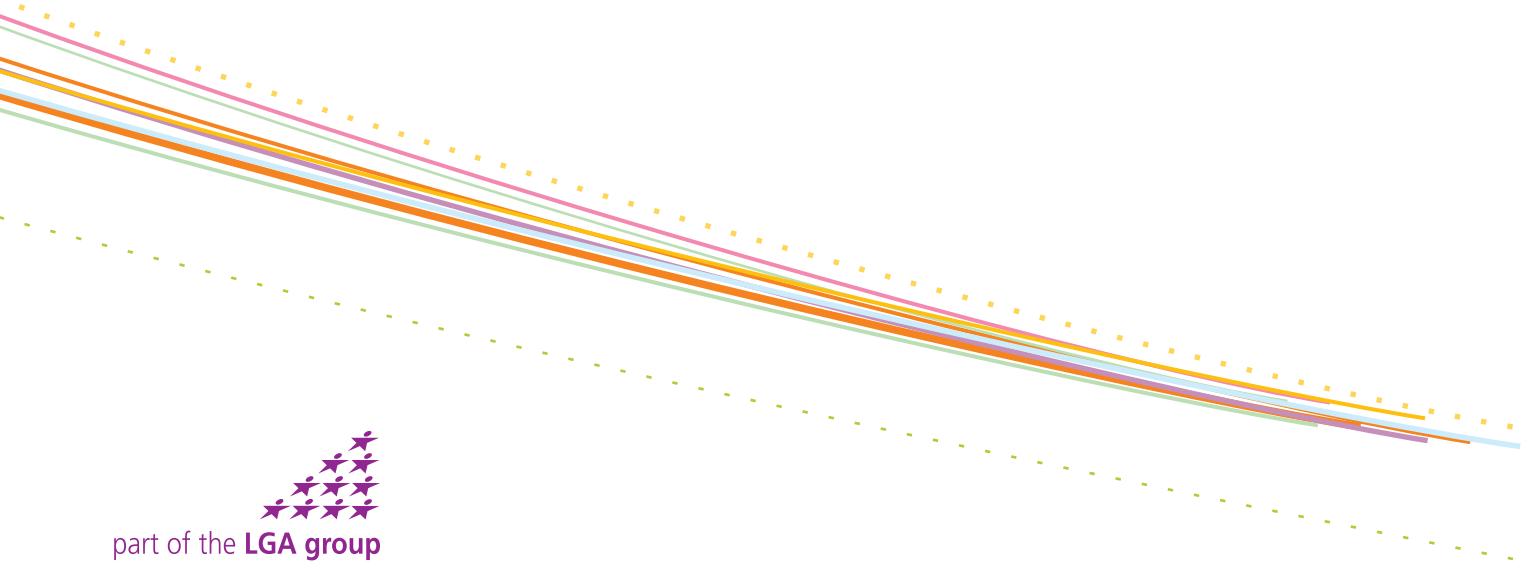




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# getting things done together

## key findings from the Partnership Improvement Programme

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# foreword

Over the last ten years, central government policy has emphasised the importance of local cross-sector partnership working. Partnerships are now a dominant feature of the local landscape, from the modernisation of public services through to the empowerment of local communities. However, despite the rhetoric, policy assumptions about collaborative capacity are not always matched by the reality on the ground. The need for support and improvement is widespread.

The Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), itself a collaborative initiative between IVAR (the Institute for Voluntary Action Research) and the IDeA (the Improvement and Development Agency), is based on a simple premise. Earlier work in this area has mostly looked at collaboration from the separate viewpoints of the two sectors; consequently it has often failed to lay the necessary foundations for productive working relationships. PIP deliberately moves beyond such approaches to consider cross-sectoral collaboration *from a cross-sectoral perspective*. We are committed to finding ways in which partnership working between local authorities and third sector organisations can be improved through a *joint approach* to the practical problems raised by the multiple pressures for cross-sector collaboration.

This report, based on delivery of the programme in ten local authorities in England, has a clear message for both policy makers and practitioners. Despite the numerous challenges and obstacles encountered locally, cross-sector partnership working can, with support, be mutually beneficial and highly productive. Effective partnerships require mutual understanding and shared goals, both of which need time and sustained attention. The approach taken by PIP directly tackles these issues and enables a genuinely collaborative approach to improving collaboration. Participants in the latest round of PIP - from Sutton to St Helens, Wigan to Darlington - testify to the possibility of real, tangible improvements to cross-sector

working. More than three quarters of the respondents in a recent feedback survey reported that their participation in PIP had helped them to understand and communicate with colleagues from other sectors better. A similar number described tangible improvements in achieving practical outcomes through cross-sector working.

The outcomes of the Partnership Improvement Programme, whilst modest, are cause for optimism. We can now say with confidence that the approach to improvement which we have pioneered through PIP - with its emphasis on building knowledge, awareness and trust as a prerequisite to partnership working, and on practical solutions to previously intractable problems - has the potential to make a real difference.



Lucy de Groot  
Executive Director, IDeA

# introduction

This is a summary report of year one of the Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), a joint initiative between the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR). It is based on work in ten local authority areas of England during 2007 and 2008 which built on the 2006 pilot programme.

