



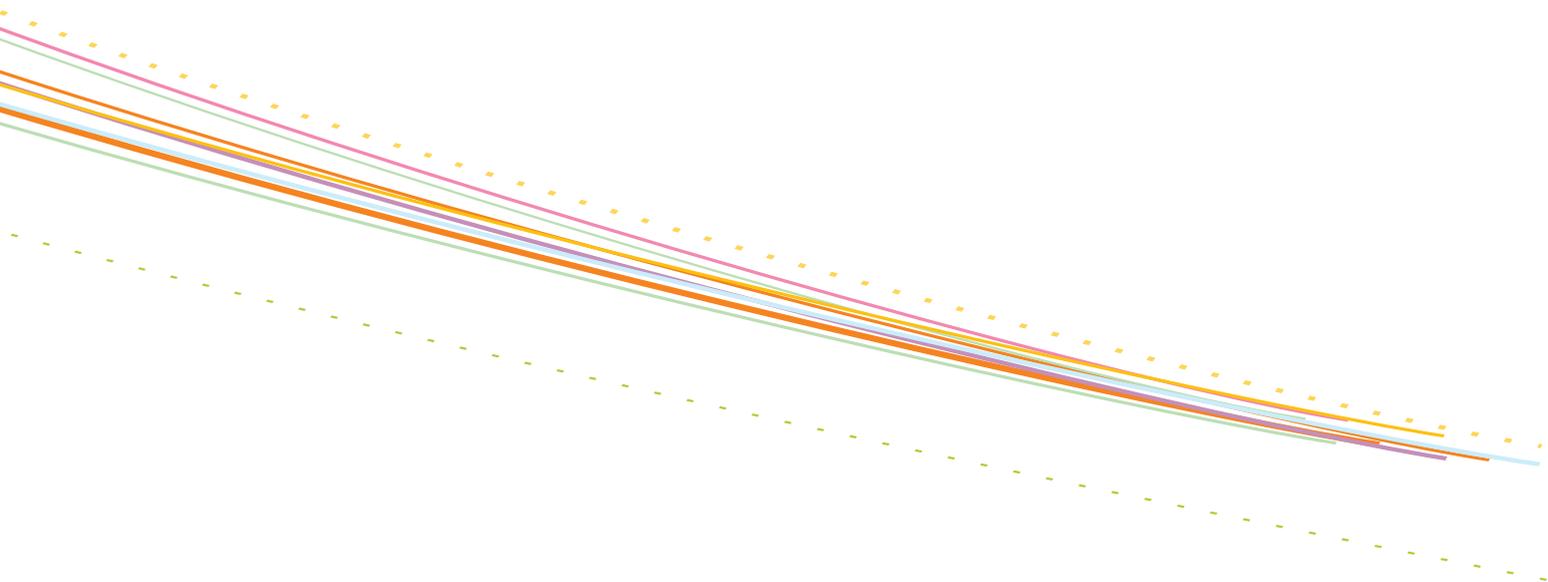
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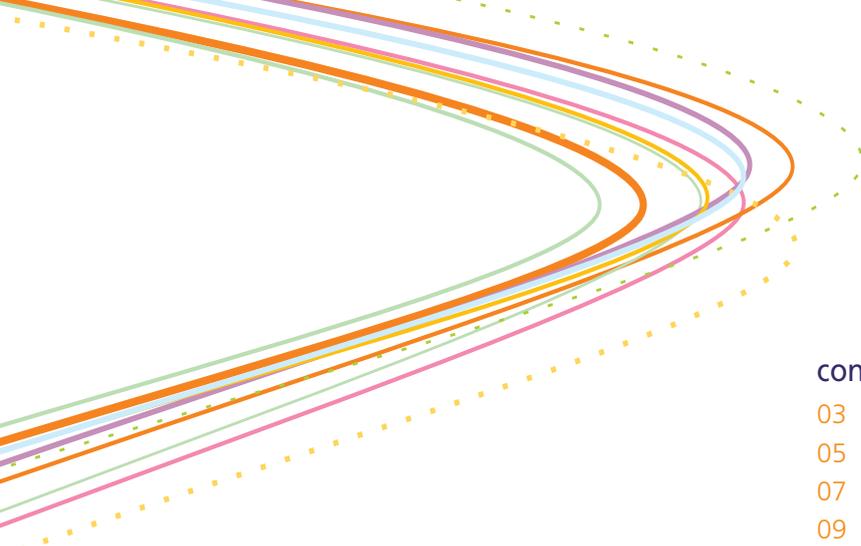


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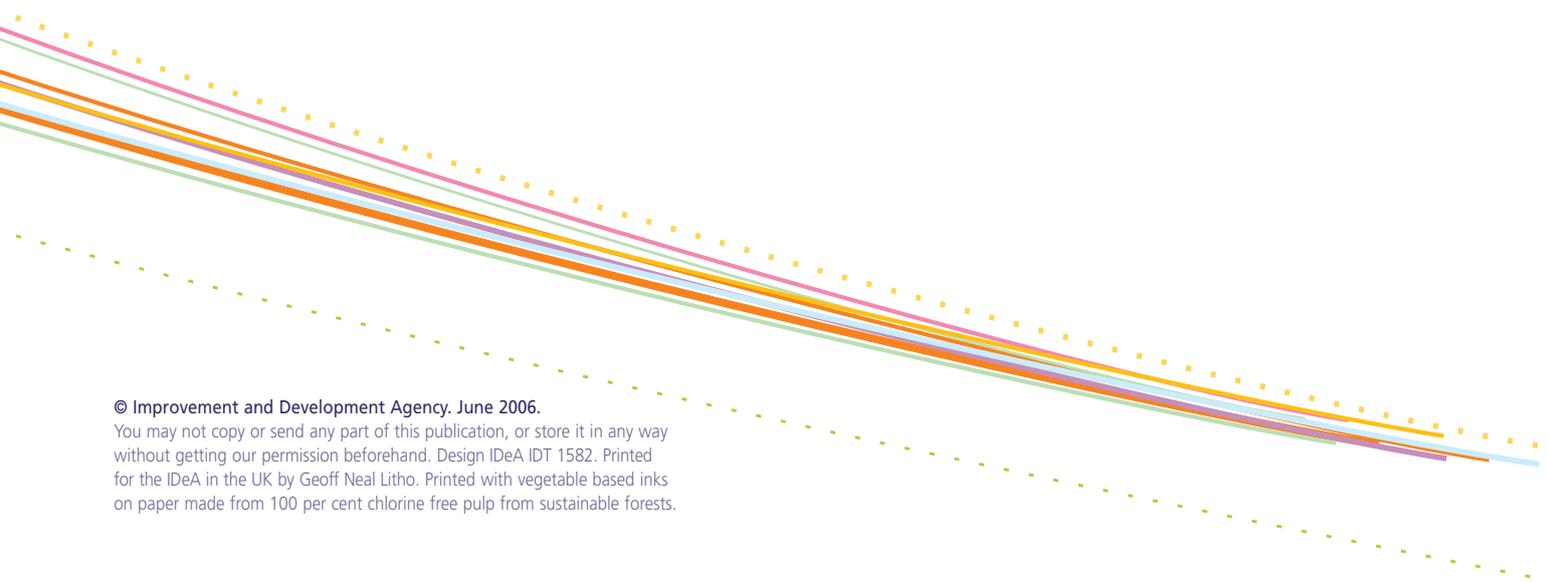
a report of the pilot partnership improvement
programme with voluntary and community
organisations and local authorities **june 2006**





contents

- 03 foreword
- 05 introduction to the report
- 07 part one: development of the PIP pilot
- 09 part two: public policy context of the PIP pilot
- 11 part three: key findings from the PIP pilot: drivers and benefits of cross-sector partnership working
- 15 part four: key outcomes from the PIP pilot: partnership improvement action plans
- 23 part five: discussion and implications for policy and practice
- 27 part six: evaluation and next steps
- 30 appendix one: abbreviations



