Strategy for Collaboration: An Operational Framework for Local Strategic Partnerships

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SUMMARY

Within the field of strategy for organisations, local strategic partnerships (LSPs) have emerged as important forms of collaborative arrangement that enables strategic decisions to be taken and implemented. The principal aim of this paper is to contribute to this subject area through the framework of collaborative strategy. The framework is used as an interpretative concept for understanding the operation of local strategic partnerships in urban regeneration, in particular their organisational structure. The research on this paper draws on information from empirical investigation on LSPs in Leicester, East Midlands. Using a mixture of interviews, observation, and documentary data, the research shows that the concept of collaborative strategy provides a useful tool for understanding partnership working. In this respect it constitutes an example of management research education and – why not – organisational success despite evidence of some dysfunctional aspects that were identified through the research.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a remarkable change regarding the way organisations from all sectors evolve structurally in recent years. This has derived as a result of significant political, social, technological and economic changes. Collaboration in this context is taken as a means of individuals of one organisation working together with individuals from another organisation. In this light, organisations under a collaborative regime need to define their structures and operational actions. Despite the fact that collaboration in this paper has a focus on public policy and management terms it is debateable how accurately someone could define it. Collaboration has been seen as a useful theoretical mechanism when applied to joint activities of organisations. It expresses people's aspirations to come and act together. This often depends (Clegg and Hardy, 1999) upon relationships of trust between participating sides. In view of this, collaboration can be defined as '*exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing the capacity of another organisation for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose*' (Himmelman, 1996: 28). As Himmelman points out enhancing the capacity of another organisation requires sharing responsibilities, resources and risks. All of these can increase the potential of collaboration beyond of just the potential of working together (ibid.).

This paper examines firstly the scope of collaboration in inspiring and creating strategy developments, as this has been the case with the establishment of a series of collaborative schemes such as partnerships, strategic alliances, formal and informal networks, etc in recent years. It then explores on the formation of an operational framework for collaborative organisations, *collaborative strategy*. Based upon the proposals of the framework regarding collaborative organisational structure it analyses these proposals as they were implemented in the context of local strategic partnerships in Leicester, East Midlands. The strategic perspectives of collaboration as they derive from the research findings in Leicester shape the paper's discussion and conclusions. To this extent the paper answers to the invitation made by the 21st British Academy of Management Conference to potential paper contributors by presenting a case of management research education, which has been at the core of contemporary research: conducting research on the strategy and management of collaborative organisations.
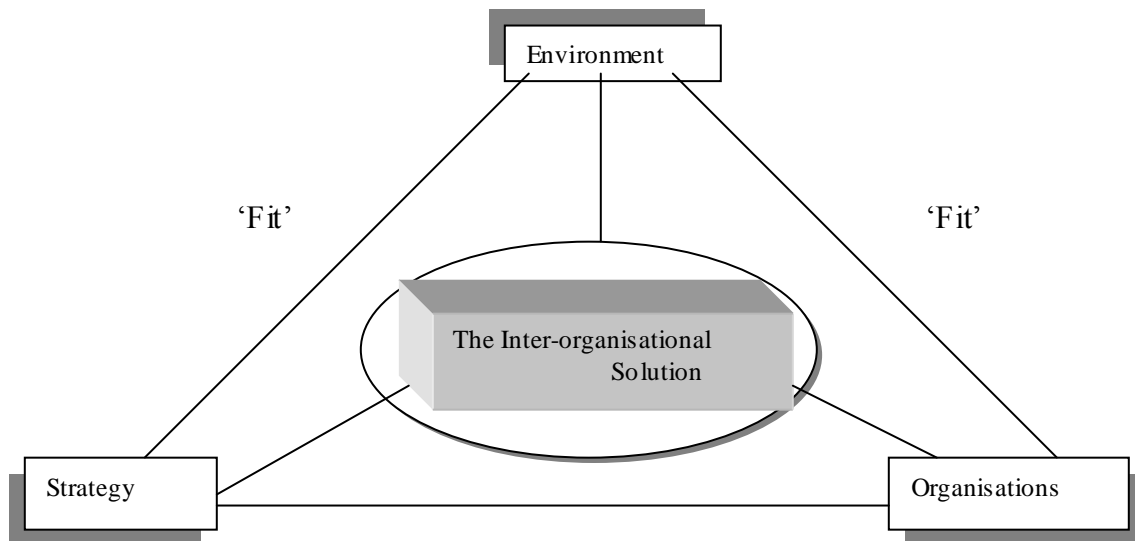
THEORY DEVELOPMENT
Collaboration in Forming Organisational Strategy

As it is mentioned in the introductory part of this paper there has been a need recently for collaborative organisations to define their structures and operational functions. In this respect, the very notion of *organisational strategy* is deployed, as the intellectual process of formulating ideas that pursue the organisation's aims and objectives (Johnson *et al*, 2005; Wit and Meyer, 1998; Joyce, 1999; Child, 2002). According to Mintzberg (1998b) the word strategy has for a long time been used implicitly in different ways and only explicit recognition of multiple definitions would help towards elucidation of its meaning.

An important issue that arises for collaborative organisations in operation is the relationship between the organisation, its environment (external and internal), and the strategy chosen for implementation. Egan (1995) argues that this relationship can be examined by looking at how far networking within the same organisation has been established. In the light of this, what is required as a solution is to keep this nexus in equilibrium as it is presented in Figure 1. As a consequence, the range of solutions is rather inter-organisational than intra-organisational for coping with the complexities of the organisation. The question that then arises based on this is about the utilisation of collaborative organisations within the environment-strategy-organisation nexus and the possibility to be in equilibrium. It could be argued that the

organisational action produced can yield direct effects upon the context within which it takes place. Therefore, there is no indication against the existence of the equilibrium under circumstances in which there would be not just a single organisation but the aggregate of different collaborative organisations.

Figure 1: The inter-organisational solution

Source: Adjusting the figure produced by Egan (195: 148)

Another issue that can perhaps influence a strategy identified for collaborative organisations is linked to the dilemma about choosing 'a top-down or a bottom-up' approach when implementing their strategic plans. Some contributors such as Parnell and Carraher (2003) emphasise on the importance of the issue within a single organisation context by arguing about the today's shift towards a more 'accountable' way of developing strategy. This is not to argue that the acumen and responsibility required by top managers should be underestimated. If it is prudent not to expect the imminent arrival of a collaborative-organisation oriented nous it may be also prudent to assume that the traditional system of hierarchical rules has not just disappeared (Hales, 2002). Considering that managing organisations is primarily about sustaining the equilibrium between continuity and change (Mintzberg, 1998a) and that strategy should be crafted depending on the circumstances occurring within the organisational context then it could be argued that principally both approaches required. Additionally, Mintzberg suggests that there are times 'when it pays to manage the details and let the strategies emerge for themselves' (1998b: 17). This seems to suit in the case of collaborative organisations because assorted actions taking place within such organisations do not normally allow for a centrally orientated administration and formation of strategy, as it is explained in the next section in which the framework of collaborative strategy is explored.

