



Epping Forest District Council

SCRUTINY

REPORT OF LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TASK AND FINISH PANEL

February 2007

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1. Chairman's Foreword

Councillor Mrs Sartin to complete

2. Introduction and Overview

Summary of issues scrutinised

Our Panel was set up by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2006. Our primary objective was to study the Consultation Paper "Local Strategic Partnerships : Shaping their future" which had been published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in December 2005 and to reflect on how the proposals in the Consultation Paper might impact on local arrangements in relation to the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership.

We were very clear from the outset that it was not the intention that we should respond to the consultation paper but look to see how the proposals might affect what already happens locally and whether there were any suggestions that might improve current practice that should be taken on board ahead of any legal requirement to do so.

Public Interest Justification

The Local Government Act 2000 put a statutory duty on the District Council to secure the production of a Community Strategy. This was defined as a longer-term vision for the district, which would cover the twenty or so years up to 2021. Government guidance suggested the best way to do this was to bring together all the key players in the area in what was to be known as a Local Strategic Partnership.

The Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership came into being in late 2002 and was a further development of an already existing Group known as the Epping Forest Community Agencies Group, a group of key players which had been meeting to improve joint working arrangements over a number of years.

The publication of the consultation paper provided the opportunity to look again at those arrangements and advise the Council accordingly.

Terms of Reference

The Panel's Terms of Reference were:

"To consider the set up and operation of the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership and formulate recommendations on its future in the light of the government consultation paper 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their Future'

Aims and Objectives

1. To identify the purpose of the Epping Forest LSP, its work, structure, way in which it is held to account, current strengths and weaknesses and the partner agencies involved.
2. To consider the current and future role and involvement of the Council.



3. To consider the nature of the work to be carried out by the Partnership including how the emerging Sustainable Community Strategy is to be linked into the Local Planning Development Framework and other local plans in the context of the government guidance.
4. To consider who should be involved in the organisation, who should attend meetings; ways to increase involvement from residents and groups and publicity arrangements for initiatives.
5. To review the Local Area Agreement and how it should be implemented locally.
6. To consider the District LSP's relationship with the County and other LSP's in the region.
7. To consider available resources, secretariat support, performance monitoring targets and arrangements.
8. To consider how to ensure great Portfolio Holder and 'back bench' Member involvement in the Partnership and the future role for Scrutiny.
9. To consult and agree with the partner agencies any recommendations for change.
10. To identify by the end of September 2006 any recommendations that require extra spending.
11. To consider the Council's involvement with other Partnerships and how any issues identified could be applied to these relationships.

How we went about the task

We met on six occasions and, in addition, individual Members attended meetings of the LSP and its sub-groups. One of our Members also attended a training course run by the East of England Regional Assembly.

Ahead of our first meeting we were supplied with copies of the consultation paper, the response to the consultation paper sent by the Epping Forest LSP, and an information pack about the Epping Forest LSP, which contained:

- The Community Strategy;
- A diagram showing the structure, governance arrangements and relationship between the different levels of the LSP i.e. The Community Conference, The Board, the Steering Group and the 7 Themed Action Groups.
- The Constitution and Terms of Reference.
- The dates of meetings of the LSP and its constitutional parts.



3. Summary of Recommendations:



4. Report

A start to the process:

At our first meeting on 24 July 2006 we thought about the task we had been set and how best to go about it. The consultation paper and its proposals were very clear but we needed to understand how the Local Strategic Partnership works to relate the consultation paper proposals to what happens locally. Therefore, in scoping the arrangements for our study we identified other documents we wished to be made available to us and the people we would like to interview to help us complete the task we had been set. The Joint Chief Executive (Community) gave us an overview to the LSP. He referred to the aims and visions behind the partnership as set out in the Community Strategy 2004-2021, the funding arrangements and the unease by some over the alleged democratic deficit in the LSP (both in terms of the general concept of LSP's and locally in relation to the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership, which the consultation paper proposals sought to address.

We noted the consultation paper contained significant proposals which sought to pass responsibility for the LSP as a whole to the Local Authority Executive, which in turn would create a role for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It also proposed greater involvement in the workings of the Partnership for both Cabinet and "back bench" Members and suggests quite strongly that the Community Strategy should become a "sustainable community strategy" co-terminus with and strongly linked to the new local development framework which the Council has to produce.

We noted that the Council appoints two Member representatives to the Board of the LSP and that for the current year our Chairman, Councillor Mrs Mary Sartin in her role as Cabinet Member with responsibility for Environmental Protection and Councillor Mrs Anne Grigg who is the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Planning and Economic Development hold these positions. We further noted that Councillor Mrs Grigg is the Vice Chairman of the LSP Board. The Joint Chief Executive (Community) is the Vice Chair of the Steering Group and Treasurer to the LSP whilst the Themed Action Groups are chaired by a mixture of District Council Heads of Service and Senior Officers from other agencies.

