

Partnership Working

RESEARCH REPORT

Social and Economic Partnership Project

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The Strategy Unit promotes medium to long-term thinking and undertakes strategic policy development for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and senior management.

Scottish Executive Social Research teams work with Ministers, policy and analytic colleagues across Departments providing research-based evidence and advice for the development, implementation and evaluation of policy. The Office of the Chief Researcher (OCR) provides direct research support to the First Minister and Cabinet.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. Since devolution there has been a greater commitment to working in partnership to build a better Scotland. Partnership working is now a prominent feature of the policy landscape and both the Executive and key partners are developing new and innovative ways of working with each other. With more opportunities being created for partnership, there has been a recognition of the need to take stock of how partnership is working and to reflect on how effective it is in meeting the challenges facing Scotland.

2. The Scottish Executive has recognised the need to improve the way in which it engages with stakeholders and delivery partners and has developed a corporate change and review programme, 'Changing to Deliver', to enable and foster a process of continuous improvement. As part of this drive, a research study was undertaken primarily to identify and consider fundamental principles of partnership working and to assess and review current relationships. The work forms part of a wider project looking at Social and Economic Partnership and builds on earlier strands of work carried out as part of this. The main focus of the study was to explore how the Executive operates as a partner to determine how relationships can be enhanced and improved. The research attempts to build a picture of partnership in relation to the Executive by providing a limited evidence base of views about partnership working. This report presents the findings from research activities carried out in early 2003 with Scottish Executive staff and representatives from a number of key partner organisations. In total, 65 people participated in the study.

The Meaning, Role and Principles of Partnership Working

3. Research participants were asked to consider the meaning and role of partnership, and to identify what characterises good or bad partnerships and what principles should underpin partnership working. Despite heavy use of the term partnership over recent years, participants adopted different definitions and emphasised different elements and dimensions of partnership. Interpretations ranged from informal conversation to high level set-piece forums, and from broad-based, ongoing engagement to specific, time-limited involvement. There was broad agreement that increased partnership working is a good thing, although some expressed doubt about an apparent 'fashion' for partnership for its own sake.

4. Individual positions on partnership were sometimes complex. For instance, some participants argued in general for a very informal, flexible approach, while at the same time demanding for other instances that the remit, roles and responsibilities should be formalised.

5. A potential tension was highlighted around the perceived need for the Executive to involve partners earlier on and to share thinking and policy development processes. For instance, Ministers' democratic accountability for decision-making was perceived by some to make it difficult to involve partners more in decision-making.

6. Although understanding of the term partnership varied within as well as between sectors, common themes did emerge on the principles applying to good partnership working. These were identified as follows:

Basic Building Blocks of a Partnership Relationship

- Trust
- Mutual respect
- Openness
- Tolerance
- Continuity

The Framework for Working in Partnership

- Shared vision
- Agreement of remit, roles and responsibilities
- Clear terms of engagement
- Appropriate life-span, including clear review procedures
- Management of change

Adopting the Right Partnership Behaviours

- Effective co-ordination and chairing
- Interpersonal skills and personal qualities
- Responsible behaviour outwith the partnership

7. Generally, the characteristics of ineffective partnerships were given mainly as the opposites of those listed above for, example lack of trust, lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities, and so on. However, **posturing by partners**, and when partnerships go **'past their sell-by date'** were also highlighted.

8. Despite differing understandings of the meaning of partnership, there was an overwhelming commitment to the overall ethos of partnership, with many having developed and implemented new and dynamic ways of working. At the same time there was also a desire from both Executive and partners alike for further improvement, and recognition of the need to increase the effectiveness of partnership working. However, some scepticism remains amongst external participants about the Executive's commitment to partnership.

Current Experience of Partnership Working

9. A key aim of the study was to explore participants' assessments of how well they work in partnership with the Executive. Participants reported significant increases in engagement and improvement in relationships between the Executive and partners, and also amongst partners, since devolution. Participants cited a number of successful partnerships. These were felt to be those which showed the features outlined above such as having a clear purpose, remit and life-span, mutual recognition of roles, trust and so on. However, many partners were disappointed with some of their experiences. A number of common frustrations and challenges were highlighted including:

- A perceived inconsistency in commitment to adopting a partnership approach across the Executive.
- Involvement of partners too late or in too limited a way.
- Lack of engagement beyond those with loud and influential voices.

- The need for feedback about the outcomes of consultation or partnership engagement.
- The need for clarity over purpose and roles.
- Resource issues.

10. In particular the **issue of inconsistency** was seen to be a problem by partners and Executive staff alike. There was optimism among Executive staff about the capacity for current internal change initiatives to improve the way the Executive relates to and works with others. Although encouraged by the potential for continued change, partners did not share this optimism, partly because they were unsure about the nature of such change initiatives.

11. The resource issue was also particularly significant. While organisations welcomed increased access and opportunities for involvement, many have found it difficult to cope with the increasing demands of partnership working and have had to re-prioritise to engage effectively. Partners saw the need to take responsibility for the requirements that partnership working brings in terms of investment and resources. It was recognised that developing a culture of involvement requires building capacity in both the Executive and partner organisations.

Suggested Improvements

12. At the same time as describing difficulties and challenges, both partners and Executive staff identified possible ways in which partnership working could be enhanced and improved. Recognising that the Executive is moving in the right direction, a number of suggestions were put forward in particular:

- Earlier engagement and continuous dialogue with partners
- Opportunities for input at a strategic level
- Clarity of purpose and roles
- Building in review and evaluation
- Widening access and building capacity
- Embedding and developing a culture of involvement
- A strategic commitment to partnership working
- A shared responsibility

13. In particular, partners were clear about the importance of **embedding a culture of involvement** through methods such as joint training. Participants also emphasised the need for **early engagement and continuous dialogue** and feedback within consultation and engagement processes. The opportunity to be involved in **discussions about overarching strategic issues** affecting Scotland was highlighted as a gap in the partnership landscape.