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foreword

It is widely recognised that a healthy and vibrant voluntary and community sector (VCS) is a crucial part of strong communities. Local authorities need to work closely with the range of organisations active in local communities as part of their community leadership role. Strong democratic society requires both sectors to actively engage with each other. Equally an increasing number of key policies and initiatives require the two sectors to work in partnership. The VCS can contribute to better public services by delivering in partnership and providing a strong user and citizen voice to drive up standards; it can support the work of the council in developing greater community engagement; and through these roles adds to the social capital of the area.

Whilst advice and guidance has been issued from central government, the IDeA recognised the need to develop a hands-on approach to this crucial partnership improvement agenda and piloted the Partnership Improvement Programme.

Eight areas in England took part in the pilot Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), a joint initiative between the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research (ACVAR). We are extremely grateful to the 70 senior officers and practitioners from local authorities and voluntary and community organisations who participated so constructively and openly in this new, *collaborative*, approach to improve partnership working across the sectors.

The PIP pilot has revealed the difficulties and complexities of cross-sector partnership working. Toolkits and checklists can provide guidance for working more effectively together, but all of these aids – including the Compact – require skills, knowledge, trust and mutual awareness if they are to be useful. The PIP pilot has demonstrated that, because each local authority area is itself complex, and because there is great diversity between areas, uniform solutions imposed from outside are not appropriate.

The barriers and obstacles to cross-sector partnership working identified in the PIP pilot were shaped by *local* circumstances and *local* relationships. The flexible and adaptable approach used in the PIP pilot ensured that local solutions could be identified and developed to improve *local* partnership working.

I am delighted to present this report of the pilot projects to you, with thanks to all those involved, and hope that the experiences outlined here are of use to others across the voluntary and community sector and local government.



Lucy de Groot
Executive Director

'[The programme has provided] an opportunity and time to meet and discuss with senior local authority colleagues some of the issues and concerns associated with partnership activity and expectations. [Now there is] an increased understanding of the local VCS and the problems and barriers sometimes faced in partnership working, in particular the representational role of individual organisations.'

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

'The willingness of attendees to voice honest views, concerns, etc and to set aside the time to input into developments taking place locally has been incredibly valuable. I am very keen for the group to carry on its work and to keep the impetus going.'

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

introduction to the report

This is a summary report of the Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP), a collaborative initiative between the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research (ACVA), funded by the IDeA with support from the Home Office.

Part one briefly introduces the programme; part two then covers the public policy context of the PIP pilot. In parts three and four we summarise the key findings from the pilot: first, local drivers and benefits of cross-sector partnership working; second, key challenges and the local Partnership Improvement Action Plans. In part five we explore the key implications of the PIP pilot for both policy and practice. Finally, in part six, we present feedback from the evaluation and outline future plans for partnership improvement work.

The PIP pilot was concerned with ‘partnership working between local authorities and voluntary and community organisations’. In the report, this is described as ‘cross-sector partnership working’ and ‘partnership working across sectoral divides’. Whilst we do give examples from the eight pilot areas, in order to preserve confidentiality we do not refer to them by name.

authorship

This report was written by Ben Cairns with Sam Brier, Jane Harris, Margaret Harris and Helen Hughes.

Ben Cairns is the Director of the Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research (ACVAR) and the Director of the new Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR).

Sam Brier, PhD, and Jane Harris are Senior Research Associates of IVAR.

Margaret Harris, PhD, is the Professor of Voluntary Sector Organisation at Aston Business School, Chair of ACVAR and Academic Adviser to IVAR.

Helen Hughes is National Adviser (Voluntary and Community Sector) for the IDeA.

'The benefits I think are that I know the people at county much better on a formal and informal basis; very often we are in regular contact with grants officers but do not have the time to just sit and discuss how we work, etc as time is limited and usually it's on formal business.'

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

'It has been really valuable to devote time to this issue. Now we must make sure the partnership improvement action plan is delivered!'

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

part one: development of the PIP pilot

The overall aim of the PIP pilot was:

- to work with mixed groups from local authorities and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to build their capacity to work more effectively in partnership and to model a new way of developing sustainable cross-sector relationships.

The principal objectives of the pilot programme were:

- to enable senior staff in local authorities and the VCS to respond to the challenges of working across VCS/statutory sector boundaries and in VCS/statutory sector partnerships
- to develop an approach to more effective engagement and partnership working across sectoral divides.

The pilot was developed jointly by the IDeA and ACVAR, and supported by the Strategic Alliance of national VCS infrastructure organisations¹ (ACRE, bassac, Community Matters and NACVS). Helen Hughes at the IDeA was responsible for overall project management and administration. Coordination and facilitation were carried out by an ACVAR team led by Ben Cairns and comprising Sam Brier, Jane Harris and Selena Teeling.

In each of the eight areas, local authority participants (assistant chief executives; senior officers with lead responsibility for procurement, social services and other areas related to cross-sector working with the VCS²) were recruited by the IDeA through an open application process, and VCS participants (chief officers from local infrastructure organisations) by the Strategic Alliance. The pilot groups had between eight and 10 members, evenly split across the two sectors.

Earlier work in this area has mostly looked at collaboration from the separate viewpoints of the two sectors. The PIP pilot deliberately moved beyond such approaches to consider cross-sectoral collaboration *from a cross-sectoral perspective*. We were concerned to find ways in which partnership working between local authorities and VCOs could be improved through a *joint approach* to the practical problems raised by the multiple pressures for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Between October 2005 and March 2006, four half-day workshops were held in each area, each facilitated by two members of the ACVAR team.

borough	city	county	district
Camden	Birmingham	Derbyshire	Bassetlaw
Waltham Forest	Leicester	Cornwall	West Devon

1 Infrastructure organisations are those whose primary purpose is to provide infrastructure functions or services (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to front line organisations, Active Community Unit (2004) *ChangeUp: Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework for the Voluntary and Community Sector*, Home Office, London

2 For example: Directors of: Strategy and Finance, Children's Services, Older People's Services, Adult Services, Community Regeneration.

The following topics were discussed and debated by participants:

- experiences of cross-sector partnership working
- drivers of cross-sector partnership working
- distinctive features of VCOs and local authorities
- barriers and obstacles to effective cross-sector partnership working
- specific local challenges to improving cross-sector partnership working
- development and adoption of local action plans to improve cross-sector partnership working.