Collaborative Strategy: A Modus Operandi for Collaborative Organisations
Establishing the Identity of Collaborative Strategy
The identification and establishment of a *strategic modus operandi* for collaborative organisations, the framework of *collaborative strategy* as it is called, is a formidable challenge because of its very nature of being related to complex structures of numerous organisations and individuals. The scope of this framework is based upon its interpretive character in analysing the case study partnerships as it can be seen in the research outcomes

section (Apostolakis, 2003; 2004). In general, participants in various collaborative groups see strategy as a good thing and something to be involved in although they cannot find enough time to spend on it (Huxham, 1991). As it has been noted above Mintzberg (1998b; 2000) portrays strategy as a plan, a direction or a course of action into the future. Moreover, he identifies it as a pattern that can offer consistency in organisational behaviour overtime in such a way that it can provide continuity and not change as the primary aspect of strategy. In view of this, the obviously preferable solution would be to involve only collaborative organisations with a strategic nous and orientation. Conversely, this would exclude collaborative schemes of a short term life span although those organisations are occasionally needed for supporting the former.

There exist various responses to the issue of why an organisational strategy of collaborative nature is preferable to the 'traditional' hierarchical one in a context of assorted participating organisations. The first one is that strategists support the view in which a collaborative organisation perspective is fundamentally at odds with competition, conventionally the primary factor of interaction between organisations especially within the business sector (Wit and Meyer, 1998). Despite the fact that relationships between organisations can be characterised by a dynamic mix of collaboration and competition, collaboration creates a web of durable and sustainable relationships (ibid.). This sets the basis for a continuum of organisational efforts that produce and command value for the organisations involved (Cropper, 1996). In this respect, continuity becomes the main characteristic of sustainability thus according to Mintzberg the essential 'ingredient' for a strategic framework (see above). Consequently, a strategy that is enacted in a collaborative way can be more beneficial for organisations willing to trust an approach characterised by continuity and long-term perspective compared to one characterised by competition forces.

Moreover, collaborative strategy is about whether and how collaborative advantage can be best achieved. Utilisation of collaborative advantage to the maximum could obviously be beneficial in developing a strategic framework of action for a particular collaborative organisation. Huxham and Macdonald (1992: 53) have identified a framework of strategy referred to as *meta-strategy,* which is the type of strategy formulated after or during the formation of a collaborative scheme of organisations. In this viewpoint, meta-strategy is a notion that '*makes clear the distinction between what can be the responsibility of individual organisations and what must be done through collaboration*'. Additionally meta-strategy is '*super-ordinate to the strategies of the collaborative organisations*' (Huxham, 1993: 23). Consequently, collaborative strategy although inspired by the concept of meta-strategy, distinctively differs from it because:

➢ Meta-strategy as it can be understood in the context of work by Huxham and Macdonald focuses on the first stages of collaboration i.e. selection of members and mission of the collaborative organisation. On the contrary, collaborative strategy is concerned with the whole life cycle of a collaborative scheme, emphasising on the later stages of organisational existence i.e. organisational operation, plan delivery and review of collaborative operation;

➢ Huxham and Macdonald seem to suggest that meta-strategy derives from being a strategy for collaborating actors with diverse strategic and other viewpoints which are needed in order to achieve common goals. In the context of this paper strategy is perceived as a framework for planning, implementing and reviewing policy actions that have come to the fore after the process of partners accumulation has strategically matured up. In the light of this, collaborative strategy is a framework for a 'single' collaborative organisation

constituted from different participating groups and/or individuals who are in the position to act as one organisational body. It is this distinctive attribute that makes collaborative strategy appearing as perhaps an evolutionary version of the meta-strategy model;

➢ Contributors proposing the existence of collaborative advantage and collaboration have sometimes seen them as both causes and effects. For example Huxham (1996a: 14) identifies collaborative advantage as a tool 'concerned with the creation of synergy between collaborating organisations' (in the role of an independent variable). Additionally, she presents collaborative advantage as the outcome of collaboration's maximisation, considering a role for it as dependent variable (Huxham, 1996b). In the context of this paper collaborative advantage and consequently collaboration are presented as theoretical tools for organisational effectiveness from the viewpoint of an independent variable;

It is collaboration and collaborative advantage that can create conditions for collaborative strategy and consequently potentially fruitful organisational outcomes and this constitutes a one-way value. In this light, an overview of the collaborative strategy is described in Table 1.

Structure of a Collaborative Organisation
The properties of collaborative strategy are outlined against the elements of added value of collaborative advantage in Table 1. The framework identifies the strategic dimensions of five proposed aspects of collaborative operation taking into account the values of collaborative advantage. In essence, the framework interprets and analyses the strategic stages a collaborative organisation may follow when operating. The third aspect of collaborative strategy is employed in this paper, the structure of a collaborative organisation, as this can mostly determine its organisational capability.