Views on New Mechanisms for Partnership

14. A secondary aim of this research was to identify whether Executive partners consider current partnership mechanisms to be sufficient, or whether they believe that there is a need to explore new partnership mechanisms for Scotland.

15. Partners were in the main content with their existing bilateral relationships with the Executive, although a number of problems were highlighted. For instance while many participants felt that new or renewed Executive partnership agreements (such as the Memorandum of Understanding with the trade unions, Compact with the voluntary sector, and Partnership Framework with local authorities) had brought about significant benefits for their sector, there were concerns that such contracts had not been universally applied across the Executive.

16. In discussions about new mechanisms, there was no clear consensus. A small minority did not want there to be any changes to current partnerships. Some felt that the current partnership landscape benefited from a degree of fluidity and diversity, and that to impose a new process would be unhelpful. However, a small number felt that introducing new mechanisms such as a statutory social and economic partnership (SEP) would send a clear message about the importance of partnership working, and at the same time improve decision-making processes. Although participants' views were often fairly open, participants from the trade union sector were generally in favour of a SEP, while those from the business sector were generally against. Many of those supporting the concept of a SEP did not propose specific models, but rather concentrated on the underlying principles, many of which were also common concerns for those who tended to oppose it.

17. The breadth of discussions about the concept of a new mechanism reflects the early status of the debate in different sectors, rather than a strong consensus for change across the social and economic partners. Nevertheless, there were many calls for more involvement of partners in discussions about overarching, strategic issues affecting Scotland. Consequently, the case for establishing a multilateral forum for ongoing discussion on some key strategic challenges facing Scotland appears to have some weight.

Overall Conclusions

18. The findings from these discussions demonstrate that there is a great deal of partnership working activity across different policy areas and sectors. Within this, there is a strong commitment among partners to develop and improve partnership activity. The research also found a strong endorsement of the messages for change in organisational style which are already permeating the Executive. Within the current partnership landscape, there was a recognition of the need to consolidate existing arrangements, but that there should also be opportunities to contribute to strategic thinking on the overarching issues facing Scotland. The findings to emerge are being used to inform policy considerations in this area and to build on Executive cultural change programmes which aim to promote more effective partnership working.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

19. The First Minister, Mr Jack McConnell MSP, has expressed a clear commitment to working in partnership with others, and to building strong partnership mechanisms. Key partners have likewise been keen to take forward a new commitment to partnership working since devolution. The Scottish Executive's current work to improve the way it engages with stakeholders and delivery partners is also a key driver for this project. This report presents the findings from research activities carried out in early 2003 with Scottish Executive partners and internal Executive staff. It seeks to contribute to the limited evidence base of views about partnership working. It is expected that this report will be of interest to Ministers, policy-makers and public servants, and those with an interest in public policy and partnership working across Scotland.

Background

20. This research report forms part of a wider project looking at Social and Economic Partnership, co-ordinated by the Scottish Executive's Strategy Unit, formerly the Policy Unit. The project has sought to reflect on where things stand four years into devolution, and in the early part of a new Scottish Parliamentary term. It is being published in early 2004, in order to help form the backdrop for policy considerations in this area early in the life of the new Parliament.

21. The research builds on earlier strands of work carried out in 2002 which looked at partnership principles and models of partnership, and the role of planning and evaluation in partnership working. A Scottish Executive official was seconded to the STUC in March 2002 to carry out a study into European Social and Economic Partnership models. The Scottish Executive Social Research group then carried out a study of models of social partnership in devolved regions and a further project on Partnership and Evaluation. In addition, in the summer of 2002 Policy Unit carried out a preliminary snapshot study into civic engagement in Scotland, the findings of which have fed into and informed this research process.

The Policy Context

22. The Consultative Steering Group (CSG) report (1998) provided the blueprint for the new Scottish Parliament. The principles set out by the CSG have been cast widely, often being taken as the touchstone of a new, more inclusive and open political culture. These principles are: access and participation; equal opportunities; accountability; and power sharing. Since devolution, Scottish Ministers have expressed a new commitment to partnership working and have pursued new models of working. Consensus is also often cited as a key element of the new politics. The commitment to partnership is founded on the idea that partnership offers the most constructive forum for discussion and, where appropriate, policy formulation.

23. Since devolution, the Executive has demonstrated a commitment to working more closely and effectively with partner organisations by introducing a series of written agreements that seek to define the broad principles, shared priorities and terms of engagement with a range of partners. The main such agreements are a Memorandum of Understanding

with the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), the Scottish Compact with the Voluntary sector (signed pre-devolution but still active), a Concordat with the Scottish Civic Forum and the Partnership Framework with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). Discussions have also been ongoing between Ministers and the STUC over the concept of a Social and Economic Partnership (SEP), and the secondment of an Executive official to the STUC was arranged to help take this work forward. In addition there have been preliminary discussions with the business community on ways to develop partnership working further.

24. At the local level, the Local Government Act 2003 sets out the legal framework for Community Planning, a process which embodies partnership working. This framework places a duty on partners to work effectively with each other and with their communities, in order to provide joined up services shaped around the needs of individuals and communities. The Act also places a duty on Ministers to ‘promote and encourage the use of community planning’. The Community Planning Task Force report (available electronically at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/planning/frcp-00.asp>), published in May 2003, makes a number of recommendations regarding the future development of Community Planning, including several directed at the Executive. These include the recommendation that the Executive and community planning partnerships should drive forward a process of partnership rationalisation at national and local levels, and that the Executive should give community planning partnerships ‘adequate space in which to address local needs and priorities’.

25. This study aims to build a picture of partnership working in relation to the Executive. To this extent, it complements the Scottish Civic Forum’s Audit of Democratic Participation, carried out over the course of 2001-02, and the recent report on the application of the CSG principles by the Procedures Committee of the Scottish Parliament.