**Part one** briefly introduces the programme and the public policy context in which it is being delivered. In **part two**, we summarise the key findings from the programme in relation to the local drivers and benefits of cross-sector partnership working. In **part three** we discuss challenges and obstacles before highlighting some examples from the Partnership Improvement Action Plans produced in each area. Finally, in part four, we present feedback from programme participants before concluding with a brief overview of the value and lessons of PIP.

PIP is concerned with partnership working between local authorities and third sector organisations (TSOs). In the report, this is described as 'cross-sector partnership working'; the people involved in PIP are referred to as 'participants' and direct quotes from them and the local Partnership Improvement Action Plans are presented, anonymously, in italics.

## authorship

This report has been written by Ben Cairns with Jane Harris, Sam Brier and Rebecca Moran. Thanks to Ben Hughes, Helen Hughes and Joanna Stuart for their comments and suggestions.

## acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to the senior officers and practitioners within local government and the third sector who have participated so constructively and openly in this new, collaborative approach to improve partnership working across the sectors.

# part one: introduction and context

## 1. introduction

The Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP) is designed to improve cross-sector partnership working between local authorities and local third sector organisations (TSOs).

The programme is funded by Capacity Builders, the OTS and the IDeA, and is being delivered region by region. The national programme builds on the pilot carried out in eight local authority areas in 2006<sup>1</sup>; it is due to be completed in the summer of 2011.

During year one of the programme, delivery has taken place in ten local authority areas across three regions:

North East	North West	London
Darlington	St Helens	Newham
Derwentside	Wigan	Sutton
Gateshead	Warrington	
South Tyneside		
Tynedale		

## objectives

The three national objectives for the programme are:

- To build trust and mutual understanding across sectoral divides
- To enable senior staff in local government and the third sector to take the lead in responding to the challenges of working across local authority/third sector boundaries and in local authority/third sector partnerships
- To develop local improvement plans for more effective engagement and partnership working across sectoral divides.

Each PIP group then sets its own local partnership improvement objectives.

## areas covered by the programme

Earlier work in this area has mostly looked at collaboration from the separate viewpoints of the two sectors. PIP deliberately moves beyond such approaches to consider cross-sectoral collaboration from a cross-sectoral perspective. We are committed to finding ways in which partnership working between local authorities and TSOs can be improved through a joint approach to the practical problems raised by the multiple pressures for cross-sector collaboration.

The national roll-out of the Partnership Improvement Programme has been informed and shaped by our learning from the 2006 pilot. We now include a more intensive preparation period (including pre-delivery visits to ensure that the programme content is locally relevant) as well as more structured arrangements for the implementation and review of action plans (to ensure follow-up support and guidance is available).

The programme comprises five half-day sessions for mixed groups of senior officers and practitioners from the local authority and the local third sector<sup>2</sup>, all held in local venues. Sessions are co-ordinated by two facilitators from IVAR; they work with programme participants through a series of exercises, presentations and debates to develop a shared understanding of:

- Participants' experiences of local cross-sector partnership working
- National policy context and local drivers of cross-sector partnership working
- Barriers and obstacles to effective cross-sector partnership working
- Benefits of cross-sector partnership working

- Specific local challenges to improving cross-sector partnership working (including conflicts and tensions)
- Local action needed to address those challenges and improve cross-sector partnership working.

PIP participants are encouraged to model effective cross-sector working in their own discussions by focusing on points of commonality rather than difference and by thinking about possible responses to difficulties identified. Local Partnership Improvement Action Plans are agreed at session four; session five takes place three to six months later and provides an opportunity to review implementation.

## 2. context

Two major themes dominate the policy environment for the Partnership Improvement Programme: the interest in relationships between the governmental/public sector and the third sector – particularly partnerships and collaborative working – and secondly, pressures on local government to work more closely with the third sector and to involve local communities more directly in civic life.

The first theme relates in particular to the third sector's potential to expand its role in delivering welfare and other kinds of public services. As part of this agenda, recent government policy has expressed a desire to see real improvements in the relationship between third sector organisations and local government, particularly in relation to: service planning, service delivery and commissioning (including procurement).<sup>3</sup> This theme is consistent with a broader shift towards 'partnership' working across the third sector and the governmental sector; and the requirements for closer working on a range of new initiatives.

The second theme is essentially about increasing participation in local political and social action, community cohesion, community empowerment and the building of 'social capital'<sup>4</sup>. As with the first theme, the relationship between local government and the third sector is seen as critical.

Despite this policy push towards partnership working across sectoral boundaries, IVAR's recent research in this area confirms that many TSOs and local authorities experience practical difficulties in their relationships with each other.<sup>5</sup> Although cross-sector partnership working continues to be an integral element of the current government's public policy modernisation agenda, there are still significant obstacles to making it effective and productive for both TSOs and local authorities. Whilst some of these difficulties may stem from issues such as power imbalance and cultural mismatch, it seems that there is also a general lack of mutual understanding, respect and trust.<sup>6</sup>

# part two: key findings

## 3. drivers of cross-sector partnership working

PIP participants grouped the drivers of cross-sector partnership working into four main categories:

- To respond to central government priorities and agendas, for example: the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006)
- To respond to local strategic priorities
- To maximise access to resources in order to improve service delivery and increase ability to meet local needs more effectively
- To build on previous success, particularly the perceived ‘added value’ derived from partnership working.

