

---

## NATIONAL EVALUATION OF LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS: FINAL REPORT

---

*John Rodger, Georgina Cowen and James Brass, York Consulting Ltd*

---

Learning Partnerships were set up across the country in early 1999 to promote a new culture of provider collaboration across the sectors (schools, FE, work-based learning and adult and community learning) and to rationalise the plethora of existing local partnership arrangements covering post-16 learning. This is the last of six reports produced for the National Evaluation of Learning Partnerships by York Consulting Limited (YCL). It provides a final assessment of the value achieved by Learning Partnerships after three and a half years development and looks to the future and their role in the lifelong learning arena. The evaluation has used a wide variety of methodologies. For the purposes of this report information is drawn from: visits to the 20 Case Study Partnerships (around one fifth of the total number) between September and November 2002; telephone surveys with half of all Partnerships and Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), and all Government Offices between August and September 2002; and key findings from the earlier research activities and evaluation reports.

### Key findings of the evaluation are:

- Learning Partnerships have been through an almost constantly changing policy environment which has had an impact on their development, particularly in relation to clarity of purpose, credibility and capacity;
- Despite this, over the past three and a half years Learning Partnerships have generally added value across a significant number of localities. Indeed, their micro interventions have, in many areas, filled an important gap that appeared during the transition from Training and Enterprise Councils to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC);
- The strength, commitment and credibility of Partnership Chairs and Managers/Coordinators have played a major role in moving the most successful Learning Partnerships forward;
- There is clear evidence of outcomes and impact through better information, understanding and awareness amongst partner organisations. Providers collaborating to deliver development projects, joint strategies to address key learning issues (such as Basic Skills and ICT), and partner capacity building are also significant areas of achievement for many of the case studies;
- In some areas, where circumstances have been right, Learning Partnerships have played an important role in helping to lay the ground for key local interventions such as Area Inspections and Area Reviews;
- Given the relatively modest central investment, Learning Partnerships should generally be regarded as a cost-efficient initiative that has generated a significant funding multiplier. Had the co-ordination, information sharing and development activity been commissioned centrally, the cost would have been significantly higher;
- The thematic area of provider collaboration on provision has seen the least progress amongst the case studies. This is their biggest challenge, namely, that of putting critical issues relating to gaps and overlaps on the agenda. There is, however, evidence in a small number of the case study areas that the Partnerships are starting to address coherence issues;
- From April this year, the LSC should play a strong role in promoting Learning Partnership benefits and cascading good practice at the local level. A critical dimension for it to manage will be around 'expectations'. There is a need to recognise that Partnership working is an ongoing process, which has to be nurtured, developed and valued. The most effective Learning Partnerships are not simply a delivery machine;
- Both Learning Partnerships and LLSCs need to understand that there is no 'single' or 'right' model of Learning Partnerships/LLSCs/LSP delivery. Local circumstances should dictate the approach. Some of the key characteristics that appear to be associated with effective delivery include:
  - strong management and coordination team;
  - clear vision and strong will to get things done;
  - effective structures for internal communication;
  - inclusiveness.

## Background

1. Learning Partnerships were set up across the country in early 1999 to promote a new culture of provider collaboration across the sectors (schools, FE, work-based learning and adult and community learning) and to rationalise the plethora of existing local partnership arrangements covering post-16 learning.
2. This is the last of six reports that have been produced for the National Evaluation of Learning Partnerships by York Consulting Limited (YCL). It provides a final assessment of the value achieved by Learning Partnerships after three and a half years development and looks to the future and their role in the lifelong learning arena. The evaluation has used a wide variety of methodologies depending on their appropriateness to the situation of Learning Partnerships. For the purposes of this report we have drawn information from:
  - visits to the 20 Case Study Partnerships (representing around one fifth of the total number of Learning Partnerships) between September and November 2002;
  - telephone survey work with half of all Learning Partnerships and Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) and all Government Offices between August and September 2002;
  - key findings from the earlier research activities and evaluation reports.

## History of Learning Partnerships

3. **Section Two** of the full report plots the journey undertaken by Learning Partnerships since their inception.
4. In the three and a half years of their existence Learning Partnerships have been through an almost constantly changing policy environment, including, in particular, the introduction of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The remit of Learning Partnerships and their relationship to these other bodies have, as a result, been subject to change a number of times. Broadly speaking, an initially powerful strategic role in the planning of post-16 learning is now less explicit and a more supporting role to both the LSC and LSPs has emerged. This evolution process has had an impact on the development of Learning Partnerships, particularly in relation to clarity of purpose, credibility and capacity.
5. The most recent review set Learning Partnerships two core roles of promoting provider collaboration in support of lifelong learning and maximising the contribution of learning to local regeneration. It also

switched the funding route to local LSCs' Local Intervention and Development Fund (LIDF) from April 2003. This will result in an end to guaranteed funding for Learning Partnerships from April 2004, since the funding will no longer be ring-fenced (in line with all other programmes funded through the LSC).

