Local Service Boards in Wales (LGIUandSTEER)

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Overview

In November 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government published its response to the Beecham review of local services. Delivering Beyond Boundaries: Transforming Public Services in Wales described its 5 year plan for accelerating progress towards the transformation promised in its improvement and efficiencies agenda, Making the Connections. Central to the process, Delivering Beyond Boundaries envisaged:

“creative and dynamic partnerships across the public, voluntary and private sectors engaging with the public to create a dynamic momentum which can meet both the challenges of today and of the future.”

It included plans to:

- strengthen local strategic leadership and service delivery arrangements through the establishment of Local Service Boards and Local Service Agreements in all local authority areas; and
- forge a new relationship between the Welsh Assembly Government and the new local Boards.

Making the Connections: Local Service Boards in Wales was published on 27 January and offers a 'prospectus' for consultation on the first year's phase of development. The proposals draw on discussions during December with stakeholders from public and voluntary sectors and across Assembly Government departments, and reflect experience of comparable arrangements in England and Scotland.

It outlines a broad vision for Local Service Boards and Local Service Agreements, the challenges inherent in their transition from the current state of local strategic partnerships and policy agreements and the role envisaged for the Welsh Assembly Government at local level. Views are sought on these proposals by 2 April 2007.

The consultation also describes an initial set of development projects to explore and provide learning opportunities on the proposals. Expressions of interest are sought from Local Strategic Partnerships to participate in these by 8 March 2007.

The LGiU sees some considerable merit in the general direction of the proposals which lend welcome weight to local leadership and scrutiny, and offer some clarification of the Assembly Government's new 'locally engaged' role. It also identifies some real omissions in terms of detail to some of the fundamental changes proposed - to local partnerships, governance and accountability in particular - and an over-
reliance on development projects to fill the gap.

Additional to responding to the key issues identified in the consultation paper, local authorities will want to look carefully at the development and cost implications for themselves and ensure that these factors are communicated effectively in their responses. They may also wish to express interest in the development projects which promise additional support and a 'tailored' approach to minimising bureaucracies.

**Briefing in full**

**Making the Connections : Local Service Boards in Wales**

**A prospectus for the first phase 2007-08**

The consultation paper sets out and seeks views on the Assembly Government's plans to establish Local Service Boards across Wales and to develop Local Service Agreements between the Boards and the Assembly Government. It also invites expressions of interest from existing Local Strategic Partnerships to participate in the development projects proposed for 2007/8.

The operational detail of the Boards and Agreements is not prescribed but, "in the spirit of engaged leadership", key elements of their role, form and function are identified and the development process outlined. The process facilitates learning from experience and local diversity consistent with the different contexts and delivery pressures across Wales.

**Local Service Boards: role, structure and membership**

Local Service Boards will develop, initially on a voluntary basis, from the current Local Strategic Partnerships to form:

"the local leadership team, comprising elected, appointed, executive and non-executive members of the statutory authorities, the voluntary and private sectors, and other key stakeholders, working as equal partners and taking joint responsibility for connecting the whole network of public services in an area."

Tasked with providing "citizen-focused leadership at local area level", the Board's size, structure and ways of working must balance the need for inclusivity of all involved with the need for 'focus' to ensure effective team work and continuity of relationships. A possible model, featuring a delivery-focused core and wider strategic membership, is put forward. The potential of a stakeholder group or network is also highlighted in order to "contribute to the intelligence and challenge required" and ensure a strong citizen focus to its work.

The Board will be convened by the local authority, in line with its statutory community leadership role, and choose a Chair from amongst its membership or from beyond. Emphasis is placed on the importance of establishing a "local leadership team … in which no partner is dominant" and a culture which can accommodate new ways of working, a willingness to pool both resources and sovereignty and consider an increasingly mixed economy of provision with greater delivery potential for the third sector.

The Assembly Government envisages establishing a "framework for engagement" by the Board’s partners which is both "enabling and robust". It also has plans to introduce a duty on local service bodies to cooperate and, dependent upon experience, may consider a wider supporting legal framework for the Boards.
Responsibilities of the Boards

The Board's responsibilities may include:

- facilitating best use of the resources available to the partners
- ensuring concerted and collective leadership across public services in areas of critical importance for the locality
- ensuring an effective whole-system or integrated service response to the needs of citizens - particularly where improved cross-sector/organisational working is required
- ensuring that arrangements for commissioning or managing particular services at regional level are working effectively at local level
- establishing a shared strategy for citizen and community engagement
- developing a shared approach to workforce engagement
- operating in an open and transparent way and reporting annually, from the citizen's perspective and for national and local purposes, on key services’ performance.

