Overview

A new publication by LGIU Policy Analyst Jo Dungey, *A wider conversation: Effective scrutiny of Local Strategic Partnerships*, shows how the council’s scrutiny role can be used in relation to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The publication covers the following areas:

- Defining key challenges in the scrutiny of Local Strategic Partnerships
- Understanding the roles and requirements for LSPs, and the legal framework
- Examples of scrutiny of partnerships in practice
- The future for LSP scrutiny, including new legislation, scrutiny of Local Area Agreements (LAAs), community involvement and neighbourhood scrutiny.

The publication provides illustrations using examples of scrutiny work done by councils including Nottingham, the London Boroughs of Southwark, Tower Hamlets, and Harrow, Birmingham, Rugby, Warwickshire, and Doncaster. These illustrate the different roles scrutiny can play in holding partnerships to account, improving service performance, and developing new solutions to local problems.

The publication is published jointly by LGIU and IDeA and available for free download, see link above. Print copies are also being circulated by LGIU to all Management Assembly members, in addition to distribution by IDeA.

Briefing in full

Scrutiny of Local Strategic Partnerships –key challenges

The new publication sets out key challenges for council scrutiny of Local Strategic Partnerships, which are:

Enhance the democratic leadership of partnerships

- Widen the understanding and engagement of elected members with partnership work.
- Bring the knowledge of local issues and communities which ward councillors have, to service providers involved in partnerships.
- Hold to account the leadership of strategic partnerships, including council
representatives.

Help to build, not undermine, effective partnership work

- Use scrutiny projects to bring partner organisations together to find new ways to work jointly to tackle important local problems.
- Communicate, raise profile of scrutiny and its work priorities, and develop understanding of roles.
- Build alliances with the council executive and other stakeholders to gain support for recommendations.

Add value

- Work towards positive recommendations and improvements.
- Ensure scrutiny does what only scrutiny can do, not duplicating the work of regulators and inspectorates.

Improve the performance of partnerships

- Help to make performance management more locally defined, rather than top-down from central government and its agencies.
- Use scrutiny to dig out the issues behind the statistics, for example in reviewing performance on Local Area Agreements.

Widen the conversation

- Use scrutiny to engage local people with service providers, involving ward councillors, neighbourhoods, users and communities.
- Hearing a wider range of voices will clarify problems and help develop more ideas and solutions.
- Give a public forum for service providers to give a higher profile to what they are trying to do.

The publication uses example of scrutiny work councils have carried out to illustrate how scrutiny can play a range of roles in tackling these challenges.

The developing role of scrutiny

Councils currently have the power to investigate any issue which affects their local area or its inhabitants. As councils have developed the potential of the scrutiny role and found new ways to work, some of the most innovative work has been scrutiny reviews which brought partner organisations, service users and community members together to investigate local problems and find new solutions. Although partner organisations have often been willing to take part in this work on a voluntary basis, this has not always been the case.

Now, an extended legal framework and a wider, more strategic role for scrutiny is emerging. From 2008, new legal powers will be in place, from the Police and Justice Act 2006 and the current Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill. Alongside the existing powers to require NHS bodies to participate in scrutiny, new powers will support scrutiny of police and community safety partners, and other services signed up to LAAs, who will generally be involved in the LSP.

As the publication illustrates, some councils are already involved in scrutiny of LSPs.
Councils will need to start a dialogue with partner organisations about how these new scrutiny powers can be used constructively.

**What councils can do in advance of new legislation**

The publication describes the type of work councils can do now to scrutinise Local Strategic Partnerships. The White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, has made clear the continuing importance of Local Strategic Partnerships. The new legal framework mentioned above, will extend the role of scrutiny, and councils can start working now to think about how this should join up, and create more effective partnership work. Some ideas to consider are:

**Review leadership and democratic accountability:** Consider elected member awareness of partnership work, especially the LSP and its sub-partnerships. Ensure the council leader and cabinet portfolio holders have appropriate leadership roles within the LSP, and members involved in partnership are adequately supported. Clarify reporting arrangements from the LSP to all councillors, for example use of the full council meeting, and ensure the LSP works with sufficient openness. Use council meetings and scrutiny reviews for dialogue and accountability of non-elected partners.