26. The project also creates links with and between several other key workstreams across the Executive. The Executive has faced new and varied challenges and opportunities as a result of devolution. In taking stock of how well it is placed to rise to increasing expectations, it is carrying out a two-year internal change programme, Changing to Deliver, which is designed to strengthen the Executive's performance across a number of priority areas. The Executive's Management Group acts as the Change Board to oversee the programme and drive it forward across the organisation. Action is being taken across three key areas – changing the culture and behaviour of the organisation; engaging more effectively with stakeholders and designing policies and services around customer needs; and improving the Executive's internal processes.

27. Changing to Deliver encompasses a number of relevant initiatives. For example, the Delivering Professional Policy team is assessing the way in which the Executive involves others in policy-making as part of an overall review of policy-making practice. Best practice is shared through guidance, training and a Policy Makers’ Network. The team also offers support to officials interested in using tools to enhance their customer focus. In addition, a dedicated research team continues to provide a source of expertise and advice on participation and consultation.

What Is Partnership?

28. During the course of this study, it has become clear that the term ‘partnership’ covers a range of different possible definitions. Often understandings and expectations differ from person to person. The term ‘Social and Economic Partnership’ (SEP) is often taken to refer to a particular type of governance model, common to several European countries, which involves the ‘social partners’ – normally taken to be government, trade unions, business organisations, and sometimes the voluntary sector and others – in a formal standing partnership mechanism. Early discussions with the STUC were largely shaped around this definition, and referred to the suggestion of a SEP as a model. However, Ministers decided early on in the project that it would be more helpful to consider more generally partnership as *an approach*. Therefore, the guiding premise for this study has been that before consideration can be given to the desirability of setting up any new mechanisms, it is important to gain a deeper sense of the current state of partnership relationships in Scotland. While we have taken soundings when given, it was not an explicit aim of this research to consult on a SEP as such. Earlier research suggested that in order for mechanisms or systems to be successful they need to be built in reference to, and embedded within, prevailing cultural and organisational contexts. Thus, for the purposes of this study it was considered important to take a broad view of partnership and to explore what partnership means to people *in their own terms*. Through documenting people’s views, we hope to chart some of that cultural territory.

The Research

29. The First Minister commissioned this research to meet the following aim:

To explore with key sectors in Scotland including business, trade unions, the third and other sectors how policy development and delivery can be enhanced through the further development of the social and economic partnership approach.

30. The specific objectives were:

- *To identify and consider the fundamental principles of partnership working;*
- *To evaluate and review current relationships with reference to these partnership principles and the aims underpinning partnerships;*
- *To apply lessons from the evaluation to enhance current practice.*

31. In addition to the above objectives, participants were asked to reflect on the idea of exploring new partnership mechanisms or systems, in order to obtain an early impression of what views might be likely to be held.

32. To fulfil these objectives, research was conducted with external partners and internal Executive staff between February and April 2003. It was carried out by Strategy Unit staff in conjunction with the Office of the Chief Researcher, and was overseen by a cross-cutting Steering Group of senior Executive officials. In total, 65 people took part in the research. The overall sample breakdown is provided in table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of Sample

Sample group	Participant numbers
External participants	25
Face-to-face interviews	22
Telephone interviews	3
Roundtable events* (2)	10
E-discussion*	5
Internal participants	40
Face-to-face interviews	9
Focus groups	31
Total no of participants	65

* Indicates activities where no new research participants were involved

External Partners

33. A series of in-depth face-to-face interviews was carried out with a total of 25 people (3 were telephone interviews) who were considered likely to have useful contributions and insights to offer the project in fulfilling its aims. The list was neither statistically representative nor comprehensive, but compiled systematically from known Executive contacts, desk research into sectoral interests and organisations, and consideration of the current partnership landscape. The majority of interviewees were from national representative organisations. However an attempt was made to include more local organisations from the voluntary sector, and 3 local representatives took part in interviews. A more extensive piece of research would seek to extend its reach to local groups and delivery organisations. This research also did not look in any depth at relationships between the Executive and public sector bodies or with the Parliament.

34. Each in-depth interview was carried out face-to-face and scheduled for around an hour, with discussion broadly conducted along the lines of a topic guide containing the key themes to be covered. Interview participants were then invited to attend **roundtable events**, designed to bring different perspectives together and to explore and develop in a group discussion context some of the key issues arising from the interviews. Two such events were held in the week beginning 24 March 2003. Jim McCormick, Director of the Scottish Council Foundation, was commissioned to provide independent input to the formulation of these events and to facilitate the sessions. He also produced a working report on them, which was used extensively by the project team in pulling together this final research report. Some key findings were then posted and trigger questions asked on an **e-discussion forum**, which was open to all external participants. This discussion took place over a short, intense period of 4 days at the end of March 2003.

Internal (Scottish Executive) Staff

35. In order to examine the experience of partnership working from the Executive's point of view, in-depth research activity was also carried out with a range of internal staff. These **in-depth interviews** and **focus groups** were intended to sample a cross-section of Executive staff. Four members of the Executive's top level Management Group – Heads of Executive

Departments – were selected for interview, to provide a view from the top of the commitment to and role of partnership working. At the next stage, 5 Senior Civil Servants with policy responsibility for key partnerships were interviewed. To supplement these interviews with a view from operational staff, 4 focus groups of staff at the policy officer or manager grade were held. Participants for the first 3 sessions volunteered in response to an open invitation to the internal Policy Makers’ Network. The final group from outwith the Network was deliberately selected to ensure that gaps in any Departments within the Executive were covered. In addition this enabled the researchers to cross-check the findings from the sample groups against a non-self-selecting group. In total 31 Executive staff participated in focus groups.

36. Each in-depth interview was carried out face-to-face and scheduled for around an hour, with discussion broadly conducted along the lines of a topic guide. The focus groups ran for an hour and a half and employed various techniques from small group discussions, to use of stimulus material and plenary workshop sessions.

