The Development of an Evaluation Framework for Partnership Working

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Abstract: This paper describes the outcomes of the "Action Planning" stage of an action research project utilising a search conference for the purposes of organisational development. The aim of the project was the design of a methodology to facilitate the evaluation of the complexities of working in partnership and to assess the extent to which collaboration actually adds value in terms of both process and outcomes. The research centred on multi-agency partnership working within Children's Services Planning (CSP) in the Southern Health and Social Services Board's area in Northern Ireland. The resulting evaluation framework contains seven interconnected dimensions with associated sub-dimensions and assessment criteria. The framework is underpinned by the concept of a virtuous circle formed by evaluation, learning, improvement, measurement, and back to evaluation.

Keywords: Evaluation, evaluation framework, partnership working, collaboration, action research, Children's Services Planning, Health and Personal Social Service.

1. Introduction

Robson (1993: 170-171) views evaluation as a form of applied research i.e. research concerned with defining real world problems and seeking solutions to such problems. Its purpose "*is to assess the effects or effectiveness of something, typically some innovation or intervention: policy, practice or service.*" The "real worldness" of evaluation is further reflected in one definition of program evaluation as "*the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of programs to make judgements about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming.*" (Patton, 1997: 23). The design of a methodology for use in an evaluation which will increase accountability, promote learning and bring about program improvements is clearly challenging, especially when the complexities of partnership working are under scrutiny. The development of such a methodology was required to facilitate the evaluation of multi-agency partnership working in Children's Services Planning (CSP) within the Southern Health and Social Services Board's area in Northern Ireland. This paper presents the evaluation framework which grew out of an action research project initiated to meet that requirement.

2. Research aims

Working in partnership is enormously challenging, complex and multi-faceted, and the efficacy of a partnership model as the mechanism for the delivery of improved outcomes for children and young people should not be accepted as a given. Collaborative working is lauded as a desirable policy goal, but there is always the lurking danger of what Huxham and Vangen (2005: 60) call "*collaborative inertia*" i.e. where the outputs from collaborative arrangements are negligible or the rate of output is extremely slow. Partnership working therefore raises critical questions about the extent to which collaboration actually adds value in terms of both process and outcomes, and how these judgements might be made. In order to go some way towards addressing these questions an action research project was initiated in order to develop a robust evaluation framework to determine the efficacy of a partnership model for the delivery of improved outcomes for children and young people. The research centred on multi-agency partnership working within Children's Services Planning (CSP) in the Southern Health and Social Services Board's area in Northern Ireland. The overarching aim of the project was to provide CSP with a practical tool for the evaluation of the partnership in order to allow it to address key questions about its effectiveness, sustainability and future direction, and thereby achieve improvements.

3. Background and context

The context for the research is threefold: the emergence of collaborative working as a policy goal in the past decade; specifically Children's Services Planning in Northern Ireland; and the emphasis on partnership working in recent legislative and policy developments in relation to services for children and young people.

4. Collaboration and partnership working

Miller and Ahmad (2000: 1) highlight that "*collaboration and partnerships between agencies, professions, and across sectors in the delivery of public services is now a major policy goal across both the developed and developing world*". Similarly Sullivan and Skelcher (2002: 1) argue that "*globally, partnership is the new language of public governance*" and estimate that approximately 5,500 individual partnership bodies at local or regional level have been formed in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This equates to an estimated £4.3 billion of expenditure by partnerships in 2001/02 of which three-quarters is provided by central government.

The emergence of partnership working in the past decade reflects a desire to move from the development of policy and the planning and delivery of services within fragmented organisational and professional silos to an integrated multi-sectoral and multi-professional approach which will deliver improvements in outcomes. Following the election of the Labour government in 1997 the emphasis on collaboration, breaking down organisational and professional boundaries and the desire for social inclusion gained momentum. Evidence of the movement towards collaboration and partnership working can be found across the public sector including, for example, urban regeneration, policing, education, housing, health and social care and in local government.

5. Children's services planning in the Southern Board area

The Southern Health and Social Services Board (SHSSB) is one of four Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland responsible for commissioning and planning health and social services on behalf of its local population. The Board works in partnership with Trusts, statutory, private and voluntary bodies, and agencies to deliver improved health and social care for the population it serves (circa 320,000). SHSSB has responsibility for leading or participating in a wide range of interagency/intersectoral partnerships.