In order to model cross-sector collaboration in the workshops and to identify joint action to improve cross-sector working, we focused on points of commonality, rather than difference. As this was a *pilot*, programme content was continuously modified and adapted, in consultation with participants. In this way, we were able to respond to local issues and circumstances. For example, the content of the programme in Area 3 was altered after the first workshop in response to requests from participants for more opportunities to focus on funding processes. And in Areas 1 and 2, planned presentations by the facilitators were cancelled to allow for more group discussion.

This collaborative and iterative approach enabled each group to finish the programme by discussing a local Partnership Improvement Action Plan for its area. Over the following six weeks, the eight plans were written up, consulted upon and agreed by participants.

Progress reviews will be held this autumn in each of the eight pilot areas. These reviews will provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on practical changes initiated through the PIP pilot; attention will also be paid to revising and adjusting objectives set out in the local Partnership Improvement Action Plans.

part two: public policy context of the PIP pilot

In part two of the report we outline the two major themes in the policy environment for the PIP pilot: the interest in relationships between the governmental/public sector and the voluntary and community sector – particularly partnership and collaborative relationships – and pressures on local government to involve local communities.

The first theme relates to the voluntary and community sector's potential to expand its role in delivering welfare and other kinds of public services. As part of this agenda, both the Treasury's 2002 Cross Cutting Review³ and the Home Office's 2004 ChangeUp report⁴ express a desire to see real improvements in the relationship between voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and local government, particularly in relation to: funding and monitoring arrangements; service planning and service delivery; and community involvement. This theme is consistent with a broader shift towards 'partnership' working across the voluntary and community and governmental sectors, and the requirements for closer working on a range of new initiatives.

The second theme is essentially about increasing participation in grassroots political and social action, community cohesion⁵ and the building of 'social capital'⁶. This agenda is usually referred to by policy makers as 'promoting civil renewal'⁷; more recently, it has become incorporated into debates about 'local governance' and 'community leadership'⁸. As with the first theme, the relationship between local government and the voluntary and community sector is seen as critical.

Despite this policy push towards partnership working across sectoral boundaries, the practical experience of the Strategic Alliance⁹ suggests that many VCOs and local authorities experience difficulties in their relationships with each other.

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.

These concerns are reflected in experience from the Local Area Agreement (LAA) pilots that has shown that, although the emphasis of the original Government guidance was on local authorities working with the VCS as *equal partners*¹⁰, there remain a number of significant barriers to VCS participation in LAAs¹¹. However, without voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in the process, the credibility of LAAs can be significantly undermined; in particular, it becomes hard for the lead partners to demonstrate that local people have really contributed to the priorities being put forward.

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- 3 HM Treasury (2002) *The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery A Cross Cutting Review*, HM Treasury, London.
 - 4 Active Community Unit (2004) *ChangeUp: Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework for the Voluntary and Community Sector*, Home Office, London.
 - 5 LGA (2004) *Community Cohesion – An Action Guide*, LGA, London.
 - 6 Performance and Innovation Unit (2002) *Social Capital A Discussion Paper*, PIU, Cabinet Office, London; Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone*, Simon and Schuster, New York.
 - 7 Social Exclusion Unit (2001) *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal – National Strategy Action Plan*, Home Office, London.
 - 8 ODPM (2006) *All Our Futures: the Challenges for local governance in 2015*, ODPM, London.
 - 9 ACRE, bassac, Community Matters and NACVS.
 - 10 ODPM (2004) *Local Area Agreements: A prospectus*, ODPM, London.
 - 11 ODPM (2005) *A process evaluation of the negotiation of pilot Local Area Agreements*, ODPM, London.

Similarly, the national evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)¹² highlights the need to make a distinction between engaging the VCS and involving the wider community. It observes that, while LSPs need to fulfil both of these aims, in many partnerships VCS representatives are assumed to speak for the wider community. The report also stresses that capacity building within the VCS is essential for full participation, yet insufficient resources are being made available to enable this to happen. Despite the injection of resources into the VCS from the Home Office's ChangeUp programme, there is little evidence of funds filtering down to the local level.¹³

It is clear, therefore, that, although cross-sector partnership working continues to be an integral element of this government's public policy modernisation agenda, there are still significant obstacles to making it effective and productive for both VCOs and local authorities. This broader problem of governmental/voluntary and community sector relationships is addressed in three recent initiatives.

First, the 2005 Treasury discussion document 'Exploring the role of the third sector in public service delivery and reform'¹⁴ identified the need for both sectors to prioritise the development of cross-sectoral partnership working:

'The principal external barrier to the successful involvement of third sector organisations in public service delivery is a lack of awareness and understanding of the sector among those in government and public bodies.'

There are three key elements to improving awareness of the sector:

- *improving knowledge of the rationale for third sector involvement*
- *challenging misunderstandings and misrepresentations*
- *targeting key stakeholders.'* (page 45)

Second, the National Audit Office report on 'Working with the Third Sector'¹⁵, also published in 2005, proposed that:

'[Through] training and co-operation, greater trust between governmental authorities and the third sector [can be built] so that real partnership can be created.' (page 8)

Third, recent guidance from the Home Office Active Communities Unit¹⁶, has resulted in a push to make the Compact carry more weight and has led to proposals for the establishment of a 'Compact Commissioner', as an arm's length government agency, with an office and a team of staff.

Whilst these developments confirm the continued priority within central government for local authorities and VCOs to work in partnership, they also highlight the practical difficulties of implementation.

12 ODPM (2005) *National Evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships*, ODPM, London.

13 bassac and IVAR (2006, forthcoming) *The role and contribution of community based organisations to public services delivery and civil renewal*, bassac, London.

14 HM Treasury (2005) *Exploring the role of the third sector in public service delivery and reform*, HM Treasury, London.

15 National Audit Office (2005) *Working with the Third Sector*, National Audit Office, London.

16 Active Communities Unit (2005) *Strengthening partnerships: Next Steps for Compact*, Home Office, London.

part three: key findings from the PIP pilot: drivers and benefits of cross-sector partnership working

In part three we discuss the key findings from the PIP pilot in relation to drivers and benefits of cross-sector partnership working. The material which is presented here reflects collaborative discussions and findings that were broadly agreed by participants from both sectors in all eight pilot areas.

local drivers of cross-sector partnership working

There was a lot of similarity across the eight pilot areas about the factors that were driving cross-sector partnership working at a local level and influencing them to participate in partnerships. Broadly, four pressures to work in partnership were identified: political factors, including policy initiatives and local political relationships; financial drivers, including access to funding; involving local communities and building social capital; and potential organisational advantages, including organisational learning and network building.

political drivers

It was noted that there is, increasingly, not only an expectation, but often a requirement, from central government for local authorities to work in partnership with a range of external bodies, including VCOs. The majority of local authority participants mentioned *specific* policy initiatives as key drivers for cross-sector partnership working (eg. the 'civil renewal' and 'community cohesion' agendas; LAAs, LSPs, Comprehensive Performance Assessment).

