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## 'Assessing the Development of Sub-regional and Local Strategic Partnerships: A Comparison of Durham and Northumberland, North East, and Leicester, East Midlands'

**by**

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the development of strategic partnerships at local and sub-regional levels in the light of recent duty placed on local government to promote regeneration and overall well-being. The paper identifies four propositions for regeneration, as well as seven criteria for effective partnership functioning. It then attempts to empirically test these propositions and criteria on six cases of strategic partnerships in the North East and East Midlands. It argues that although there are indications of successful partnership arrangements for effective regeneration there are some dysfunctional elements that need to be considered.*

## Introduction

Regeneration in urban and rural areas has taken a new form in recent years as regions, cities and local areas face continuing problems such as the erosion of economic activity, high unemployment levels and employment shifts towards suburban locations (*Carley, 1999*). In this respect the Local Government Act 2000 sets a duty that '*every local authority has the power to do anything which they consider likely to achieve any one or more of the following objectives in their areas:- (i) the promotion or improvement of the economic well-being, (ii) the promotion or improvement of the social well-being, and (iii) the promotion or improvement of the environmental well-being' (HM Stationery Office, 2000: 1).*

It is clear that these three objectives constitute the main aims of regeneration, and in this sense, every regeneration initiative can be divided into two parts, the strategy or '*what to do*' and the organisational framework or '*how to do it*'. This paper then examines contemporary regeneration trends and their implications at sub-regional and local levels. Four propositions for regeneration are suggested as well as seven criteria for effective partnership working, accepting that partnership is a feasible and attractive mechanism to achieve regeneration.

## Four propositions for contemporary regeneration

A first step in any strategy for regeneration is the '*what to do'* element of the process, and requires regeneration managers who can assess the trends and forces at local and

sub-regional levels. However this is not an easy task. As Southern (*2001*) points out, the term 'regeneration' means many things to many people and can create problems when it becomes meaningless and unmanageable. Three main trends or concepts are used in this paper to create the context in which regeneration takes place. These are 'c*ommunity involvement*', '*new regionalism*' and '*city-region*'. According to Rhodes (*1997*) multiple contradictions characterise local government, as explanations based on just one cause could be inadequate. He argues that the labyrinthine system that replaced traditional bureaucracies has created problems in poor co-ordination, accountability, control, as well as a multitude of unintended consequences. From a post-modern perspective it might be argued that new local and sub-regional agendas have challenged Weberian formalisation, centralisation and bureaucratic procedures and displaced generalised, top-down, command and control public sector management approaches with more flexible, fragmented and segregated organisational forms that allow decentralised decision-making across formal organisational boundaries (*Bogason, 2000: 10*).

In this context it might be asserted that community involvement in regeneration is not simply an example of New Labour rhetoric but more a pre-requisite for transformation and change. Under recent legislation, communities are urged to play a more prominent role in developing regeneration strategies, and accordingly a series of policies focusing on community involvement have been introduced. A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal sets out policies to tackle social exclusion and deprivation in the 88 most deprived areas of the country (*Social Exclusion Unit, 2001*). However, if this enhanced role for communities is to be achieved it is vital to specify the role that policy makers envisage for communities, as well as the role that communities themselves believe they can play in designing and delivering policies (*Foley & Martin, 2000*).

Above the community level concepts such as '*new regionalism'* and '*city-region'* are informing the regeneration agenda and adding to the debates in this policy area. In '*new regionalism'* the region becomes the crucible of economic development and the prime focus of economic policy (*Webb & Collis, 2000*). When New Labour came to power there was a recognition that traditional regional policies had failed to address long standing and fundamental economic and social problems. Although there was an

initial commitment to elected regional government, there has instead been a strengthening of GORs (central government's offices in the regions), tinkering with existing arrangements for joint working on regional planning, and the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to encourage regeneration and competitiveness (*Stephenson & Poxon, 2001*).

In parallel with the debate on '*new regionalism'* the concept of a '*city-region'* has arisen in the last decade or so. This was due to '*the disjoined nature of many of the regions [which] means that the principal constituent cities are frequently at odds with the broader regional agenda' (Robson, 2001: 128).* A city-region includes not only the main city in a particular area but also the surrounding towns and villages. It could be argued that the two concepts of *community involvement*, at a neighbourhood level, and *city-region* (as a travel-to-work-area) could achieve broader social revival and economic prosperity.

