

# S.I.G.O.M.A.

*The Special Interest Group  
of Municipal Authorities (Outside London)  
Within the LGA*

## **LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS: SHAPING THEIR FUTURE**

### **A RESPONSE FROM SIGOMA**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

SIGOMA is a special interest group of 46 municipal authorities in the northern, midland and south-coast regions of England. Our membership comprises 35 metropolitan districts and 11 major unitary authorities with similar characteristics.

SIGOMA is very pleased to see the Government seeking to clarify the role of LSPs with this consultation paper. The context within which LSPs operate is clearly changing with new policy initiatives like Local Area Agreements and the ODPMs *local:vision* process. We also feel that the Government's decision to extend the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to March 2008 provides a timely opportunity to consider how LSPs work, look at the relationship between different local partners and understand the importance of non-ringfenced funding like NRF for strengthening partnership work on the ground.

Our response is based upon considerable experience within SIGOMA local authorities – all SIGOMA members have well-established LSPs and 42 of our authorities currently receive NRF. SIGOMA authorities also benefit from related funds like the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund or its pre-cursors. As such, SIGOMA authorities have a good experience of strategic partnership working and of trying to ensure that different Government initiatives link up in their area.

All SIGOMA member authorities have been consulted upon earlier drafts of this response and this paper is to be formally ratified at the SIGOMA Members meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> march 2006. Should this meeting make any amendments or additions, a revised copy will be sent to the ODPM immediately after the meeting.

## **KEY POINTS**

We have tried hard to address the majority of the questions posed in the consultation paper in a consistent and methodical manner. However, many of the issues our members wish to make cut across several of the questions in the report. As such, it is worth identifying the key points raised by SIGOMA. These are:

- that LSPs are very different in different areas – as such central government prescription needs to be kept to a minimum.
- that LSPs should concentrate upon the long term vision and strategy for an area, and are not delivery partnerships;
- that Local Area Agreements are important delivery agreements, but should not restrict the scope of community strategies or an LSPs work;
- that SIGOMA supports moves to ensure that public agencies ‘have regard to’ community strategies in their own service plans or thematic plans;
- that the structure of LSPs should be left to local partners to decide and should not be centrally defined;
- that SIGOMA would support moves to set a duty on public agencies to cooperate with local authorities to produce a community strategy, where this would strengthen the community leadership role of local authorities and would not establish LSPs as a ‘statutory’ partnership;
- that the role of elected members needs greater clarity and prominence in LSPs, with distinct contributions to be made by Executive Members, Front line councilors and Members of Scrutiny Boards; and
- that the future of the NRF and linked funds like the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund need more consideration in any discussions about the capacity of LSPs.

The following sections elaborate on each of these points.

### **1. The role of LSPs and Sustainable Community Strategies (qns 1-11)**

#### **LSPs: sustainable community strategies and LAAs:**

As the paper suggests, the role of LSPs should concentrate upon the development of a widely owned ‘vision’ for a local area, through a sustainable community strategy, as well as on the development of a delivery plan in the shape of a LAA or collaborative action plan. This means that LSPs are essentially about long-term and strategic planning in a locality, although they are increasingly concerned with shorter-term issues like the coordination of local services and rigorous performance management of their work.

However, LSPs concerns with service coordination and performance management does not make it a ‘delivery partnership’. As such, we believe that it is unhelpful to describe LSPs as delivery partnerships and the paper needs to state more clearly that the role of LSPs should be to develop long-term strategy and facilitate better delivery of this, ie drive the delivery of community strategy objectives across its partner organizations. Paragraph 81 of the paper states clearly that ‘while LSPs can join up strategy and commissioning, they are not direct delivery bodies’ and we feel that this point should be made earlier in the paper so that the emphasis for delivery is more

properly placed on the local partners in any LSP. This will be vitally important in ensuring that local agencies ‘take ownership’ of the community strategy and take real responsibility for making it happen. The approach currently set out in the consultation paper is likely to cause confusion for local authorities without greater clarification on this relationship between LSPs and the delivery of local objectives and services.