In this respect, the structure of a collaborative organisation can be of great magnitude. Aiming for a collaborative structure suggests that rather than pursuing the organisations' management by examining tasks, functions or techniques it seems more important to examine its social character in organisational ideology and as a nexus of social and operational power. In this light, managing collaborative organisations takes the form of not using any specific technique or technology of organisational control (Charlesworth et al, 1996). Furthermore, according to Hendry (2000), the most significant implication of conceptualising strategic decision-making in cases that are likely to occur in collaboration environment is that it allows for a sense of decision-making in parallel. Consequently, decision-making can address a wide range of issues that effectively escape narrow, partial perspectives.
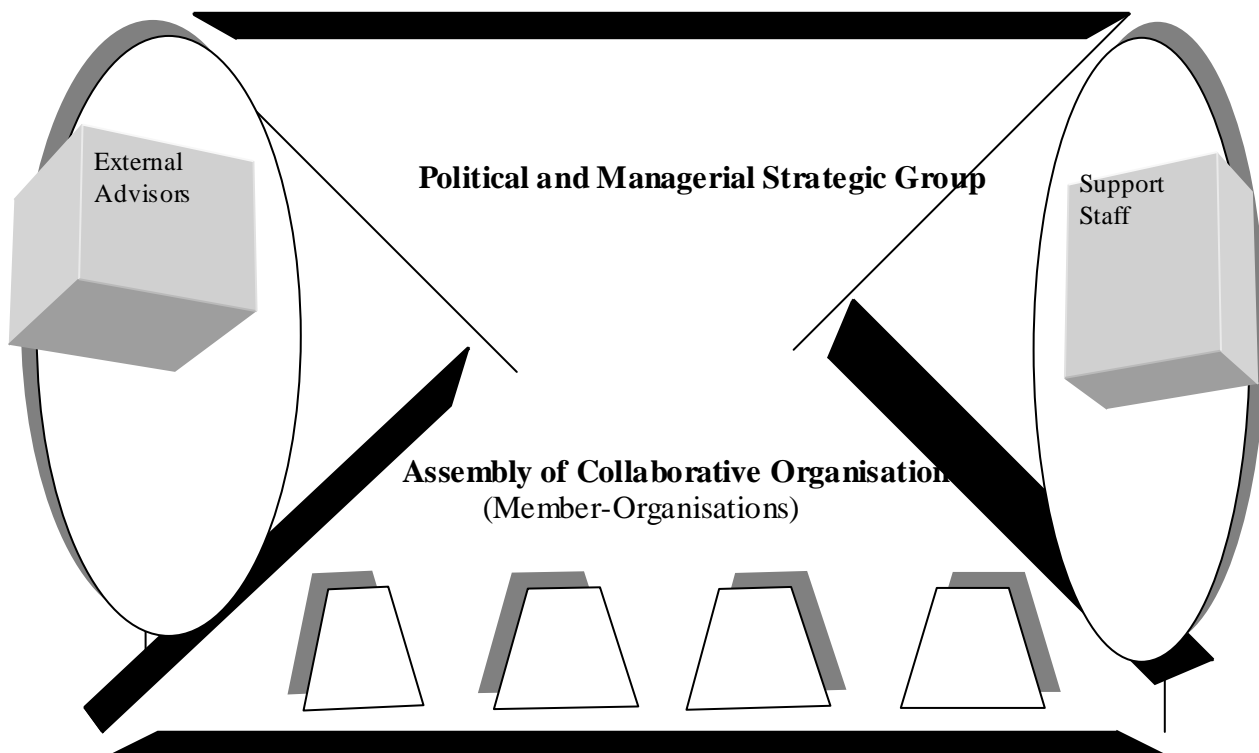
At the purely organisational level collaborative strategy proposes an organisational structure that can perhaps explain the complicated assorted functions of a collaborative scheme. This structure relies on the five basic parts of an organisation suggested by Mintzberg (1983; 1998c; 2003). It could be argued that the particular organisational structure is very similar to the one of a diversified organisation because it is not as integrated as a single organisation (several independent entities-organisations in a loose structure) (1998c). As it can be seen in Figure 2 the primary parts of a collaborative organisation as such include the *political and managerial strategic group*, which is the executive group responsible for implementing the decisions taken in the organisation's *assembly*. The assembly includes all the members of the collaborative organisation and it is responsible for taking decisions about strategic planning and organisational matters.

Aspect of Collaborative Strategy	Added Value of Collaborative Advantage	Indicators	Contra-indicators
Selection of Members	The importance of collaborating expressed in patterns of involvement, trust, and commitment (Collaborating action as an expression of purpose)	Strategy for recruiting well motivated in terms of trust and probity as well as prepared participants in terms of allocation of time and resources	Collaborative groups representing different sectors face extraordinary difficulties in overcoming differences
Vision of Collaborative Organisation	Integration of a collaborative organisation into the whole under a shared vision and integration with the broader environment (Collaborative action as an institutional framework)	Strategic vision that reflects the participation and expectations of all members – Shared feeling that collaborating will solve common problems	Involving members from different sectors is often critical to a collaborative organisation's success and frequently problematic
Structure of Collaborative Organisation	The ability of a collaborative organisation to act responsibly within a collaborative scheme (Collaborating action as a model of conduct)	Strategy is realised as a plan that has an objective viewpoint of the reality and aims to provide context for decisive acts of implementation	Examples of abuse of power, unfair allocation of resources, and appearance of conflicts cannot permit smooth operation of the collaborative scheme
Plan Delivery of Collaborative Organisation	The ability of a collaborative organisation to acquire and organise resources to deliver activity against purpose or task (Collaborative action as capacity)	Implementation of the strategic plan according to allocation of roles and responsibilities – Adaptation to need demands	Insufficient implementation of the strategic plan because of existence of disharmony and conflict between the members of collaborative organisation
Review and Change of Collaborative Action	The ability of a collaborative organisation to review its processes (Collaborative action of a mechanistic repetitive character)	Strategy in looking at reviewing policies and processes by feeding back into policy making and producing appropriate changes	Lack of coordination in what aspects of the collaborative organisation's operation should be reviewed can be in particular cases problematic

Table 1: The framework of Collaborative Strategy

Additionally, the organisation can be supported by *external advisors* e.g. governmental staff which guide on and evaluate the organisation's function. Finally, professional help by *support staff* normally on administrative matters can be regarded as essential. The fact that a collaborative organisation treats its members in equal terms can be seen by the position of the political and managerial strategic group in relation to advisors and support staff. They all form a straight line, which reflects the networking character of the collaborative organisation. In short, there is no managerial apex in this type of organisation. The assembly constitutes the highest possible decision-making body having a say on crucial matters e.g. the economic, social and political planning of the organisation.

Figure 2: Structure of collaborative organisation

Source: Adjusting the model produced by Mintzberg, Five Basic Parts of the Organisation, (1983: 11; 2003: 210)

There exist other types of structures which under certain circumstances could be operational for collaborative organisational schemes. Matrix structure for example appears to allow the advantage for separate areas of action to get integrated across organisational boundaries. This structure is flexible enough because it allows different dimensions of an organisation to be mixed together. As a result, issues of conflict and lack of centrally imposed control often occur within the divisions of the organisation involved (Johnson et al, 2005). However, despite its similar logic in functioning with the organisational structure proposed in this paper it could be argued that the matrix structure applies more to formally formatted organisations, which have decided to follow an internally informal way of operation. In contrast, the framework under consideration appears to be more applicable to more 'loose' organisational relationships i.e. collaborative schemes.

