



An Evaluation of Sustainability within Birmingham Strategic Partnership

(Executive Summary)

Commissioned by Sustainability West Midlands in partnership with Environment Agency and Birmingham Strategic Partnership.



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A report from Warwick Business School
In association with Joan Bennett

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT CENTRE
Warwick Business School
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
Tel 024 7657 2546
Fax 024 7657 2545
lgc@wbs.ac.uk
<http://users.wbs.ac.uk/group/lgc>

Joan Bennett
Tel: 01663 762 036
joanbennett@dsl.pipex.com



Executive Summary

Introduction

Local administrations have a vital role in achieving sustainable development. This was recognised at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the current UK Sustainable Development Strategy – *Securing the Future* - continues to attach great importance to their contribution. This study evaluates how well the Birmingham Strategic Partnership (BSP) is fulfilling this role. It was commissioned by Sustainability West Midlands, with the support of DEFRA and the Environment Agency. It concentrates on how well BSP is promoting the four UK sustainable development priorities. (See box 1 below.) The aim was not only to draw out lessons for BSP, but also for other LSPs and for DCLG.

Box 1: The four shared priorities for UK action on SD

1. Sustainable production and consumption – achieving more with less resources and fewer adverse environmental impacts.
2. Climate change and energy – reducing climate change emissions and preparing for climate change.
3. Natural resource protection and environmental enhancement.
4. Sustainable communities – communities that embody the principles of sustainable development at the local level.

One of the challenges was to distinguish between the role and contribution of individual partners and that of the partnership itself. We concluded that the partnership's distinctive role is:-

- Leadership
 - Raising commitment to sustainable development
 - Creating a sustainable vision for the city
- Guiding partner delivery
- Joint working on common issues such as procurement, management of estates or staff travel
- Information and skill sharing

This was a very brief project and could only investigate a small sample of BSP's activities. It would therefore be advisable for BSP and the study sponsors to test the findings more widely.

Findings and Recommendations

Local Strategic Partnerships are new and complex bodies. It has taken time for BSP to build its capacity, but the vast majority of interviewees agreed that it is becoming a stronger and more effective organisation. The proposals in the Local Government White Paper will place the partnership centre stage in the city, giving it a real opportunity to become a leader on sustainable development and to set the benchmark for other LSPs.

Unsurprisingly, given local priorities and the nature of neighbourhood renewal funding (NRF), the BSP has focussed on the delivery of sustainable communities. BSP did not start to actively embrace other aspects of the sustainability agenda until February 2005 when its then chair requested the Environment Partnership to develop a board paper on sustainability. There is little doubt that it is adding value and raising its partners' commitment and awareness, but there is still a long way to go in terms of feeding this through into strategies and delivery.

Although our evaluation has identified a number of areas where BSP could strengthen its performance, this should not be seen as a criticism. Our 2006 survey for the *National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships* (for DCLG) revealed that many LSPs are struggling with the same questions. Now, with the development of the new Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and the government's proposals for strengthening LSPs and the role of Local Area Agreements (LAAs), BSP has an exciting opportunity to set Birmingham on a more sustainable path.

Leadership: Raising Commitment

Most partners were convinced that the BSP has raised Board members' awareness and commitment to sustainable development. The most influential factors were: an Environment Partnership which manages funds and is represented on the BSP Board by its non City Council co-chair; the Head of Sustainable Development; the appraisal of the Community Strategy against the regional sustainable development framework; the development of the Climate Change Strategy; the restructuring of Board agendas to allow more time to discuss and integrate policy issues; the Innovation and Development Fund which is designed to support the development of new approaches and is currently funding several sustainability projects.

Overall there appears to be good progress on raising commitment at the top level of partner organisations. Reaching practitioners lower down in partner organisations is inevitably more difficult. The BSP is trying a number of methods: extended sessions for more in-depth discussions of issues with a wider audience; the Sustainable Birmingham E- Group; and constituency sustainability champions.

Business has a crucial role in achieving sustainable development, but like many other LSPs, BSP has limited involvement from the business sector. Given the diversity of businesses in the city, it will be impossible to reach most businesses via BSP membership. Other mechanisms will be necessary.

Recommendations:

1. It will be important to retain an independent (non council) and high profile SD champion on the Board when the current chair of the Environment Partnership withdraws.
2. BSP learns from other local areas that are leading on different aspects of sustainable development, e.g. by organising visits or exchanges.
3. BSP finds better ways to translate its vision for a sustainable city to practitioners. One possibility would be to hold a series of practitioner workshops on the messages in the new SCS once it is approved.
4. BSP finds better ways to involve business in developing and delivering its vision for a sustainable city, for example:
 - Involve business representatives in the proposed theme groups (see below) to develop the new SCS, including a theme group around carbon neutrality
 - Raise the profile of Severn Trent, the business representative on the Environment Partnership
 - Once the SCS is approved, the Environment Partnership and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to jointly lead on involving business in delivering key SD outcomes in the new strategy

Leadership: Vision and Strategies

The BSP's good work on raising commitment has still to feed through to its core strategies – the Community Strategy and the LAA.