For the Boards' member organisations, this may entail the establishment of new patterns of working, participation in new models of delivery, pooled resources, and aligned or shared arrangements over specific services.

In relation to already existing partnerships and networks, the emphasis is upon ‘adding value', particularly affecting the key delivery partnerships for Health, Social Care and Wellbeing, Children and Young People and Community Safety:

“The role of the Board is not to duplicate their work, but to provide challenge and support from the citizens' perspective, and identify if, and how, it needs to intervene – for example by tackling barriers to delivery, raising ambition or enhancing capacity and expertise.”

Local Boards will also need to take account of relevant Spatial Plan groups and other regional and cross-sector planning/commissioning arrangements, forge relationships with local community partnerships such as Communities First partnerships, and build on any Community Strategy processes.

The role of the Assembly Government

“The aim is to forge a new relationship between the Assembly Government and the local leadership team, based on a shared goal of ambitious and innovative service improvement for citizens”.

The Assembly Government will contribute directly to the work of the Boards. Spatial Plan Ministers will take responsibility for relationships with Boards in their areas and a senior Assembly Government official will be represented on each Board.

The official involvement will ensure a “purposive two-way conduit” on local/national policy, priorities and operational/bureaucratic matters in addition to having a role in local problem-solving, “acting as honest broker, if necessary, particularly between sectors”, resolving conflicting priorities which may arise from competing performance frameworks or other tensions and contributing local perspectives to the Assembly Government’s own change agenda through which aspires to become, itself, “more citizen-centred, outward-facing and delivery-focused”.

The Local Service Agreement
“The challenge for Boards will be to forge a manageable, agreed programme of work which captures the priorities for adding value to the delivery of the Community Strategy. The Local Service Agreement will offer the discipline for this …”

Each Board will, with the involvement and agreement of the Assembly Government, develop a Local Service Agreement to which each member of the Board will be required to commit. It will set out a limited number of shared priorities for local delivery reflecting “jointly-owned discipline and outcome focus” and offering a balanced approach in terms of both “direct service outcomes, and indirect, capacity building measures”. The priorities will incorporate local citizen and community concerns, staff experience, local performance and national priorities. They may also be shared with neighbouring Local Service Board Agreements.

**Governance**

The Boards are described as:

> “a means of pulling together the leaders of all the public services in an area with other stakeholders who have an important delivery or challenge role, to agree joint action, improve decision making and strengthen leadership in the areas for which they are already accountable through existing governance arrangements”.

Subject to development project experience, the Local Service Agreement model is envisaged as the means by which all members of the Board have a mandate from their respective organisations to contribute effectively and will provide the basis of a Board’s accountability to its constituent organisations and stakeholders.

**Scrutiny**

> “The establishment of Local Service Boards should act as a catalyst for the development of a more citizen-focused approach to scrutiny and improvement at local level, as envisaged in Delivering Beyond Boundaries.”

The intention is to develop a multi-disciplinary scrutiny process capable of addressing public service effectiveness and responsiveness in a “constructive and improvement-focused way”. It will contribute to both policy review and strategy development - and allow scrutiny of the Board's own activities.

Reflecting their community leadership role, local elected members will be at the heart of the process which will also involve citizens, service users, advocates and other stakeholders to ensure “sufficiently cross-cutting expertise and to encourage an even-handed and objective approach”.

A consultation paper on scrutiny is promised later in the year. It will address the means by which the governance and accountability arrangements of each of the partners will be respected.

**Board support**

Local Strategic Partnerships are advised to evaluate their existing arrangements, including culture, working relationships and secretariat support structures, and agree actions required
in their transition to a Local Service Board - “the challenge is to determine how best to utilise all the partnership support resources currently deployed in an area” both in the short and longer term.

Although the arrangements should be created within existing resources, it is anticipated that new forms of capacity support, particularly to enhance expertise on new ways of working, pooled resources/responsibilities, and redesign of services, and will form part of the support offer for the first phase development projects.