Organisational structure strongly indicates the degree of integration within a collaborative organisation. This is normally evident through the organisational procedures that are established and the extent to which those are followed by the collaborative parties. In this light, four elements appear to matter: *Political and managerial leadership, Power balance and inclusiveness, Consultation, accountability, and Decision Making Process*, and *Commitment of human and financial resources* (Table 2). Based upon this, a *culture of strategic integration* is identified. This constitutes the core element of the proposed collaborative strategy. Conducting research and analysis of findings that are presented in the following sections is based upon the concepts and elements as they are identified in Table 2.

Aspects of Collaborative Organisational Structure	
Key concepts for Constructing Collaborative Organisational Structure	• **Integration of Strategic Nature and Culture:** As an integral part for the public and business sectors • **Inclusiveness and devolution of power:** As an integral part for the community and voluntary sectors
Elements of Organisational Structure	• *Political and Managerial Leadership;* • *Power Balance and Inclusiveness;* • *Consultation, Accountability and Decision Making Process;* • *Commitment of Human and Financial Resources*

Table 2: The process regarding partnership organisational structure

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology that was used for this paper is based upon some of the author's previous work. In terms of research evidence the paper relied heavily on data that was collected in 2003/2004 in order to analyse the utilisation of the collaborative strategy framework. In this light, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from strategic partnerships in Leicester. Interviewees were selected primarily because of their expertise on the topic. Additionally, 21 partnership meetings were observed and secondary data was collected. To this extent, part of this research material has been used for this paper. The choice of Leicester as the case study for this paper relied on its attribute as a 'typical' example of an English city that could satisfy the requirements for a research on partnerships within the context of urban regeneration. Research-wise although Leicester cannot match with metropolitan cities such as London, Manchester or Liverpool in terms of experience in constructing partnerships, however, there exists a partnership tradition in the city since almost the 1970s. This makes Leicester a very interesting place to be researched. Moreover, the fact that Leicester has been developed into a multi-cultural and economic centre that provides diversity and vitality implies a place of partnership action that could support new ideas and working practices to be brought in.

It could be argued that this paper is strongly linked with this year's BAM conference's principal theme on '*Management Research Education and Business Success: Is the Future as clear as the past? Present/future directions based on the*

past'. The reason for this is that in essence this paper presents a case of management research education, which has been at the core of contemporary research: conducting research on the strategy and management of collaborative organisations. Although no much of history exists for this topic there is sufficient evidence that research on collaboration has contributed significantly to the creation of cutting edge findings that can push the boundaries in the the fields of management, strategy, and organisational studies yet further.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES
Strategic Partnerships in Leicester
Strategic partnerships in the current urban regeneration landscape have been defined as the ones that can embrace a wide range of participants from the public, business, community and voluntary sectors that act together and have clearly defined goals and objectives (Southern, 2002). Taking into account the difficulties in their construction and the multi-complex character of the regeneration issues some of the challenges facing such partnerships are as follows:

> ➢ The need to achieve sustainability or a long stream of benefits in regeneration set against a series of inconsistent urban regeneration initiatives;
> ➢ The need to harness mainstream policy to urban regeneration requirements
> <div align="right">(Carley et al, 2000)</div>

In this respect, the principal case study partnership, the Leicester Partnership (LP) was founded in June 2001 as the 'local strategic partnership' of the city. Its establishment came as a response to the governmental guidance on Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). According to the policy initiative on Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (NRF), creation and development of an LSP has been the prerequisite for receiving NRF funding. Leicester embraces the 13 out 88 most deprived areas in England as they were identified through the NRF programme. In the light of this, as an NRF authority Leicester ought to establish an operationally effective local strategic partnership. The Government Office for the East Midlands has been responsible for assessing this effectiveness on an annual basis. Organisation-wise the partnership has been a collaborative arrangement of statutory agencies, businesses, voluntary and, community groups coming together to contribute to the 'greater good' of the people in the city (Leicester Partnership, 2003).

Apart from the Leicester Partnership three more partnerships in the area can claim the label of being 'strategic'. First, the (Leicester) Education Partnership Board which came to the fore in the late 1990s, with the aim to renew and modernise the Local Educational Authority (LEA) in Leicester after the establishment of the OFFSTED scheme for inspection of LEA, introduced by the Labour government (Leicester City Partnership Board, January 2002). Second, the Leicester Regeneration Agency was possibly the most powerful strategic partnership in Leicester until the establishment of the Leicester Partnership in 2001. This was due to its introduction as an agency that would streamline important policies in solving chronic social problems in the city e.g. raising living standards in the most deprived communities. Finally, Voluntary Action Leicester (VAL) has been the largest overarching organisation in Leicester with the purpose to help voluntary and community groups and local charities in their development. It has worked on a partnership basis and overseen the work of several voluntary organisations around the city. In 2004 it had over three hundred members

drawn from Leicester's voluntary sector. VAL has also been one of the founder and most influential members of the Leicester Partnership (Voluntary Action Leicester, 2004).

Organisational Structure of Leicester Partnerships
Leicester Partnership: Operating Collaboratively
The operational structure of the Leicester Partnership has originated in the function of its forerunner partnership, the Leicester Partnership for the Future (LPF). During the process of establishing the Leicester Partnership it became apparent that what was needed was a structure that would reflect the broad representation of membership within the partnership. As a consequence, the principal issue addressed was the potential capability of the partnership to fully embrace representatives from the business, community and voluntary sectors. Thus, the decision taken was to establish an initial board, with an equal number of members from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and to review the partnership's structure later in the year (From the observations of the Workshop of Setting Up and LSP in Leicester of 11th May 2001, the meeting about 'A Local Strategic Partnership for Leicester of 5th June 2001, and the Inaugural meeting of the Leicester Partnership of 29th June 2001).