From a VCS perspective, being involved in partnerships provided an opportunity both to learn about and, in *theory*, to influence local policy. The gradual reorganisation of welfare in the UK, coupled with more recent changes

in the national policy agenda, has led to an increased role and new opportunities for VCOs. Despite some of the challenges of working in partnership, most VCS participants felt that it was better to be at the partnership table than to miss out on opportunities that partnerships might present. Indeed, some participants admitted that the primary influence for their involvement in partnerships was a perception that not taking part would make their organisation vulnerable, and they highlighted the importance of 'being seen to participate' and 'knowing what's going on'.

financial drivers

Both VCS and local authority participants pointed out that the ability to access certain funding streams through forming and participating in partnerships was a strong driver for working together. In particular, VCS participants noted that trends in funding and commissioning were requiring closer working relationships between the local authority and the VCS. Again, however, participants stressed that access to funding, whilst important, was not the overwhelming driver of partnership working, and that cross-sector partnerships were desirable for their own sake.

There was also a perception that partnership working had the potential to deliver better value for money, by reducing duplication of effort and allowing more effective planning of service delivery. It was felt that local authorities faced increasing demands for services, and, with limited resources to meet client expectations, were turning more and more to the VCS to supplement local authority provision. Some local authority participants commented that working with the VCS was a route to financial savings, subject to partnership processes being managed properly.

involvement of local communities

A recurrent theme for local authority participants was the role of local authorities in providing 'community leadership'. It was noted that local authorities are an integral part of the government's community cohesion agenda, but could not fulfil their obligations to diverse communities on their own. A key pressure for cross-sector partnership working was, as one PIP Group put it, 'reaching the parts that local authorities cannot reach alone'. Participants in several of the pilot areas observed that working with VCOs enabled the local authority to fulfil its responsibility to reach and get closer to local communities. The ability to involve local people in issues affecting the community was perceived to be particularly important at a time of consistently low voter turn out in many areas. It was felt that working with the VCS enabled greater local accountability, since VCOs could act as a conduit for local people to voice their opinions and to participate in planning and service delivery. From a VCS perspective, working in partnership with the local authority was seen as an opportunity to facilitate the involvement of traditionally excluded members of local communities, in particular black and ethnic minority (BME) groups, faith groups and disabled people. For community-based organisations, community involvement has an importance in its own right (as an expression of mission and values), irrespective of public policy trends and initiatives.

organisational advantages

Both local authority and VCS participants described the opportunities for organisational learning presented by partnership working across sectoral boundaries. Participants were influenced to work in partnership by a recognition that each sector could bring specific skills and expertise from which the other could learn. VCS participants pointed to the importance for individual organisations of building networks across both organisations and sectors. Local authority participants spoke of the benefits of having close relationships with a number of specialist VCOs – those with expertise in working with certain client groups, for example – which could be approached to provide advice and assistance on a fairly informal basis.

local benefits of cross-sector partnership working

For many PIP pilot participants, local benefits of cross-sector partnership working were linked to drivers. In particular, participants identified examples of partnerships that were perceived to have led to better outcomes for service users. For example, although it had taken some time for strategies to be translated into outcomes, participants in one area noted that cross-sector partnerships had led to tangible improvements in services for families, children and young people, through the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and the Early Years Development Partnership. In another area, the LSP was chaired by a representative from the VCS, and it was felt that the participation of the VCS at this level had helped to facilitate the greater involvement of excluded groups in the LSP.

'I think that if you can maintain this level of partnership then it will have a big impact. It certainly has for [us]. I feel that now we are beginning to be recognised by the local authority and that they are starting to see the value. I also believe that it has given me an insight into the problems faced by the councils working very often to a tight agenda.'

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

'This was a valuable opportunity to discuss the issues in an open and honest way and to identify solutions in an action plan that reflects the real potential to make significant and lasting change.'

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

Some PIP Groups talked about partnerships that had apparently achieved greater impact through shared expertise and joint problem solving; in these cases the whole, in the form of the partnership, had turned out to be greater than the sum of its parts. The work of the Crime and Disorder Partnership was cited as an example of this in one pilot area, where the progress made in addressing community safety issues through a strong cross-sector partnership contrasted with a perceived lack of progress made by other local partnerships, which were not functioning as effectively. Others shared experiences of partnerships where partners had taken the opportunity to be innovative and to approach issues and problems in creative ways. For example, in one area the planning of an event to launch the Compact had encouraged partners to think more laterally about their relationship, through the use of creative approaches such as art and performance.

For some participants, working in cross-sector partnerships had exploded previously held beliefs about other sectors; for example, local authority participants had been surprised to learn that VCOs could also operate in a bureaucratic way, while VCS participants had learned that innovation was not the exclusive preserve of VCOs. This debunking of myths was seen as one of the ways in which partnership working had fostered goodwill between local authorities and the VCS. In several of the pilot areas, participants from both sectors were able to share their previous fears about working in cross-sector partnerships, and to acknowledge that their perceptions had now changed.

summary

It should be noted that, whilst we have concentrated on areas of similarity across the eight pilot areas, each individual group demonstrated subtle differences of emphasis and of interpretation. In some areas, for example, financial drivers were not seen as overly significant, whereas the need to work together to facilitate community involvement was seen as the highest priority. In other areas, participants identified local politics as the biggest influence.

A number of participants stressed the importance of recognising that, despite having a shared view across sectors about local drivers and potential benefits, cross-sector partnership working itself was still fraught with practical difficulties. For VCS participants, these difficulties were closely associated with a sense of power imbalance and inequality between the sectors.

Whilst objectives for cross-sector partnership working were broadly shared – for example, helping older people to remain independent, improving educational attainment, reducing crime, creating a sense of community cohesion – experiences of implementation and views about improvement varied, both between pilot areas and sectors.

part four: key outcomes from the PIP pilot: partnership improvement action plans

In part four we discuss five key challenges to cross-sector partnership working from the PIP pilot as a whole:

- capacity of partners
- representation and participation
- governance of partnerships
- funding mechanisms
- relationships between partners.

First, we briefly outline each challenge; second, we present specific difficulties discussed in individual PIP pilot groups, to illustrate how the general challenges played out in specific areas. Finally, we highlight the different responses from individual areas with examples of action set out in the eight local Partnership Improvement Action Plans (PIAP).

capacity of partners

capacity of partners, introduction

All PIP pilot participants stressed that working in partnership was immensely time consuming and that both the VCS and local authorities lacked sufficient capacity – in terms of staff time, skills and funding – to meet all the expectations placed upon them. Traditional approaches to capacity building were seen to have been unsuccessful on account of their failure to move beyond a silo approach and take an integrated approach to the different needs of *all* stakeholders (eg. local authorities; service providing voluntary organisations and community-based organisations).

The sheer volume of partnerships itself created problems, in particular within large counties, where it was the norm for senior local authority officers and directors of VCS infrastructure organisations to be asked to be involved in around 60 formal partnerships. These problems were exacerbated in rural areas, where travel time was likely to make attending meetings more onerous, and in two tier authorities, where the number of partnerships was multiplied and there was sometimes confusion between accountability at a district and county level.