In addition, participants identified a number of sector specific drivers for cross-sector partnership working, which included:

### third sector

- To increase funding and enhance sustainability
- To deliver improved local services by responding more effectively to community needs
- To enable a diverse range of voices to be heard.

### local authorities

- To deliver on the new ‘engagement’ agenda<sup>7</sup>
- To create flexible local infrastructure able to respond more effectively to needs
- To extend the ‘reach’ of the local authority.

## 4. benefits of cross-sector partnership working

During the programme, participants also identified three principal benefits of cross-sector partnership working:

### learning and innovation

- “*Partnership working offers access to a broader range of perspectives and experiences and encourages the sharing of good practice. This increases the potential for learning, innovation and creativity.*”
- “*The third sector is more able to take risks that might enable local authorities to meet their statutory objectives. This translates into new, more innovative ways of working together which break down traditional barriers and encourages: greater flexibility and responsiveness; increased levels of trust, openness and commitment; and enhanced levels of power and ability to influence broader agendas.*”

### better services and outcomes

- “*The ‘whole’ of cross-sector partnerships is greater than the ‘sum’ of its parts.*”
- “*Partnership working increases the potential to develop and deliver improved services more able to respond to complex social needs because of the increased involvement of – and buy-in by – local people.*”
- “*Partnership working improves the quality and integrity of local decision-making.*”

### additional resources

- “*Cross-sector partnership working provides access to additional financial, physical and human resources.*”

# part three: Partnership Improvement Action Plans

## 5. introduction

Local government and third sector staff in the ten local authority areas covered by the Partnership Improvement Programme during 2007 and 2008 have broadly had positive experiences of partnership working. The local partnership improvement objectives of all ten areas demonstrated, in different ways, a desire to use partnership working as a means to tackle the needs of local communities more effectively and responsively.

Partnership working was generally seen as an opportunity to enhance the impact of both sectors and to produce benefits for local people. A commitment to the 'added value' of partnership working is widespread and visible. However, challenges and obstacles remain; these can be summarised as being concerned with organisation, people, and power. At the end of the programme, participants produced their own local Partnership Improvement Action Plans, to meet their local objectives and overcome their local challenges.

## 6. challenges of cross-sector partnership working

### the organisation of cross-sector partnerships

Most formal cross-sector partnerships – those concerned with strategic or financial matters – are constructed and co-ordinated by local authorities. Third sector participants expressed concern about their lack of capacity to engage meaningfully in such partnerships. These capacity constraints include insufficient funding and lack of resources, as well as limited time and knowledge. Many local authorities experienced frustration with the pressure to respond to overarching statutory obligations, in contrast to the (perceived) narrow focus of many local TSOs. Both parties experienced difficulties with understanding each other's distinct sectoral agendas and priorities, as well as their different models of governance and accountability.

Some of the processes of cross-sector partnerships can also be problematic. For example, a lack of clarity and consensus about aims and objectives can lead to inadequate decision making and a focus on talking rather than doing, resulting in a general lack of achievement. Alongside this, the time consuming nature of relationship building (widely viewed as an essential element of effective partnership working) was also seen as an obstacle, carrying a degree of risk as to whether the investment will actually generate dividends. Such concerns were further compounded by the challenges presented by a lack of organisational commitment and buy-in which often further undermine fragile relationships and constrained capacity to deliver.

Encouragingly, much of the partnership improvement action – for example the adoption of guides and terms of reference for the formation and operation of cross-sector partnerships and the introduction of health checks for longstanding partnerships – is designed to bridge this divide.

### the people involved in cross-sector partnerships

There was cross-sector agreement that the individuals involved in partnerships can themselves present an obstacle to effective working. Concern was expressed about the extent to which people were sufficiently skilled, knowledgeable and senior, with sufficient legitimacy and credibility to act on behalf of broader constituencies. In some cases, the difficulties which arise simply reflect the distinctive ethos and structure of each sector. Elsewhere, participants described problems related to fear of openness, resistance to change and the degree of genuine, personal commitment to working in this way, as contrasted to a 'tick-box' mentality in which partnership working is merely seen as a way to fulfil certain obligations.

Some participants described a 'disconnect' between senior level staff who were committed to this way of working

and operational staff who often attended partnership meetings, but did not have the authority or power to take the necessary decisions, resulting in ineffectual partnerships. This problem appears most acute in local authorities, with some participants highlighting a 'lack of corporate third sector awareness'.

The ability of third sector staff involved in cross-sector partnerships to think and act strategically also continues to be a concern. In a number of local authority areas, there are ample opportunities for the third sector to influence and shape local policy. Often, these are not being fully exploited on account of under-developed skills at Chief Officer level, a lack of policy awareness and inadequate inter-organisational relationships within the third sector. Related to this issue is the history of mistrust across the sectoral divide which, in some areas, has shaped previous partnership working and continues to exert a negative influence on current partnerships.

Several actions were identified by participants to overcome some of these difficulties, including: adopting a more strategic approach to the recruitment and selection of individuals involved in cross-sector partnerships; the introduction of joint induction, training and staff development programmes; and cross-sector awareness-raising, for example the production and dissemination of information on key aspects and features of both sectors (such as governance and decision making).