Since its inception the partnership organisational structure was reviewed again in July 2002. During this time the initial board of 19 members was increased to 26 in response to the need for the partnership to be more inclusive. However, there has always been a strong pressure from other agencies and organisations to be represented at board level (Greengage Consulting Ltd, November 2002). According to the report conducted by Greengage Consulting that partly based its conclusions on a survey with partnership members, two divergent views appeared to be regarding the size and structure of the LP, which seemed to emerge within many partnership contexts of this kind. Firstly, an *action focused structure* that embraced:

1. Small executive board;
2. 6-10 members in the board;
3. People with authority to take decisions;
4. People of sufficient seniority to make things happen

On the other side of the spectrum, an *inclusive and representative approach* embraced:

➢ Coverage of the whole range of interests in the city;
➢ Greater community involvement;

(ibid)

However, the tendency for embracing a collaborative manner in operation has not prevented conflicts and contradictory issues occurring within the Leicester Partnership, as it can be seen from the interview by a representative of the public sector to the partnership below:
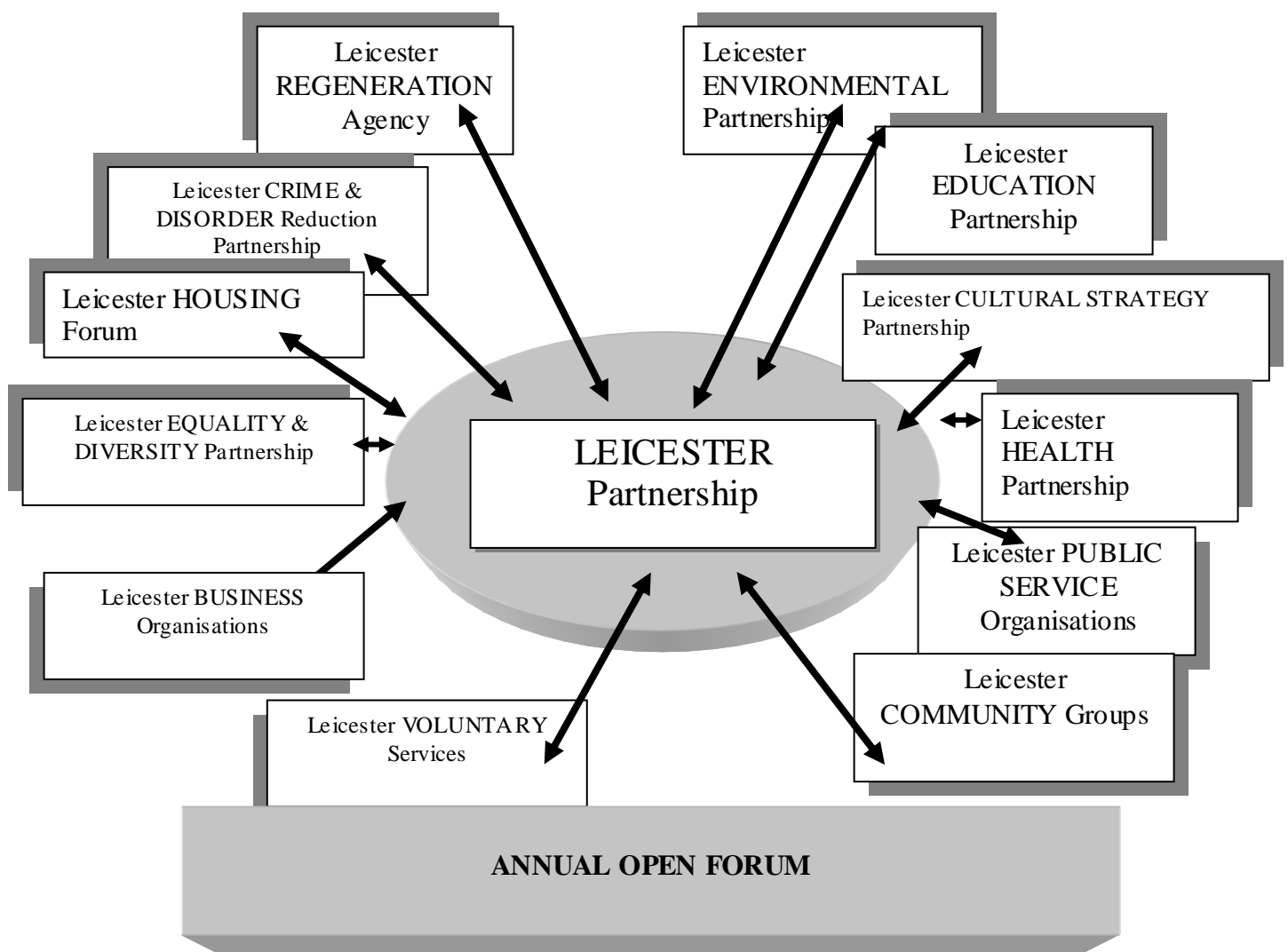
> INTERVIEWEE: There are two people who had doubts about the basic principle. Z, although I think her concerns are addressed in the proposals more than she thinks, and X who clearly doesn't like the whole idea.

INTERVIEWER: ...whole idea of ...
INTERVIEWEE: ...of restructuring and re-proposing. He doesn't act with the
partnership. He wants to see a small executive body. On that view, you know, he
is the [profession of X] of a major service provider that is nice and convenient
for him. But it won't satisfy all the partners.
(Senior representative of the public sector to the Leicester Partnership)