The LSP has its own performance targets and a performance framework in place. It relies entirely on voluntary contributions in both cash and in kind from its constituent members to fund its activities which includes the employment of the Community Strategy and Partnership Manager, Marina Sherriff via the good offices of Voluntary Action Epping Forest.

It has close links with the County LSP via the Local Area Agreement arrangements and also works with Harlow LSP from time to time but not other LSP's in the region as there is little common ground between the diverse areas covered. That said, however, the LSP is a regular attendee at the LSP Network events organised by the East of England Regional Assembly in association with the Government Office for the East of England where LSP's have the opportunity to come together to share experiences and good practice.

Meeting with the Chairman of the LSP:

At our second meeting on 30 August 2006, we had planned to receive evidence from the past Chairman of the Epping Forest LSP, Aidan Thomas, and the current Chairman, David Butler. Aidan Thomas is the Chief Executive of our local PCT and David Butler, the Principal of Epping Forest College. In the event Aidan Thomas was not able to be present, but he did send us a letter in which he highlighted the achievements of the LSP as he saw them and his expectations for the future (See Appendix *). David Butler did attend and in view of the fact that both he and our Joint Chief Executive (Community) had been involved in the process from the very beginning we had an interesting and fruitful evening.



It was made clear to us that the Partnership had always been aware that it has no legal status and has always worked in that knowledge. Each Member comes to the table on a voluntary basis, working within the limits of their own governance arrangements. The Partnership does not have the ability to direct or overrule the governance arrangements of constituent Members and indeed has always been very clear that it has no wish to do so. This is seen as one of the strengths of the LSP in that agencies work together in the common good because they choose to do so. Whatever they offer, however, is written into LSP Action Plans and the agency making the offer is held to account for delivering against that offer.

The LSP had also recognised that it was asking a lot of busy people and therefore should avoid meetings for meetings sake or the unnecessary creation of new working groups. Wherever possible therefore it adapted existing groups to become the action groups of the Community Strategy Themes. Particular examples can be found in “A Safe Community”, “Fit for Life” and “Lifelong Learning”.

It was further explained to us that there are two types of LSP, funded and unfunded. Funded LSP's have some form of statutory basis and come about as a result of the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Area Programme. Harlow is such an organisation. Others such as that in Epping Forest come about from the guidance issued with the Local Government Act 2000. They receive no funding from Government and there is no statutory basis for their existence. It is debateable whether this is a strength or weakness.

We found the information pack on the LSP which had previously been provided, helpful and were able to explore with Mr Butler what benefits he thought the LSP was able to bring to the Community of the Epping Forest District. We did this through a series of questions about the LSP in general and the Themed Action Group which Mr Butler chaired dealing with the Lifelong Learning. We also heard of the arrangements the LSP had made from the outset of holding an annual Community Conference to provide feedback to the wider community and give them the chance to comment on and influence the work of the Partnership. The Community Conference is held in a different part of the district each year and transport and refreshments are offered to those who attend. The 2006 Community Conference was held in Ongar on 13 October under the banner “Solve it”. A number of us were able to attend and indeed two of our Members have joined Themed Action Groups on a voluntary basis (Councillor Mrs Whitehouse, Lifelong Learning and Councillor Mrs Cooper, Green and Unique).

We explored with Mr Butler the aims underpinning the consultation document which seeks to increase the democratic accountability of LSP's by passing responsibility for the LSP to the Local Authority Executive. We also discussed the suggestion that Local Authority Leaders should chair the LSP.

Mr Butler replied that the District Council had always had a strong influence on the workings of the LSP and he believed that was welcomed by other partners. In Epping Forest, the Council had always preferred not to take on the Chairmanship leaving that appointment to a free vote. This was not dissimilar to what happened in many other LSP's. The District Council had, however, always taken the Vice Chairmanship and in the early days that position had been held by the Leader of the Council. However, over time, the District Council has reviewed its appointments with the result that the Leader was not always amongst its representatives. Mr Butler recognised and acknowledged the direction of the consultation paper but suggested it needed to be handled with care if we wished to encourage others to continue with their voluntary participation.

We explored a number of examples where added value had been achieved or seemed likely as a result of the partnership arrangements within the LSP, the involvement of Town and Parish Councils, the opportunities for public participation and the interaction with the County LSP and the Local Area Agreement process.