One of the partnerships it is responsible for leading is Children's Services Planning (see Godfrey, 2003: 181-198 for a detailed overview of Children's Services Planning in

Northern Ireland). Every three year's each Health and Social Services Board publishes a Children's Services Plan which sets out how the Board will co-operate with other statutory, voluntary and community organisations to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the Board's area. Plans have been produced for the periods 1999-2002 (1999) and 2002-2005 (2002). The Southern Area Children's Services Plan 2005-2008 (2005) is currently in draft and is due for publication following a period of consultation. In addition an annual review is published which sets out what progress has been made in terms of the development of the planning process and in meeting the needs of particular groups of children and young people with specific needs. The overall aim of the Southern Area Children's Services Plan is to meet the needs of children and young people who are vulnerable, so that they can reach their full potential and be socially included members of the community, as children and adults. Four overarching high level and long term strategic objectives have been adopted: promoting social inclusion; equality and human rights; needs led planning and resourcing; and coherent and integrated family support. Figure 1 shows the partnership's planning structure and the inter-relationships between the key groups

Figure 1: Children's services planning structure

The Children and Young People's Committee (CYPC) provides strategic direction to the partnership and consists of representatives from each partner agency, the voluntary, community and ethnic minority sectors. There are eight Working Groups which are multi-agency and carry out the detailed planning in particular areas. An Interagency Information Forum exists to ensure that performance information is used to support the partnership's strategic planning process. The Southern Area Child Protection Committee is comprised of all the main statutory and voluntary agencies involved in child protection. It is constituted by and collectively accountable to the SHSSB and is principally responsible for developing

and reviewing inter-agency child protection policies and procedures; reviewing the operation of child protection registers; and reviewing significant issues and conducting case management reviews. The Southern Area Childcare Partnership is a multi-agency forum of statutory, voluntary, community and private organisations working in childcare and family support with children aged 0-14 years and their families. Its remit is to assess the demand for childcare and family support services, direct investment to meet that need, raise the quality of childcare and ensure that reliable information on childcare services is readily available. The remit of the Family Support Strategy Group is to develop an integrated family support strategy and co-ordinate the work of other groups in this area. Its membership is drawn from each of the other CSP Working Groups, the Childcare Partnership and the Area Child Protection Committee. It is representative of the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and supported by academic input where appropriate. The Southern Area Action with Travellers (SAAT) partnership aims to help improve health, accommodation and educational status of the Travelling community by securing funding and resources to enable mainstreaming of provision to Travellers.

6. Recent legislative and policy developments

Recent legislative and policy developments in relation to services for children and young people reflect the central importance of partnership working. *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps* (2004) follows on from *Every Child Matters* (2003)*, the Green Paper that responded to the issues raised by the Laming enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2003), and which proposed measures to reform and improve children's care across a range of agencies. *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps* (2004) sets out a programme of action to put these ideas into practice; at its heart is the Children Bill (2004), which emphasises partnership working and places a statutory duty on all local public bodies to work together to improve the well-being of children. A chapter of *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps* (2004) - "Working in Partnership" - examines how different sectors can play a key part in the proposed changes and thus improve outcomes for children and young people. The government's underpinning intent is "*to work closely with a wide range of partners in developing a broad coalition for*

change" (*Every Child Matters: the Next Steps*, 2004: 37).

7. Methodology

Hart (1996: 454) defines action research as "problem-focussed, context specific, participative, [involving] a change intervention geared to improvement, and a process based on continuous interaction between research, action, reflection and evaluation". According to Eden and Huxham (1996: 75), in action research (AR) "the research output results from an involvement with members of an organisation over a matter which is of genuine concern to them". French and Bell (1995) describe AR as both an approach to problem solving and a problem solving process. Thus it includes a model or a paradigm and a specified series of activities and events for organisational development.

Figure 2 presents an Action Research model as a cycle whereby one cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation leads to another cycle with the in-built opportunity for ongoing learning (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002: 233).