Analysis and Consideration

37. Interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed verbatim, and the data charted on a database according to emerging themes. This enabled the research team to systematically analyse the views of participants, to consider the range and depth of experiences and accurately chart areas of commonality and of difference. The database charts were then fully analysed in the preparation of this report. In addition, the project team also drew on earlier work exploring the level of civic engagement in Scotland, and work examining models of social partnership in other European countries, as well as related ongoing policy developments.

Reporting

38. The findings from both internal and external research are reported together. Quotations are used to illustrate findings, but not in a way as to identify individuals. The findings are not statistically representative of wider populations as the research was qualitative in nature. The report does not set out to assess particular partnerships in detail, but rather to draw out key general points about current partnership working in Scotland. Therefore the aim of the report is to present the range and depth of views of those participating and highlight any commonality and differences between groups.

39. We present the findings in separate chapters structured around the key themes of:

- The meaning, role and principles of partnership.
- Individuals’ experience of current partnership relationships.
- Suggestions for improving the way the Executive works with others.
- Views about the need for new mechanisms or systems.

40. In Chapter 6 we attempt to sketch some overall findings, drawing out the successes and areas of agreement, as well as the challenges and tensions as we see them. In the final Chapter we suggest some of the implications of the findings for the Executive and its partners, and go on to suggest areas for how to promote more effective partnership working, and on how to take the partnership agenda forward in the future.

CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS – THE MEANING, ROLE & PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Introduction

41. A key aim of the study was to identify and consider the fundamental principles of partnership working. During the interview stage external partners and internal Scottish Executive staff were asked how they define partnership, what characterises good and bad partnerships and which principles they consider should underpin partnership working. The roundtable events and focus groups allowed for further consideration of some of these issues. This chapter outlines and considers responses to these questions.

The Meaning of Partnership

42. There can be a wide range of interpretations of the term ‘partnership’, which may explain why participants were in general more inclined to discuss their practical experiences of partnership working rather than the underlying abstract concept. However, when asked what the term implied there were a number of common threads evident:

- Partnership is seen to most accurately describe ways of **working together in long-term, on-going relationships**.
- The extent of partnership working can be limited when contact is ad-hoc, one-off or around issues where partners argue from entrenched positions.
- Partnership can be informal or formalised, but it is the **quality rather than the form** that determine success.
- A founding concept would be that, in partnership, different interests working together become **more than the sum of their parts**.
- Partnerships need a sense of **shared aims and objectives**.
- Partnerships need to recognise and provide **space for difference** and disagreement.

“ I think the reality is that partnership should be about people having a common goal or interest and working together to achieve that goal”. (External participant)

“Partnership implies a long-term relationship in which you don’t turn the tap on and off and just go out and consult people now and again and then come back. It actually involves engagement, preferably engagement written up in advance. It doesn’t just happen and it requires resources to support it.” (Internal participant)

“We all necessarily don’t sing at the same time from the same hymn sheet and that’s the nature of partners... It’s about a constructive moving forward and at times it’s important for partners to be critical of each other because then it means that you’re either reinforcing agreed objectives or you’re beginning to change objectives as you get more information or you see what’s happening.” (External participant)

43. Despite differing perceptions of what it is, there was a strong commitment to partnership working found throughout the research process. However, some participants were careful to point out that their commitment had definite limits and that they would take a confrontational approach when they envisaged benefits from doing so.

44. Views around partnership can often be somewhat contradictory. For instance some participants (both external and internal) argued in general for a very informal approach, while at the same time demanding for other instances that the remit, roles and responsibilities should be formalised in writing. Understanding of the *application* of the term partnership varied within as well as between sectors, however common themes did emerge on the principles applying to good partnership working.

45. Interestingly, internal participants were very open to discussing what they understood partnership to mean, perhaps indicating the Executive's increasing focus on engaging with external partners. While internal participants recognised that there remains a lack of clarity around aspects of partnership working, they offered the following sorts of views on the concept in relation to the Executive:

- It is important that the Executive develops partnership behaviours in the way it does its business.
- The Executive needs to view partnership as a spectrum – there isn't one simple model.
- The Executive should have a listening and facilitating role – helping facilitate dialogue with and between partners.
- Ministers make final decisions, but whenever possible these must be informed by prior engagement with the main stakeholders.

46. It was sometimes easier for participants to define what they think partnership *is not*. Some common views emerged from both external and internal participants over what partnership is not:

- **Negotiation:** It was considered important to distinguish when negotiation – seen as bargaining between interests for settlement of a particular issue – not partnership is the appropriate method of engagement.
- **A power of veto:** Partnership may offer partners influence in, and access to, the policy development process, but the importance of recognising that it is Ministers who have the final say and that are accountable for decisions was highlighted.

How the Executive and Partners view each Other

47. External participants were asked what they understood the Executive to mean by partnership working. It was generally understood that the Executive regards partnership as a useful, pragmatic response to certain situations. Many did not regard partnership as a fundamental guiding principle of the way the Executive conducts its business, and identified instances where they believed the Executive's commitment to partnership has been lukewarm. A common example would be of the Executive only involving partners late in a policy process, meaning that they have limited opportunity to affect outcomes. Participants generally did not feel that the Executive has articulated a clear overall commitment to enhancing its relationships with partner organisations.

48. Asked the same questions of their external partners, Executive participants expressed the view that although there is much experience of effective and constructive partnership working, sometimes partnership can be used less as a constructive policy-making or delivery tool and more as a lobbying device or a route to securing undue influence. Participants' comments highlighted the fact that there can be significant differences in how the role of partnership is perceived.

The Role of Partnership Working

49. All participants expressed some degree of commitment to partnership working, with a clear majority expressing a very strong commitment. Some of the benefits of partnership working in general were identified as follows:

- It can act as a **source for new ideas**.
- It leads to **better policy-making**.
- It **adds credibility** to policy.
- It **assists with implementation**.
- It **knits networks together**.