In the second step of any regeneration strategy; the '*what to do*' part of the process it is vital to define the main principles required to affect change and transformation. What then are the main features of regeneration in the '*city-regions*' that reflect both the attributes of '*community involvement*' and '*new regionalism*'? Taking the White Paper, *Our Towns and Cities (DETR, 2000),* as a guide to combine what local citizens would like to achieve in and for their localities, with new policy developments at sub-regional and local level it could be proposed that the main attributes of regeneration are as follows:-

1. ***To get the appropriate design and planning at the city-region level;***
2. ***To enable all city-region areas to create and share economic prosperity;***
3. ***To provide the quality public services local residents need;***
4. ***To make local people capable of participating in developing their communities.***

The major problems facing regeneration managers are in identifying key issues, as well as setting up the correct arrangements and processes to affect significant change. How can they achieve these aims? Partnerships are still seen as the main vehicle for regeneration, as we shall see in the following sections.

## Managing regeneration through Local and Sub-Regional Strategic Partnerships.

Attempting to respond to the question about the appropriate organisational framework or '*how to do it'* in order to achieve effective regeneration at sub-regional and local level it is generally accepted that neither public nor private sector have control over economic and social issues. So partnership arrangements are considered as the recognisable way to solving problems of economic and social decline (*Parkinson, 1996*).

In this paper we consider Local Strategic and Sub Regional Partnerships (LSPs and SRPs) as the organisational frameworks for effectively responding to contemporary regeneration needs at sub-regional and local level. By examining some of the early problems that are emerging it is hoped that policy makers and other agency representatives may learn from early mistakes and the ensuing discussion may offer some guidance for future operation and management of what is, essentially, a policy experiment. However, it is as well to point out that at this juncture that SRPs and LSPs are configured differently in the North East and East Midlands, and although there are recognisable similarities they do differ in many ways. The SRPs and LSPs in the NE have a longer history and are better established than the E. Midlands counterpart organisations, and the concepts of '*new regionalism'* and a '*city region'* are not well established in the NE, save for an occasional reference in academic articles. The notion of having ' *a city region'* has been restricted to a debate on whether or not Newcastle is the premier city, but Durham and Morpeth (the locations of Durham County Council and Northumberland County Council, respectively) are unitary city/town councils where little debate on these issues has been evident. On the other hand, in Leicester, and in the East Midlands generally these concepts have been fully debated and are part of the regeneration agenda, at local and sub-regional

agenda, as shall be seen in the following sections. We now turn our attention to describing LSPs and their activities.

The core tasks of LSPs are to develop and deliver the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal mentioned in the previous section, to prepare and implement a community strategy for the area and to bring together plans, smaller scale partnerships and initiatives, and to work with local authorities on developing Public Service Agreements (PSA) (*DETR, 2001*). In Leicester, Local Strategic Partnerships act within the boundaries of an urban area in contrast with Sub-Regional Strategic Partnerships whose activity can be met within the boundaries of the city-region concept. In any case an LSP can participate in an SRP partnership arrangement. In Durham and Northumberland LSPs act within (but sometimes across) district local authority boundaries, whereas SRPs (and there are four of them, the other two being Tyne&Wear and Tees Valley) operate at the sub regional level to achieve the objectives of the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) of the Regional Development Agency, One North East (ONE). However, so far it is not exactly clear where the limits are as there have been cases in both regions where overlapping activities have been identified.

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Further to their broader geographical boundaries of activity SRPs have the responsibility for the preparation and development of sub-regional economic strategies in collaboration with the Government Offices and RDAs. In addition, they lead the preparation and delivery of regeneration plans for target areas within the sub-region (*EMDA, 2001*).

The government has set the criteria for accrediting Local Strategic Partnerships, by February 2002, by Government Offices with the overall objective of making qualitative improvement in the local community. Six criteria have been set up, which LSPs should demonstrate are met:

- ***To be effective, representative and play a key role;***
- ***To involve all key players;***
- ***To establish genuine common priorities, and agreed actions leading to demonstrable improvements;***
- ***To align performance management systems of member organisations to LSP aims and objectives;***
- ***To reduce and not add to bureaucracy;***
- ***To build on best practice from other successful local, regional and national partnerships*** *(Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2001).*

So far there is no similar accreditation framework for SRPs in the East Midlands, but in the NE each SRP has agreed an Action Plan with the RDA, ONE. For the purpose of this paper we will use the above criteria in order to assess up-to-date the development of LSPs and SRPs. These criteria constitute the organisational framework needed in order to have effective regeneration at the local level. At sub regional level the framework of partnerships is the same apart from an additional criterion should be met by all SRPs, as it is defined in the role of Sub-regional Strategic Partnerships (*EMDA, 2001*)

- ***To lead the preparation and development of sub-regional economic development.***

In the NE all four SRPs are working in collaboration with the RDA, One North East (ONE) to achieve commonly agreed social and economic objectives for the sub-regions, in the same way that the Leicester counterpart organisation is expected to. In the NE these loosely coupled networks are required to prepare, monitor and review the needs of their sub-region and membership partners are expected to be as flexible as possible in achieving overall regional aims.