Figure 3: The organisational structure of the Leicester Partnership

Leicester
REGENERATION
Agency

Leicester
ENVIRONMENTAL
Partnership

Leicester CRIME &
DISORDER Reduction
Partnership

Leicester
EDUCATION
Partnership

Leicester HOUSING
Forum

Leicester CULTURAL STRATEGY
Partnership

Leicester EQUALITY &
DIVERSITY Partnership

**LEICESTER
Partnership**

Leicester
HEALTH
Partnership

Leicester BUSINESS
Organisations

Leicester PUBLIC
SERVICE
Organisations

Leicester VOLUNTARY
Services

Leicester
COMMUNITY Groups

ANNUAL OPEN FORUM

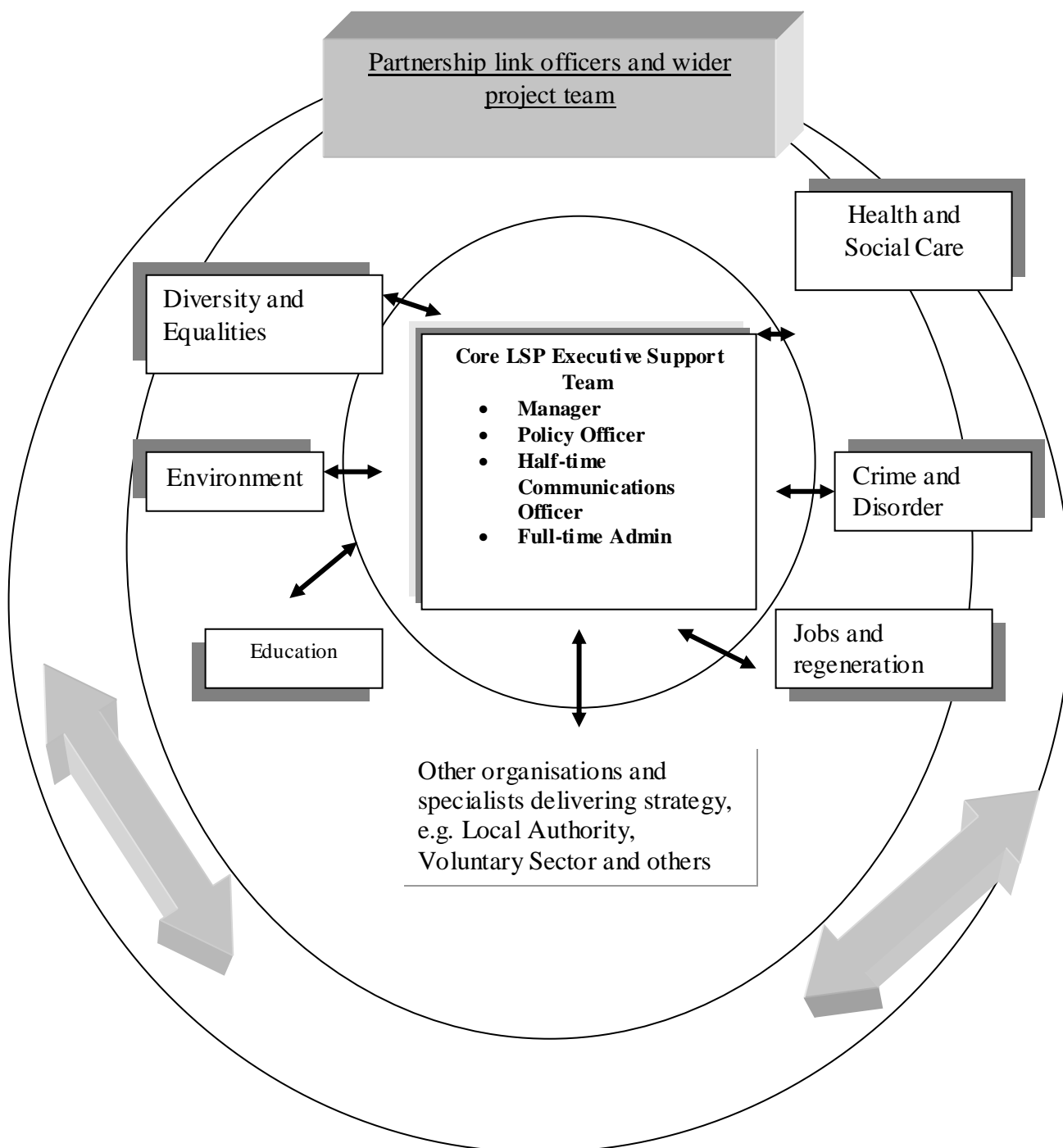**Source:** Leicester Partnership (September 2003)

As the Liberal Democrats came into office after the successful result in the local
elections held in May 2003 this has reflected a shift on the partnership's development
regarding the increase of the partnership board into the total number of 52 (From the
observation of the inaugural meeting of the 'new' Leicester Partnership, 29th May
2003). The six community-plan partnerships supplemented with the Housing Forum
and the Cultural Strategy Partnership as shown in Figure 3 have participated in order
to explicitly create a way of delivering the Partnership's objectives whilst allowing
Leicester Partnership to maintain a strategic overview. Equally important have been
the key business, community and voluntary networks. The *annual open forum* has

epitomised the partnership assembly open to the widest possible representation of local residents' agencies and groups (Leicester Partnership, September 2003). With regard to the issue of the ineffectiveness that the increase in members would have brought, the chair of the partnership argued about exactly the opposite: that '*the value both of having a smaller co-ordinating group to progress operational matters and of setting up working parties with a limited remit*' has helped the partnership to achieve both inclusiveness and effective function (Greaves, Bernard, 14th January 2004).

The core of the administrative work has been entrusted to a dedicated group, the Partnership Development Team in order to shape the future programme of the partnership. As it can be seen in Figure 4 the team's manager has coordinated the team towards delivery of improvements in joined up practices in Leicester. Regarding the financial support of this project, it has been estimated that the annual cost of running the development team is about £148,000 per annum. However, considering the contributions by some of the partners towards the cost of running the team it has become clear that there must be another way for financing the project, as the shortfall for 2002/2003 has been £83,000 and for 2003/2004 £103,000. Therefore, it has been decided for the partnership to bid for resources from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (Leicester Partnership, 24th April 2002, Paper D).

The financial and administrative support the Leicester City Council has provided the partnership with has been widely accepted by other partners. In the light of this, the role of the city council has been crucial because it has promoted the establishment and development of the LP, as it did with previous partnership attempts in the city during the last 15 to 20 years. As in the case of many other local authorities this capacity by the council has been reinforced by the Local Government Acts 1999 and 2000. The acts state explicitly that every local authority has the power to do anything that could have an impact on achieving 'the promotion or improvement of the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area'. In so doing 'every local authority must prepare a community strategy' (HM Stationery Office, 2000: 1, 2, and 3). This dynamic role of the local council has been apparent since the preliminary activities of establishing the Leicester Partnership. It is worthy to mention for example, the administrative support the council offered to the transformation of the Leicester Partnership for the Future into the Leicester Partnership. However, the council has always tried to keep balance of power between itself and other partners as such a political behaviour could be beneficial for a fruitful partner symbiosis within the LP (From the observations of the Workshop of Setting Up and LSP in Leicester of 11th May 2001, the meeting about 'A Local Strategic Partnership for Leicester of 5th June 2001, and the Inaugural meeting of the Leicester Partnership and the last meeting of the LPF of 29th June 2001). The latter has also been apparent in a series of the council's documents in which collaboration with other organisations in the city in the form of formal and informal partnerships has been a prominent role for the city council (The Improvement and Development Agency, April 2003).