### **power in cross-sector partnerships**

Linked to this history of mistrust is an ongoing perception of power imbalance and inequality between the sectors. In some areas, there was a lack of recognition of the distinctive contributions brought by each sector, especially the third sector. Some participants talked about the difficulties which local authorities have in ceding power within partnerships.

Concerns about third sector accountability and representation, questions about the quality of some third sector services and performance, and changes to commissioning arrangements (including procurement) also contribute to practical difficulties in the interaction between the two sectors and compound a profound sense of 'mismatch'.

Specific action to address these challenges included: promoting awareness of the distinctive features of each sector, for example through the active promotion of opportunities for more cross-sector contact for staff, such as employee volunteering schemes and work shadowing; the development of new processes for commissioning (including procurement); and the introduction of proportionate arrangements for monitoring and reporting.

An equally important outcome from the Partnership Improvement Programme was the emergence of a group of partnership practitioners who are able to see cross-sector partnerships as an 'exchange', whereby both sectors are motivated to participate in partnerships in order to secure those resources they most lack: delivery capacity and expertise for local authorities, and financial resources for the third sector.<sup>8</sup> The idea of 'exchange' can allow the distinctive contributions of each partner to be better understood and is useful as a concept to help people overcome a narrow understanding of the roles played by the two sectors in partnerships.

Below, we offer three practical examples from the Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), all written by members of the respective PIP groups:

- A case study of the Darlington PIP
- A case study of the St Helens PIP
- The outcomes of the pilot work-shadowing programme in Sutton.

## **7. partnership improvement in Darlington<sup>9</sup>**

### **our starting point**

Our starting point was a shared acknowledgement that partnership working is often challenging and difficult. However, we also believed that the potential benefits of working together justified concerted efforts to overcome those difficulties and to work together to achieve real improvements.

### **the local partnership profile**

Our journey to partnership improvement began by deliberately putting to one side the practical minutiae of our day-to-day dealings with each other. We recognised that, in order to come up with an action plan that could be jointly owned and implemented, we would need to begin by building up a picture of what we all thought about partnership working. This 'partnership profile' comprised of four dimensions:

### **local drivers of cross-sector partnership working**

Our PIP group identified three key drivers of local cross-sector partnership working:

- National policy initiatives, eg the Local Government White Paper
- A shared recognition that both sectors need each other to meet common objectives and to ensure effective and high quality delivery
- The opportunity to access a broader range of funding sources.

### **local benefits of cross-sector partnership working**

We agreed that the two most positive aspects of partnership working between the local council and the third sector were:

- The opportunity for learning and innovation: "thinking outside the box"

- The potential to achieve better results: "we can achieve greater flexibility if we get it right".

We were all agreed that partnership working could be viewed as an exchange, whereby each sector should contribute what it was most able to provide (eg resources from the council in return for local contacts and services from the third sector) in return for tangible benefits, both to itself and to the local community.

### **difficult aspects of cross-sector partnership working**

Working in partnership is not an easy process and we highlighted several difficult aspects of cross-sector partnership working:

- Partnership models: "Top down structures and terms of reference"; "Public sector trapped by government targets"
- Partnership participants: "Partisan attitudes and resistance to change"; "Lack of commitment from senior decision makers"
- Partnership processes: "Bureaucratic talking shops which lack direction"; "Lack of adequate resources to pull it off".

### **obstacles and barriers to effective cross-sector partnership working**

We then identified the four main obstacles and barriers to effective cross-sector partnership working in Darlington:

- Lack of resources to participate
- Insufficient skills and confidence
- Inadequate structures for communication
- Low levels of awareness, understanding and information (of the local authority (LA), the third sector and current public policy).

## our partnership improvement objectives

Having built up this picture of our shared experience of partnership working in Darlington, we were then able to look forward and to begin to identify the steps we might take, together, to bring about positive improvements. In order to tackle both our concerns and our aspirations, we agreed three specific partnership improvement objectives:

- To develop a shared approach to build sustainability and maximise resources within all sectors
- To develop new and improved approaches to supporting better communication, involvement and partnership working
- To develop a shared cross-sector understanding of sustainability and support issues; governance structures; and key elements of partnership working.

## our partnership improvement action plan

For each of these, we allocated responsibility for co-ordination to one council and one third sector member of the PIP group. Timescales were also agreed, alongside a commitment to a joint review after six months.

objectives	preliminary action
To develop a shared approach to build sustainability and maximise resources within all sectors	Cross-sector audit and development of a database of service provision, resource needs and skills availability  Development of a local authority employee volunteering strategy
To develop new and improved approaches to supporting better communication, involvement and partnership working	Inclusion of PIP action plan in joint LA/ Third Sector Strategy  Development of a cross-sector training strategy  Development of a cross-sector induction strategy for new staff  Establishment of joint terms of reference for individual cross-sector partnerships
To develop a shared cross-sector understanding of: sustainability and support issues, governance structures, and key elements of partnership working	Production of joint factsheets on governance and operational issues  Formalisation of policy on LA participation and representation on third sector boards

## our vision for improvement

We believe that the local council and the local third sector should regard partnership working as a **long-term commitment**. It is not an approach which can be put into place for a specific project or outcome and then discarded when it is completed.