In terms of the relationship between community strategies and LAAs, we would support the desire to see LAAs and action plans for community strategies becoming more closely aligned. However, we do not believe that LAAs are the only ‘delivery contract’ that LSPs need to agree. Most LSPs will be addressing a much wider range of local issues than those defined in their LAA and many pilot areas have been keen to limit the focus of their LAA so that the initiative can be trialled successfully. This, and the fact that LAAs are based around four distinct blocks defined by the ODPM and negotiated with regional government offices, will mean that LAAs could prove to be too tightly drawn around issues that relate to a narrow range of largely public sector local partners. As such, we would be concerned to see that LAAs do not restrict the breadth of community strategy objectives or the inclusion of local partners from the private and voluntary sectors in the core work of an LSP.

#### **Links to regional, sub-regional and other local plans:**

We would strongly support the move to place a requirement on bodies producing thematic or service based plans to ‘have regard’ to the sustainable community strategy where this would strengthen the community leadership role of local authorities. At the moment there is a real weakness in the system, as only local authorities have to demonstrate this duty and only local authorities are assessed on partnership working in their Comprehensive Performance Assessment. This means that there can be organizational difficulties in encouraging local partners outside of the local authority to take some ownership and responsibility for the community strategy and make some contribution to developing the LSP. The realization that a service or agency has to pay regard to the community strategy will help to address these issues.

Taking this thinking one step further, we would also suggest a similar requirement being applied to sub-regional and regional agencies as well as the parent departments of these agencies in Whitehall. This support from Whitehall departments for local community strategies would mean that all public agencies are able to play a fuller role in LSPs and ensure that local community strategies are reflected in sub-regional or regional plans. In this way community strategies become the sum total of collective aspirations in a local area, rather than a restatement of nationally defined targets.

As well as a legal requirement to recognize the community strategy (the ‘stick’), we would also like to see more positive incentives (the ‘carrots’) for local, sub-regional and regional partners to take part in the work of LSPs. This may mean reducing the number of individual inspections or external reviews of public agencies and partnerships that are part of a successful LSP so that the links between local partners is strengthened and the degree of central government control over decision-making is reduced. Although any changes will require careful planning and testing, LAAs provide a good start and SIGOMA supports the extension of this kind of thinking so that local partners can negotiate more challenging freedoms and flexibilities to deliver services that

are better aligned to local needs. Further views on this are included in SIGOMAs response to the parallel consultation paper on ‘Local Service Inspection’ from the ODPM.

### **Neighbourhood engagement:**

Neighbourhood engagement is about supporting and promoting local democracy, which needs to be at the heart of all neighbourhood arrangements. As the consultation paper acknowledges, there are currently a range of existing neighbourhood activities such as area forums, neighbourhood management pathfinders, NDC’s, Sure Start and other community organizations that have direct engagement with local people in local areas. Each forum can represent a different policy theme, such as crime, education and health, or a different local area and therefore has the ability to engage local people on issues that matter to them.

LSPs can usefully play two roles to support this. Firstly, at the district wide level LSPs should be helping to coordinate and rationalise neighbourhood arrangements across different agencies to avoid duplication and ensure that resources are used efficiently. At the neighbourhood level, it is unlikely that the LSP will have a significant presence. However, their second role could be to ensure that different agencies, such as police, health and education, work together in neighbourhood forums with local councillors. These may mean neighbourhood based partnerships, referred to as ‘mini LSPs’ – although this term is confusing as neighbourhood partnerships would need to focus on service delivery rather than ‘strategic’ issues. This would be an important step in ensuring the true needs and opinions of local people are heard through engagement.

In line with these structures, elected members have a number of important roles to play in neighbourhood engagement – at both the district wide and neighbourhood levels. These are discussed in more detail later in this response.

### **Links with Local Development Framework:**

Sustainable community strategies should provide the general framework for the LDF, which are usefully seen as a spatial expression of the community strategy. As such, we feel that spatial planning teams developing the LDF need to begin to develop shared pieces of work with the community strategy and LSP teams – for example, the conclusions from statistical evidence on the key issues in an area, the key messages from community engagement exercises and the identification of key economic opportunities are all pieces of work that could be carried out for both the LDF and the community strategy in joint exercises. All of these should be part of the community strategy process and should also be used to set the direction of the LDF.