While *Taking Birmingham Forward* is understandably focussed on sustainable communities, it included some commitments around the other three UK sustainable development priorities. But the Community Strategy was developed when the BSP was only just beginning to address a broader sustainable development agenda, and does not provide an inspiring vision of what a future sustainable city might look like. There is an opportunity to correct this in the new Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) which BSP will prepare this year.

Although the LAA is only one means of implementing the community strategy, it undoubtedly carries the greatest weight. The current LAA focuses primarily on sustainable communities and fails to take forward many of the other SD commitments in *Taking Birmingham Forward*. This is understandable given DCLG / GOWM's focus on mandatory outcomes and the very short time available to negotiate the LAA. If important SD commitments continue to be left out of the LAA almost certainly they will become "second class outcomes."

A draft Climate Change Strategy has been agreed and is currently undergoing consultation. This is a good example of BSP's growing leadership on SD. As far as we are aware BSP is the only LSP to have taken this leading role on climate change. The challenge remains to ensure that the commitments are followed through into BSP's core strategies and delivery mechanisms.

The *Birmingham Prospectus* will have a significant influence over the contents of the new SCS. It proposes transformational changes that will have a fundamental impact on all four UK SD priorities. The need for a sustainable city was discussed by the Prospectus themes groups and this is captured to some extent in the text. However, much of the debate appears to have been lost in the draft document and especially in the Initial Plan for Action. The latter gives little sense that the city has genuinely started to grapple with the huge and complex question of how to achieve the proposed level of growth while retaining sustainable communities that are living within environmental limits.

Recommendations:

1. The theme groups that were used to develop the Birmingham Prospectus helped to pull SD into the debate. We suggest a similar approach to developing the new Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS).
2. For the development of the SCS each theme group is explicitly asked to think about how their proposals might support or contradict the goal of carbon neutrality and other UK Sustainable Development priorities and to make suggestions for what the city can do to achieve the priorities and avoid any conflicts.
3. An additional theme group on "becoming a carbon neutral city" is established which involves representatives from all of the key sectors that contribute to climate change emissions (transport, housing, business).
4. BSP provides briefings / videos / speakers for SCS theme groups to stimulate discussion around achieving carbon neutrality and the other UK SD priorities.
5. The new SCS presents a vision of how Birmingham will achieve a sustainable future that is interweaved into all sections of the SCS and not dealt with in isolation.

6. The 2007/8 LAA is more adventurous in picking up on sustainability commitments in the new SCS and the Climate Change Strategy.
7. SD commitments that are relevant to the new national indicator set (such as those on climate change) are included in the 35 + 18 nationally negotiated LAA targets. Others should be included in the local priority targets that will in future form part of the LAA but will not be monitored by central government.
8. Alongside the consultation on the draft Climate Change Strategy, the draft strategy is assessed against the guidance in the Nottingham Declaration Action Pack.

Guiding delivery

All LSPs are struggling with the question of how to convert a joint vision into joint action. While the BSP's new Delivery Unit and the government's proposals to place duties on public sector partners around LAA targets should help to strengthen delivery, there remains the danger that pressure to deliver nationally negotiated LAA improvement targets will distract attention from other equally important local priorities. But there are several ways in which the BSP can guide partners' delivery of sustainable development.

The BSP has two **delivery plans** - the Community Strategy Implementation Framework and the LAA Operational Plan. The Operational Plan is a more rigorous document. It is important that in future the BSP establishes equally rigorous mechanisms for guiding the delivery of both the 2007/8 nationally negotiated LAA targets and the local priority targets.

Similarly BSP's **performance monitoring** is more rigorous around LAA outcomes as compared with other Community Strategy commitments. The appointment of a Director of Partnerships and the creation of a new Performance Management Team will bring new capacity for a wider range of monitoring. It is also intended that the Team will monitor the Audit Commission quality of life indicators, including climate change emissions and ecological footprint. But there remains the risk that the team will become preoccupied with monitoring the new 35+18 nationally negotiated LAA improvement targets and that any additional monitoring will not be given the same prominence.

The BSP is in a strong position to promote **integrated outcomes** that support social, economic and environmental goals at the same time. It made a good start during the LAA negotiations by preparing a paper on how the outcomes in each of the LAA blocks could support six cross-cutting themes. But our review of how well this has been followed through found a mixed picture. The presence of BSP has undoubtedly helped organisations to engage with other partners, but it has played a passive role rather than actively making connections, and there is still little sense of a joint responsibility for all of the LAA outcomes.