6. These issues have been at the core of the activities of the national Transition Group for Learning Partnerships, which was set up to oversee the change over from DfES to the LSC. This group has now produced a Learning and Skills Council and Learning Partnership National Policy Framework, which is on the Learning Partnerships website.

## Effectiveness of Partnership Working

7. In **Section Three** of the full report, we consider the latest stage of development reached by the 20 case study Learning Partnerships. A summary of findings at earlier points in their development is outlined in Annex A of the full report.
8. Partnership working across the 20 case studies is generally good. The most positive picture is in relation to aspects of management and co-ordination and delivering actions - we assessed three-quarters of the case studies as having made "significant progress" or being "advanced". A significant factor contributing to the progress made is the dedicated resource that most Learning Partnerships have in the form of a Partnership Manager.
9. In addition, most of the case studies performed well in relation to resources. This reflects the success that a number of Partnerships have had in bidding for external funds.
10. Conversely, a little under half of the case studies were assessed as being at the early development/development stage in relation to planning and three-fifths in relation to review and evaluation. In cases where performance measures have been developed, there is little evidence that actual measurement and assessment has subsequently taken place.
11. Given the variation in progress we have observed, it is reasonable to assume that the local context is a key factor that ultimately determines the stage of development reached on partnership operation. However, we have also identified other factors that influence partnership effectiveness, in terms of both strengths and weaknesses.
12. The three most significant strengths mentioned by Partnerships were:
  - strong management and coordination team;

- clear vision and strong will to get things done;
- fit within a clear local structure.

13. The three most significant constraints were:

- lack of clarity and recognition of the value of Partnership;
- lack of ownership amongst partners;
- inconsistent representation

14. We also identified 'effectiveness of internal communication' and 'inclusiveness' as two areas that contribute to a Learning Partnership's ability to add value. Just under three-quarters of the 20 case studies are assessed as having made at least "significant progress" in relation to internal communication and just over half in relation to inclusiveness.

#### **Learning Partnership Outcomes and Added Value**

15. In **Section Four** of the final report, we outline the key achievements of the 20 case studies. Over three quarters of the case studies have undertaken activities directly focused on achieving outcomes for learners, including those aimed at addressing participation, basic skills needs, social inclusion and barriers to learning. Markedly fewer, approximately a third, have sought to address the areas of equal opportunities, quality and standards and workforce development or employer participation. Workforce development and employer involvement, in particular, have simply not been a priority or have been regarded as too hard to tackle for many Learning Partnerships.

16. All case studies have undertaken a range of activities aimed at improving partner working (intended to indirectly lead to outcomes for learners). In particular, there is clear evidence of outcomes and impact through better information, understanding and awareness amongst partner organisations. Providers **collaborating to deliver development projects, joint strategies** to address key learning issues (such as Basic Skills and ICT), and **partner capacity building** are also significant areas of achievement for many of the case studies.

17. Informing and challenging stakeholders has been an area of activity where Learning Partnerships have had to tread carefully; particularly in relation to challenging LLSCs.

18. The thematic area of **provider collaboration on provision** has seen the least progress among the case study Learning Partnerships. This is their biggest challenge, namely, that of putting critical issues relating to gaps and overlaps on the agenda. There is, however, some evidence in a small number of the case study areas that the partners and Partnerships are starting to move towards achieving some outcomes in

relation to increasing the coherence of learning provision. There are also some examples where Learning Partnerships are taking the lead on developing or implementing the action plan resulting from Area Wide Inspections.

19. We have identified **three models of added value** for Learning Partnerships, demonstrating the differing levels of value generated by different Partnerships:

#### **Model 1: Joint project delivery and information sharing**

20. Learning Partnerships that have achieved this type of value have facilitated the sharing of information across partner organisations and joint working on the delivery of projects and activities, where previously they would have sought funding independently and delivered activities separately. **Five of the twenty case studies** have achieved added value relating to Model 1.

#### **Model 2: Strategic/joint working on learning issues**

21. Learning Partnerships achieving this type of value have sought to work strategically to address fundamental learning issues, barriers and priorities in the local area. A common example is basic skills. These partnerships use research that they or others have undertaken to identify the most appropriate strategic action to take forward to address the needs identified. They also broker funding to ensure that it is targeted in priority areas. **Seven of the case study Partnerships** have been assessed as achieving added value associated with Model 2.

#### **Model 3: Collaborative planning and delivery of learning provision.**

22. Learning Partnerships achieving this type of value added have undertaken action aimed at improving the coherence of learning provision and support locally. These Learning Partnerships may have played an active role in planning for, and developing action plans following area wide inspection. They have delivered real and effective change in working arrangements.