Coughlan and Coghlan (2002: 230-233) describe AR projects as comprising three steps: the first is defined as a "pre-step" during which the researcher seeks to understand context and purpose. Afterwards, the researcher conducts the six main steps i.e. gathering data, feeding data back, analysing data, planning actions, implementing actions, and evaluating actions. Finally, a meta-step is proposed to account for the researcher's monitoring of the cycles.
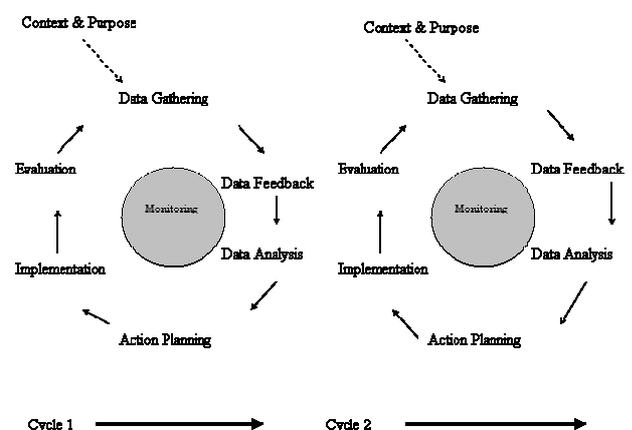
Figure 2: Action research cycles (adapted from Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002)

This action research approach was judged to best fit the requirements of a project to

develop an evaluation framework for partnership working. In this paper only the outcome of the Action Planning stage of the total project is presented i.e. it describes the development of the evaluation and improvement tool for the partnership. The next phases – Implementation and Evaluation – are not considered.

The rationale for action and for research – the "pre-step" – has already been considered. The Data Gathering phase of this research project aimed to generate as much data as possible as a basis for collaborative organisational development. An initial data gathering exercise was carried out. Methods included interviews with the CSP Project Manager, a literature review and an examination of documentation. The background, structure, status and monitoring/review arrangements within the partnership were discussed in detail with the CSP Project Manager. The aim of the literature review was to identify and review the major approaches to program evaluation and the evaluation of collaborative initiatives in the public sector. In addition the literature on multi-agency partnership working was reviewed. Relevant documentation was examined in order to obtain factual and background information on Children's Services Planning. Documents included policies, guidelines, plans, statistical reports etc. and these were drawn from both internal and external sources.

The outputs and ideas from this initial exercise formed the basis for further data gathering, data analysis and action planning. However, these were not discrete phases within the project. Rather the process was iterative, dynamic and interactive culminating in a final action planning phase. The researcher and participants worked together towards a common goal via a combination of interviews, feedback and a search conference so as to jointly develop an enabling assessment and improvement tool that would satisfy the needs identified by key members of the partnership.

A representative cross-section of the members of the Children and Young People's Committee from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors were interviewed. Interviewees were selected to ensure that the diverse perspectives of the various organisations involved in the partnership were captured. The use of multiple respondents allowed data triangulation through comparison of different perspectives and interpretations of the various responses. The type of research envisaged in this study lent itself to the semi-structured, open-ended type of interview. The process of data gathering via the interviews was simultaneously a process of joint data analysis. Critical success factors for partnership working within Children's Services Planning emerged through discussion (and from review of the literature) which had the potential to act as key building blocks for the evaluation framework.

These interviews were followed by a participative search conference (Emery and Purser, 1996) with representatives from the partnership to review the preliminary data analysis/action planning and rapidly develop a comprehensive, structured and cohesive assessment tool. It was also a vehicle to gain collective ownership of potential outcomes and the buy-in of members of the partnership to the implementation phase of the project. This allowed for the development of a final draft version of the evaluation framework which was then presented to and formally adopted by the CYPC.

