

Summary of Councillors engagement with Partnerships sessions 24th September 2008 at the Key Learning Centre, Oxford Castle

The aims of the event were to improve understanding of the national partnership agenda and raise awareness of partnerships in Oxfordshire and the Oxfordshire 2030 strategy. The sessions also aimed to develop ideas about how elected members can become more engaged and involved with partnerships – and how partnerships can do more to engage and involve elected members. The sessions were facilitated by Steve Rogers from the Institute for Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham supported by the council's Partnership Team.

Attendance

Afternoon session		
Cllr Atkins	Cllr Brighthouse	Cllr Bryden
Cllr Fooks	Cllr Hallchurch	Cllr Joslin
Cllr Lamont	Cllr Legge	Cllr Mallon
Cllr Macintosh-Stedman	Cllr Patrick	Cllr Purse
Cllr Roaf	Cllr Robertson	Cllr Wilmshurst
S. Ouzman	K Luddecke	
Evening session		
Cllr Couchman	Cllr Fitzgerald-O'Connor	Cllr Smith
T Cloke		

Comments raised in background to partnerships sessions

Steve Rogers made a presentation on why we work in partnerships, the drivers for this and some of the wicked issues. [Presentation on engaging with partnerships \(.pdf format, 106 Kb\)](#)

Councillors discussed the issues raised in the presentation and their experiences of working in partnership which are summarised below.

- Partnerships are working well in Oxfordshire
- How is a partnership more accountable than councillors – need to ensure robust performance management of partnerships and clarity that councillors remain those with legitimacy and ensure that there is strong internal governance in place.
- Fear of constantly reinventing ways of working rather than learning from earlier efforts at working in partnership
- Concern that there isn't the link from bottom to top (e.g. Neighbourhood Action Group level to Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership)
- Partnership lifecycle – concern raised that partnerships may have a tendency to be exclusive as they become 'functioning' and 'flying'. We need to ensure that they don't become like this and that others are able to engage with them and that they don't become inward looking.
- Cabinet structure of local government means that not all members have the opportunity to be involved in thematic partnerships.

Comments on Oxfordshire 2030

Claire Evans, Partnership Manager gave a brief presentation on the development of Oxfordshire 2030, the Oxfordshire Partnership's sustainable community strategy for the county. [Presentation on Oxfordshire 2030 \(.pdf format, 90 Kb\)](#)

Members were invited to give any comments or views on the priorities identified and pledges for the strategy which has been open for 12 weeks public consultation over the summer.

- The demographic challenge is a major issue for the partnership and the services we provide
- Access to jobs – we need to ensure that there are enough jobs available in the area and improving skills levels for key jobs
- How do we ensure that we deliver on the priorities identified? This is part of the role for thematic partnerships to identify targets for the delivery plan that will ensure we meet our pledges.
- World Class Economy, the key to this is a strong transport infrastructure but what we have in Oxfordshire currently falls far short of this. It is not clear how the strategy will address this
- There could be more emphasis on Affordable Housing
- We need to ensure that the youth don't get disaffected and we must keep them motivated through schemes such as youth mentoring and apprenticeships
- The military was raised as good vocational training for many young people who are often disaffected with formal education.
- The problem of schools not being obliged to work in collaboration with the education authority was raised
- Religious groups – it was noted that as the partnership involves religious groups potential tensions or strong views should be taken into consideration. This was noted and it was agreed that governance arrangements need to take this into account and that job descriptions with basic standards for members would be useful.

Review of Partnerships

Paul James, Head of Partnership working gave an overview of the recent review of partnerships in Oxfordshire, the key findings and initial recommendations and next steps for the proposals. [Presentation on the review of governance \(.pdf format, 70 Kb\)](#) Members' comments are listed below

- Concern that this structure focuses on cabinet members and the role of backbenchers is marginalised
- Problems with Neighbourhood Action Groups that do not always involve councillors
- Environment partnership seems to have lost the goodwill of people that were involved originally in the development of Local Agenda 21.
- Children's Trust seen to be focused on child protection rather than achievement
- Accountability issues arising out of the number of organisations working within an area
- Climate change was seen as too big an issue to be subsumed into the Waste Partnership
- Concern that town councils don't know anything about this review and they need to be aware of it much more. Association of local councils reps need to be feeding back to their members about the partnerships more
- Recommendation that all partnerships are brought together once a year

Conclusions

- There's a need for an information hub to improve the quality of information available to councillors and partners
- Scrutiny needs to have a regular review of governance and achievement of the individual partnership
- Need to work out where councillors can be involved in elements of partnership working
- Councillors need to be involved in consultation work on strategies
- The problem of the perception of local government is that councillors are no longer seen as representative of the local community which needs to be addressed.
- The role for scrutiny needs to be clearly distinct from that of the Public Service Board which has a form of scrutiny role over thematic partnerships.
- Partnerships should be constantly monitored to ensure that they don't become talking shops

Feedback

Feedback from the afternoon event was very positive with councillors finding the session useful and presentations good. We will note the feedback when planning agendas in the future.

Next steps and finding out more

The Partnership team are planning a programme of development activities for partnerships and members. Councillors provided lots of suggestions for future sessions on partnerships. The team will use these suggestions to plan future events. Topics suggested were;

- Member involvement
- How to scrutinise partnerships effectively
- How can councillors really influence what happens
- Further engagement following the proposed changes to partnerships
- Monitoring and outcomes

The Partnership team are happy for further suggestions to be forwarded to them.

The Oxfordshire Partnership website now includes information about all thematic partnerships. It is a useful resource for councillors, partners and the public wanting to find out more about partnership working in the county www.oxfordshirepartnership.org.uk . The regular report to full council on the progress of partnerships also enables councillors to see what partnerships are achieving.

Meetings of the Oxfordshire Partnership and Public Service Board are open to the public. Details of meetings can be found on the website.

Scrutiny will be working on the work programme for partnerships in the coming months and the partnerships team will be supporting them in this.

For further information please contact:

Claire Phillips, Partnership Officer
claire.phillips@oxfordshire.gov.uk
 01865 816029