23. **Two of the case studies** have been identified as achieving value added associated with Model 3, and a further **four case studies have been assessed as having made clear progress** towards achieving such added value.

#### **Exceptions to the three models.**

24. For three of the case study Learning Partnerships (which are characterised by having an overarching strategic board together with a series of well-developed, local geographical groups) our assessment of the model of added value achieved is different for

the local groups than it is for the overarching strategic board.

25. Two of the case study Learning Partnerships are considered as not having achieved added value relating to any of the models presented.

#### Future Direction

26. **Section Five** of all the full report, considers the future direction that Learning Partnerships are likely to take. The analysis highlights the range of both opportunity and concern. It also reveals a diversity of opinion, but perhaps more fundamental, a range of expectancy cast within a general framework of uncertainty.

27. Based on the perceptions that we obtained from both the case study Partnerships and LLSC representatives, we have identified a number of potential models of delivery for Learning Partnerships in the future (note that we have classified some of the case studies within more than one of these models):

(a) **LLSC owned:** This relates to a situation where the Partnership is effectively driven or owned by the LLSC. It essentially becomes part of the supplier network, forming a portfolio of subject focused sub-groups. A total of **seven case studies** in our view fall into this category.

(b) **Close to the LSC but independent:** Partnerships in this category are keen to deliver activities in line with aspects of the LLSC agenda, perhaps in similar areas to those identified in the previous model, but retain independence. **Nine case studies** fall within this category.

(c) **Disappear/replaced:** In this model the Partnership will either completely disappear or be replaced by another body. **Six case studies** feel that this is a distinct possible outcome, but only if an alternative strategy fails to materialise.

(d) **Declared independence/wider agenda:** Partnerships in this group wish to maintain their independence but also maintain their strategic high ground. Partnerships falling into this category tend to be in a stronger position than others, given that they have built up a range of other funding sources to draw upon. A total of **six case studies** fall within this category.

#### Conclusions

28. Over the past three and a half years Learning Partnerships have generally had a bad press. In many cases this has been undeserved. We conclude that in

the main they have achieved added value in a significant number of localities.

29. Early on in the evaluation we estimated that one quarter of Partnerships were performing very well, one quarter were making little/no progress and the remainder were somewhere in between. Our current assessment would be that 10% stand out as leading performers, 50% have made significant progress, 20% are showing positive signs of development and 20% are still close to base position. This represents both an overall performance improvement and a significant base to build upon.

30. The vast majority of Partnerships have been able to demonstrate aspects of added value by increasing the level and amount of joint working and information sharing across partner organisations and sectors. Some have also made significant inroads to developing the voice of the learner including local research and mapping exercises. While these activities are now the responsibility of the LLSC they are now perhaps further advanced than they might have been without Learning Partnership involvement. In some cases Learning Partnerships have retained this role through agreement with the LLSC.

31. Where the circumstances have been right Learning Partnerships have shown that they have been able to lay the ground for important local interventions such as Area Inspections and Area Reviews.

32. Furthermore, there is evidence that Learning Partnerships have added value beyond the micro interventions in their individual localities. In a national policy context, in many respects, they filled an important gap, which appeared in the transition from TECs to LLSCs. Had they not been there, not only would a number of projects have been lost, but there would have been a breach in both momentum and continuity.

33. In some respects it is true that Learning Partnerships have failed to deliver policy expectations. As a national initiative it also failed to generate a national network of homogeneous Partnerships with common agendas and structures. This failure may be due more to the problem of policy reality rather than Partnership delivery:

- the failure to lock Learning Partnerships firmly into the national policy context has been an initial and recurrent blow to their development. They were from an early stage perceived nationally almost as a failed and forgotten initiative. This view has been perpetuated, and reinforced by poor performance in some Partnerships, to the extent they were essentially perceived, in many quarters, as a tarnished product. All tarred with the same

brush. This has made effective LLSC engagement all the more difficult. It has also inhibited a stronger lead from the national LSC;

with the same money than an LLSC type body might have done in isolation.