8. An evaluation framework for partnership working

Leeuw (2002: 6) identifies four challenges facing both evaluation in practice and evaluation research in Europe. One of these challenges "*concerns the ways in which evaluators deal with the network society, the collaborative state or 'partnering arrangements' between organisations*". Similarly Sullivan and Skelcher (2002: 185) argue that the evaluation of collaboration gives rise to a range of views on the design and purpose of evaluation and that "*this debate about public policy evaluation offers considerable scope to devise bespoke frameworks for assessing collaborative action*".
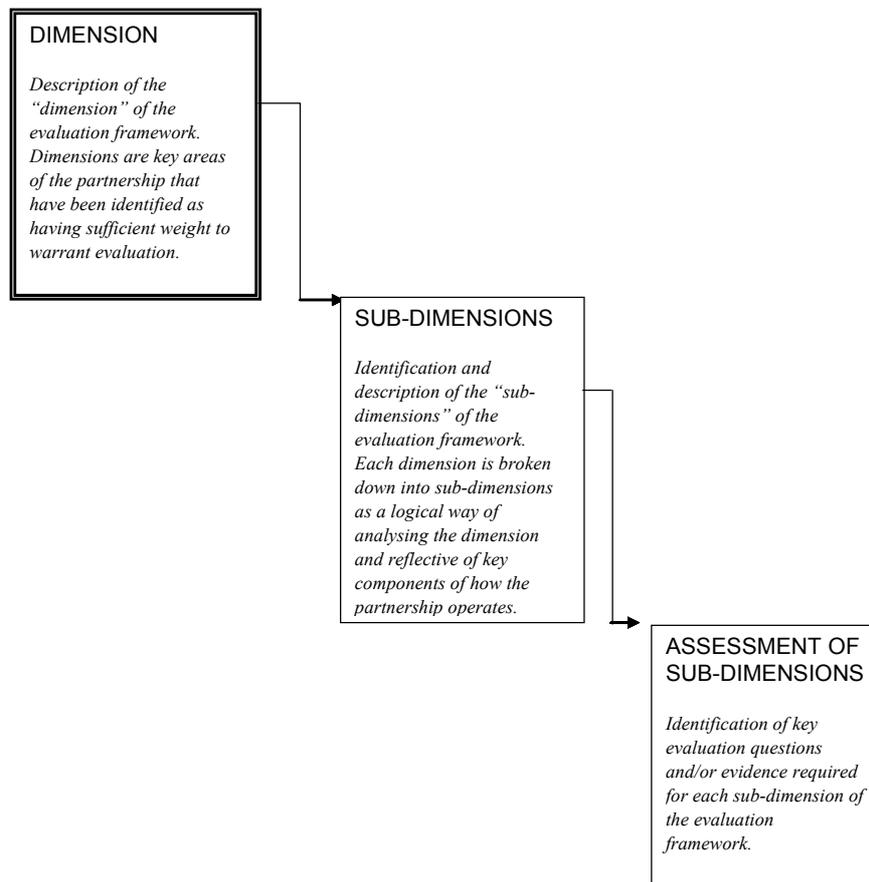
The bespoke evaluation framework designed for the Children's Services Planning partnership has been structured in terms of Dimensions, Sub-Dimensions and Assessment Criteria. A number of dimensions or key areas of the partnership have been identified as having sufficient weight to warrant evaluation. The number and type of dimensions identified resulted from the nature, purpose and complexity of partnership working within Children's Services Planning. A description of each dimension is provided to define it and give a sense of its scope. Each dimension of the evaluation framework is further broken down into sub-dimensions as a logical way of analysing the dimension and reflective of key components of how the partnership operates.

Each sub-dimension is defined. Furthermore, for each sub-dimension a range of critical and focused questions and/or evidence has been identified which would form the basis for conducting the evaluation, although these assessment criteria are not covered in any detail in this paper. The key to using the framework in a dynamic way, and potentially with other partnerships, is to tailor the assessment criteria to match the specific nature of the collaboration to be evaluated.

The approach to structuring the evaluation framework is shown in Figure 3 as a high-level schema.

Sullivan and Skelcher (2002: 185-207) provide a useful overview of approaches to the evaluation of partnerships over the last two decades. They identify a number of key approaches to evaluating public policy collaboration which include: value-for-money evaluation which emphasises questions of economy, efficiency and, to a lesser extent, effectiveness; outcome-focused evaluation which gives greater emphasis to the assessment of the outcomes of collaborative activity and offers greater flexibility in how these outcomes are achieved; process-outcome evaluation which examines the process of implementing an initiative in order to understand whether and how the objectives of the initiative were met and in elaborating the circumstances in which particular interventions take effect; stakeholder or "interactive" evaluation which requires the consideration of a range of stakeholders' views, since different stakeholders will have differential access and influence over the evaluation process; and evaluation of collaborative mechanisms which focuses on the assessment of the means of collaboration i.e. the partnership itself.

DIMENSION

Description of the "dimension" of the evaluation framework. Dimensions are key areas of the partnership that have been identified as having sufficient weight to warrant evaluation.

SUB-DIMENSIONS

Identification and description of the "sub-dimensions" of the evaluation framework. Each dimension is broken down into sub-dimensions as a logical way of analysing the dimension and reflective of key components of how the partnership operates.

ASSESSMENT OF SUB-DIMENSIONS

Identification of key evaluation questions and/or evidence required for each sub-dimension of the evaluation framework.