The burden of making partnerships function well often fell onto a small number of individuals, who picked up jobs because no-one else would do them or because their involvement was politically important. The corollary of this was that partnerships were seen in some cases to depend too much on individual personalities, raising concerns about organisational and community accountability, and project sustainability.

capacity of partners, local examples of challenges

- The Area 1 PIP Group thought that partnership working required a distinctive set of skills, for example: communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and policy analysis.
- In Area 8 there was a strong feeling that the VCS, especially infrastructure organisations, did not have sufficient capacity, in terms of time and funding, to be involved in the range of partnerships that existed: partnership participation required a choice between increasing capacity or reducing involvement.

capacity of partners, local examples of partnership improvement action

- A sub-group in Area 1 will utilise ChangeUp funding to develop a skills audit, organise cross-sector job swaps and mentoring and circulate policy briefings to the VCS, in order to build capacity to participate.
- The Area 7 PIAP has designated members of the PIP Group to enhance the capacity building nature of the LAA, in order to achieve some of the LAA targets.
- The Area 8 PIAP proposes that VCOs review their current involvement in all partnerships, using organisational outcomes and benefits as a measure. It also makes recommendations for the costs of participation in partnerships to be written in to all new service level agreements and for future funding to recognise the full cost of participation.

representation and participation

representation and participation, introduction

In almost all of the pilot areas, arrangements for the involvement of VCOs in planning and strategic partnerships (eg. LSPs; Children and Young People's Strategic Partnerships; Early Years Development Partnerships; Crime and Disorder Partnerships) were seen as problematic and a critical barrier to more effective partnership working. Amongst most local authority participants, there was an expectation that the VCS should be 'represented'; in some areas, officers made clear their preference for local VCOs to 'speak with one voice'. VCS participants, on the other hand, had difficulty with the notion of 'representing' a sector that is extremely diverse and, in some areas, increasingly competitive since the changes initiated by the Treasury's 2002 Cross Cutting Review^{xv} and the Home Office's 2004 ChangeUp report.

There were also obstacles of a practical nature in the form of the willingness and capacity of individual VCOs to undertake the consultation and feedback necessary to represent both the VCS and local communities effectively. Historically, this role had proved very difficult and, for many VCOs, had threatened to undermine their independence. It was widely felt that partnership working would be improved by both parties having clearer expectations of how representation of, and consultation with, the VCS might best and most appropriately be achieved, within the constraints of available resources. This process might be supported by investment in skills development for key people within the VCS, around advocacy, policy awareness and strategy.

representation and participation, local examples of challenges

- In Area 1, participants from both sectors were concerned that there was a lack of clarity about the mandate, role and responsibilities of VCS 'representatives'. There were often inconsistent lines of communication and reporting between VCS representatives and the wider VCS and a lack of clarity about their accountability.
- Concern was expressed by both local authority and VCS participants in Area 2 about incoherent arrangements for co-ordination and representation, often leading to a lack of efficiency, effectiveness and impact in cross-sector working.
- The PIP Group in Area 5 accepted that the VCS could not abdicate responsibility for trying to articulate the views of local VCOs on key issues and initiatives simply because it was apparently impossible to speak with one voice.
- In Area 8, infrastructure VCOs were often invited to represent the views of the entire sector; in a rural area, with geographically dispersed and diverse organisations with different interests and perspectives, this required more resources than were available and, in some cases, a greater volume of partnership working than was desirable or appropriate.

representation and participation, local examples of partnership improvement action

- The Area 1 PIP Group plans to rethink the ideas of 'representation' and 'VCS representatives' by using 'VCS participants' to describe individuals who can offer a VCS perspective in cross-sector partnerships. The VCS will carry out further work in: identifying the range of skills and attributes required for VCS participation; establishing transparent processes for the selection and adoption of VCS participants in partnerships; and initiating further discussions to determine the level of accountability and reporting back that can realistically be expected.
- The Area 5 PIAP sets out a number of ways in which the role of VCS infrastructure bodies and arrangements for VCS representation could be improved. These include: developing a process for determining which VCOs should be involved in which partnership structures and how they can then be supported, and agreeing which organisations would be most appropriate to lead on which topics. In order to gain support for the capacity building required to achieve this, the PIAP will be circulated to all LSPs in the area.
- The Area 7 PIAP has allocated individuals from the PIP Group to review arrangements for VCS representation and consider new approaches for communication within and across the wider VCS.
- In Area 2 the existing PIP Group will continue to meet and to oversee a review of existing VCS infrastructure which will include consideration of options for strengthening, co-ordinating and improving the longer term efficiency and sustainability of the local VCS infrastructure, in particular its 'representative' function.
- The PIP Group in Area 4 identified a need to examine and rationalise how VCOs could best participate, given the number of partnerships, the different levels at which they function and the lack of apparent links between them.

governance of partnerships

governance of partnerships, introduction

It was noted that 'partnership' is often used to describe a structure or group as well as a way of working together. Comments about local obstacles and barriers related to a range of partnerships between the local authority and the VCS, from contractual exchange to full participation in strategic partnership groupings.

Partnerships tended to be formed quickly, with little or no preparation or time to consider ultimate outcomes, terms of reference or governance arrangements. Many partnerships had been formed at short notice to meet timescales imposed by central government policies, and were immediately expected to focus on meeting set targets. There were widespread examples of partnerships that had been established with no clear outcomes, timescale or review processes, and it was thought that many partnerships would benefit from being time limited and wound up once agreed outcomes had been achieved.

It was widely suggested that, ideally, the structure and membership of partnerships should follow from an overall purpose and intended outcomes, but, again, this did not always happen. Membership sometimes comprised people who were located at the wrong level in their organisations to make the necessary decisions. In other instances the structure of the partnerships themselves meant that it was unclear how decisions were made, pointing to a fundamental difficulty with the overall 'governance' of these partnerships. Often partnership structures were seen as an obstacle to transparency and accountability, with blurred boundaries between organisational and partnership roles and a lack of clarity about how decisions were communicated or consulted on outside partnership meetings.

'Simply getting the council and voluntary sector into a longer term discussion that is not fraught with conflict is worth its weight. This process will support the Compact discussions, and will help break down the misunderstanding between the Council and sector.'

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

'We don't normally have, or allow ourselves, time to talk through the issues. This programme has given us the space to discuss difficult and often intransigent issues and has provided a really useful intellectual sounding board. We now have a sound basis for taking this work forward.'

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

At their worst, partnerships were seen as ‘tokenistic’, or ‘pretend partnerships’, where decisions were actually made elsewhere, with the wider partnership simply rubber stamping or acting as a ‘talking shop’. Most participants had experienced this, and it was felt that partnerships tended to function in this way either when the purpose and outcomes were unclear at the outset, or when partnerships were formed to fulfil a requirement imposed from elsewhere.

governance of partnerships, local examples of challenges

- In Area 1 the PIP Group expressed concern about the agenda for cross-sector partnership working often being pre-set and pre-determined by central government, thus removing much of the potential power of local partnerships as well as restricting innovation.
- The Area 7 PIP Group was concerned about the lack of VCS and community involvement in setting outcomes for LAAs. This concern was further reflected in the role of the LSPs, where the local authority was seen as dominant and the VCS as lacking basic awareness of LSP objectives.
- Clarity about the purpose and accountability of partnerships was identified by the Area 8 PIP Group as a key concern. It was often unclear how partnerships fitted with the council’s priorities and few specified the rights and responsibilities of participants, thus making lines of accountability unclear.
- In Area 4, the PIP Group noted the lack of clarity of purpose in many partnerships, the differing expectations held by participants and confused governance arrangements.
- The Area 5 PIP Group highlighted the management of cross-sector partnerships in a two-tier authority as a specific challenge: co-ordination between district and county plans and partnerships was extremely resource intensive, with a lack of funds to meet those expectations.