In the next two sections we will examine the activities of three LSPs and three SRPs in the North East and East Midlands in terms of the proposed attributes of regeneration and the criteria for effective partnership functioning at sub-regional and local level. The NE has contradictory evidence of affluence and deprivation whereas in this respect the East Midlands presents a more balanced socio/economic picture.

This being so this research is not purely comparative because, as stated earlier, the partnerships under consideration are not exactly equivalent in terms composition, structure, operation and management or policy implementation. The research methods used in the NE were interviewing and observation because LSPs and SRPs have, in the main evolved from existing partnerships and have a longer history. On the contrary, observation and secondary data were the chosen methods in the East Midlands because LSPs and SRPs are at an early stage of development.

## The functioning of LSPs and SRPs in Durham and Nortumberland.

In County Durham and Northumberland each of the districts qualifying under the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) has established an LSP but because of uneven development they are at different stages of evolution. There have been moves by each county to confirm the historical supremacy they have always asserted in economic development, and there is an expectation that they will lead the districts. This indicates that second and third criteria about the '*involvement of all the key players*' and '*establishment of genuine common priorities and agreed* actions' may prove problematic, but each county level LA (and SRP) is working with the districts to overcome these.

One of Durham districts is East Durham, where an LSP has met at least twice. It is located in one of the most deprived areas of the country; a former mining area with very high levels of unemployment, poor health, low educational attainment and aspiration, and higher than the UK average rate of criminal activity. The LSP is a natural successor to East Durham Task Force (EDTF), an economic development forum that was wound up after ten years of operation, and many of the members simply transferred over to the new LSP, one major difference being the establishment of a Community Executive to represent the needs of the community. So far this forum has not been successful in recruiting suitable people to articulate local needs and the lead body, the local authority, is hoping that council members will resist the temptation to act on behalf of local communities. If they do take on the 'voice' of the community then the aims of genuine community involvement will fail to materialise.

Structurally the East Durham LSP is divided into five key implementation groups. What is interesting to note at this point is how neatly these implementation groups shadow the departmental and cabinet re-structuring within Easington District Council, which implies that far from being based around community determined priorities business is organised around existing local authority determined priorities. It was accepted at the first meeting of the LSP that '*there is still more to do to involve community' (East Durham LSP minutes, 22nd June 2001).* The acceptable mechanism to achieving this is thought to be through the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) but this organisation is almost non existent in the East Durham area so the decision to use Settlement Renewal Officers, who are youth and community officers, as an alternative is an attempt to reach the grass root level (*Interview with East Durham LSP Director, 10th July 2001*).

In Northumberland, a mainly rural area, LSPs have been established in all districts but, more importantly 35 of LA wards are among the 2000 most deprived wards in the country. In Wansbeck, the most deprived area of Northumberland there are high percentage of households with long term illness, high levels of depression and mental illness, and high incidences of substance misuse. The sub region has the lowest earnings in the country, low skills levels, low educational attainment and aspiration and very high levels of under age pregnancies. The foot and mouth crisis has added to the deprivation. Only Wansbeck qualifies for Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, although other areas qualify for New Deal For Communities. Like Durham SRP the Northumberland SRP has attempted to involve the communities in young people's forums eg, and in developing Leadership and Community Strategies. There is a declaration to establish joint preparation of community strategies encompassing both economic and social aspects, however, as in Durham there is an expectation that district and local needs will neatly dovetail into sub-regional or county level priorities. The major problem in Northumberland as in Durham at the district level is finding a suitable mechanism for articulating community priorities, one that can be agreed by all parties at both local and sub-regional levels.

SRPs in the NE, led by local authorities in each sub region, drew in representatives from various partner organisations and the criteria for partner involvement was generally been based on how well organisational resources and capacities could be co-

ordinated to match the objectives of the regional economic strategy (*Cockerill, Liddle & Southern, 2001*).