50. Most external participants described partnership as their preferred way of working, although some admitted to being selective about when to get involved:

“We are generally willing to participate in partnerships but we are becoming more discerning about when to get involved. We have to believe that participation will achieve tangible benefits for our members”. (External participant)

51. Most believed that, by following a partnership approach, they were able to exert a greater degree of influence over policy development therefore obtaining tangible benefits for their constituency. It was noted that participants were sometimes inconsistent in their views, showing up certain tensions in their individual experiences of partnership. For example, whilst explicitly professing an overall commitment to partnership per se, *over and above specific policy outcomes*, participants across the different groupings were still inclined to be explicitly partisan when it came to securing outcomes for their members or constituency.

Risks of Partnership Working

52. Participants recognised that partnership working brings with it a number of risks. Some possible risks of partnership working were identified as follows:

- It can create **unrealistic expectations** among partners.
- It can create ‘**unhealthy consensus**’ among partners – where most partners are signed up to a solution or policy but it is widely felt to be unsatisfactory, and key areas of tension remain unsurfaced.
- It tends to **suit producers rather than customers** of public services, who are usually absent from the process.
- It maintains an ‘established’ way of doing things – if partnerships always involve the same participants then there may be **little space for radical ideas**.
- It may be likely to confer status and authority on partners who are **not truly representative** of their constituency.

Guiding Principles and Characteristics of Good Partnerships

53. Participants were asked which characteristics are associated with effective partnerships, or which principles should guide partnership working.

“I think that principles should be about: where we agree, we work together to achieve common aims; where we disagree, don’t throw our rattles out of the pram and walk away but we continue to have dialogue”. (External participant)

54. The majority view was that success in partnership working very much depends on individuals, and on organisational culture. Success was considered to occur when all people in a partnership relationship feel empowered, failure when people are defensive and fail to behave in ways that encourage partners to relate well and often with each other.

“You can have paper partnerships when people sign up to something and then no-one does anything, but you end up saying that you’re in partnership anyway. Or you can have effective partnership in which like minded people see a common goal and all contribute something towards achieving that goal” (External participant)

Basic Building Blocks of a Partnership Relationship

55. There were some key features that participants felt could help build strong partnerships and these are set out below:

- **Trust:** Trust was taken to be a fundamental necessity of good partnership working, and was mentioned by all participants who offered a view.
- **Mutual respect:** Participants considered respect between partners – and acknowledgement of the fact that they bring different things to the table – as another fundamental principle. This included listening properly to different points of view and recognising the value of a diverse range of opinions.
- **Openness:** Some participants described a need for there to be a *“willingness to be affected by the process”*, by all partners. This meant partners being less attached to fixed outcomes, and more open to new ideas or approaches.
- **Tolerance:** There was general agreement that effective, healthy partnerships must be able to withstand robust exchanges of view, and allow space for disagreement.
- **Continuity:** Getting to know each other as individuals was considered key to building effective relationships, therefore continuity of members was identified as an important factor.

The Framework for Working in Partnership

- **Shared vision:** The clear view among participants was that common overall aims and objectives need to be identified, otherwise there is little rationale for a partnership to exist.
- **Agreement of remit, roles and responsibilities:** These were all identified as crucial to effective partnership working, so time allocated at the outset for discussion of them was considered a vital investment, as well as regular review or re-focusing as necessary. The *scope* as well as the *limits* of the partnership both need to be clearly understood by all.
- **Clear terms of engagement:** Terms for operating the partnership need to be agreed amongst partners to avoid misunderstandings and to set out what can reasonably be

expected. For example, some participants preferred informality while others were more comfortable with defined rules for operating and engaging with each other.

- **Appropriate life-span:** Participants involved in more specifically focused partnerships emphasised the need for these arrangements to be time-limited. Others felt wider partnerships need time to grow and establish themselves. Some emphasised the need for more formal review and/or wind-up procedures for partnerships was necessary.
- **Management of change:** For established partnerships, some emphasised the need to ensure continuity, through for example having appropriate induction procedures for new members. According to some, it was difficult to find examples where this currently happens.

Adopting the Right Partnership Behaviours

- **Effective co-ordination and chairing:** All partners should have the opportunity to contribute and be made to feel that they are being listened to.
- **Interpersonal skills and personal qualities:** Along with good listening and clear communication, honesty, patience and enthusiasm were also identified as being important factors in success.
- **Responsible behaviour outwith the partnership:** Some participants noted that inconsistency in partners' behaviours could lead to the partnership being undermined.

56. Generally, the characteristics of ineffective partnerships were given as the opposites of those listed above e.g. lack of trust, lack of clarity over roles etc. However, the following were also identified in particular:

- **Posturing by partners:** It was suggested that often people who do not share a partnership's aims and objectives continue to participate because they do not wish to lose their symbolic place at the table. Participants reported instances of negative behaviour where partners had not had the best interests of the partnership at heart.
- **Past their sell-by date:** There was a view, particularly but not exclusively among internal participants, that many partnership mechanisms outlive their usefulness and no longer concern Executive priorities. However, it was thought that it can be difficult for Ministers to wind up processes that have been successful in the past. Since policy priorities change, it was felt that this should be reflected in the allocation of the resources used to support partnerships.

57. The characteristics and principles of effective partnerships outlined above reflect the accumulated experience of a diverse set of participants. The following chapter considers participants' experience of working in partnership in more detail.