The relationship between LDF and community strategy may also be strengthened where local partners are able to coordinate the timing of the two plan-making processes. This may mean ensuring that a clear, and up to date, community strategy is in place before the LDF can be progressed.

At the national level, this relationship between the LDF and community strategy needs greater recognition in national planning guidance, so that LDFs can be aligned with community strategies without conflicting with the formal planning process.

## **2 Governance of LSPs (Qns 12-21)**

### **LSPs as the partnership of partnerships**

Whilst we support the need for greater coordination of local partnerships, identifying the main role of LSPs as a ‘partnership of partnerships’ is only a partial explanation of what LSPs do. LSPs do have a very important role to play in coordinating and rationalizing the wide range of local partnerships that successive governments have asked councils or other agencies to set up. However, this is not the only (or primary) function of an LSP. To be able to develop a realistic community strategy and facilitate the delivery of this, LSPs have an important role to play in bringing key public, private and voluntary or community organisations together to take ownership of the strategy. As such, LSPs are also a strategic partnership of the ‘key-players’ in any locality and provide an opportunity for these key players to look beyond immediate service priorities and identify long-term aspirations and then to make sure that their services are aligned to these.

As such, SIGOMA does not support the proposal for LSPs to be defined as ‘partnership of partnerships’, with a rigid, centrally defined model based around thematic partnerships and an Executive (see comments below).

### **Structure of LSPs - clustering partnerships around LAA blocks**

As noted above, LSPs are partnerships of key players within an area as well as bringing together different thematic partnerships to try and ensure that fragmentation and duplication does not occur. Because of the geographical boundaries of many of these partners, i.e. some are local, some regional and some sub-regional we also suggest that it would be difficult to appoint a sole model of governance to LSP’s. As such, the structure of LSPs needs to be decided by local partners working together to meet the needs of local areas and reflect the priorities in their community strategy. Whilst there is some merit in clustering themed-based partnerships around the four LAA blocks, and many LSPs are working towards this, there may also be other considerations that the LSP has to address in its structure. Leaving these decisions to the LSP partners is consistent with our view that as much autonomy as possible should be left with LSPs.

### **Providing a legislative foundation**

We support the proposals for setting a duty on public agencies to cooperate with local authorities to produce a community strategy. This should be designed to strengthen the community leadership role of local authorities as the ‘first amongst equals’ in the community planning process as well as help to support local partnership working in LSPs. Any new duty could be applied to key public agencies like the Learning and Skills Councils, RDAs, Police, Jobcentre Plus and Primary Care Trusts as well as to the Whitehall departments that oversee their work. We feel that greater recognition of community strategies (and therefore local priorities) by central government departments should be an important goal of the new duty and would help to strengthen the relationship between central and local arms of government.

However, we would also be concerned to see that this new duty does not translate into making LSPs statutory partnerships, with the increased levels of central government prescription on LSP

structures and operations that this usually creates. As noted above, LSPs and wider partnership working is very different in different localities, so such a move would be too restrictive to operate in any consistently successful way and could be difficult for private and voluntary and community sector partners to meet. In this sense, we feel that a new duty to cooperate with local authorities on community strategies could most usefully be targeted at other public agencies beyond the council and framed around making sure that they are:

- attending and contributing information to LSP meetings on the community strategy,
- sharing data on key issues identified in the strategy,
- providing support to the costs of producing strategies and consulting local communities on the proposals,
- being accountable for ensuring that service plans support the community strategy;
- providing annual progress reports on work towards meeting the objectives in the strategy.

Given the importance of skills and enterprise in many SIGOMA areas, we also feel that thought should be given on how organizations like universities and colleges can be required or encouraged to contribute towards community strategies. These bodies rely on public funding and have an important part to play in local areas, but clearly have a different role to mainstream public service providers that may require a slightly different approach.

As well as this type of legislation, we also hope that the Government can provide some positive incentives to encourage greater cooperation amongst partners. For example, as noted above, we feel that there is some scope for reducing the amount of external auditing and inspection on agencies that are part of a successful LSP, replacing this with the more collaborative performance management frameworks that most LSPs are now developing (see earlier points).