**Figure 3:** High-level schema of the evaluation framework

A range of different approaches to partnership evaluation are thus available, each underpinned by a set of theoretical assumptions. Children's Services Planning is a complex initiative with multiple strategic objectives and involving a wide range of stakeholders and agencies. The complexity of the partnership thus required the utilisation and integration of the most persuasive and useful elements of the approaches to partnership evaluation outlined above. The resulting framework contains seven dimensions:
- Dimension 1 – Impact;

- Dimension 2 - Vision and Leadership;
- Dimension 3 – Partnership Dynamics;
- Dimension 4 – Strategy and Performance Measurement;
- Dimension 5 – Influencing;
- Dimension 6 – Participation; and
- Dimension 7 – Cost Effectiveness

A high-level overview of the framework is shown in Figure 4.
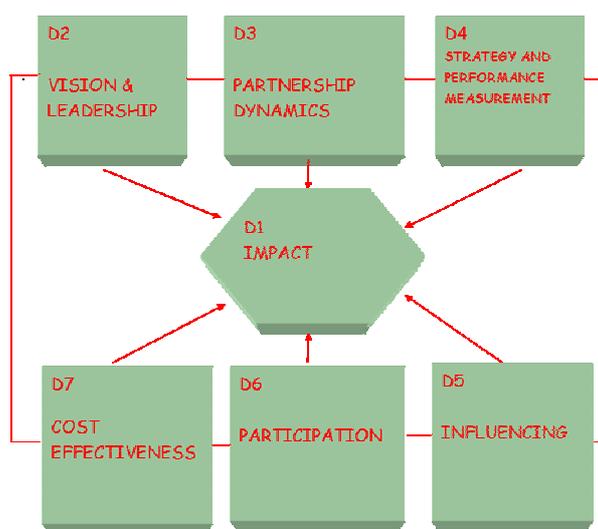
Figure 4: An evaluation framework for partnership working

This section describes each of the dimensions of the evaluation framework in detail.

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8.1 Dimension 1 – Impact

Dimension 1 of the evaluation framework is designed to determine the extent to which the partnership has added value and achieved a greater impact than would have been achieved without its existence. Clearly this is a problematic exercise as it necessitates the establishment of causal links between the interventions made by the partnership and the perceived resulting outcomes.

This dimension of the framework is assessed in terms of six sub-dimensions: quality; innovation; integrated service delivery; changes to existing services; resources; and efficiency. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. To what extent has partnership working brought about an improvement in the quality of services which would not otherwise have been achieved? Has the partnership been innovative in the development of new services or approaches which would not otherwise have been introduced? From the perspective of

service users, has partnership working resulted in improved and integrated service delivery on the ground? Has the delivery of existing core services changed significantly to meet the needs of users more effectively? Has partnership working enabled pooling of resources or an increase in the scale of services to reach more children and/or more consistently? Is there greater efficiency in the way resources are being used? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and interrogation of qualitative and/or quantitative evidence. The development of these sub-dimensions is indebted to Thorlby and Hutchinson (2002: 60-64) and the eight types of potential benefits arising from working with others which they have identified.

This dimension was viewed as a vital element of the framework as it represented the key test of the overall effectiveness and performance of the partnership. It is therefore presented as the lynchpin of an integrated framework to which all of the other dimensions are inextricably linked.

8.2 Dimension 2 – Vision and leadership

There was a consensus amongst participants in the project that two of the keys to the success of the partnership were vision and leadership and thus these were identified as two of the top five critical success factors for partnership working within CSP. They are obviously closely aligned and have been combined within the second dimension of the evaluation framework.

Dimension 2 of the evaluation framework is principally designed to determine the extent to which the partnership has been able to develop a shared and cohesive vision as an outcome of effective leadership.

This dimension of the framework is assessed in terms of three key sub-dimensions: future orientation; making it happen; and creating opportunities to lead. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. Is the partnership future orientated with key individual/s who can exercise leadership and create a vision through personal skills (rather than position or power) to catalyse, champion and nurture collaboration between individuals and organisations, and secure the necessary resources? Are there key individual/s in place to make it happen, possessing the skills to

establish, facilitate and co-ordinate collaboration? Have leadership opportunities been created at all levels to empower and facilitate different individuals from a range of organisations to take up leadership positions? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and interrogation of qualitative and/or quantitative evidence.

