



*Local Area Agreements Road
Shows Report April 2007*



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1 Introduction

The response of local areas to the Roadshows was very positive. Attendance overall was good, particularly given the short lead in time. Attendance by members was relatively low. This was partly due to the short notice and the time of day at which the Roadshows were held. However, it was also felt to reflect the extent to which members have been excluded from the development of Local Area Agreements (LAAs). This was felt to be a matter of concern about which action should be taken by local authorities, as the allocation of resources to priorities is a key political function.

2 Lessons from first generation LAAs

Positive views were expressed about the idea of a more mature conversation about performance and targets. LAAs are acting as catalysts for change, particularly in strengthening and improving partnership working. However, some participants were sceptical about the promised reduction in the reporting burden actually materialising.

3 Reactions to proposals for new LAA arrangements

There was strong sense from participants that LAAs have been seen as a marginal within local authorities and by some partners. As a result, levels of involvement of some key partners are still variable. The change to new arrangements were thought to be helpful in raising the profile of the LAA. However, participants who had only recently finalised their LAAs were anxious about both the extra work negotiating new LAAs would cause and the impact on their relationships with their partners.

There was support for a smaller number of targets but also some scepticism about the extent to which local areas will be allowed to identify their own targets in line with local priorities and some concern that targets which support particular government priorities would be insisted on by the GOs to the exclusion of targets which focus on locally identified need.

It was evident from the discussions that negotiating the LAA had put a strain on some Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which did not have sufficiently robust governance or performance management arrangements. Capacity remains an issue for some LSPs, particularly in non-Neighbourhood Renewal Funded areas.

The duty to co-operate was generally welcomed, although some participants did express doubts that it could be enforced. Others expressed the view that it was organisational pressures, such as re-organisations of PCTs, which made it difficult for

health colleagues to participate to the full, rather than an inherent reluctance to be good partners. As a result the duty to cooperate would not help in similar situations in the future.

MAAs were generally welcomed as a way of tackling major issues which affect a number of neighbouring areas. However, there was some confusion about the order in which MAAs and LAAs should be negotiated and the geographical areas to be covered by MAA.

4 Developing new LAAs in local areas

The change of name of 'blocks' to 'themes' was not thought to be a material improvement. As LSPs have produced community strategies with a number of different themes, it was thought that partnerships should be able to carry these themes, which have been consulted on and are owned by local partners, into the LAA. Participants reported problems aligning key themes from their community strategies with the LAA blocks or themes in a way which would make sense to communities. There were also some concerns that such a rigid structure makes it difficult to place enough emphasis on cross cutting issues such as equality and diversity.

Many participants remarked on the number of different strategies which impacted on local plans. The lack of involvement of some key partners, such as the Highways Agency and Job Centre Plus was also noted. It was felt that there is a need to clarify the connection between the LAA and other key strategic documents and also to find new ways of involving agencies which are not currently actively involved.

Indicators and targets

There were a significant number of comments and questions about the planned move to 35 plus 18 DfES targets. As well as questions about the need to have so many DfES targets, there was also evidently a lack of clarity about how the 35 would be chosen. There were also concerns that 35 would not be enough to cover the diverse needs of a large county. There was some confusion among participants about whether locally identified targets would be part of the 35 or whether there would be 35 mandatory targets with some additional local ones.

Managing the negotiations

Data and the lack of a common data set was raised as an issue by a number of participants. Some local areas reported problems with persuading some partners to share data. Robust data was thought to be essential for effective negotiations. Some concerns were expressed about the capacity of the GOs to handle so many negotiations under a new approach to LAAs, at the same time.

5 Implementing the new LAAs

It was felt that a clear steer from central government departments to local agencies to cooperate would be more effective than simply imposing the duty to cooperate. Also, unless central government departments are able to align the expectations of local agencies, their separate demands will continue to work against a focus on delivering local priorities in partnership.

6 Performance management

Internal

Governance and scrutiny were raised as issues of concern. Few local authorities have effective scrutiny arrangements in place for LAAs, though many do use their health overview and scrutiny committees to scrutinise delivery and performance of the health block. Clear guidance on how scrutiny should be organised would be welcomed. Members and other participants reported that, in general, members have not been sufficiently involved in the development of LAAs. This makes it harder for scrutiny members to be sufficiently well informed to be able to fulfil their scrutiny role.