**Continue to develop LSP capacity:** Issues to consider include a shared communications strategy, aimed at the staff of partner organisations as well as the public. Think about common resources for communications, such as newsletters, induction sessions for staff, and a website. Plan to develop shared resources for understanding current issues and future thinking about the place you represent. Share skills and develop a common language and understanding, for example through secondments, seminars and joint training.

**Prepare for new legislation in dialogue with partners:** Although new external scrutiny powers will not take effect before 2008, work can be done now to develop understanding of scrutiny among partners. Seminars and training involving LSP partner organisations, for example on lessons from health scrutiny (see page 30 of new publication), could be planned for the autumn, when primary legislation will be completed. Scrutiny reviews on important local issues can happen now which engage partners on a voluntary basis and build awareness of scrutiny potential.

**Develop scrutiny of the Local Area Agreement:** The council (the county in two tier areas) is responsible for leading implementation of the Local Area Agreement. Scrutiny can play a role in examining how well the LAA develops the ambition of the Sustainable Community Strategy, and whether targets are being met. Councils can use the capacity of scrutiny for investigation of problems and new ideas, and start thinking about how scrutiny will use the new legal powers in relation to Local Area Agreements.

**Develop community engagement with scrutiny:** Many councils have implemented imaginative ideas about how to involve the public and specific service users in scrutiny enquiries. There is increased awareness of the need for a joined up consultation strategy for the LSP, which develops the community strategy, the LAA, and the Local Development Framework. Scrutiny work is one of the areas where community engagement is important. The development of a comprehensive consultation and engagement strategy could be championed by scrutiny committees. Partnerships can work together on consultation, making best use of resources, and learning from each other. Councils may want to review how the LSP partners engage with and support current area and neighbourhood arrangements run by the council.
Use scrutiny to develop partnership strategy: The role of the LSP can be developed as a focus for moving forward important cross-cutting local issues, such as sustainability, or regeneration and economic development. Councils may want to review whether scrutiny bodies could be more effectively involved in the development and revision of the Sustainable Community Strategy, and other key strategies, for example for children, or for crime and disorder reduction.

Think about implications for member support: There is a need to rethink member support as a whole system, which supports integrated democratic arrangements. The developing role of external and partnership scrutiny, the forthcoming Community Call for Action (and its need to link with existing casework and complaints systems), the stronger ward member role, the need to develop the LSP and its sub-partnerships and to support members involved in partnership work - councils need to think about how this is integrated.

Comment

LGIU first put forward proposals to extend the powers of scrutiny over public services which are external to the council, as part of our contribution to the government debate to create a Ten Year Vision for local government. From this we developed proposals for Ministers, to link extension of external scrutiny powers with a more decentralised framework of performance management and scrutiny of Local Area Agreements, and to make the external services subject to the Community Call for Action (CCfA). These would all be tools of a strengthened community leadership role for councillors, at both a council-wide and neighbourhood level.

Some of these proposals are being taken forward in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill. However, there are still amendments to the Bill LGIU would hope to see. At present, the Bill would only require external services (other than NHS services and the police, covered by separate legislation) to take part in scrutiny on the topic of specific LAA targets to which they are signatories. The CCfA in this Bill also only covers local government matters. We will continue to press for these amendments, and councils interested in this are encouraged to raise the issue with local MPs.

More generally, there is much councils can do to use scrutiny to strengthen their community leadership role.

Additional Information

Covers

- Skills, Training, Economy, Environment, Regeneration (STEER)
- Democracy, Governance, Councillor issues, Standards board, Neighbourhood governance, Regional governance, Local government information
- Corporate management, Audit and Inspection, Evaluation, Targets, Procurement
- Community planning and well-being
- Community involvement, Partnerships and LSPs, Voluntary sector

Send Feedback for this briefing

Related links

- A wider conversation: Effective scrutiny of Local Strategic Partnerships
Related briefings

- **Strong and prosperous communities: an overview of the Local Government White Paper**
- **White Paper 2006: Implications for Local Strategic Partnerships**
- **White Paper 2006: Implications for Political and Electoral Arrangements**

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