- Partnerships from the outset felt that as voluntary organisations they were ill equipped to deal with the more strategic roles they were initially given. It is perhaps to their credit that now over half are assessed as achieving some added value through strategically working together to identify and address learning issues within the locality;
  - it has not always been recognised that Partnership development, which involves cultural change and changing hearts and minds, is a long term process. Everyone is at a different starting point and some are more able to deal with the practicalities and the politics than others. The situation is often dictated by local circumstances.
34. It is quite clear from our analysis that Partnership managers, coordinators and chairs have played a major role in moving the Learning Partnership agenda forward in times of conflict and uncertainty. Over the past 12 months, in particular, despite job insecurity issues, over half of Partnerships have been assessed as having accelerated in terms of Partnership effectiveness and added value achieved. The Partnership managers and coordinators supported by their chairs have played a major role in holding things together.
  35. In some respects Learning Partnerships might be regarded from an Exchequer perspective, as one of the most cost efficient initiatives ever introduced. Relatively modest funding of approximately £100k per annum has levered in many times this in direct additional funding from, for example, ESF/SRB and in-kind support from individual partners. It has generated a significant funding multiplier.
  36. In terms of cost effectiveness it is clear that the majority of Partnerships have been able to demonstrate value added; some more than others. Once again from the point of view of the Exchequer, given a relatively modest central investment, this, even on average, Learning Partnership performance probably represents value for money. Where the Partnerships have worked particularly well it represents excellent value for money.
  37. Had the information sharing, coordination, coherence and development activity that has been achieved, been commissioned centrally from a remote point the cost would have been significantly higher and the will to deliver (given the voluntary nature of Learning Partnerships) possibly lower. It might therefore be argued that Learning Partnerships have achieved more
  38. We have identified a myriad of potential problems and uncertainties concerning the future of Learning Partnerships. These have been documented and are genuine enough. However when one cuts through the general 'noise' of 'who's going to do what with whom and how' the position is actually very positive. More than three quarters of Partnerships have indicated that their LLSC are currently very supportive towards them. This represents a significant step forward from earlier in the summer.
  39. There will inevitably be organisational changes. It is likely that over one third of Partnerships may significantly restructure to reflect LLSC local delivery structures. In other cases Learning Partnerships are keen to retain a 'cradle to grave' remit, which is broader than the LSC's direct interest. These different approaches should not pose major problems providing the process is handled well. The continuation of collaborative activity is more important than the method of delivery.
  40. There is evidence of tension around aspects of Partnership independence. If handled sensitively by the LLSC this might yet prove to be more of a problem in theory than in practice.
  41. A critical dimension for the LSC to manage is 'expectation'. They need to understand what can be done and what is more difficult to do with Learning Partnerships. Asking Learning Partnerships to address the most difficult problems immediately may not be productive. They also need to recognise that Partnership is a continuous process, which has to be nurtured, developed and valued. Learning Partnerships are not simply a delivery machine.

### Recommendations

1. Both Learning Partnerships and LLSCs need to understand that there is no 'single' or 'right' model of Learning Partnerships/LLSCs/LSP delivery. Almost anything can be made to work. Local circumstances should dictate the approach.
2. Learning Partnerships in consultation with their LLSCs need to place the benefit of activity on the ground above historical structures that they have developed. While the old structures may have supported them in the past they may not be sufficient for the new agenda.
3. LLSCs should recognise the importance of the manager and coordinator to Learning Partnership activity. They are not simply an overhead. Their removal or downgrading could significantly affect Partnership working. The softer outputs they generate should be valued.
4. LLSCs should think twice before dismantling overarching Partnerships. Whilst the main LLSC interest may be at local level they may find it difficult to control independently. Some of the most successful Partnerships to date have built their achievements around an overarching strategic centre.
5. The LLSCs should seek to work towards establishing three year contracts with Learning Partnerships. While it is perhaps reasonable that they might be reluctant to do so in this first year they should be making undertakings that providing performance is satisfactory then a three year deal will be entered into from 2004/05.
6. The National Learning Skills Council should play a strong role in promoting Learning Partnership benefits and cascading good practice. An important co-ordination role, played by the Government Offices in terms of providing information on policy and funding, may not be so direct. The LSC should consider whether this role is required and if so who should undertake it.
7. Learning Partnerships should be encouraged to aspire to take on the learning arm role of the Local Strategic Partnerships. There are already good practice examples here which should be cascaded.
8. LLSCs should use this initial year to get to know and better understand Learning Partnerships. Although it is understandable that they may wish to make some changes, they should perhaps avoid major surgery until they are clear what can be delivered.
9. Learning Partnerships, with support from their LLSCs, should seek to establish clear performance measures, which are smart and can be evaluated. This has been a major failing in the past and, if

addressed, is likely to secure a more productive future.

10. LLSCs might find it useful to use the framework within this final report to assess where their local Learning Partnership is. Government Offices have already identified the need to undertake such an assessment in preparation for the local Learning and Skills Councils.
11. LLSCs should study the examples of Learning Partnerships good practice set out in the Learning Partnership Toolkit and promote its use.

### Additional Information

*Copies of the full report (RR391) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ. Cheques should be payable to "DfES Priced Publications".*

*Copies of this Research Brief (RB391) are available free of charge from the above address. Research Briefs and Reports can also be accessed at:*  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>

*Further information about this research can be obtained from Janette King, Room W611, DfES, Moorfoot, Sheffield, S1 4PQ.*

*Email: [janette.king@dfes.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:janette.king@dfes.gsi.gov.uk)*