

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF SOUTH BUCKS PARTNERSHIP

Summary Note

Progress through Partnerships

Monday 20th July

1. The South Bucks Partnership met on 20th July to reflect on the new partnership structures formed earlier in 2009, and to discuss how the partnership could best deliver upon its Sustainable Community Strategy, which is soon to be finalised. This note summarises discussions between partners on the day, which focused on the strengths and weaknesses of current arrangements and how the partnership structure and processes could be improved.

Strengths

2. Current arrangements, which incorporate the previous memberships of the Partnership and the Joint Local Committee were thought to have the following strengths:
 - **Political representation:** Councillors' presence on the Partnership improves democratic accountability;
 - **Parish councillor involvement:** Provides improved accountability to residents and local communities; and
 - **Stakeholder involvement:** Allows stakeholders beyond councillors and statutory partners to express themselves.

Weaknesses

3. The Partnership was felt to have a number of weaknesses in the way it currently works that need to be addressed:
 - **Risk that councillors dominate:** There was a concern that in the meetings so far elected Members somewhat dominated discussions. It was therefore felt that discussions should be designed to allow representatives from the VCS and private sector to participate more fully and that these representatives needed to make use of those opportunities.
 - **Insufficient discussion at meetings:** Recent meetings were perceived to have involved presentations which were felt to be too long and/or insufficiently linked to future action.

- **Papers too long:** A number of attendees felt that the Partnership papers were much too long to read and digest and that a shorter set of papers would be more useful for Partnership members.

Challenges

4. It was felt that the Partnership is facing a number of challenges at present, which need to be addressed. These have emerged following the fusion of the previous two bodies, and include:
 - **Clarity of purpose:** Several participants thought that a clear, common definition of partnership working was needed, and several others felt that the aims and purposes of the Partnership were unclear.
 - **Large number of attendees:** A number of attendees said that the Partnership was too big and this made it difficult to have a productive discussion.
 - **Effective use of resources:** One person felt that the Partnership needs to truly act as 'more than the sum of its parts' and be able to deliver more for taxpayers money.
 - **Balance local and District-wide focus:** Some felt that discussions can tend to be too parochial, and a better balance needs to be struck between local and District-wide issues.
 - **Demonstrating impact:** A number of people felt that the Partnership needs to agree how it is going to measure whether it has made a difference through its work.
 - **Specific areas of interest:** Several issues were identified as being of interest to elected Members. Planning control, street lighting and parking were some of the areas raised. It was acknowledged that while a 'case work' approach could provide very useful illustrations of problems, the Partnership needs to focus on providing a strategic input to issues.

Proposals

5. Participants made a number of suggestions for ways in which the Partnership could operate more effectively and with the full participation of all members.

LSP role and structure

- **The role of task groups needs to be clarified.** Some attendees felt that the Partnership structure should integrate task groups or sub-committees under every SCS theme, and that these should be set up where no appropriate group already exists. As a minimum, it was felt that existing task groups that fit with SCS objectives – such as the Community Spirit task group – should report to the Partnership on their work;

- **An organogram and glossary of terms** should be given to Partnership members setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of the Partnership Board, the Implementation Group and existing task groups;
- **The Partnership should have reviews** – like today’s meeting – at regular intervals (annual or once every 18 months) to review structures and effectiveness.
- **Strengthen communications** both within the Partnership and using the networks and communication tools (newsletters etc.) of individual members to get shared messages across.

House keeping and agenda setting

- **Ensure everyone can contribute.** In particular, give non-councillor Partnership members sufficient chance to contribute to discussions and suggest agenda items;
- **Bring in ‘experts’ and practitioners.** Experts should be asked to report to Partnership meetings on areas relating to the SCS, for example representatives from the Waste Committee and South Bucks primary care providers. This should both provide the Partnership with up-to-date information on activities and support the Partnership in identifying future actions;
- **Ensure sufficient time for discussion.** The balance of time should be moved from presentations to discussion amongst Partnership members; several people suggested a 15 minute time limit for presentations.
- **Change room layout.** It was felt that sitting in rows wasn’t conducive to good discussion and alternative room layouts were suggested (horseshoe, roundtable or cabaret);
- **Clearer record** of meetings and actions was suggested. Meeting notes should be shorter and clearly identify agreed actions.

Forward work plan

- **Balance agenda between immediate issues and more detailed discussions.** Proposals to review one SCS theme at each meeting were felt to leave much too long (15 months) between discussions on each theme. It was therefore suggested that agendas have a roughly 50/50 split between in-depth discussions on one SCS theme and discussions on more current issues or immediate Partnership actions.
- **Information to support the Partnership in understanding future challenges/opportunities for the area.** It was felt that there were a number of areas where either data or a stronger understanding of the evidence base and policy context would support the Partnership in identifying future challenges/opportunities. Areas included demographic trends, tackling disadvantage, highways and development control.

- **Clarify role and ownership of SCS action plans.** SCS action plans need to be developed where there are SCS objectives that are not being addressed by the Council's or other public agencies' strategies. The role of the Implementation Group also needs to be more widely understood.
- **Share examples of 'best practice'.** It was felt that there is a huge amount being done already that fits with the SCS priority objectives, in particular by the VCS sector. The Partnership should provide a forum for sharing examples of effective projects or approaches.
- **Make better use of networks.** Collectively the Partnership has a wide-reaching set of networks to access local residents and the community that could be better used to achieve Partnership objectives. For instance, the VCS and parish networks could be used to promote volunteering opportunities locally.
- **Clearer expectations about accountability.** Holding each other to account and calling other agencies to account was seen as a key role for the Partnership. For example, several attendees felt that the Partnership should aim to hold the Police to account and to be able to influence police budgets. Greater clarity is needed about *how* this accountability is achieved.
- **Cross boundary working/links.** It was suggested that for some issues cross-boundary working will be important – e.g. with neighbouring LSPs/ police authorities for certain community safety issues.