

science summary

Developing effective engagement with Local and Community Strategic Partnerships Science Summary SC010044/SR6

Between 2001 and 2004, a research consortium headed by the consultancy Shared Practice undertook a major research study, 'Joining Up', to clarify the nature and extent of the social dimension of the Environment Agency's work.

This report describes one of the components of the Joining Up study, namely, the action research undertaken during 2003 and 2004 to support the Environment Agency in maximising the benefits of engaging with Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England and Community Strategic Partnerships (CSPs) in Wales.

LSPs/CSPs were created under the Local Government Act 2000, which placed a duty on local authorities to prepare 'community strategies' as the overarching framework for all local plans. Community strategies were intended to "enhance the quality of life of local communities and contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK through action to improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area and its inhabitants".

The setting up of LSPs/CSPs, and the development of community strategies, provided a crucial opportunity for the Environment Agency to influence priorities on local environmental issues as part of the wider sustainable development agenda. More specifically, the Environment Agency 2002 Corporate Strategy included a target that the Agency should "contribute to Local Strategic Partnerships, focusing effort on the 50% where we can most benefit environmental and social capital, including disadvantaged communities and ethnic minorities".

The objectives of this work were to:

- help the Environment Agency clarify more detailed objectives for working with LSPs/CSPs;
- develop a framework for prioritising work with those LSPs/CSPs that would most benefit the Environment Agency;

- build operational capacity for working effectively with LSPs/CSPs;
- support the wider aims of the Joining Up Project, particularly the development of the Environment Agency's social policy;
- explore the contribution of social science in the Environment Agency in achieving these objectives.

There were six outputs from this research:

1. A series of briefing sheets for Environment Agency staff working with community strategies and LSPs / CSPs.
2. Clear objectives for the Environment Agency in working with LSPs/CSPs, a model for measuring progress against these objectives, and a matrix for prioritising the 50% of LSPs/CSPs the Environment Agency should work with in order to most benefit environmental and social capital and make best use of resources.
3. A framework for working with other environmental bodies on LSPs/CSPs and community strategies to ensure that greater priority is given to environmental issues in LSP/CSP programmes.
4. Guidance on developing effective two-way relationships between the Environment Agency and LSPs/CSPs to enable more effective partnership working, including identifying and addressing the challenges a partnership approach makes to the Agency as a regulatory body.
5. An assessment of Environment Agency involvement in LSPs/CSPs in 2003, including the environmental issues being prioritised by Areas in their work with LSPs/CSPs.
6. Detailed guidance for Environment Agency staff on working with LSPs/CSPs, circulated to all relevant Agency staff in April 2003.

The study took an explicit action research approach. In practice this meant designing a process that drew on the expertise of the consultant team working in partnership with Environment Agency staff already working on these issues. Two sets of overarching lessons emerged from the study:

Lessons for building capacity for effective relationships with LSPs/CSPs. The research itself was designed to test methods of capacity building for partnership working with some of the Environment Agency staff most involved at Area and national level. The main lessons were:

- ❑ The Environment Agency LSP/CSP guidance to staff should be reviewed regularly with Area staff (e.g. every two years);
- ❑ Area business and investment planning should include regular reviews (e.g. every two years) of the opportunities to match Environment Agency Area environmental priorities with the concerns and interests of local communities, based on partnership working with LSPs/CSPs;
- ❑ New approaches to learning were needed including the development of 'learning hubs' (possibly based on the Area teams involved in this study), an annual national conference for Environment Agency staff on partnership working (possibly in collaboration with partner organisations), and training in both the relevant technical expertise and 'people skills' including facilitation and outreach process design.

Lessons on the use of social science. One of the objectives of the study was to consider the value of taking an action research approach to capacity building within the Environment Agency. The main lessons were:

- ❑ The action research approach was enthusiastically received by both Environment Agency Head Office and Area staff, enabling them to work well together and to produce extensive practical guidance and tools, and detailed recommendations for future work, based on practical experience on the ground and with wide ownership among staff;
- ❑ However, the research process was also slowed down by the unfamiliarity of Environment Agency staff with the action research approach, and their uncertainty about levels of autonomy and responsibility, especially at a time of significant organisational restructuring.

Given the growing importance of partnership working in public service delivery in current Government policy, the benefits of policy and practice development processes that focus on experimentation, reflection and adjustment are likely to be increasingly seen as essential. The practical experience of this study testing such approaches (particularly action research), within the complex field of local partnerships, has provided some useful learning during and since the process, that can inform future Environment Agency work in this field.

This summary relates to information from Science Project SC010044, reported in detail in the following output(s):-

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Project manager: Dr John Colvin, Social Policy Manager, Rio House, Waterside Drive, Aztec West, Almondsbury, BRISTOL BS32 4UD

Research Contractor: Shared Practice, 11 Clifton Street, Brighton BN1 3PH
Tel: 01273 774557

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