Partnership working requires a culture of working together which is open and transparent. It should be based upon trust and an ability to listen and value what each partner has to say. We believe that this approach allows a loosening of controls and fixed ways of working, leading to relationships between different sectors which are supportive and empowering. Where this kind of partnership environment exists there is likely to be much more willingness to take risks and experiment with new forms of service delivery and engagement, and to tolerate mistakes.

## key learning

Three things really helped us to work together to improve partnership working in Darlington:

- A willingness to take risks and to accept that "*we're different, for very good reasons; and that's okay because it can act as a strength and mean that we can get more done by combining what each of us has to offer*"
- High-level commitment to change in both sectors: "*by placing the Partnership Improvement Action Plan within the borough-wide Third Sector Strategy, we ensured that there would be corporate buy-in, scrutiny of implementation and a high profile for both the vision and the action*"
- An understanding that improvement is a process and not a unique event: "*we have only just started really; but whereas before we all had hidden agendas and were suspicious of each other, now our agendas are*

*out on the table and we can listen, argue, disagree but still get things done together."*

## 8. partnership improvement in St Helens<sup>10</sup>

### our vision for improvement

St Helens Council has a long-standing commitment to partnership working across all sectors. The Local Strategic Partnership's (LSP) Community Plan includes a Partnership Concordat of undertakings and principles. One of the main aims of this group was to contribute to the government's and St Helen's objective of developing a 'thriving third sector'. There was recognition from our PIP group that partnership working in St Helens is well-established and has shown clear benefits. We recognised that there are constraints and challenges to working in this way, with which the action plan and priorities seeks to deal.

Our PIP group's overall vision is to ensure that cross-sector partnerships work to achieve the community agenda as set out in the Local Area Agreement, thus benefiting the people of St Helens.

### the local partnership profile

Our group sought to explore the many facets of partnership working, acknowledging that although we were starting with firm foundations, there were a number of areas that presented difficulties and challenges.

### local drivers of cross-sector partnership working

We identified a number of key drivers that influenced both sectors to work in partnership:

- A shared belief in the benefits for local people of working in partnership
- Recognition that each sector brings different and complementary skills and attributes to complex problems

- Opportunities for innovation and improved practice.

### **local benefits of cross sector partnership working**

The three most positive aspects of working in partnership, based upon our experience in St Helen's, are:

- The opportunities for learning and innovation, especially where each partner is open and receptive and able to 'try something different'
- Obtaining better results, such as better information sharing, shaping key policies and clarity of outcomes
- Using new ways of working, including improved networking, joint approaches and outreach to all parts of the community.

### **difficult aspects of cross sector partnership working**

A number of problematic aspects of partnership working were identified by our group, including:

- Partnership models which are too complex, fragmented and difficult to evaluate
- Participants from the third sector feeling the 'poor relation' and being expected to act on behalf of the entire sector
- A lack of capacity and consistency of representation from both sectors.

### **obstacles and barriers to effective cross-sector partnership working**

We also highlighted a number of obstacles and barriers – specific to St Helens – that we needed to overcome if partnership working was to be effective. The core themes were:

- Lack of clear communication frameworks regarding competing priorities, participation and organisational roles

- Partnership processes which require stronger champions and are able to emphasise that partnerships could make a real difference
- A greater level of 'challenge' required, where risks can be taken and participants are able to relinquish accepted ways of doing things.

### **our partnership improvement objectives**

Against this background, our group agreed a number of local objectives for improving partnership working in St Helens:

- To review the Compact and develop a new partnership framework
- To develop clear specifications and processes for services the LA wishes to commission with and procure from the third sector
- To review and co-ordinate arrangements for community grant funding agreements
- To clearly define CEN and CVS roles and develop an integrated approach to delivery through the third sector
- To strengthen and develop the capacity of partnerships/ networks within the third sector; in the interface with LSP (thematic groups) and within cross-sector partnerships
- To develop a joint induction and training programme on partnership for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), for members and council middle managers.

## our partnership improvement action plan

<b>objective</b>	<b>preliminary action</b>
To review the Compact and develop a new partnership framework	<p>Completion of a draft document setting out underlying principles, which will inform the other priorities in this action plan, by the Compact Implementation Group (CIG)</p> <p>CIG to be chaired by a PIP member and membership to be reviewed, with representatives from LA service departments</p> <p>Terms of reference to have wider circulation</p>
To develop clear specifications and processes for services the LA wishes to commission with and procure from the third sector	<p>Audit process to build upon the existing information held on the procurement corporate database</p> <p>Public Service Delivery Network (PSDN) facilitated by the CVS, consisting of procurement officers and representatives from the third sector, to act as a conduit for views</p> <p>Membership of the PSDN to be extended</p>
To review and co-ordinate arrangements for community grant funding agreements	<p>Link with the work being carried out on the Area Based Grant (ie the funding controlled by the LA) which includes the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and is commissioned by the LSP</p> <p>Third sector input to be co-ordinated by the CVS and the remit to be broadened to include all of the grants made to the third sector</p>
To clearly define CEN and CVS roles and develop an integrated approach to delivery through the third sector	<p>Develop a conference, ideally facilitated by an outside organisation, in order to develop what each organisation does and what needs to be done to improve the position</p> <p>Joint CVS/CEN strategy has been submitted to the LSP and requires wider comment</p>
To strengthen and develop the capacity of partnerships/networks within the third sector; in the interface with LSP (thematic groups) and within cross-sector partnerships	<p>Develop an audit based upon the CVS management information system</p> <p>Commence work on rationalising the ways in which various partnerships use the third sector, and expectations of attendance. Chairs of the LSP thematic groups to be involved.</p> <p>Offer CVS training module on a wider basis</p>
To develop a joint induction and training programme on partnership for the VCS, for members and council middle managers	<p>This priority is linked to Priority One above, which will provide a partnership framework to be disseminated and embedded</p> <p>Induction for both LA and third sector staff to include information on the Compact</p> <p>Training course in each sector to provide material on partnership working and on each sector. Joint induction and training programmes to be extended, building upon the existing service /practice joint training which takes place</p>