8.3 Dimension 3 – Partnership dynamics

Dimension 3 of the evaluation framework brings together many of the critical success factors identified for partnership working within Children's Services Planning. During discussion of the development of the framework process issues emerged as a critical area for consideration i.e. how effectively the partnership operates as a partnership.

Dimension 3 of the evaluation framework is designed to determine the extent to which the partnership has developed appropriate structures, processes, resources and a culture inducive to collaboration.

This dimension of the framework is assessed in terms of six sub-dimensions: structure and processes; trust; commitment to an ethos of collaborative working; communication; learning; and capability. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. Does the partnership have in place appropriate organisational structures and processes to deliver partnership activities? Has trust been built amongst individuals, organisations and stakeholders to facilitate collaboration? Is there a commitment to an ethos of collaborative working evidenced by shared values and common goals, the decentralisation of decision-making and the development of new roles and relationships? Are the purpose, achievements and needs of the partnership being effectively communicated and promoted internally and to key external target audiences/stakeholders? Is there evidence of learning having been built into collaborative processes to improve the ability to work together and the effectiveness of partnership activities? Does the partnership have the capability to deliver on its agenda through having access to adequate resources and the development of appropriate skills/competencies to support collaborative working? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and

interrogation of qualitative and/or quantitative evidence.

The following example provides an indication of the assessment criteria developed for Partnership Dynamics/Commitment to an Ethos of Collaborative Working:

- Are there shared goals, values and principles?
- Is there clear evidence of commitment in host organisations to working in partnership?
- Do CSP group members have the delegated authority to fully represent their parent organisations?
- Do CSP group members adequately present the partnership's agenda back in their parent organisations?
- Has involvement in CSP fundamentally impacted on how organisations and agencies plan, deploy resources and define roles, responsibilities and relationships? Is there a genuine commitment to an ethos of joint working in individual organisations?
- Are there effective methods of involving service users?

8.4 Dimension 4 – Strategy and performance measurement

The core function of Children's Services Planning is the strategic planning of services and a 3-year strategic plan is produced which "*sets out how the Board will co-operate with other statutory, voluntary and community organisations to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the Board's area*" (*Southern Area Children's Services Plan 2002 – 2005*: 9). In addition CSP has been very deliberate in adopting a performance measurement approach which underpins the development of strategic objectives and the assessment of the degree to which outcomes have been achieved. A *Multi-Agency Needs Indicator Profile* (2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005) has been developed which profiles the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the Board's area and the outcomes identified by each Working Group are monitored using a set of associated measures or performance indicators.

Dimension 4 of the evaluation framework is designed to determine the extent to which processes for strategic and performance measurement have been embedded within the partnership and the degree to which they are effective.

This dimension of the framework is based on the five tasks of strategic management identified by Thompson and Strickland (2003) which have been adapted as sub-dimensions. These are: developing a strategic vision; setting objectives and performance targets; formulating a plan to achieve those objectives and performance targets; implementing and executing this plan; and evaluating performance and reformulating the strategic plan and/or its implementation. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. Has the partnership developed a strategic vision setting out its long-term vision based on identified need and a clearly charted strategic path as to how this will be achieved? Has the strategic vision been translated into challenging and specific strategic objectives and performance targets i.e. the results and outcomes the partnership wants to attain? Does the partnership have a clearly defined plan setting out how those strategic objectives will be achieved matched to its resources, competencies and capabilities? Are processes in place to ensure that the strategy is flexible and adaptable? Are mechanisms and resources in place to implement that plan effectively to ensure that strategic objectives are achieved on schedule? Have processes been established to evaluate performance against the achievement of strategic targets and to take necessary corrective action? And is the strategy kept under review in light of the changing internal/external environment? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and interrogation of qualitative and/or quantitative evidence.

8.5 Dimension 5 – Influencing

Influencing emerged as an important criterion by which the performance of the partnership should be judged. Dimension 5 of the evaluation framework is therefore designed to determine the extent to which the creation of the partnership has enhanced the joint understanding of the political, organisational and funding context in which the partnership operates and how effectively it influences at different levels to bring about change.

This dimension of the framework is assessed in terms of three sub-dimensions: influencing government departments/funders; influencing partner organisations; and influencing other relevant partnerships/initiatives. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. Is there evidence of the partnership being able to influence

government departments/funders in terms of the way they work; policy and strategy development; and funding and resource deployment? Is there evidence of the partnership being able to influence partner organisations in the "mainstreaming" of CSP into their overall planning and service delivery processes and in the deployment of resources? Is there evidence of the partnership influencing and creating appropriate linkages with other relevant partnerships/ initiatives? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and interrogation of qualitative and/or quantitative evidence.