governance of partnerships, local examples of partnership improvement action

- Members of the Area 1 PIP Group will widely promote and apply the programme learning (eg. to the LAA, LSPs and local VCS boards) and will implement action concerning preparation for partnerships.
- The PIAPs in Areas 4, 7 and 8 also specify a commitment to action around preparation for partnerships.
- The PIP Group in Area 2 will continue to meet and will contribute to the development of Compact Plus by exploring the possible introduction of pre-partnership agreements.
- In Area 4, the PIAP focuses upon the introduction of a project management approach to the governance of cross-sector partnerships that, it is hoped, will improve their efficiency and transparency. This will begin with a mapping exercise of VCOs to consider the purpose and outcomes of the partnerships in which they are involved and seek to rationalise their involvement.
- In Area 5, a dedicated working group has been set up to work alongside the local VCS infrastructure consortium to improve the organisation and management of partnerships, including arrangements for linking district and county partnerships.
- In Area 8, the PIAP outlines a number of initiatives regarding the governance and evaluation of partnerships, including: a joint review of existing partnerships to determine their purpose and benefit; the development of a statement of roles and capacity for all partners; the introduction of written terms of reference for all new partnerships. Proposals for change will be reported to the Strategy and Resources Committee, the LSP, the local infrastructure consortium and other interested bodies.

funding mechanisms

funding mechanisms, introduction

Participants in some areas observed that local authorities still lacked a common understanding of, and approach to the 'added value' that the VCS could bring, in addition to the straightforward delivery of services for an agreed price. This often persisted outside the partnership arena, with local authority officers involved in cross-sector partnerships facing the task of making the case for the added value of the VCS to other local authority colleagues or elected members. This problem was seen to be exacerbated by a widespread failure amongst VCOs to demonstrate their value and impact beyond anecdotal evidence.

It was thought that there is still confusion about the difference between grants, contracts, service level agreements and commissioning, and about the concept of full cost recovery and how it can be implemented in practice. PIP pilot participants from both sectors described the funding relationship as confused and unsatisfactory; in particular, concern was expressed about levels of investment, as well as the transparency and appropriateness of arrangements for measuring and reporting outcomes. In particular, VCS participants pointed to a general lack of understanding amongst local authorities about the importance of proportionality in reporting arrangements.

funding mechanisms, local examples of challenges

- In Area 3, the local authority wanted to involve the VCS in the process of designing services without recognising the true costs of providing them. There was little agreement on which funding arrangements were appropriate for which types of VCS activity.
- Similarly, in Area 2 a need for improvements to commissioning arrangements was identified, in particular to the preparation of tender briefs and timetables, and the transparency of decision-making processes.

funding mechanisms, local examples of partnership improvement action

- The PIAP in Area 2 includes proposals for the continuation of the PIP Group in order to monitor the implementation of the local authority Commissioning Review.
- In Area 3, the PIP Group is pursuing issues around commissioning with the local authority Corporate Working Group and is organising a seminar with elected members, as well as linking the issue to the scrutiny committee process.
- In Area 5, the PIP Group is carrying out a review of the 'added value' of VCOs through the district LSPs.

relationships between partners

relationships between partners, introduction

Despite a willingness to work together, local authority and VCS participants observed that there remained cultural differences between the two sectors, which were sometimes seen as an obstacle to effective partnerships. Examples of the ways in which these differences manifested themselves included the relative formality of meetings, the language used and speed of decision making – with local authorities and the VCS cited in equal measure as being slow to make decisions or unable to delegate decision making to partnership ‘representatives’. Frustration was expressed on both sides: VCS participants commented on the dominance of a local authority ‘meeting culture’ and jargon, as well as an inequality of resources to support partnership working; and some local authorities questioned the skills and capacity of VCO participants in partnerships.

Lack of trust was cited in some pilot areas as an obstacle to effective partnership working. It was felt that, where partners were mistrustful of each other, this arose from a belief that participants in partnerships were there to protect their own interests, rather than to advance those of the partnership or local community. In such cases, it is questionable whether these cross-sector arrangements could genuinely be described as ‘partnerships’.

relationships between partners, local examples of challenges

- The participants in Areas 1, 2 and 6 all remarked on the cultural differences between the local authority and the VCS and linked this to a lack of trust and mutual understanding about respective roles. Participants referred to the difficulties experienced by individuals and organisations in letting go of traditional ways of doing things in order to adopt approaches more conducive to working in partnership with other sectors.

relationships between partners, local examples of partnership improvement action

- The Area 3 PIAP includes a mapping exercise intended to describe the VCS and to outline its service delivery activities, in order to build and share intelligence on the shape, scope, role and impact of the sector in future strategic planning. It is hoped that this exercise might help to build mutual awareness and understanding.
- The PIAP in Area 6 is based on a senior policy officer from the local authority securing an initial six month period to co-ordinate and implement a process of activities, meetings and reflection on cross-sector partnership working. The project will seek to understand the ‘cultural paradigms’ of a selection of public and VCS organisations and to identify the factors and conditions in the area that will make it easier for those organisations to work in partnership.
- In all eight areas, participants from both sectors emphasised the positive contribution of the PIP pilot itself to building trust and enhancing skills and ability to work in partnership across sectoral divides.

'I do believe there is an increased awareness of others' barriers and drivers, etc. and an improvement in personal relationships between our council and us – I am much more likely to pick up the phone now than before!'

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

'All LA policy officers should be forced to participate in the future!'

LOCAL AUTHORITY PARTICIPANT'S FEEDBACK

part five: discussion and implications for policy and practice

This pilot Partnership Improvement Programme has highlighted the complexity and difficulty of partnership working between local government and the voluntary and community sector (VCS). In part five of this report we draw on the findings set out in parts three and four to discuss important lessons from the PIP pilot for policy makers and practitioners alike.

public policy agenda

Two distinct but related themes dominated the policy context for the PIP pilot. First, the interest in relationships between the governmental/public sector and the voluntary and community sector – particularly partnership and collaborative relationships. Second, pressures on local government to involve local communities. Running through these two themes is a set of assumptions about the benefits of ‘joined up’ approaches to delivery of services: greater efficiency; deeper reach into communities; more effective responses to complex problems.

Despite these assertions, the experience of the PIP pilot suggests that it is extremely difficult to work across sectoral divides. PIP pilot participants highlighted numerous practical problems that stand in the way of effective partnership working: insufficient resources; lack of appropriate skills or personnel; unrealistic agendas and timescales. In almost all cases, the problem was not essentially about willingness or compliance. Rather it was, in effect, a policy implementation gap; in other words, a mismatch between, on the one hand, public policy directives and, on the other, the practical reality on the ground.

