

Priority Setting

Priority setting in LSPs and LAAs

One of the keys to a high performing organisation or partnership is keeping a *sustained focus on what matters*:

- more change can be achieved through doing fewer things well
- organisations with a clear direction are better able to deliver well and resist being deflected and distracted

But establishing and maintaining such a focus – characterised by a strong sense of priorities – can be one of the most challenging activities in a partnership setting. Too easily, partners can settle for ‘lowest common denominator’ solutions and treat everything as a priority – with the result that nothing is a priority. Performance management becomes a huge and not very productive task, and it can be difficult to communicate what the partnership is trying to achieve – internally as well as externally.

In theory, priority setting becomes easier as a partnership matures – where partners have worked through the pleasures and pains of getting to know each other, build common understanding and degrees of consensus on what matters.

However, even the most productive partnerships need to review priorities, and small ‘p’ politics rarely go away. There can be dangers that attempts to set priorities are characterised by ‘s/he who shouts loudest’ gets their way and that bureaucratic pecking orders override other factors (“*my budget is bigger than yours, so what my organisation does is more important and therefore the priority*”).

Dimensions of ‘priority setting’

Priority setting may relate to strategic direction *or* to operations:

- strategic choices to be made in steering the partnership, and in overall resource allocation which in turn provides...
- a basis for setting delivery priorities and appraising options

In an LAA context, there may be different levels of ambition in considering strategic choices:
status quo

- ‘as we are’ – accepting a large number of priorities as a means of getting partner buy-in and making fundamental choices

adding value through co-ordination

- focusing on where partners can add value at the margins of what they do – through better co-ordination and modest adaptations to plans and practices

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raising our sights: reshaping collaboration

- where partners say, “if we are to really make a difference in responding to the needs and aspirations of local people and ‘shaping our place’ we need to bring about more fundamental change”

The last – which lies at the heart of taking advantage of the new LAAs – will require:

- a strong – and shared – evidence base, balancing statistical information with qualitative evidence
- strength of vision in what partners want to achieve, and recognition of the need for change
- active engagement of everyone crucial to the success of the partnership, through consultation and formal decision-making processes
- a deliberative priority setting process
- a willingness to take hard decisions, based on good evidence
- skills in building consensus and reconciling the dilemmas or conflicts which can arise

Evidence of a more robust approach to priority setting will include:

- priorities communicated and widely understood
- partners making changes in the light of agreed priorities, including shifting resources
- translation into delivery plans and performance management

Part of the process in LAAs is to consider the fit of national priorities and indicators with local. National indicators may feel imposed though, on deeper consideration, many are likely to relate closely to what’s been identified locally. Focus first on local priorities – then reflect on national priorities> These can draw attention to issues which *may well* need addressing locally, but which have been latent. One illustration has been the need for economic development and health theme partnerships to work together to reduce numbers of people on Incapacity Benefit as a key to improving employment rates.

In some situations it may be helpful to clarify first what are *not* priorities (eg, where local needs are low, where expectations cannot be met or significant achievements have been made and needs are now less pressing).

Criteria for priority setting

At the Community Strategy level, priority setting relates to partners debating and judging the broad areas of intervention needed to achieve the aspirations and goals expressed through consultation processes. Typically, there is a need to recognise the interplay between activities – how, for instance, some underpin achievement of other objectives, eg, a prosperous economy as a necessary condition for reducing child poverty and the numbers of young people not in employment, education or training.

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Within LAAs, priorities may also include crucial areas for improvement, where outcomes are rated as important and performance shows little sign of getting better and/or lags in comparison with national change or comparable areas. Priorities may also be selected where early action is likely to contribute to provide a better return (eg, reducing the causes of ill-health, or targeting low income families with young children) in reducing the need for later interventions

Some of the most difficult decisions in setting priorities may have to be made at theme partnership level, as part of delivery planning and commissioning processes. Criteria within LAA themes could then include:

Should we do it?

- fit with Sustainable Community Strategy vision and objectives/priorities?
- contribution to achievement of wider SCS goals?

Why should we do it?