### **3. Accountability (Qns 22-30)**

#### **Accountability between partners**

We would strongly agree with the proposal for making partnership working a key part of the assessments for public agencies, as is currently the case in local authorities. In line with our comments above, we believe that this would help to strengthen work within LSPs and bring a more even handed approach to the implementation of the community strategy. Importantly, assessing the partnership work of a wider range of agencies may also help bodies like the Audit Commission to understand and review local issues 'in the round'. This would mean taking an issue like worklessness, education or crime and identifying the weakest link in delivering change amongst all of the key local players. We feel that the recommendations from this kind of review would help to provide a much more useful action plan for addressing problems.

However, this type of approach is only relevant to public sector partners and other approaches are needed for the private and voluntary and community sectors. In working with these types of partners, local authorities need to be able to influence, persuade and use more informal forms of pressure. This way of working, and the requirement of LSPs to be able to respond to private and voluntary/community sectors, underlines the importance of ensuring that LSPs are locally led and defined, with minimal imposition of central government prescription.

### **Involvement of local councillors**

The consultation paper is right to identify the current confusion around the roles of local councilors in LSPs and the need to clarify this. This is a priority and we would propose different roles for different types of councillor. For example:

- Executive councillors – are ultimately responsible for leading on the key themes of a community strategy through their own portfolios and role in both the LSP and local authority Cabinet. As such, they need to be working at the highest levels in LSPs - chairing or leading LSP Executives and playing a lead role in thematic groups. They also have a role in ensuring that council and local community priorities are accurately reflected in community strategies and communicated to all LSP partners, as well as ensuring that council services contribute to the objectives set out in the community strategy. However, in order to fulfill this role properly, local authorities need to see the extension of duties and assessments of partnership working applied to other public agencies – ie as mentioned above, the duty placed on public services to contribute to community strategies and an assessment of partnership working applied to public agencies.
- Front line councillors – local ward councilors should be responsible for feeding local or neighbourhood priorities into the LSP and community strategy, helping to represent their local community within the LSP and ensuring that district wide plans reflect neighbourhood priorities. Within their own ward, frontline councilors also have the responsibility for informing local people of the LSPs work and making sure that neighbourhood arrangements are suitable and operate effectively, so that communities can be engaged successfully.
- Scrutiny – councillors on scrutiny panels have important roles in holding local partners to account on their commitment and contributions to the community strategy as well as ensuring that the strategy reflects ‘bottom-up’ issues of importance to local people. However, to be able to fulfil this role effectively, scrutiny panels need the authority to be able to ask all public agencies receiving public money to attend their meetings. As such, we would support the extension of a scrutiny board powers to enable them to call on all LSP partners to attend scrutiny meetings, provide information for scrutiny inquiries and respond to the recommendations of scrutiny board reports. This would help to improve local accountability and engage a wider range of elected members in the role of LSPs.

### **4. Capacity issues in LSPs (Qns 31-35)**

We feel that all of the issues raised in the paper are important here, but current proposals fail to address the key issue of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. Indeed, nowhere in the discussion of LSP capacity is the role of NRF considered. As previous evidence from local authority bodies like SIGOMA, the LGA and the Association of London Government have shown, NRF has played a key factor in strengthening the the capacity of LSPs and in delivering successful projects on behalf of many LSPs. This is particularly important in urban areas where NRF supports and generates new, multi-agency initiatives to address neighbourhood renewal across all of the Government’s floor target areas. We welcome the Government’s decisions to extend NRF to March 2008, but also wish to point to the need for further clarification on the future of the fund as this will have an important impact on any proposals for the future of LSPs. In particular, NRF plays a crucial role in generating many collaborative ventures that would otherwise need to

be funded through the EPCS spending block. Whilst welcoming the continuation of NRF until 2008, there needs to be clarity on the longer term level of funding that will be available to the most deprived areas and the capacity of these LSPs.

As such, SIGOMA calls for the current review on the future of LSPs to be widened to look at the future of NRF after March 2008 and its role in building the capacity of local partnership working. A key priority for this type of review would be to ensure that local authorities in urban areas have the financial resources to lead partnership working and ensure collaborative work is successful at both strategic and operational levels. SIGOMA would be happy to provide more information on the role of NRF, and linked funds like the Safer Stronger Communities Fund, in building LSP capacity.

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