Constituency Strategic Partnerships (CSP) are still evolving. In this short study it was impossible to enter into the debate over the CSP's future role. However, our brief review of one CSP found a willingness to give more thought to how the CSP could address climate change and other SD priorities, and that more strategic leadership from BSP on this would be welcomed. As we only briefly looked at one out of 10 CSPs, the conclusions from this case study must be treated with care.

Recommendations:

1. The BSP establishes equally rigorous mechanisms for guiding the delivery of nationally agreed improvement targets, local priority LAA targets and any other BSP commitments

that are not included in the LAA. This would be achieved by merging the Community Strategy Implementation Framework and the LAA Operational Plan.

2. Performance monitoring and reporting to the Board gives equal status to all of BSP's targets. It should cover both outcomes and delivery of actions that have been agreed by partners, namely:

Outcomes

- The nationally agreed LAA improvement targets
- Other local priority targets included in the LAA
- Other BSP targets that are not incorporated in the LAA but appear in BSP strategies

Delivery

- Delivery of Action Plans – such as the one linked to the Climate Change Strategy
3. The BSP Board reinforces the notion that all partners have joint responsibility for delivering *all* of its commitments and wherever possible that partners should co-operate to help deliver outcomes. This might be included in the BSP's *Statement of Intent*.
 4. The BSP takes a more proactive role in developing integrated outcomes by organising practitioner workshops across the partners on LAA outcomes that are most suited to integration.
 5. In partnership with CSPs, the BSP develops a view on the CSPs' unique contribution to achieving the SD priorities in the Sustainable Community Strategy. Once this contribution is agreed, it is fed into guidance on the preparation and delivery of SCPs.
 6. CSPs are asked to nominate a partnership level sustainability champion who will be supported by the officer level constituency sustainability champion and the BSP's Head of Sustainability.
 - 7.

Lessons for other LSPs

As a core city with NRF funding, BSP is one of the most well resourced LSPs in the country. Not all of its lessons are transferable to smaller LSPs. Therefore the recommendations below are divided into two groups.

Recommendations for all LSPs:

1. Include an independent and high profile SD champion on the Board
2. Design Board agendas so that they allow time for major policy discussions
3. Audit the existing Community Strategy and LAA against the regional sustainable development framework and / or national SD priorities
4. Include a vision of how the area will achieve a sustainable future in the new SCS. Interweave the implications of achieving that vision into all sections of the SCS and do not deal with it in isolation.
5. Work with other LSPs to develop thinking on how LSPs can add value on SD by sharing and synthesising good practice, for example through the LSP Futures network

Recommendations for larger LSPs that have a duty to prepare an LAA:

1. Have a thematic partnership with an SD remit chaired by a non local authority partner. Provide them with a budget.
2. The chair of the SD thematic partnership to sit on the LSP Board, (or in the absence of such a partnership the Board to include an independent high profile SD champion)
3. Appoint an SD manager reporting to the SD thematic partnership

4. Establish a fund to support innovate forward looking projects and to address the findings of an SD policy audit.
5. Take the lead on developing and delivering a climate change strategy
6. Consider developing the new SCS through thematic discussion groups that are asked to think about how their proposals will support the goal of radically reducing climate change emissions and other UK SD priorities. In addition have a theme group on reducing climate change emissions.
7. Translate a representative range of SD outcomes from the new Sustainable Community Strategy into the LAA (both nationally agreed improvement targets and local priority targets) and manage all SCS commitments through the LSP's performance management systems.

Lessons for DCLG

Although BSP has managed to achieve much in terms of raising its partners' commitment to sustainable development, as we have seen there is still a long way to go in terms of feeding this through into strategies and delivery. DCLG has an important role in helping LSPs down this path, through its guidance on preparing SCSs and negotiating and delivering LAAs.

Recommendations:

1. The new guidance on preparing Sustainable Community Strategies should remind LSPs of:
 - The four UK SD priorities and how these relate to the social, economic and environmental aspirations of local areas
 - The transformational change that will be needed to achieve the national goal of a cut in climate change emissions of 60% by 2050
 - The need to interweave sustainable development goals into all sections of the SCS and not to treat SD in isolation.

And include:

 - Illustrative examples, either model examples or taken from existing Community Strategies
2. The next round of LAA guidance and negotiations should avoid mentioning themes and simply encourage the delivery of SCS priorities – both through nationally agreed and local priority targets.
3. New LAA guidance should include recommended climate change targets and indicators which encompass all key contributors to climate change (domestic, transport and business) and are designed in such a way that LSP partners can adopt appropriate sub-targets, e.g. percent reduction in climate change emissions from partners' own buildings and transport.
4. The same climate change targets should be transmitted to public sector partners via their lead government departments.
5. There should be consistent government targets for all public sector LSP partners across the range of SD outcomes in order to ensure comparability of indicators and baselines.
6. As the *improving male life expectancy* case study has illustrated, the pressure to achieve short-term improvements in LAA outcomes can divert attention from more sustainable long-term solutions. DCLG should investigate if this is a common problem and how it could be overcome.