This finding supports arguments for public policy makers to take much greater account of the actual experience of those charged with the implementation of cross-sector partnerships. Recent public policy initiatives – most notably the ODPM report, *All Our Futures: the Challenges for local governance in 2015*¹⁷ and the Treasury’s establishment of a new Charity and Third Sector Finance Unit – provide a genuine opportunity for this policy implementation gap to be addressed by bringing policy and practice closer together.

local differences

Earlier work concerned with improving cross-sector partnership working has generally taken a uniform approach; toolkits and checklists imply that, if participants follow a set of prescribed guidelines, relationships and outcomes will be improved.

The PIP pilot, however, suggests otherwise. Whilst we found a great deal of consistency across each of the eight areas – for example, in relation to pressures to work in partnership, and barriers and obstacles – we also found subtle but significant variation when it came to identifying practical, locally appropriate, solutions to identified problems. In almost all cases, these differences (and the need, therefore, for local solutions) could be traced back to a set of key variables, in particular:

- the history of cross-sector relationships. In other words, is there a tradition of conflict and mistrust or do people work together in an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding and respect?
- the attitudes of key personnel within the local authority. Are VCOs viewed, in simple terms, as unprofessional and awkward or seen as desirable and useful partners?

¹⁷ ODPM (2006) *All Our Futures: the Challenges for local governance in 2015*, ODPM, London.

- relationships *within* the voluntary and community sector. Are there existing arrangements for coordination and representation between VCOs or is there a dominant culture of competition?
- capacity to work together. Are there key people within both sectors equipped with the necessary set of skills, in addition to time and resources, to work across sectoral divides?

In the eight pilot areas, these variables influenced the specific ways in which problems manifested themselves, affected how successfully and effectively local authorities and VCOs were able to work in partnership together and shaped the options available for improvement. They are a reminder, again, of the critical importance of *local* solutions to the challenges of cross-sector partnership working. Blanket demands to ‘work better together’ ignore the subtle differences of each locality – its history, its politics and its people.

governance of cross-sector partnerships

Whilst the rhetoric, within central government, is effectively about local authorities and VCOs working together in a ‘partnership of equals’, the PIP pilot has revealed profound mismatches: of expectations, resources, power and influence.

However, this did not deter participants from seeking new approaches to working together. Although the PIP pilot demonstrated that local authorities and the VCS approach cross-partnership working from different perspectives and different starting points, the programme also revealed that their respective interests and concerns did coincide at various points. For example, there were numerous examples of a shared commitment to extending services more widely across the breadth of the community. So, it was possible to identify discrete initiatives where partners might come together to achieve an exchange that could secure more and better outcomes.

This reinforces the importance of preparation for partnership working, identified as a priority in many of the pilot areas. Pre-partnership agreements were widely proposed as a core element of improving the governance of cross-sector partnerships; they are a way of addressing purpose and roles, as well as an opportunity to invest in a development phase to enable participants to anticipate and address some of the challenges of this kind of working. The benefits of such an approach to governance might include: a more consensual approach to collaboration; greater consistency of expectations; transparency around accountability; more focus on practical outcomes; and seeing partnerships as a means to an end, thus avoiding them becoming ‘talking shops’ and merely an end in themselves.

representation

Both local authority and VCS participants in the PIP pilot described real difficulties around the theme of 'representation'. What is the mandate of VCS participants in cross-sector partnerships? In areas with low voter turnout, from what source do local authorities derive their legitimacy? How can either sector genuinely claim to act on behalf of diverse and dispersed communities?

The discussion of local drivers of cross-sector partnership working set out in Part Two showed that local authorities viewed VCOs as important conduits for reaching and engaging with local communities. And that role for VCOs, acting at the interface between state and citizen, is being increasingly promoted within the new 'neighbourhood governance' agenda.¹⁸ However, the pilot highlighted a myriad of conceptual and practical difficulties around the implementation of this role. For example, in areas where relationships amongst VCOs were historically fractious, the challenges of collective organisation were acute. These difficulties have been exacerbated by emerging tensions within the voluntary and community sector: between service providers and more traditional community based organisations; between large and small organisations; and between infrastructure bodies. Concerns were also raised about the need to reconcile the local authority's desire for efficient and consistent lines of communication with the VCS, with the diversity and difference of the VCS.

Some pilot areas, however, could point to more robust and durable arrangements for managing the dialogue between sectors; these shared a number of key features, including:

- VCS 'champions' within the local authority
- mature relationships and mutual respect and understanding between key individuals in both sectors
- recognition of the distinctive features and independence of VCOs
- transparent models for the recruitment and selection of individuals to act as lead participants in cross-sector partnerships
- adequate investment by the local authority in VCS partnership participation costs.

¹⁸ Miliband, D. (2006) 'Empowerment and Respect: Building Change from the bottom up', Speech to the Cleaner, Safer, Greener Conference, 13 March 2006.

summary

The pilot Partnership Improvement Programme has highlighted some important lessons about cross-sector partnership working for policy makers and practitioners.

First, it reveals a potentially encouraging consensus within and across sectors about the drivers and challenges of cross-sector partnership working; this provides a platform for improvement. However, the PIP pilot also highlights the critical importance of local solutions that are sensitive to and grounded in local history, politics and relationships. Failure to respect these local differences is unlikely to result in practical improvements.

Second, 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.

Third, those conditions for successful cross-sector partnership working can be seen to include:

- appropriate governance arrangements (including adequate preparation for all participants)
- mutual understanding and acceptance of difference (both within and across sectors)
- investment in time, money and skills development
- transparent and consistent arrangements for the identification and selection of all participants.

Finally, it reveals that the kind of *collaborative* approach to improving cross-sector partnership working and relationships pioneered by the IDeA/ACVAR Partnership Improvement Programme can lead to practical improvements, for *both* sectors. These include:

- increased trust and mutual understanding
- new approaches to governance of partnerships, including the introduction of pre-partnership agreements
- new initiatives to respond to the challenges of representation and communication
- investment in building skills and capacity.

part six: evaluation and next steps

participants' evaluation

The pilot partnership improvement programme comprised four workshops for mixed groups of senior staff from local authorities and VCOs in eight areas of England. At the end of the programme, participants were asked to evaluate their experience:

- 80 per cent rated the programme materials as 'good' or 'excellent'
- 85 per cent rated the programme content as 'good' or 'excellent'
- 90 per cent rated the programme facilitation as 'good' or 'excellent'.

In addition, participants were asked about the extent to which specific learning outcomes had been met:

- 80 per cent reported that they had significantly increased their knowledge and understanding of the organisation, management and accountability challenges of cross-sector partnership working
- 80 per cent reported that they had significantly increased their ability to apply this knowledge to practical situations.

Overall, 90 per cent of participants stated that the programme had met their expectations and confirmed that there had been significant improvements in:

- mutual awareness and understanding across sectoral divides
- the development of more open and trusting relationships
- the establishment of new relationships and networks, both within and across sectors.

The IDeA and IVAR¹⁹ are committed to building on the positive experience and important lessons of this pilot and hope to continue to develop this collaborative approach to partnership improvement over the next three years. The outline of the 2006–09 programme incorporates a number of critical and practical suggestions for changes from PIP pilot participants.

These include:

- new arrangements for recruitment to ensure appropriate participation from both sectors and the identification of 'lead contacts' from both sectors
- new arrangements for preparation to ensure that programme content is relevant to each individual area
- less emphasis on presentations and more opportunity for group discussion and practical work
- the introduction of follow-up support to assist with the implementation of local Partnership Improvement Plans.