For all of these actions, lead responsibility was allocated to members of the PIP group and detailed arrangements were agreed for timelines and co-ordination.

## key learning

*Carole Hudson, chief executive, St Helens Council*

- *"It has promoted a real willingness to work together on a broader range of projects and to involve the voluntary sector at an earlier stage than we would have done previously."*
- *"We are more willing to share our 'issues' with the voluntary sector in an open and trusting way."*
- *"We have opened up the Area Based Grant to the voluntary sector who have succeeded in bidding for additional funding to support the development of the agreed joint action plan."*

*Sally Yeoman, chief executive, St Helens CVS*

- *"The VCS in St Helens are now more aware of the environment that colleagues from the local authority operate in."*
- *"Talking things through is often all you need to do to develop a common understanding."*
- *"The process has been a great springboard for developing an even more fruitful and positive relationship between the council and the local voluntary, community and faith sector."*

## 9. work-shadowing in Sutton

The Partnership Improvement Action Plan in Sutton included a commitment to the development of work-shadowing opportunities across the borough.

*John Sharples, head of corporate policy and partnerships, London Borough of Sutton*

'You never really know a man,' Atticus tells his daughter Scout, 'Until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.' The parallels between southern Alabama as depicted in Harper Lee's famous novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Sutton may not be immediately apparent but the principle that it's beneficial to see things from a different perspective stands true across continents.

As part of an initiative stemming from the Sutton Partnership Improvement Action Plan, I recently spent a day shadowing Ann Kinahan, the chief executive of Sutton's Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB).

Perhaps too often in the past there has been a tendency for public sector and third sector organisations to focus on their differences rather than the common aims that they share. Even in these days of partnership working, often as individuals we are representing organisational perspectives at the forums and meetings where we do business. So the idea emerging from the recent Partnership Improvement Programme is that by job-shadowing, council officers and voluntary sector officers can build a better understanding of their respective roles.

The day began with my first visit to the CAB's headquarters in Pentonville Road. Working with voluntary sector organisations in the borough it is easy to forget that in many cases they are part of London-wide and national organisations and that for somebody like Ann there is a complex set of external relationships to be managed.

The meeting, which brings together a mix of Ann's equivalents from a number of other London CABs and staff from the national organisation, is to discuss the implementation of the London Gateway Training project. This is an initiative to change the way in which the CAB provides services to the public by introducing gateway

assessors that speed up the handling of enquiries and make long queues outside CAB offices a thing of the past.

Ann is at the forefront of the project because Sutton is one of the first CABs nationally to have successfully implemented the new model. It is apparent that her creativity and leadership is pivotal to the work and much appreciated by her colleagues.

Early on in the meeting there was a discussion about how best to promote the pilot project with local authorities, in particular London councils. For me it's interesting to see the issue from the CAB perspective and to be able to suggest some of the ways to get buy-in. I was struck by the 'can do' attitude of all those present and a confidence that this ambitious project will be delivered successfully.

After a post-meeting sandwich lunch (more upmarket, I must acknowledge, than the standard municipal fare!), Ann took me to the Camden Arts Centre café where, over coffee and cheesecake, we talked through the report she is preparing for her next trustees meeting; the changes taking place in commissioning which have already seen some large bureaus losing contracts for legal advice work and mean increasingly there's a need to find strategic partners; and the theme of Sutton CAB's annual report this year – celebrating the contribution of young people. During the summer the CAB has had a large number of young people volunteering and Ann is keen to build upon this.

Again, it's apparent how much overlap there is between what Ann is doing and the work of the council. As an employer, the council is looking to attract more under 25s and it strikes me that many of the young people volunteering with Sutton CAB are acquiring skills that would be relevant to jobs within the council.

So, all told, I had a very interesting and worthwhile day, learning much more about the work that Ann does and getting to see things from a different perspective. At a time when we can do more and more of our work

through the web, it's important not to underestimate the value in building working relationships that are based on more than just the exchange of emails.

Next month, the tables will be turned when Ann shadows Paul Martin for a day-in-the-life of a council chief executive; and I very much hope that this will just be the start of a series of job-shadowing opportunities.

*Ann Kinahan, chief executive, Sutton Borough Citizens Advice Bureau*

Today I was privileged to pull up a chair next to Paul Martin for eight hours and to witness for myself some of the business of the London Borough of Sutton and to discover some of the current issues exercising our council's chief executive.