External

There were a significant number of questions about the future shape of regulation and inspection. Key issues included: the roles of the Audit Commission and GO in relation to judging the robustness of LAAs and; the risks relating to delivery of the targets. There were also questions about the level at which Comprehensive Area Assessment judgements will be made in two tier areas. The promised reduction in the performance management burden was welcomed but there was a feeling that such promises had been made before but the benefits have not always materialised in the way local partnerships hoped.

7 Key messages

Messages for local partners

A number of common messages emerged about the actions which local partnerships can take to make the development of the LAA easier for themselves. One key action identified was the need to ensure the sustainable community strategy is fit for purpose before trying to base LAA negotiations on its priorities. Others included: the importance

of involving members; the need to develop effective scrutiny to strengthen local accountability and; the need to engage with communities to set priorities and also to report back to them on performance and achievements.

Messages for central government

At the Roadshows, examples were given of partnerships struggling because, e.g. Home Office targets were requiring the police to focus on one set of issues when the community strategy and LSP focused on a different set of issues. This is also linked to the risk of targets, outside the scope of the LAA, set by central government departments for individual agencies, being perceived as more important, by both the central department and therefore the local agency, than delivery of the LAA targets.

There was strong message from two tier areas that central government appears to have a London-centric and unitary view of local government. It is thought that, as a result of that view, many policy initiatives are a much better fit for unitary areas than they are for two tier areas. One example of this is that community strategies operate at both district and county level but the LAA operates at county level only. Some key strategic planning responsibilities rest with counties e.g. LAA, whereas others, such as the Local Development Frameworks, which need to link up with the community strategies, are developed at district level. There have been real problems with co-terminous boundaries e.g. between PCTs and local authorities. This causes confusion and duplication and also requires local partners to expend more energy making sense of complexity at a local level.

Messages for Communities and Local Government

The need for effective communication between Communities and Local Government and local partnerships was highlighted at all the Roadshows. There were some conflicting messages from participants about guidance. Many welcomed the idea of 'light touch' and non-prescriptive guidance while at the same time others asked a number of detailed questions about targets, transitional arrangements and the development of scrutiny. One message which did emerge clearly was the need for guidance to be timely and for any late changes to be avoided as they were thought both to make more work for partnerships and also to undermine the credibility of local authorities with their partners.

Messages for GOs

The role of GOs was thought to be central and this highlighted a need to strengthen the capacity of GOs. The GOs are seen as a very useful mechanism for making sense of the complexity of requirements from different central departments at a local level. Participants would welcome more open and mature relationships with GOs and continuity of GO staff involved with each partnership was felt to be helpful.

Indicative LAA negotiating timetable for 2007/08

This is a broad overview of likely milestones leading up to sign-off of agreements in June 2008. The pace of negotiations may vary from area to area and we envisage the negotiating process being an iterative one. Government Offices and partnerships will together set detailed implementation plans and appropriate milestones to take account of local circumstances.

2007

May: LAs and LSPs agreeing scope and coverage of Sustainable Community Strategy targets and discussing any changes required to governance and capacity building in the partnership; continued feasibility testing.

June: Round 1 and 2 LAAs submit performance review self-assessments and transition plans ready for discussion with GOs; recommendations of feasibility testing;

July: Government Offices Round discuss performance and transition plans with Round 1 and 2 LAAs and agree scale and pace of implementation of Sustainable Community Strategy targets; round 3s meet with GOs to discuss transition planning and pace of implementation of Sustainable Community Strategy targets.

September: report on feasibility testing results.

October/November: Possible completion of national indicator set and guidance package. Regional roadshows to discuss implementation arrangements. All LAs consulting on Sustainable Community Strategy targets, preparing material for discussion of new LAAs with Government Offices.

December: All LAs consulting on new LAA outcomes frameworks, funding plans and performance arrangements; Government Offices and central departments review of proposed priorities.

2008

January: Negotiation of priorities based on departmental and GO discussions and LA/LSP consultations.

February: LAs submit revised outcomes framework to Government Offices.

March: Continuing negotiation of priorities based on departmental and GO discussions and LA/LSP consultations; .

April: LAs submit revised outcomes framework to Government Offices which will include proposed improvement targets.

May: Continuing negotiation of improvement targets based on departmental and GO discussions and LA/LSP consultations

June: GO Regional Directors make recommendations to central government; Ministerial Sign off.