**Timetable**

A rolling programme is envisaged, following the timetable set out in *Delivering Beyond Boundaries*, which builds 'as rapidly as feasible' upon the experience of the development projects (below):

- 2007-08 – all areas start to establish Local Service Boards and ‘Phase 1 development projects’ are initiated in designated areas;
- 2010 - Local Service Agreements in place in all areas.

**Local Service Board development projects 2007-8**

The “highly adaptive development process” involved in the establishment of Boards and Agreements is reflected in the ‘prospectus’ of development projects planned for 2007-8. These will explore and establish a process of system design and learning for wider benefit. This will be facilitated through ‘Board learning clusters’ established around the development project areas and consistent with Spatial Plan areas. Experience gleaned from the projects will form the basis to the wider roll-out across Wales.

An application process is outlined and expressions of interest sought from current Local Strategic Partnerships to the projects identified for 2007-8 which will test:

- governance and scrutiny models
- Local Service Agreement - form and content
- partnership relationships
- relationships to Spatial Plan, regional planning/commissioning and community partnerships
- relationship with the Welsh Assembly Government
- Local Service Board performance reporting
- Local Service Board support and management arrangements.

A package of development support, including funding, will be available to the development project Boards. They will also be able to identify locally-specific of Wales-applicable “opportunities for improved delivery through specific flexibilities, including funding regimes, which will be negotiated through the Assembly Government lead on the Board”.

Other Local Strategic Partnerships will be expected to start making progress on cross-cutting delivery, including the identification of a shared set of priorities for delivery by local partners, participate in the learning clusters and may apply to be a development area in 2008-9.

**Comment**

The step change from Partnership to Board, as envisaged in this paper, poses real
challenge. Local authorities will have particular regard to the Assembly Government’s insistence of a five year time frame in which to achieve improvement in the absence of reorganisation - and the powers it is seeking to change council boundaries in the *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill*.

There are, undoubtedly, some very welcome aspects to these proposals - the duty to co-operate, wider remit for scrutiny and more ‘muscular’ approach to local leadership in particular. However, the openness of the proposals and developmental process on which they intend to rely, pass a heavy onus onto the local Partnerships/Boards - notwithstanding the Assembly Government’s new ‘locally engaged’ involvement, in itself something of a curate’s egg and of which local authorities will have some concerns.

The changes envisaged for national/local relations, local scrutiny processes, member roles and governance/organisational accountability suggest fundamental change - and require real definition. Is it appropriate that so much is reserved to a ‘trial and error’ project approach? Is it appropriate that the additional support and resources are reserved to those participating in the development projects when, ultimately, all local authorities will have to achieve the changes?

Local authorities will want to assess their local starting point, the size and nature of the challenge and the costs, in terms of time and resources, inherent in the transition process in order to inform their response to this consultation. Local members will wish to consider their relationship to the new arrangements and the implications for their own community leadership role. Consultation responses will also benefit from experience to date of local/national working, joint scrutiny and governance/accountability issues in collaborative working in order to avoid ‘relearning’ those difficulties.

Reflecting on learning from England, Welsh local authorities should be wary of underestimating the complexities involved in attempting to focus on both cross-cutting issues such as hard to reach groups and older people, as well as well defined partnership areas such as children and young people and community safety. Experience from local area agreements in England continues to show that where there are clear delivery partnerships and partnership agendas, cross-cutting issues face an ongoing risk of slipping out of sight.

Welsh authorities may also want to reflect on some of the obstacles faced by English local authorities with LAAs - specifically legal barriers to cooperation (which have dogged attempts to pool funding in England) and the difficulties in coordinating performance with national agencies whose priorities are determined outside the locality. Welsh authorities may benefit from the proposed close relationship with the Assembly, however, should such issues arise during the development process.

**Additional Information**

- Views on the role, form and function proposed for Local Service Boards are sought by 2 April 2007;
- Expressions of interest from Local Strategic Partnerships in becoming one of the 2007-8 development are required by 8 March 2007.

For further information, to return expressions of interest or consultation responses, please contact:

- **Making the Connections Unit** - Department for Public Services and Performance,
Covers

- Wales

Send Feedback for this briefing

Related links

- Making the Connections - Local Service Boards in Wales

Related briefings

- Delivering Beyond Boundaries : Local Service Boards and Local Service Agreements
- Delivering Beyond Boundaries : Transforming Public Services in Wales
- Review of Local Service Delivery in Wales
- Local Government Bill - Implications for Wales

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