County Durham SRP, one of these partnerships, and supported by a number of focused working groups (eg business and regeneration) involved around fifty partner organisations and has recently been subsumed into County Durham Strategic Partnership. This is to reflect the Neighbourhood Renewal legislation, to involve the district levels in achieving overall well-being, and to include social and economic aims. The partnership is rather bureaucratic with dependence on officer-type committee structures as well as on the informal links of individual officers. CDSP three year Action Plan shows that the county-wide priorities are: to develop skills for employment and competitiveness; to increase and widen participation; to encourage a learning culture; to raise basic skills; to promote collaboration and co-ordination; to provide high quality information; and to raise standards in Post 16 Provision. All LSP s beneath the sub regional level are represented on CDSP, and this is a reciprocal arrangement as county or sub regional, as well as regional representatives sit on the LSPs.

The Northumberland SRP (the successor of the long established Northumberland Strategic Partnership) has an interesting mix of formal bureaucratic and informal processes. Like Durham the local authority gives a strong lead to the business and community sector, as well as district authorities. The economic development strategy is loosely based on the objectives of the regional economic strategy and is informed by an action planning process, which involves multi-agency action teams that are adapted to sub-regional needs. The critical priorities of the sub-region have been exacerbated by the foot and mouth crisis but originally were aimed at developing rural areas and former mining communities.

Northumberland SRP has a strong corporate centre and recently established sub-groups to review its first year of operation. The main elements of its Strategy and Action Plan are: to achieve economic development and provide business support; to provide HRD and skill development; to raise educational attainment, aspiration and life long learning; to reduce health inequalities; to improve infrastructure; to secure sustainable and safe environment; and to develop culture. Both Durham and

Northumberland County Councils wish to take the lead on Community Strategies and envisage districts dovetailing local needs into countywide objectives. However, officers in Northumberland County do recognise that ' *the NSP will prepare a three year rolling action plan, but recognises that the developing maturity of local community partnerships will allow decisions to be made on deciding local priorities to be delivered at local level' (Northumberland SRP Discussion Paper, 15th May 2001).* Both county (sub-regional) levels have developed joint working arrangements between SRP/LSPs, and in the case of Durham there is a formal joint consultation working document informing the relationship.

Although LSPs and SRPs are considered as a way forward for regeneration at sub-regional and local level the research has shown some difficulties in the NE, for instance, there is a history of top-down management approaches which tend to represent a cultural legacy of 'macho' management, and as the following quote shows it has been difficult to achieve representativeness :-

*'It is very difficult to get representativeness on all issues as there are so many agendas, so many ethnic and disadvantaged groups that it isn't possible to have them all on the agenda' (From interview held by the first co-author, November 2000).*

Over the summer of 2001 a series of community appraisals were instigated at district (LSP) level by Government Office NE. Moreover, recent advertisements have called for community development advisors across a range of activities. Interviews are to be held soon, and appointments will follow.

Moreover, there are other major difficulties such as organisational effectiveness of partnerships. One suggestion in both County Durham and Northumberland SRP is to recruit relationship managers who could liaise and interact with the LSPs. These managers could play the role of advisors, mediators and problem solvers. Another issue of importance is how to jointly fund such operations, the type of skills needed, and to whom these people would be accountable. Furthermore there is the question over whether a process rather than an output management system is needed for the LSPs and SRPs to function effectively. Added to this all partnerships must represent and satisfy all the community interests. This last point illustrates the importance

attached to exchanging resources and negotiation on shared priorities. There is a need for each network to be interdependent on the others. Can LSPs and SRPs function in this manner? Evidence so far has shown that there are problems in establishing how to exchange resources, share priorities, and work interdependently. The fact that CDSP and NSP have signed concordats or joint working agreements with the districts may overcome these problems, but they are at an early stage of development..

## The functioning of the LSP and SRP in Leicester.

There have been some considerable attempts of constructing LSPs and SRPs in the East Midlands. The case of Leicester is a significant because since April 2001 there has been a move to create an LSP from nothing Previous to this there were two rather successful city-wide partnership arrangements in existence, the Leicester Regeneration Agency (LRA) with a specific focus on regeneration, and the Leicester Partnership for the Future (LPF) with a strategy focus similar to an LSP. The LSP was set up in May 2001 and it is worth mentioning that at the same time a debate started about the construction of an SRP that would act at a district or even county level. It is expected that Leicester LSP be fully operated by April 2002. The main elements of Leicester LSP' vision and strategy are: to build on the city's cultural diversity; to make Leicester an international city with a 24-hour culture; to transform Leicester into a place where there are excellent living conditions brought about by regeneration and a learning economy; to revitalise neighbourhoods through the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal; and to provide a Community Plan that could make community planning and strategy a reality for Leicester (*Leicester LSP, Minutes, 27th July 2001 & 14th September 2001*).