Marina Sherriff and Action Group Chairs

At our third meeting we held a discussion with the Community Strategy and Partnership Manager, Marina Sherriff, and some of the Action Group Chairs in order to understand their roles, the membership of their groups, their relationship with the LSP Board and Steering Group and possible ways in which Members of the Council might become more involved in the process.

We were supplied with a range of documents which included:

- Epping Forest Community Strategy – Key Achievements 2005/06;
- Membership lists for LSP Action Groups;
- The Action Group – Action Plans.

This provided us with some real in-depth knowledge and understanding as to how the work of the LSP was taken forward. We were impressed with the range of organisations that participated in the Action Groups and noted that they covered the complete spectrum of statutory, private sector, not for profit and charitable agencies that deliver services within our district. We invited Marina Sherriff to attend all future meetings of our Panel.

We were particularly interested in the interplay between the two non Council Chairmen that were present, Frances Haste (Fit for Life) and Matt Roberts (Green and Unique). Both of these had had involvement with LSP's elsewhere which had compared less favourably with their experiences so far with the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership. Matt Roberts in particular advised that he had only recently taken on the Chairmanship of the Green and Unique Group. He said he had been surprised by the past achievements of his group and expressed support for the successful outcomes achieved by others. He reported that he had relayed such positive information back to the Corporation of London and recommended that priority be given to the work of his group. In his view the issue was not so much about what was done but how it was achieved. His group worked with agencies such as the Lee Valley Park, the Environment Agency, DEFRA and National England. He was continuing with his approaches to the farming community and the County Landowners Association and expressed disappointment at their lack of positive involvement.

A full record of this debate is set out in the notes of our meeting but we were impressed by both the enthusiasm displayed and the wide range of issues tackled by the LSP and its Action Groups.

The Local Area Agreement

At our fourth meeting we were pleased to welcome Mr Richard Puleston, the Head of Community Planning and Regeneration for Essex County Council who gave a presentation on the current situation regarding the Local Area Agreement (LAA) for Essex.

We had been supplied with details of the five LAA priorities that EFDC had signed up to, the LAA itself, a copy of a LAA organisation chart produced for the LSP and a letter received from the County Council Chief Executive which gave an update on the LAA.

Mr Puleston gave an interesting explanation of the LAA process, the six-month review and the year one refresher required by Government. He explained that the LAA was a means to join up funding streams at a local level by bringing together a number of public sector partners around shared targets and objectives. The LAA was delivered via the county level LSP in association with District LSP's (a government requirement) and was a mixture of national and local performance targets. The Essex LAA had been signed in March 2006.



He gave a very full explanation of the structure, performance management, funding, research and Member involvement in the LAA process details of which are set out in the notes of our meeting (25 October 2006) along with the slide pack which Mr Puleston used to assist his presentation.

We noted that our Council's achievements against the five LAA priorities, which we have agreed to prioritise, are included within the Council's Performance Management Framework and reported on a regular basis to the standing panel of Finance and Performance Management.

And finally

Over the course of our study we have seen various items from the Local Government Press, received a copy of a briefing note from the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) and shared information from National Conferences attended by Members of our Panel or Officers which were relevant to the work of the Panel. All of these are contained in our work file or referred to in the notes of our meetings. Finally on 12th January 2007, some of us attended the briefing session held at the Council's offices in association with the Local Government Information Unit on the Local Government White Paper and the Local Government Bill, which is now in process. Some of that will impact on the workings of the Local Strategic Partnership but it is too early in the process to say precisely what the effects will be.



5. Conclusions

1. We have found a great willingness amongst the various agencies in the Epping Forest District to work together in order to produce value for money solutions which result in better outcomes for our constituents.
2. Those agencies, public, private, not for profit and charitable are represented by a lively and enthusiastic range of people who demonstrate great affection for the Epping Forest District and the people who live, work or visit our area.
3. The District Council has played a leading role in this process and was the founder Member of the Epping Forest Community Agencies Group which evolved into the Local Strategic Partnership.
4. Senior Members have played an active role in this process but perhaps the reporting back arrangements have not been as good as they should have been. This has led to the situation where Members generally have felt excluded from the process and therefore had suspicions and concerns about the Local Strategic Partnership itself. In our view those concerns are not justified.
5. The minutes of the Local Strategic Partnership are provided in the Council Bulletin so all Members have the opportunity to keep abreast of what is happening.
6. That Portfolio Holders should become members of or take a greater interest in appropriate Action Groups.
7. Those Members of the Executive appointed to represent the Council on the Board of the LSP should be more pro-active in reporting back to the Council on the work of the Partnership.
8. The Local Strategic Partnership has developed its own website which can be accessed via the Council's website where information is freely available.
9. Members with a particular interest in the work of the Theme Groups can volunteer to join those action groups and in our experience will be welcomed.
10. The financial position of the LSP is in our view a matter for concern. It relies on voluntary contributions from its constituent members and survives from year to year. The withdrawal of that support by any one contributor would cause extreme difficulties. The District Council contributes £10,000 each year but this is not assured and is met from DDF funding. The County Council is likely to offer a 3-year funding deal to all LSP's, which comes from top slicing the reward element of the LAA targets. This should be welcomed.
11. It seems clear to us that the consultation paper proposal to give political responsibility and accountability to the Executive of the District Council will become a reality via the Local Government Bill presently before Parliament.
12. This responsibility seems likely to pass to the Leader personally under the new arrangements although as we currently understand it, the Leader will have the power to delegate (i.e. practically what happens now).
13. The Leader will be given the right to chair the LSP or at least to approve the appointment of the Chairman. Whilst recognising the vital role the District Council must play in terms of leadership of the LSP, we are not persuaded this is absolutely necessary and would prefer to see the Chairman of the LSP appointed by its Membership on merit.



