

This case study was developed by CAG Consultants for the SDC and has been co-published with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). It is one of a set of case studies that has been produced for the SDC's Capability for Local Sustainability project. For more information on the other case studies and the project as a whole, visit [www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk).



# Partnership working in Gloucestershire

## Abstract

As a two-tier area, Gloucestershire's partnership working is often complex. Through new working practices both the SCS and LAA now have sustainability as a cross cutting theme.

The sustainability proofing process of the LAA, together with leadership by the voluntary sector, led to the development of the natural and build environment block of the LAA.

## The issue

Gloucestershire is a two-tier area, with seven councils. It's partnership working arrangements are therefore complex.

The LAA was initiated before the existing partnership model was fully in place, although most of the new structures were heavily involved in developing its content.

## What Gloucestershire did

The Gloucestershire approach encompasses: partnership working models and practices; an LAA which has sustainability as a cross cutting principle, a Natural and Built Environment Block (NBEB) which encompasses the environmental limits principle and focuses on climate change, sustainable energy and resilient homes, and which was informed by a sustainability proofing process; and strong involvement of and leadership by the voluntary and community sector.

The lead actors and organisations are:

- The voluntary sector, organised through the Voluntary Sector Assembly;
- Gloucestershire County Council's (GCC's) Corporate Sustainability Manager;
- County Council's Policy and Partnership Manager and LAA Manager.

Both the SCS and LAA have sustainability as a cross cutting theme. This has been implemented by the mechanism of sustainability proofing by means of self assessment with support from GCC's Sustainability Manager and LAA Manager.

## The impact

The sustainability proofing process of the LAA, together with leadership by the voluntary sector, led to the development of the natural and build environment block of the LAA. This has led to the 'living within the earth's natural limits' principle being acted upon within the LAA structure, especially climate change and sustainable energy factors. The separation of environment issues from the broader sustainability cross-cutting theme has enabled an action-focused approach to be developed on environmental issues.

The small working group which developed the NBEB adopted a deliberate 'action-orientated' approach to the environment block and lobbied hard to avoid a measurement-based approach. They found that helped to gain wider understanding and commitment to deliver from partners, and plan to add in

measurement processes at a later date once sign up and commitment had been achieved (via the LAA refresh).

The leadership for the sustainability cross cutting theme, and for the inclusion of the NBEB has come from the voluntary sector which in turn is enabled by the Partnership model.

The key capability factors which enabled the good practice to happen were:

### Leadership

The leadership of the voluntary sector in promoting sustainability as a cross-cutting theme in Gloucestershire is a long one. The initial LSP in Gloucestershire, set up seven or eight years ago, had two fundamental principles: (1) access and inclusion; (2) sustainability. This stems in part from the inclusion of the Sustainability Roundtable on the partnership, which in turn stems in part from the Local Agenda 21 process in Gloucestershire. These two priorities have been retained in the new partnership arrangements. The leadership of the voluntary sector on the inclusion of 'environment' as one of the pillars of the LAA and also within the SCS in a way that did not exist in the previous community strategy.

### Attitudes

The review of partnerships by the Tavistock Institute identified that in previous partnership arrangements there was no scope to give people 'the benefit of the doubt'. The Gloucestershire Conference has built 'giving people the benefit of the doubt' into the ethos of its working practice which means that the partnership operates with more give and take.

The same review identified the importance of approach within local government itself for the success of partnership working. The Council clearly leads the partnership arrangements in a 'first amongst equals' role. There is acknowledgement amongst partners that, as the accountable body 'the buck stops with the Council'.

Members of the voluntary sector lobbied hard for this block, and were able to take advantage of the lack of an environment partnership. The GSP asked a small working party which included just six people with a focus on the environment to develop the framework for an environment block.

### Culture

The new partnership model within the County is a response to a recent history of confused partnership working that lacked a delivery focus. The Tavistock Institute undertook a study of partnership working within the County and identified as a key problem the reliance on one strategic partnership which brought together all partners in one meeting, despite all partners having different roles, different interests, different levels of action.

The review resulted in the Gloucestershire Conference, described in the diagram. The new structure was seen by all those interviewed as creating more clarity and a clearer route through which partners could have a say, raise grievances and make decisions.



The chair of the Voluntary Sector Assembly (as a body with a relatively modest budget), chairs the Accountable Bodies Group of the Gloucestershire Assembly, which brings together all the large scale budget organisations (the county, PCT, police, LSC etc).

Visit: [http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/utilities/action/act\\_download.cfm?mediaid=15341](http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/utilities/action/act_download.cfm?mediaid=15341) – for a wider explanation of this diagram.

### **Skills and competencies**

The knowledge base on environmental issues specifically (especially energy and biodiversity) was largely drawn from the voluntary sector, together with the experience to understand on which issues to lobby. However the role of bringing a wider sustainability context and framework was taken by the County Council Sustainability Officer, again drawing on many year of experience of working on sustainability within a local authority context. The Tavistock Review of partnership working brought a new and shared understanding of the ‘cycle of partnership working: deliberation, authorisation, implementation and evaluation”, increasing clarity and a sense of shared responsibility.

The County Council’s Leadership Training, which all managers attend, emphasises an integrated approach to Council business, through which every senior management is seen to be responsible for the entirety of council delivery.

### **Tools**

For the LAA sustainability proofing was brought into the discussion early on. The Sustainability Manager worked with Block Leads at the development of the delivery element. The proofing culminated in a multi-agency conference to involve delegates in double checking findings and recommendations.

The main outcome of the proofing process (and parallel processes of discussion which were lead by the voluntary sector) was the inclusion of environment within the LAA, which would have not have been the case otherwise. Gloucestershire is now exploring combining all the different proofing tools into one tool, to simplify and rationalise several proofing processes into one and to increase clarity.

### **Lessons**

However the NBEB group experienced some difficulty in negotiations with Defra who were keen to see an outcome measurement approach. The team felt that the capability to understand a pragmatic approach did not exist at central government level.

Politically, the inclusion of an environment block could have been difficult and met with some resistance because the push for its inclusion came from the voluntary sector rather than from council leadership. However the LAA Manager felt that, because councillors had been brought on board, this potential barrier didn’t materialise.

## **Other lessons**

### **What key capability factors were missing, which would have made the achievement of good practice easier or greater?**

- The LAA Manager felt that the requirement on LAAs to include an equalities statement but not a sustainability statement was not helpful. An all encompassing statement would raise the profile of all issues.

The Strategic Director from Stroud District Council felt that there was merit in a benchmarking approach as long as it helped partnerships to prioritise actions to reduce GHG. He suggested a benchmarking tool which helped partners to assess the trade offs between GHG savings, costs, degree of partnership action required.

## **Data / evidence**

The internal support of the County Council's Sustainability Manager was key to: the establishment of the environment block of the LAA; the sustainability proofing process; the inclusion of sustainability as a cross cutting theme for the LAA and SCS.

GOSW have "been a genuine critical friend", especially in terms of linking the partnership work to the national agenda. On the LAA, the restructuring within GOSW to have thematic leads and geographic leads has been seen to lead to greater integration.

## **Further information**

Rob Ayliffe, LAA Manager, Gloucestershire County Council.

Jackie Harris, Policy and Partnership Manager, Gloucestershire County Council.

Nigel Riglar, Strategic Director, Stroud District Council.

Peter Wiggins, Corporate Sustainability Manager, Gloucestershire County Council