Leicester LSP immediate priority is '*for Leicester to be a premier city in Europe with a thriving and diverse society in which everyone is involved and in which everyone can have a decent, happy and fulfilling life' (Leicester LSP, Initial Priorities, 29th June 2001).* The theme arising is how feasible is this considering that there have been difficulties in establishing an all-encompassing organisation. The local council is the key player and this is considered to a necessity. This is due to recognition that no other local organisation could provide the facilities and staff needed for setting up the partnership. The interesting point is that other membership partners accept Leicester City Council as the leading partner. In this respect the partnership is regarded as

functioning in a very effective manner, primarily because it has met all the time schedules required to receive funding from central government as the first annual part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. There are doubts though about the active participation of the business and community sectors. Additionally, the multicultural attributes of the city may help in some respects but also make things complicated as community partners are expected to take a more active role as time goes by.

The construction of an SRP for Leicestershire or whatever geographical formation it will finally take, started back in August 2000 when the regional development agency of East Midlands, East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) and the regional government office, GO-EM, published a discussion paper about the overwhelming need for the creation of an SRP in the East Midlands (*EMDA, 2001*). Since then discussion has centred on which of the two options, either a countywide Leicestershire SRP or a Central Leicestershire SRP ( to include travel-to-work area around Leicester) is the best option. The latter option matches the notion of a city-region developed in the second section of this paper (*Leicester LSP, Minutes, 29th June 2001*). There has not been so far a final decision about the geographical extension of the SRP, and discussions continue.

## Conclusion

Based on the case studies above there are a number of generic resource issues facing both LSPs and SRPs. LSPs are benefited from massive injection of funds but each has faced difficulties in defining which representatives from the locality to involve and determining where deficiencies in capacities lie. On the other hand, SRPs members need to commit resources to certain initiatives, considering that Government Offices and RDAs are members of SRPs, where there is a level of seniority required from those people who participate. In addition, there appears to be no uniformity in the level of contact between RDAs, LSPs and SRPs and some bodies or partners are better in communicating than others mainly because the have the appropriate facilities and staff needed (normally local authorities).

In relation to how successfully the LSPs and SRPs under examination satisfy the four propositions for regeneration and the criteria for accrediting their functions the table in Appendix 1 below is of significant importance.

## Appendix 1

| | LSPs\SRPs – North East | LSPs\SRPs – East Midlands |
|---|---|---|
| **Existence of '*new regionalism*' and '*city regions*'?** | Regional focus on ED, but 75% of funding devolved to SRPs, main deliverers of RES.<br><br>City region debate focused on Newcastle. Durham and Northumberland SRPs focal point and mediator between regions and communities. | Yes, specifically in the case of Leicester City and the surrounding area. |
| **Do the four propositions for regeneration apply to partnerships under examination?** | Yes, in terms of ED. Joint consultation between SRP\LSP to agree social\economic objectives.<br><br>SRP\LSP member involvement on NSP\CDSP.<br><br>Difficulties in community participation (community appraisals underway).<br><br>SRP\LSP communication established, but in need of improvement.<br><br>Attempts to identify service improvement. | Yes, in terms of economic prosperity.<br><br>Dysfunctional elements in relation to community participation. |
| **Do partnerships satisfy the seven criteria of accreditation of their functions?** | Effectiveness\representativeness: early to say but attempts to broaden.<br><br>LSPs given prominence on SRPs.<br><br>Key players identified: problems with community representation. Use of Community Executive and Settlement Renewal Officers.<br><br>SRPs\LSPs working to agree common priorities and agreed actions (social/economic).<br><br>Too early to establish effectiveness of aligning performance management systems to LSPs. SRP action plans approved by ONE, other agencies in progress.<br><br>Too early to say on reducing bureaucracy.<br><br>Best Practice comparisons: SRPs\LSPs benchmarking with others. | Significant problems in participation.<br><br>Existence of leading partners.<br><br>Lack of effective economic development (SRP at very early stages). |

***Table 1***
***Examination of the partnerships under consideration on the four propositions for regeneration and seven criteria for accrediting their functions***

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