14. All of these changes will bring the LSP more closely into the Local Government family and create a stronger role for Overview and Scrutiny to oversee and influence the work of the LSP.
15. We are persuaded that the LSP is already carrying out the role of “Partnership of Partnerships” as envisaged in the consultation document. To that end we were pleased to see it adopt the Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) as its eighth Theme Action Group in accordance with a recommendation we made through the study process.
16. We note the requirement for the Community Strategy to evolve and develop into a “Sustainable Community Strategy”. However, it seems to us that the requirement to align the “Sustainable Community Strategy” with the Local Development Framework, and to reflect regional and sub-regional plans where relevant, turns the original process in the 2000 Act on its head. It now seems that the District Council will have to produce the Sustainable Community Strategy and use the mechanisms of the LSP for the necessary and important consultation process. The legal responsibility for the production of the Community Strategy has always rested with the Local Authority.
17. This is likely to be a resource intensive process, especially when coupled with the production of Local Development Framework. In that context the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development should consider and report to the Council on the implications for the Forward Planning Unit within Planning Services.
18. We have noted the Consultation Paper suggestion that there should be more effective joint working between LSP’s and regional organisations. This seems more difficult to achieve in Shire Counties but to an extent already seems to be happening within Essex. The County Partnership engages with regional bodies on a formal basis and Local Partnerships engage with the County Partnership. Local Strategic Partnerships also have the opportunity to participate in the Regional LSP Network, which the Epping Forest LSP does on a regular basis. However, we accept that this liaison could be further developed.
19. Whilst acknowledging that liaison could be improved we would prefer to see such process evolve rather than be imposed. The East of England is a large and diverse community where it is important to acknowledge that one size does not fit all.
20. We note the debate around the consultation paper proposals that various bodies should have a legal duty to have regard to the Community Strategy in preparing service plans etc. The Council had already taken this on board as demonstrated in the current Council Plan and therefore we feel no further comment is required.
21. Likewise there are mixed views on whether designated bodies should have a legal duty to participate in the work of the LSP as already applies in the case of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. A little encouragement sometimes helps but on balance we think participation on a voluntary basis is likely to be more productive.
22. We acknowledge that the LSP can have an important role to play in supporting neighbourhood engagement and in ensuring that Neighbourhoods can influence strategic local priorities, e.g. the Epping Forest LSP input into the East of England Plan consultation especially in relation to North Weald and the South and West of Harlow.



6. Acknowledgements

List of people who gave evidence to our Panel

John Scott	-	Joint Chief Executive (EFDC) Vice Chair LSP Steering Group LSP Treasurer
Chris Overend	-	Policy Officer, EFDC Admin Support to LSP
Aidan Thomas	-	Chief Executive (EFPCT) (Written evidence only)
David Butler	-	Principal, Epping Forest College Chairman, Epping Forest LSP Chair, Lifelong Learning Action Group
Marina Sherriff	-	Community Strategy and Partnerships Manager Epping Forest LSP (Voluntary Action, Epping Forest)
Alan Hall	-	Head of Housing Services (EFDC) Chair, Homes and Neighbourhoods Acton Group
John De Wilton Preston	-	Head of Planning Services & Economic Development (EFDC) Chair, Economic Prosperity Action Group
Frances Haste	-	Associate Director of Public Health (EFPCT) Chair, Fit for Life Action Group
Matt Roberts	-	Superintendent of Epping Forest Chair, Green and Unique Action Group
Richard Puleston	-	Head of Community Planning and Regeneration ECC



7. Appendices

If needed to add background information, tables, graphs etc.