No doubt his day began a lot earlier, but at 9am Paul moved from his desk in the open plan office to the meeting room, and the week kicked off formally with his department executive heads' briefing meeting – a weekly look at key events from the previous seven days and a look forward to key issues for the following week. Having reviewed issues as diverse as the final drafting of the council's plan to help residents and businesses through the recession to the chief policy officer's voluntary work and preparations for Remembrance Sunday, Paul's team went back to their desks. The scene was set for the week, everyone knew what everyone else was doing and they could get on with their work.

The next meeting, following directly on, was that of the Programme Board for the new LIFE Centre, an exciting community resource for local young people and schools in Kimpton. The board was meeting to check the costings and agree the timetable for the building work following the exciting news that £4m of funding had been secured from My Place.

Individual meetings followed with a councillor and

with the head of the Safer Sutton Partnership before a welcome sandwich lunch and a free ranging discussion about local policy issues over a cup of coffee. I was then allowed to pop out to the Post Office while Paul hurried back to his desk for a meeting with one of his directors and a booked telephone call to give a reference for a member of staff.

The regular meeting with the council leader and deputy followed, cut short this week by the leader needing to leave for a meeting in London to explore options for retrieving the council's £5.5m frozen in an account of an Icelandic Bank UK subsidiary. The shortened meeting allowed time for an exchange of views with Paul on the best way to achieve effective communication within an organisation and for me to promote my own hopes for joined up advice services in Sutton.

The final meeting of the day was Paul's monthly address, which forms part of the induction of the council's new employees. Today there were something like 60 new recruits meeting for tea and to hear Paul set out the council's vision and values, and for him to receive their feedback both on what was working well for them and what could be better organised. As Paul said, employees, especially new ones, need both to understand where they fit into the organisation as a whole and that the head of that organisation is interested in them personally.

I was able to take a great deal from the day, both in terms of the time given to ensuring effective communication (the briefings with team members and with new employees, for example, as well as the communications team's contribution to every meeting); clarification of how our two organisations might be able to work together more effectively to support the community through a difficult period; and above all some valuable lessons in how to be open, transparent and to receive all kinds of feedback positively.

# part four: feedback and summary

## 10. feedback

In December 2008 we contacted 110 participants from the ten PIP groups to ask for their feedback on the programme. We received 58 replies (a response rate of 53 per cent). The majority of the respondents (82 per cent) had attended between three and four PIP sessions; the gap between the completion of the programme and participation in the survey ranged from eight months to two months.

The responses represent views from programme participants who work in both local authorities and the third sector (43 per cent and 53 per cent responses respectively), with an even spread across the ten areas.

### the survey

Participants were asked to rate the helpfulness of PIP in enabling, achieving and contributing to improvements on a range of issues associated with partnership working. In each case, there were five possible responses; 'Not helpful', 'Partially helpful', 'Neither helpful nor unhelpful', 'Helpful' and 'Very helpful'.

Participants were also asked "Is there anything you have done as a result of PIP that you may not have done otherwise"? There was then space to make any further comments. Responses to this question are included in the analysis below.

### findings

The table below shows how respondents rated the helpfulness of PIP in enabling them to:

	<b>Helpful or very helpful</b>	<b>Neither helpful nor unhelpful</b>	<b>Partially helpful</b>	<b>Not helpful</b>
Learn more about the perspective of people from other sectors	<b>90 %</b>	5 %	5 %	0 %
Feel more able to approach colleagues from other sectors	<b>75 %</b>	20 %	0 %	5 %
Gain more respect for colleagues from other sectors	<b>65 %</b>	28 %	5 %	2 %
Trust colleagues from other sectors more	<b>60 %</b>	24 %	16 %	0 %

90 per cent said PIP was 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in enabling them to learn more about the perspectives of people from other sectors:

*"As a result of PIP we have shared our learning and worked together to develop the local authority's Third Sector Commissioning Framework."*

*"It has helped raise wider awareness of services and structures across the borough."*

*"We have a shared understanding and a more holistic way of working across the voluntary and community sector... We have more of an understanding about the difficulties facing the council."*

75 per cent said PIP was 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in enabling them to feel more able to approach colleagues from other sectors to discuss issues and problems.

*"I am now more likely to contact a wider range of local authority colleagues about issues."*

*"I made a working relationship with statutory body representatives I would never have done otherwise."*

*"I am now more willing to consider using third sector secondments and commission them to do work which we may otherwise have done in-house."*

The table below shows how helpful respondents rated their involvement with PIP in enabling them to:

	<b>Helpful or very helpful</b>	<b>Neither helpful nor unhelpful</b>	<b>Partially helpful</b>	<b>Not helpful</b>
Overcome barriers and obstacles to partnership working	<b>79 %</b>	11 %	10 %	0 %
Manage cross-sector partnerships better	<b>63 %</b>	24 %	10 %	3 %
Develop a meaningful action plan for improving partnerships	<b>76 %</b>	14 %	5 %	5 %
Achieve better outcomes through partnership working	<b>78 %</b>	15 %	5 %	2 %

Overall, the response was very positive. 79 per cent of respondents rated PIP as 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in enabling them to overcome barriers and obstacles to partnership working, and 76 per cent of respondents gave the same rating for PIP's contribution towards achieving a meaningful action plan for improving partnerships.