8.6 Dimension 6 – Participation

In the semi-structured interviews a strong view was expressed that the only effective way that service users, their carers and communities can have a real say in identifying need, planning, developing and monitoring services is by ensuring that they are offered a voice within the working of the partnership. In the *Southern Area Children's Services Plan 2002-2005* (2002) there is recognition of the importance of inclusive participation in the work of the partnership. The plan indicates steps that CSP have or intend to take to increase the involvement of children and young people, disabled children and young people, the voluntary and community sectors, ethnic minority groups and front line staff in CSP.

Dimension 6 of the evaluation framework is designed to determine the extent to which the partnership actively promotes the involvement of children and young people and/or their representative bodies and communities as stakeholders in collaborative action.

This dimension of the framework is assessed in terms of six sub-dimensions: membership; community development; consultation with users; communication; generating evidence and knowledge; and reduction in social exclusion. This translates into a series of evidence-based questions for the partnership. To what degree are children and young people and/or their representative bodies and communities involved in development and implementation processes, via membership of CYPC and groups? Is community development utilised or promoted as a method of working to achieve objectives? What is the extent of consultation and user involvement in decision-making about strategic plans, services and policies? How effective is communication to

keep the public informed and develop public support? How does the partnership tap into community and user involvement to generate evidence and knowledge to for example, gauge the experiences of those using services; as part of a needs assessment process etc? Is there evidence of the partnership empowering children and young people and their communities via programmes to reduce social exclusion? These critical questions are in turn addressed through specific assessment criteria requiring the production and/or interrogation of qualitative and quantitative evidence.

8.7 Dimension 7 – Cost effectiveness

The Audit Commission (1998: 34) suggest that "even when a partnership has a comprehensive evaluation framework, this in itself is not enough. The key test is whether the extra benefits that come from working in partnership are greater than the costs involved in doing so". It will therefore be necessary for CSP to quantify both direct and opportunity costs incurred through partnership working. The main opportunity cost is the time spent by members of the Children and Young People's Committee and CSP groups at and between meetings.

The purpose of this costing exercise is to demonstrate that CSP is proactive in monitoring the costs of working in partnership, to enable the partnership to weigh the costs identified against achievements and thus be able to substantiate how it is generating value for money to a range of funders and stakeholders. The identification of direct and opportunity costs to establish whether or not these costs are outweighed by the achivments of the CSP partnership is an integral part of the overall assessment process and complementary to the other dimensions of the evaluation framework.

9. Using the evaluation framework

This paper does not present the Implementation phase of the project. However it is worth noting that the utilisation of the evaluation framework requires analysis of the evidence captured, diagnosis of areas of strength and weakness, and action planning for improvement. The resulting evaluation report should demonstrate to partners the value of their participation as well as the achievements of the partnership to others; ensure that the partnership focuses on prioritiy objectives and that these are aligned across partner organisations; challenge poor

performance; improve decision making by providing feedback on progress, identifying areas where action is required to improve performance and reviewing resource allocation; and provide the basis for learning and development. Responsibilitiy for implementing the recommendations of the evaluation must be clearly identified together with indicative timescales for their achievement.

10. Conclusion

This paper has described the outcomes of the "Action Planning" stage of an action research project utilising a search conference for the purposes of organisational development. The aim of the project was the design of a methodology to facilitate the evaluation of a complex and multi-faceted partnership. More specifically the evaluation framework was required to allow judgements to be made about the overall effectiveness of the collaboration, facilitate debate about its sustainability and future direction and identify clearly defined areas for improvement, development and learning. In addition the development and use of the framework had to contribute to the wider debate about whether collaborative working adds value and, in the context of the Children's Services Planning partnership, is the best mechanism for the delivery of improved outcomes for children and young people. The resulting framework is underpinned by the concept of a virtuous circle formed by evaluation, learning, improvement, measurement, and back to evaluation. If, as part of the implementation of the evaluation framework for partnership working, this continuous process is maintained then its full benefits may be realised. There is of course no "best" evaluation framework applicable to all partnerships. However, the potential does exist for other partnerships to adapt the framework described in this paper and apply it ensuring that it is compatible with the purpose and ethos of the collaboration in order to deliver change and improvement.

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