degree of partnership working. Effective partnerships **can** make all the difference to quality of life. But without a clear focus, the right partners, sufficient people and financial resources, their impact can be insignificant.

Following our initial CPA self-assessment in 2002, we highlighted the need to review our partnerships to make sure they are delivering benefits to our communities. We started by identifying the 27 formal partnerships we are involved in that consist of 'two or more organisations, where at least one is not a local authority, acting together and using diverse resources to achieve a common purpose with clear goals and aims.' Through these we work with over 80 different organisations, including other councils, statutory agencies, voluntary organisations and businesses.

Between May and August 2003, we carried out 80 structured interviews with Wychavon officers, councillors and partners involved in each partnership. A university student on a work placement with us carried out the interviews. This gave a strong degree of independence to the research. Although the approach we used did have some limitations, for example we were not able to interview every partner, we feel it was a rigorous and robust piece of research.

Our findings are wide ranging. We found that partnership working is not new. **Two thirds of our partnerships have existed for more than two years.** Some, like the Business Start-Up Partnership and Mental Health Liaison Group, have been around for longer. At the time of the interviews, several, including the Droitwich Spa Area LSP and Wychavon Youth Strategy Group, were less than a year old. **64% of our partnerships are viewed as operating at a strategic level. Only six are statutory.**

The partnerships cover a wide range of issues from improving quality of life to more specific activities such as setting up farmers' markets or reducing youth homelessness. We found a high concentration of partnership activity on economic, housing and transport issues and a gap in activity on environmental issues. **72% of the partners we interviewed had a good awareness of our community plan.** Our partnerships contribute to our community plan themes and play a key role in helping us deliver two of our own strategic priorities.

We are involved in twice the number of partnerships at a county level as at a district or sub-district level. Our degree of influence tends to be greatest in partnerships at a district or sub-district level and decreases as the geographical area covered by a partnership widens.

The key features of an effective partnership are a focus on action, evidence that they are making a difference to people, efficient organisation, effective performance management and an inclusive approach. We looked at how our partnerships measure up to each of these characteristics.

The headline messages from the review are positive. **Two thirds of our partnerships are action focused and base their work on local needs.** Our three LSPs, Droitwich Canal Restoration and the Business Start-Up partnerships are amongst those with a strong action focus.

Those without a clear action focus include the Riverside Tourism Consortium, Supporting People Strategy Group and Wychavon Youth Strategy Group.

Around a third of our partnerships are making a difference to local people and delivering tangible benefits. We found good examples of physical, social and economic impacts, but relatively few significant environmental outcomes. The two Market Town Partnerships, Mental Health Liaison Group and Worcestershire Farmers' Market Group are good examples of partnerships that are making a real difference. Partnerships with little impact for people in Wychavon include the AONB Partnership, Better Care Higher Standards and the Riverside Tourism Consortium. We expect the impact of partnerships such as the Droitwich Canals Restoration Partnership and Droitwich Area LSP to increase once they start to deliver action on the ground.

Most of our partnerships are efficiently organised, with the majority of decisions made within the partnerships. We contribute leadership to 12 partnerships, funding to 21, project management to 16 and administrative support to 13. Some partnerships, such as the Droitwich Canal Restoration, Lifelong Learning and two Market Town partnerships, have been extremely successful at attracting external funding. For others, like the Cotswold and Malvern Transport Partnership, lack of funding is a barrier to success.

We see **our involvement in 16 partnerships as critical, desirable for ten and marginal for just one.** This suggests that overall we are focusing our attention on the right partnerships.

We used the partnership life cycle to identify the maturity of each partnership. We found that in general, **younger partnerships are at the forming stage of the life cycle, with older partnerships at the functioning or flying stages.** Notable exceptions include the Riverside Tourism Consortium and Worcestershire Partnership, which despite being over four years old, are still at the forming stage. The relatively young Droitwich Canals Restoration Partnership is already flying. **Two thirds of the partnerships describe their work as 'ongoing' and do not have an exit strategy**

About **half of our partnerships are effectively managing their performance,** whilst nearly a third are weak in this area. The Community Plan Core Group is a good example of a performance managed partnership. It regularly monitors progress on community plan actions and produces progress updates telling people how we are getting on.

We found that generally **the membership of our partnerships reflects the issues being addressed.** The Droitwich Spa Area LSP is a good example of a partnership that became more inclusive following a review of its membership.

Most of our partnerships have links to other relevant partnerships. Although there is room for some, like the Youth Strategy Group, to build stronger links with the three LSPs. Our LSPs use theme groups to engage a wide range of individuals and organisations. We found that **most of our partnerships could do more to raise their community profile.**

The review has shown there are clear benefits from working in partnership, including attracting external funding and delivering real improvements for the community which we couldn't achieve on our own. It has also highlighted a number of less effective partnerships where we need to make decisions about our future levels of involvement.

Based on the review findings **we have made eight recommendations for improving our partnership working.** In summary these are to:

- keep our levels of involvement low in seven partnerships
- reduce our involvement in, or withdraw from, two partnerships
- increase our input and influence in two
- maintain a high profile in six
- explore opportunities for joining up some partnerships
- share the review findings with our partners
- improve the way we share information and communicate with partnerships
- review our key business partnerships not covered by this review.

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