¹⁹ IVAR, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, is a new, independent, charitable research institute which has been set up to build on the work of the Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research.

next steps...

areas for delivery

A total of 50 top tier local authorities across the nine English regions will be selected for participation in the three year programme. The programme will be delivered region by region to enable maximum opportunities for shared learning and mentoring. Upon completion of delivery in each region we will work with programme participants to organise Regional Learning and Mentoring events to ensure all authorities have the opportunity to access and utilise the learning about effective models and best practice in their area.

programme participants

Up to six senior local authority participants and six VCS participants for each area will be identified and selected by the IDeA and IVAR, in conjunction with the four national infrastructure organisations and local ChangeUp consortia. Particular attention will be paid to supporting the participation of people from local BME networks and LAA providers. Lead VCS and local authority participants will be nominated for each area to act as central points for communication.

programme objectives

The 2006–2009 Programme will have four principal objectives:

- to build trust and mutual understanding across sectoral divides
- to enable senior staff in local government and the VCS to take the lead in responding to the challenges of working across VCS/local authority boundaries and in VCS/ local authority partnerships
- to develop and implement local improvement plans for more effective engagement and partnership working across sectoral divides
- to share models of effective cross-sector partnership working and areas of best practice.

programme outcomes

By the end of the programme it is expected that participants will:

- understand the policy context and organisational pressures for VCS/local authority partnership working
- know about the distinctive organisational features and challenges of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and local authorities
- understand the organisation, management and accountability challenges of VCS/local authority partnership working
- understand the pre-conditions for effective cross-sector partnership working
- apply this knowledge and understanding to achieving improvements in cross-sector partnership working.

advisory arrangements

A Partnership Improvement Programme Reference Group will be established to:

- act as a critical sounding board for the ongoing and future development of the programme
- advise on programme content and materials
- discuss key findings
- review learning and outcomes.

Membership of the PIP Reference Group will include the CEOs of ACRE, bassac, Community Matters and NACVS, as well as senior officers of both local authorities and VCOs that participated in the pilot.

model of delivery

The programme will have three core elements:

i. **preparation**

Each area will be visited in advance by the IVAR Partnership Improvement Team and all participants will receive a full briefing on the programme (face to face or electronic): purpose, content, process, time commitments, benefits. This will ensure that participants understand the rationale and style of the programme, as well as enabling the Partnership Improvement Team to familiarise themselves with relevant local initiatives.

ii. **delivery**

Four workshops will be delivered in each local authority area by two members of the Partnership Improvement Team, with intervals of four to six weeks between each one. Workshops will be held in both VCS and local authority premises.

The core content of the four workshops will be based on the PIP pilot; appropriate adaptations will be made during the course of the programme to reflect local circumstances and priorities, as well as emerging policy trends. Workshops will be interactive and will include presentations by participants and group work. At the fourth workshop, participants will aim to reach consensus on their draft Local Partnership Improvement Action Plan (based on their own ideas and suggestions); this will be accompanied by an outline implementation plan.

iii. **progress reviews**

In all of the 50 participating areas, we will offer two consultancy support sessions to the lead participants and a full group follow up review. These will offer an opportunity to support progress in the implementation of the Local Partnership Improvement Action Plan, assess impact and to identify other concerns and issues related to cross-sector partnership working.

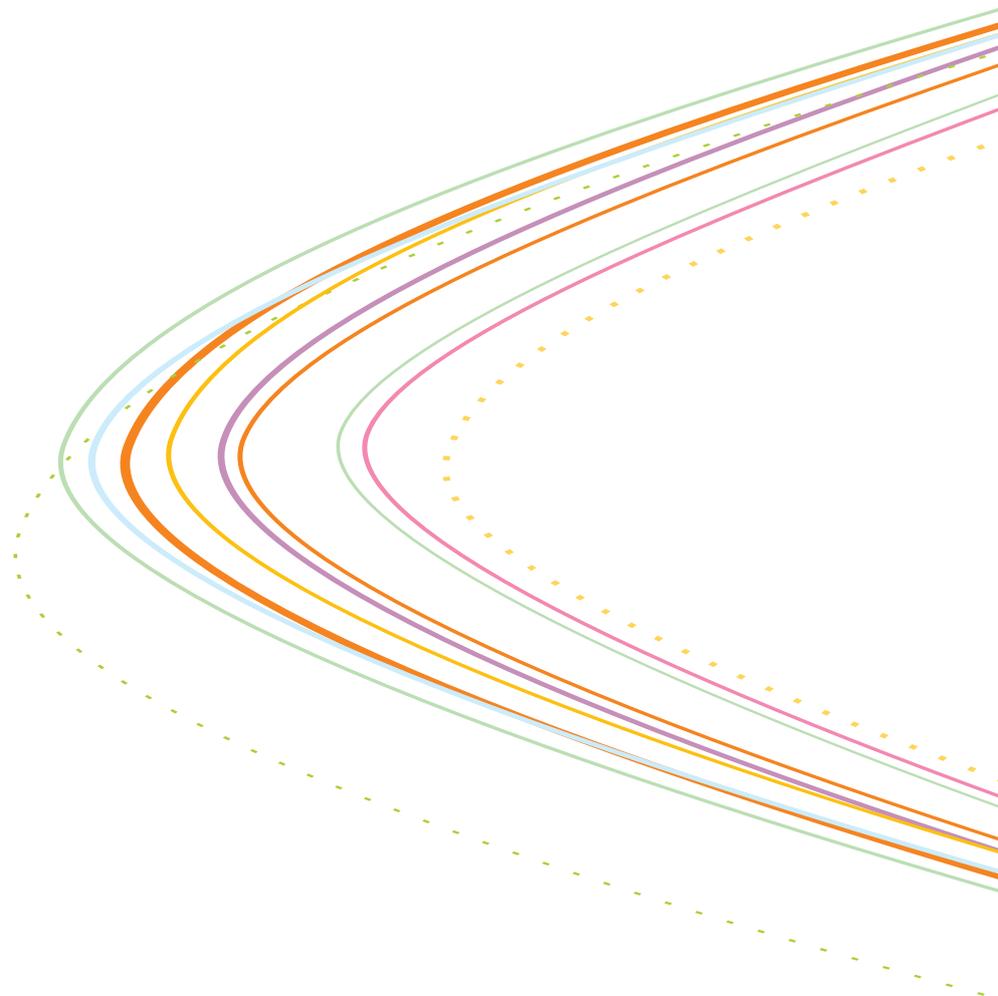
appendix one: abbreviations

ACVAR	Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research
BME	Black and minority ethnic
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
IVAR	Institute for Voluntary Action Research
LA	Local Authority
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
PIAP	Partnership Improvement Action Plan
PIP	Partnership Improvement Programme
VCO	Voluntary and Community Organisation
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

Aston Centre *for* Voluntary Action Research

IVAR

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research



for further information, please contact:

Improvement and Development Agency

Layden House

76–86 Turnmill Street

London EC1M 5LG

telephone 020 7296 6600

fax 020 7296 6666

email info@idea.gov.uk

www.idea.gov.uk