*"We have a robust action plan in place and a full review of our voluntary sector Compact is underway based on a better joint understanding."*

*"I think it has cemented trust. Prior to PIP we were faltering, despite best efforts, and PIP came at just the right time."*

PIP was also rated highly in helping respondents to achieve better outcomes through partnership working, with 78 per cent saying that PIP had been 'helpful' or 'very helpful':

*"The action plan that was produced, following the PIP project, enhanced our position and confirmed the investment that had been made over time in establishing strong partnership arrangements."*

*"We have been able to use the action plan that was produced to great effect and this has been held up as an exemplar of best practice."*

Respondents rated the helpfulness of PIP in contributing to improvements in other areas, including:

- Cross-sector communication
- Commissioning (including procurement)
- Joint planning of services.

83 per cent of respondents describing PIP as 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in contributing to improvements in cross-sector communication:

*"It was a good process for having open dialogue and sharing how it feels from both sides."*

For the remaining two issues - 'commissioning (including procurement)' and 'joint planning of services' - 41 per cent and 55 per cent respectively of respondents said PIP's contribution was 'helpful' or 'very helpful', with 43 per cent and 45 per cent respectively rating the contribution as 'Neither helpful nor unhelpful'. These are issues which have been addressed in a number of action plans; as such, we might expect improvements to emerge over time. Despite this, participants did have examples of PIP having a more *immediate*, practical impact:

*"We have been very proactive in following actions from the PIP. Some examples include joint training, jointly planning services and joint attendance at conferences, as well as more input from the voluntary sector on commissioning and training opportunities."*

*"We have carried out a full review of our voluntary sector Compact in partnership with our CVS partners and we also have a robust plan for developing our joint approach to commissioning and further partnership working."*

## 11. summary: the value and lessons of PIP

In our report of the pilot programme in 2006<sup>11</sup>, we wrote that:

*"The PIP pilot exposes an 'implementation gap' between policy directives and practice on the ground. This suggests that public policy makers might benefit from seeing cross-sector partnership working as a highly specialised and resource intensive method of working which requires certain conditions to be met in order to be effective."*

Our recent experience of delivering the programme – in the north east, the north west and London – suggests that those conditions include: mutual understanding, open communication channels, shared goals and locally appropriate arrangements. Cross-sector partnership working continues to be challenging and demanding.

As such, it requires the kind of careful, bespoke support pioneered by the Partnership Improvement Programme:

*"It does make you take a step back away from the day job to see how things could work better."*

*"Participating in a programme also provides a focus and an impetus that might otherwise not have been there."*

*"PIP has reinforced my view that all parties need to remove historical baggage before a proper and well-balanced process of partnership working can take place, with clear outcomes and action points for all concerned."*

*"It's enabled the public sector and the voluntary sector to reach a common understanding on a variety of issues."*

Although the obstacles to effective and mutually beneficial cross-sector partnerships remain, the outcomes of the Partnership Improvement Programme are cause for optimism and the feedback from participants confirms that the programme:

- Tackles key issues of mutual understanding and shared goals
- Enables open and honest dialogue
- Develops strategies to overcome barriers
- Builds relationships and trust
- Develops open communication channels
- Focuses on local circumstances
- Provides focus, impetus and practical outcomes.

*"PIP gave us an opportunity to have open and honest dialogue in a facilitated session. It broke down a lot of barriers and greatly assisted cross-sector working in our area."*

*"PIP highlighted the barriers to effective partnership working and, from my perspective as a VCS representative, there remain huge barriers around trust and confidence between the sectors. However, the fact*

*we are working together and recognise these barriers exist and are detrimental to effective partnership working, is a starting point for progress."*

*"A colleague from the VCS and I have spoken together at local events and at a national conference. This has been about the value of partnership and cross-sector working. I don't believe that this would have happened without PIP."*

However, we also need to highlight the importance of processes aimed at mainstreaming partnership improvement. Participants in the Partnership Improvement Programme are often those people who are already most committed to partnership working. One of the challenges which they face at the end of the programme is to promote the action plan and achieve wider endorsement of new approaches to joint working. Whilst it can never be sufficient for a small number of individuals to carry the burden of improvement, there is evidence to suggest that PIP participants do have a vital ambassadorial role to play.

In several areas, strenuous efforts have been made to ensure that Partnership Improvement Action Plans are linked into and adopted by existing partnership structures (for example, the LSP, Compact Working Groups and Partnership Boards). This approach, together with endorsement from the most senior levels of both local authorities and the third sector, radically increases the potential for partnership improvement action to be adopted, as well as remain alive to contemporary events.

## **12. next steps**

For local authorities, the need to engage effectively with third sector organisations is more pressing than ever: the challenges posed by the economic downturn, public procurement, the personalisation agenda, new statutory duties in the empowerment bill – these are just some of the policy imperatives which require meaningful and effective local relationships and joint action.

For the third sector, the drivers to engage are equally pressing, including: the need to achieve and demonstrate impact, the challenge to improve efficiency, the importance of fulfilling charitable objectives, and the opportunity to influence and shape policies for local people.

Together, these pressures demand local partnerships which are responsive, responsible and productive. As a tested approach, the Partnership Improvement Programme can help to lay the foundations required to make partnerships work and to begin to facilitate the changes required to ensure that cross-sector working improves, to the mutual advantage of local authorities and third sector organisations, as well as local communities and neighbourhoods.

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The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

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