Figure 4: Managing Leicester Partnership and its partnership links

Source: Leicester Partnership (24th April 2002) Minutes, Paper D, p. 4

(Leicester) Education Partnership Board (EPB) and Leicester Regeneration Agency (LRA): Operational Impediments

The Education Partnership Board has been organised in a manner that would reflect its strategic focus on educational matters and delivery of education policies. However, there have been certain doubts expressed by members of the partnership on the organisational capacity of the partnership especially after its restructure in 2002. One of the partners, representative of further education, was very critical up to the point to

be initially reticent in being interviewed because he could not see the purpose of it! He did not feel able to contribute to the debate about strategic partnerships as 'he participated only in the last three meetings of the partnership' he was participating to. A second reason and perhaps more important was that he felt disappointed by the partnership operation. Some of his remarks were: 'It's a partnership of just 6-7 people' or 'I'm disappointed because the partnership has not presented any sign of work so far' or 'it's not even a talking shop in the sense that if it was there would be discussions about future plans'. However, there have been some less bleak but still negative opinions about the partnership's operational function with a tendency to describe a pragmatic picture, such as the one by a representative of higher education who described the situation as:

> *And even if we now created the new partnership board… and we have taken formally the seat on the LSP through that there are still discussions about legitimacy, about membership. We have never met with the same group of people. As soon as we do somebody like St. Andrews or D. Nelson says: 'should we expand the group? Do we need heavy hitters? Do we need other people in? Can we possibly give our opinion about the City Academy for example? Because if we do are we really representatives?'*
>
> (Representative of Higher Education)

The organisational impediments have also been apparent in some of the partnership documents in which the need for the partnership to provide leadership and advocacy for the learning agenda has been emphasised. In this context, the partnership has had a desire to take prompt actions and it has been recognised that it is better 'to do the best, most evident things now rather than spend too much time searching for the optimum solutions'. One of the ways to obtain results with this process could be adding value to the EPB by augmenting its existing membership (Leicester Education Partnership Board, 29th April 2003).

The case of the Leicester Regeneration Agency has somehow been different. The partnership has begun to luck on aims and objectives. This has led to some form of organisational decline after the Leicester Partnership took over as the overarching partnership of the city in June 2001. Before this the LRA along with the Leicester Partnership for the Future constituted the two main pillars of strategic partnerships in Leicester. At this time (1999-2001) the board of the LRA was drawn from all the four sectors in the city (Leicester Regeneration Agency, July 2000). The establishment of the Leicester Regeneration Company as an independent partnership specifically for physical regeneration has weakened further the LRA both politically and organisationally. As senior member of staff of the LRC pointed out he '*knew very little about the LRA at all except that they are managing the tailoring of the SRB programme*'. However, '*originally they [the LRA] had aspirations to become the body that would draw physical regeneration as well*' but he did not '*really know if they've pulled that off*'. Nevertheless, '*that is probably why the LRC was needed*'. Despite these critical points about the partnership's function a senior policy officer of the city council heavily involved in the latest developments of the LRA had his own view about the story:

> *Well, the LRA, its primary function is to promote the social regeneration of Leicester. The Leicester Regeneration Company is one of a small number of*

regeneration companies established by the government and their main function is to support the physical regeneration of Leicester. And of course as an authority we want to ensure that with physical regeneration there is a ...social regeneration as well.

What he did not reply to though was the question on how many meetings the LRA has had since 2001 and how many partners attended these meetings. As another senior member of the council's managerial staff has put it: '*I would argue I don't think that the Leicester Regeneration Agency has developed as a partnership really beyond its own funding'.* .

Voluntary Action Leicester (VAL): An Overarching Structure for Supporting Community and Voluntary Groups

The organisational capability of VAL has stemmed from its network-type operational activity as the 'umbrella' agency for coordinating the action of community and voluntary groups in Leicester. The organisational aim of VAL has been to help new and existing groups to '*develop, provide information and training, assist in liaison with local government and enable the view of voluntary groups to be represented*' (Voluntary Action Leicester, 2004). As a senior officer of VAL has argued:

> *I mean, VAL has not being seen as a local strategic partnership. The first issue is to make sure that people around the table understand that the voluntary sector exists. And also we help them in understanding what the voluntary sector is capable of doing. And what it is doing now and what it will do in the future. So there is a lot of action to do in terms of trying to encourage those partners to be able to deliver…. We have a membership of 300 voluntary organisations and they elect their trustees who govern them. So we are governed by the organisations we are trying to serve in the city.*

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that VAL has functioned through a network of volunteers who are management committee members and can include: fund raising, financial advice, personnel and employment advice, constitutions and governance, and charity and company formation and coordination of the local community and voluntary sectors (Voluntary Action Leicester, 2004).

DISCUSSION – CONCLUSIONS
Achieving Culture of Integration (Or an Efficient Modus Operandi) for Local Strategic Partnerships
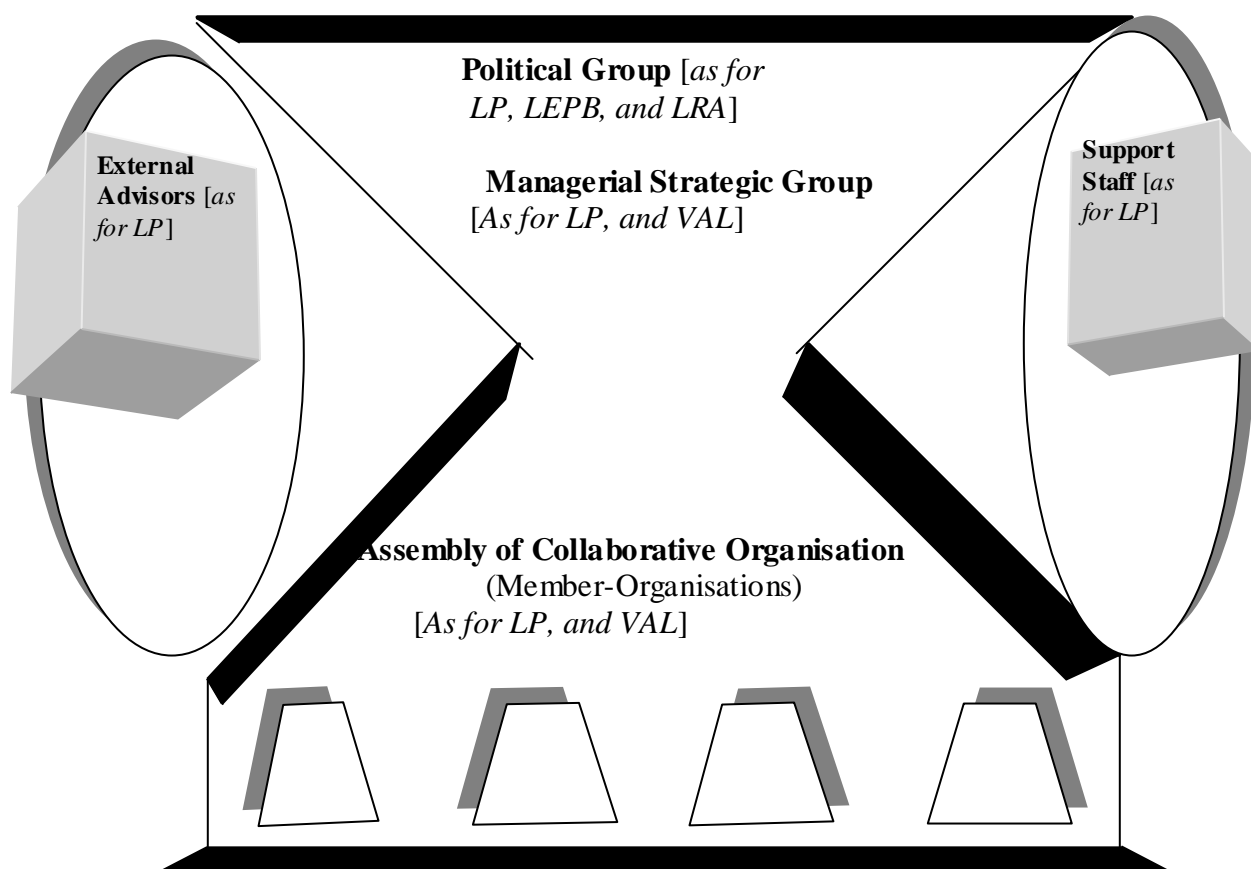
The achievement of a culture of strategic integration was a vital point in the investigation of the case study partnerships. It could be argued that the usefulness of this model relied on its capacity to interpret the operation of the case study partnerships regarding specific elements of this operation i.e. *political and managerial strategic group*, *collaborative organisation's assembly, external advisors, and support staff*.