SUMMARY

- The research showed that ‘partnership’ appears to be a broad term which can be understood in complex and differing ways. While there has been heavy use of the term over recent years, participants continued to adopt different definitions and emphasise different elements and dimensions of partnership. Therefore an agreed precise theoretical or practical definition remains elusive.
- Despite this lack of clarity, there was an overwhelming commitment from participants, internal and external, to work in partnership and to strive to increase the effectiveness of partnership working. However, some scepticism is evident about the Executive’s commitment to partnership.
- Creating trust between all parties was identified as the first principle of partnership working. Mutual respect, openness, tolerance and continuity were also highlighted as key principles. Having a shared vision, agreeing remit roles and responsibilities, having clear terms of engagement were identified as the main features which help to build effective partnerships. The need for partnerships to have appropriate life-spans and for there to be good management of change were also stressed.
- Participants described the right partnership behaviours principally as being effective co-ordination and chairing, and a set of personal skills and qualities including good listening, clear communication, honesty, patience and enthusiasm. That partners should be expected to behave responsibly outwith the partnership was also emphasised. Posturing by partners and partnerships going past their sell-by date were particular negative features of some participants’ experience of partnership working.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS – CURRENT EXPERIENCE OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Introduction

58. A key aim of the study was to evaluate and review some of the current relationships between the Scottish Executive and its partners. External interviews therefore focused on participants' assessments of how well they work with the Executive. Building on these initial impressions, roundtable events and an e-discussion forum provided opportunities for participants to consider the significance and implications of these experiences. Alongside these discussions with external partners, Scottish Executive staff were also asked to talk about their experience of Executive relationships with partners. These views are considered together here. Many participants described specific examples of effective or ineffective partnership experiences. In the main, we refer to these instances in general terms and avoid exposing specific examples in order to avoid misrepresenting experiences through a small sample size.

59. As shown in Chapter 2, understanding and application of the term 'partnership' can vary considerably. It is worth noting that when describing their experience of relationships and partnership working more generally, between them participants referred to a range of types of engagement, both formal and informal. These include:

- Time-limited or **one-off engagement** (working groups, meetings etc) over specific issues.
- Ongoing **bilateral relationships** between an Executive Division and a single sector.
- Medium to longer-term **formal multilateral** forums and taskforces.
- Regular **informal links** or contacts between external and Executive interests.

60. The findings of this Chapter refer to engagements and relationships in a general way. However, where specific points are made by participants about the different types of engagement, these are highlighted in the text where appropriate.

An Increase in Partnership Working

61. External partners participating in the research were quick to report a much greater range of relationships with the Executive since devolution, with more opportunities for involvement in policy development. The nature of engagement was also reported to be different, with many indicating that engagement is "*less formal and stuffy*" and relationships more personal.

"I think we have seen attitudes change because of the opportunity to have more personal relationships – that wouldn't have been practical with the old style of government."

(External participant)

62. Some external participants talked about dramatic increases in engagement since devolution, with greater access to both officials and Ministers. Reporting a move towards a more open style of government, many felt that the Executive is – to a greater or lesser extent – making serious attempts to improve partnership working.

"I think the Scottish Executive is genuinely embracing the questions around how to do partnership better." (External participant)

63. In a similar vein, Scottish Executive staff who participated in the research signalled the emergence of new and more positive ways of working with partners. These changes were felt to bring significant benefits both to relationships and to policy and legislative development. It was recognised that there have been significant changes in the way the Executive works, which has led to notable growth in experience of partnership working and involving others.

"We have become much more open, more prepared to work with others." (Internal participant)

64. However, despite recognition of the recent growth of partnership working, effective partnership approaches were not always perceived to be an exclusively recent phenomenon, as one participant pointed out:

"I can think of some very good collaborative work that was happening 25 years ago." (Internal participant)

Changes Since Devolution

65. Discussion around general experiences of working together tended to be fairly positive and participants identified a number of striking changes observed in relationships. The changes identified, which were noticeably similar between internal and external participants, fell into the following main categories.

Quality of Engagement

- More opportunities for **proactive involvement** earlier on.
- More experience of developing innovative and **meaningful ways of engaging stakeholders** and partners in the work of the Executive.
- More opportunities for **open dialogue** between partners and officials (and Ministers).

Quality of Relationships

- Relationships which are less guarded, **more open**, informal and constructive.
- Scottish Executive officials being **more supportive** and encouraging, and actively communicating about policy processes.
- Relationships which are **less partisan** in nature.

Scottish Executive Culture

- Improved attitudes to engagement, with more **willingness to engage** partners in the work of the Executive than before.
- A recognition of the benefits of **working together for the greater good** in Scotland.
- A recognition of the role and benefits of partnership working in **development of policy**.
- Openness to outcomes being **affected by partnership process**.
- An internal **commitment** to fostering and developing better relationships (for example the internal change programme 'Changing to Deliver').

Partners

66. While most of the changes observed related to the Executive, both internal and external participants were encouraged by corresponding positive developments occurring within partner organisations. Participants noted:

- Willingness and commitment from partners to **work together for the greater good**.
- **Commitment of time and resources** to engaging with others, including the Executive.

Success Stories

67. Throughout the discussions, participants referred to specific examples of positive relationships and effective partnerships. These covered a range of partnership experiences described by Executive staff and external participants, both formal and informal, from one-off engagements to regular involvement in, for example, working groups, forums and taskforces. In discussions about the nature of these ‘success stories’, participants identified several key features which characterised such engagements. Unsurprisingly, these resonate with some of the general principles – described in Chapter 2 – which participants felt should underpin relationships and effective partnership processes. Positive examples were where:

- There is **trust and respect** between partners.
- There is a **defined purpose, remit and life-span**.
- All partners are **clear about their roles and responsibilities**.
- There is a focus on **achieving outcomes** and, where appropriate, discipline about timescales for achieving outcomes.
- There is a **mutual recognition of each other’s roles**.
- There is **shared ownership**, where partners take responsibility for actions and contributions.
- Partners are **involved early on**.
- There is **meaningful dialogue** - all partners are taken seriously, feel listened to and there are opportunities to exchange views and differences of opinion.
- Those on all sides of the partnership demonstrate appropriate **partnership behaviours**.
- There is **equality among partners**.

68. If priority was given to any of the above, it was the behaviours of partners which were felt to influence relationships and the likely success of any partnership mechanisms most – almost all of those interviewed spontaneously mentioned the importance of partnership behaviours. Importantly, these attributes were felt to lead to other successful features of partnership working, such as meaningful dialogue, trust and respect, and ultimately better outcomes.