- expected impact – eg, on:
 - theme targets?
 - contribution to other partnership priorities? cross-cutting themes?
 - equality and diversity outcomes?
- likelihood of adverse consequences if we *don't* do it
- partnership added value?

Can we do it?

- affordability – is there the money and is it value for money against alternatives?
- capacity to deliver – are there constraints on successful implementation?
- risks in delivery – relative to returns, and ability to manage these?

In a partnership setting, there is also an underlying consideration: *'what will partners get out of it?'* 'Leverage' may also be a criterion, where it is desirable, say, to attract resources, in cash (eg, private sector investment) or in kind (eg, through volunteering). And pragmatically, some options may be attractive because they offer quick wins that might be needed to strengthen partner commitment and demonstrate progress to stakeholders.

Priorities might include new activities which are to be supported for their *potential* to make a difference on community outcomes, eg, where early interventions are expected to improve longer term community outcomes and reduce costs, or where pilots have the potential to be scaled up as part of mainstream delivery.

Tools

There are several facilitation tools which may prove useful in testing or setting priorities with a consultative or decision-making group. They may lend themselves to electronic voting systems or other active participation such as the use of sticky notes on flipcharts.

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Depending on the situation, it may be necessary to use these in conjunction with other means of building the common understanding and trust which allows partners to focus and take difficult decisions. As appropriate, priority-setting criteria may be presented to participants as a given, or generated during the exercise.

Tools include:

- *Criteria Grid* – where participants assess options against an agreed set of criteria (eg, feasibility, likely impact, partnership added value)
- *Rank Order* – most useful for narrowing down a long list of suggestions. Take the number of suggestions, divide this by three and give everyone that number of votes. Agree assessment criteria and proceed to vote (no more than one per suggestion)
- *Multi-voting* (weighted voting) – variant on Rank Order where participants can allocate more than one vote on a given option
- *Paired comparisons* – where participants work through pairs of options to identify which they prefer

The IDeA Knowledge website provides an online prioritisation tool, using this method.

www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=4620898

It invites the user to set their own assessment questions such as:

- which of these is most important?
- which should be done first?
- which of these will be most crucial for success?
- which of these will benefit users more?

Such methods can be made more sophisticated, if needs warrant this, eg, in developing more detailed evaluative criteria to help participants come to considered opinions or judgements, or bring in financial constraints (actual or hypothetical).

Resources

- Both *Negotiating New Local Area Agreements* and *LAA Dry-run Negotiations – Final Report: Headline Messages* (DCLG) note examples of LAA priority setting from the LAA feasibility testing sites (eg, Kent, Northamptonshire, Sheffield, Stockton, Windsor & Maidenhead)
www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localareaagreements/
- Learning to Deliver resources on Basecamp:
 - Skills for Partnership Working and Improvement
 - Partnership Life Cycle<https://harrisonassociatesthelearningstudio.projectpath.com/projects/1320992/project/log>
- IDeA Priorities and Prioritisation
www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=4446257
- Setting priorities and maintaining focus: learning from Comprehensive Performance Assessment (Audit Commission)

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www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/NATIONAL-REPORT.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=04427960-AAEI-11d7-B316-0060085F8572

- Worcestershire County Council Consultation Toolkit includes a guide to a range of research and facilitation techniques including several which are intended to draw out preferences and priorities (eg, Nominal Group Technique, SIMALTO, Conjoint Analysis and Budget Simulator)
<http://worcestershire.whub.org.uk/home/wcc-con-toolkit-stage5-a>
- Strategy Survival Guide – Assessing Options (Cabinet Office)
www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/downloads/survivalguide/skills/appraising_options.htm
- Renewal.net – content includes ‘How to consider your options’ and ‘Ranking exercises’
www.renewal.net

Examples of more sophisticated methods (used in, eg, appraisal of major programmes and projects):

- Emerging Methods for Sustainability Valuation and Appraisal (Sustainable Development Research Network Rapid Research and Evidence Review)
www.sd-research.org.uk/post.php?p=129
- Multi-Criteria Analysis Model (an archived DCLG publication covering more sophisticated assessment methods)
www.communities.gov.uk/archived/publications/corporate/multicriteriaanalysismanual