Based on the research findings the strategic integration of the case study partnerships in terms of how they operated can be described as follows:

➢ *Establishment of a political group*: In other words formation of the partnership board – Irreplaceable element for all partnerships' efficacious operation –

Because of their advisory nature and wide remit it was not possible for Voluntary Action Leicester to formulate a partnership board;

➢ *Formation of a managerial group:* Indispensable element of operation for VAL due to their large network of members from the community and voluntary sectors;

➢ *Assembly of collaborative organisation:* In other words the whole of the partnership – Applicable for LP because of its extended political and social remit – Applicable also for VAL due to their extensive network of membership within the community and voluntary sectors;

➢ *Existence of external advisors:* Normally embraced the governmental and quasi- governmental regional authorities - Important for the LP as the Government Office of East Midlands was responsible for accrediting the partnership condition for allocating the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Community Empowerment Fund – In addition, the LP contracted out parts of its consultation process to private consultancy companies e.g. Greengage Consulting Ltd;

➢ *Support Staff:* The Partnership Development Team of the LP was an example of case study partnerships operating via a purely managerial group regarding administrative issues;

Figure 5: Application of the structure of collaborative organisation to the partnerships in Leicester

Contextual Affairs in Partnership Organisational Structure

The operational capacity of the partnerships under consideration was considered as a major factor that affected their activities. This was due to the weight all parties involved put on developing partnership arrangements, which could benefit them socially, politically, and economically. Following agreement on a desirable vision, organisational structure was the next stage in the prioritisation of partnership action - translating this vision into strategy, and transforming wish lists into action plans. As Carley *et al* (2000) argue achieving goals in urban regeneration means that the vision statements have to be carried out in such a manner as to produce consensual, workable objectives that can be backed up by commitments to finance and human resources. Research findings showed that the case study partnerships all attempted to do so, but the most resourceful, thus potentially more powerful ones, succeeded more than others (in other words the Leicester Partnership in comparison to the other case study partnerships).

Four elements of organisational structure are examined in the following paragraphs based on the model presented in Table 2: Political and managerial leadership, Power balance and inclusiveness, Consultation, accountability and decision making process, and Commitment of human and financial resources.

  ➢ *Political and Managerial Leadership:* Political leadership by the borough council proved to be a strength of the partnership administration in Leicester. The city council took the responsibility and leadership in the first place in setting-up the partnerships but its then political tactics favoured a role of equality in comparison with their co-members. The formulation of the partnership administrative team as an independent group responsible for managerial duties helped considerably towards this direction.
  ➢ *Power Balance and Inclusiveness:* In terms of the balance of power in Leicester, it was thought that the synthesis of the partnership board since May 2003 finally gave an aura of power balance and inclusiveness to the partnership (Leicester Partnership, 2003).
  ➢ *Consultation, Accountability and Decision Making Process:* The government's guidance on the establishment of local strategic partnerships has noticeably referred to the promotion of monitoring and reporting arrangements as a means of increasing consultation and accountability within the partnership structures (DETR, 2001). In the light of this, it could be argued that the Leicester Partnership's consultation process towards the launch of the revised Community Plan in March 2003 was the largest event-expression of a successful consultation amongst the case study partnerships aiming to create accountability for the partnership itself and not for its individual members. It was estimated that more than 10,000 local residents were informed about the revised Community Plan and Leicester's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy 2003 and gave their opinion on the Leicester Partnership (observation of the launch of the revised Community Plan, 20th March 2003).
  ➢ *Commitment of Human and Financial Resources:* In terms of the commitment of human resources the governmental guidance was explicit: 'the local authority should take the first steps in convening local public services, the local people, voluntary organisations and the private sector to begin the establishment of an LSP' (DETR, 2001: 17). The Leicester Partnership evolved by abolishing direct leadership by the council. However, the city

council remained a strongly influential partner.

Conclusions

The exploration of an approach that can contribute to a potentially effective organisational structure for the case study partnerships was the focal point in this paper. The paper identified the way each partnership used to operate and explained the particular operational 'paths' taken by each partnership according to the remits of the collaborative strategy framework. Based on the research findings it could be argued that the strengths and weaknesses of establishing this particular organisational structure within the LSPs in Leicester were as it follows:

In terms of strengths:

➢ Formulation of an organisational capacity that could decentralise the priorities via thematic partnerships whilst to obtain the establishment of detailed community strategies – The creation of the Leicester Regeneration Company as the body responsible for improving physical regeneration in the city can perhaps be deemed as a significant example of this;

➢ Formulation of an organisational capacity that could cope with the demands put by the central authority for implementing governmental initiatives on urban regeneration (e.g. Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy) and being funded because of this.

Then, weaknesses:

➢ The partnerships failed to obtain sufficiently strong community leadership to bring about substantial policy outcomes;

➢ The Education Board Partnership and the Leicester Regeneration Agency experienced severe organisational problems of existence after the establishment of the Leicester Partnership in the city. The LP took over as the most holistic, strategic partnership arrangement leaving them the secondary role of dealing with only particular themes such as social regeneration and education.

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