“[There should be] a willingness to be honest... a meaningful exchange, a willing exchange because the value of that is six times that of a formalised mechanised exchange which is just a question of coming to a meeting, shaking hands and then walking away two hours later.”
(External participant)

69. A common view was that it is not the structures that are important, but the people involved. As one participant stated:

“You can set up all the infrastructure but in the end it depends on the Minister or the person involved.”
(External participant)

70. Positive experiences were often felt to depend on the people involved, both within the Executive and among partners. Pre-existing, established relationships were also felt to be important.

“We got some pretty high powered people... you had some big players so I think they were lucky in getting the quality inputs that they did... The other thing was that we met frequently but not too frequently... I think also the help from the Executive was good, the people in the Executive were real enthusiasts for the topic and that shone through.”
(External participant)

“It depends on the person involved. Some people are better at listening than others... Some people want to listen and others are resentful of contrary opinion.”
(External participant)

71. Other important factors included the clarity of purpose and roles. There were numerous examples cited where partnership working was seen to be successful in achieving its aims because there had been overall clarity about the function of the partnership. There were also many examples of positive relationships and engagements provided by both sets of participants which signal positive changes in the way partners engage and interact with each other. Speaking about a particular taskforce, one participant outlined some of the key factors of its perceived success:

72. Some partners commented on the effectiveness of formal bilateral agreements. Participants from the relevant sectors which have implemented a partnership agreement felt that these have undoubtedly brought significant benefits and have improved relationships. For example, it was felt that they formally recognise the role particular organisations or sectors have in the work of the Executive which, for some, has allowed the development of new engagements with different areas of the Executive.

“This [contract] helps us make our pitch for why we should be involved.”
(External participant)

“We have further developed relationships with [particular Executive Departments] that maybe [we] didn't have before.”
(External participant)

Disappointments

73. While finding accounts of general improvement in engagement and relationships with the Executive, many external participants expressed considerable disappointment with some of their experiences of partnership working. For example, one participant commented that despite an increase in relationships, there was a lack of meaningful engagement in some areas.

“There is a much greater range in relationships but a disappointing lack of depth to most.”
(External participant)

74. Executive staff also stressed the need for more progress in the way the organisation works with and involves others, and while there are constructive guiding frameworks in place, it was felt that there is room for improvement:

“The messages from the outside is that it is mixed. The message is that the Executive has got better but is has a long way to go... We haven’t gone far enough in implementing the CSG principles.”
(Internal participant)

75. Although there was an overwhelming sense by both sets of participants that the Executive has made considerable progress in how it involves others, the majority felt there were still substantial improvements required.

Common Problems and Challenges

76. A number of common frustrations and challenges were highlighted by both external and internal participants during the course of the study which, it was felt, undermined progress towards better partnership working. These disappointments and challenges can be grouped by the following themes:

- Achieving **consistency in relationships**.
- The **limits of involvement**.
- The **composition of partnerships**.
- The need for **feedback**.
- The need **for clarity over purpose and roles**.
- **Resource issues**.

Achieving Consistency in Relationships

77. Despite reported progress in many areas, external participants highlighted variations in relationships with Divisions and individuals across the Scottish Executive. While there was a strong sense that there is more openness among Executive staff, this was not seen to be universal. Experience of what was described as an ‘old style’ civil service were not uncommon. Typified by an approach which is closed and where comments are not felt to be listened to, many internal and external participants felt that a lack of willingness to make relationships work still exists across areas of the Executive. Participants described experience of attitudes and behaviours that undermine commitment to partnership working, and can damage trust and respect amongst partners.

"You can have brilliant partnerships with one Executive department and you can go along the road and have the most dreadful, patronising sort of '20 years ago' experience with another one."
(External participant)

"The Executive can't talk with one voice about partnership. Some parts of the organisation have forged effective relations with partners but there is a lack of consistency... The Executive seems to talk about partnership between others. It doesn't tend to think of itself as a partner unless in a symbolic way."
(Internal participant)

78. Formal bilateral agreements were referred to earlier in the context of improvements in relationships. While it was felt that their development has to some extent brought both benefits and improved relationships, a number of common problems were highlighted. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, but the main concern expressed was that formal agreements are not being delivered with the same enthusiasm across all areas of the Executive.

79. Rapid staff turnover, or 'churn', has been highlighted as a problem through the Executive's initial analysis for its internal change programme 'Changing to Deliver'. This may be one reason for the lack of consistency and continuity, particularly within *existing* relationships. Interestingly, only a few external participants highlighted this as a particular difficulty, referring to turnover of both Ministers and Executive staff. More emphasis tended to be given to the importance of consistency of approach and robust hand-over strategies, which were felt to be able limit any difficulties arising from the movement of staff. In addition, a few external participants noted an advantage of staff moving in that it was perceived to give 'friendly contacts' in other, potentially 'uncharted' areas.

80. While Executive staff were attuned to the perceived problem of staff churn for partners and recognised this as a difficulty, we might also note from the Executive's perspective that turnover among stakeholders is potentially equally problematic, although it did not specifically arise in discussions with staff who participated.

81. An overall strategic commitment to partnership within an organisation was felt to help limit inconsistencies. Although many external participants believed that such an Executive commitment to better partnership probably exists, many were unaware of any such thing, and felt that if it does exist it is expressed in vague terms. One individual questioned why the Executive has never made a public statement about its commitment to partnership working. The Executive's internal change programme 'Changing to Deliver', in which developing a greater 'outward focus' is a central aim, attracted some comment from external participants whose knowledge of the programme was relatively limited. While the concept was welcomed, several questioned why it has not been shared more widely with external partners and additionally has not involved partners in a more strategic way.

82. Recognising that lack of consistency is problematic for partner organisations, Executive staff were encouraged that positive steps are being taken to address some of the issues. Interestingly, it was the more senior Executive participants who placed greater emphasis on the role of such initiatives. Importantly, staff felt that there is a general undercurrent of commitment to improvement throughout the organisation. In addition, many were hopeful about internal change initiatives which, it was perceived, would build on progress.

“With Changing to Deliver, you know, there’s a new kind of impetus in looking at the way we work with others, our customer focus, our culture, our attitudes... If you’re being more customer focused and more stakeholder focused, then you are much more likely to be a more effective partner and to be developing partnership attributes.”

(Internal participant)

“I think Changing to Deliver, if effectively implemented and adopted, could probably take us a good deal further on.”

(Internal participant)

The Limits of Involvement

83. At the same time as acknowledging increased opportunities for involvement, most external participants expressed concern that their involvement tends to be limited. The main concern to feature was the belief that the Executive tends to consult partners too late in the process of developing policy, with a focus on operational matters rather than creating room for partners to shape policy.

“There’s not much point in being consulted on things when the thinking process is so well developed that, at best you’ll make changes round the margin, and at worst you’ll have absolutely no impact whatsoever.”

(External participant)

84. A number of external participants focused on the reasons for partners not being involved early on and a small number were sceptical:

“I think that comes from a fear within the civil service... they are not happy about exposing their thinking to outsiders for fear they might be contradicted and the public might not like what they’re doing. So the best way then is to develop it to such a stage that it is almost a completed body and ‘now we’ll open the door too late so that you can’t really change it because we’ve decided anyway’.”

(External participant)

85. Many Executive staff who participated recognised this as a problem requiring addressing and were supportive of some of the ways in which the Executive could broaden involvement of partners. However, a number of staff stressed that expectations of the extent of stakeholder involvement can sometimes be an area of tension. For instance, partners are sometimes perceived to have unrealistic expectations about how much involvement is possible in the decision making process: according to some, partners sometimes expect more involvement and influence in setting the agenda than is possible.

“In my experience partners can add to the agenda but they can’t set it.” (Internal participant)

86. Some participants said that there is a need for clarity at the outset about what is open for negotiation as part of the partnership process and what is not.

“Defining the parameters of that partnership that you’re having [is important], whether it is a genuine everything’s up for grabs, we’re starting a new policy, you can say anything you like and if it’s good, hopefully it will be taken into account. Or...this is going to happen, let’s try and do it as best we can.”

(Internal participant)

87. A number commented that partners need to see the legitimate role of government in decision making. This was highlighted in the context of accountability, in that decision making ultimately rests with government. The rights of Ministers, having been elected, to take forward what they were elected to do, was emphasised.

"The politicians will decide what they want to do – to take forward some cherished thing."
(Internal participant)

88. That there can be fundamental differences in expectations appears to represent a significant challenge to partnership processes. The importance of being realistic at the outset about processes was highlighted.

89. Linked to the perception that involvement was often too late in routine consultation exercises, a number of external participants felt that there were limited opportunities to contribute to wider strategic policy development. For instance, some felt that partners could usefully contribute to strategic thinking on the big, longer-term issues facing Scotland, discussions which were considered to be largely absent in the context of the policy agenda.

"...what should the issues be in terms of consultation...not just for the next four years but the four years beyond that?... We've always got a difficulty in separating out strategy from operational aspects. We're consulted on how things should be working rather than the principles and the issues at the beginning..."
(External participant)

"[I have] the aspiration that there would be some sort of vision for the future of Scotland which would be articulated having had some consultation at a local and national level... The biggest criticism ...[is that there is] this plethora of initiatives and priorities and a lack of a focus in terms of what it is that the government intend to do."
(External participant)

90. Alongside views about the timing of involvement and the need for input into strategic challenges, a number of other concerns about involvement, particularly in relation to Scottish Executive consultations, were highlighted. These included:

- **Lack of time to respond:** Deadlines were often not felt to be realistic, especially if people are to be involved in an informed way. This concern was expressed by many external partners and some internal participants.
- **Overload:** Despite emphasising the need for continuous involvement, participants were mindful of consultation overload. It was felt that the lack of a co-ordinated approach to many different Executive consultations was a key contributing factor. It was felt that often separate initiatives cover similar ground, implying a lack of overview or prioritisation from the Executive.
- **Focus on paper-based consultation:** The limits of paper-based consultation were highlighted and consequently it was felt that there is a need for more creative methods in consulting partners.

The Composition of Partnerships

91. A number of internal and external participants expressed concern about the lack of engagement beyond a relatively limited group (sometimes referred to as the ‘usual suspects’), in other words looking beyond those with loud and influential voices. In addition, there were difficulties expressed about achieving the involvement a wide range of interests. Concerns were expressed in a number of ways:

- There tends to be a reliance on a small number of larger organisations.
- Representative organisations may not be totally representative.
- Communities and the wider public are not necessarily involved.
- There are difficulties and tensions around parity of esteem.

Reliance on larger organisations

92. Some participants, particularly Executive staff, were cautious about relying too heavily on larger organisations or the ‘big players’. It was felt that this could lead to potential distortion of agendas or privileging of certain interests, which could threaten to cut across principles of democracy and accountability. The need for a diverse approach to involvement was emphasised. However, a number of Executive staff suggested there are major practical difficulties in getting the right people round the table and in trying to go beyond the traditional partners every time.

Representativeness of external organisations

93. The issue of how much ‘reach’ is achieved by representative organisations in consulting their members or those in their sector was questioned by a minority of external participants and Executive staff. Interestingly, a number of external participants highlighted difficulties *for them*, both in consulting and involving members appropriately and in broadening links to the grassroots level within their sectors. To ensure appropriate representation of members takes place, a number of organisations have developed sophisticated surveying techniques to capture the views of members accurately. One participant suggested that the Executive needs to be aware of the methods organisations use to involve and consult members since different techniques are used by different organisations and there may be a risk of relying on the views of a minority rather than the full membership.

Involvement of communities

94. The issue of wider participation was raised by a number of Executive staff and several external participants. Concern was expressed that community networks and citizens have largely been neglected in favour of the larger institutions:

"[It's] the big partner organisations like the unions and the churches and business just grabbing power with the Executive themselves and creating a so called 'social partnership'."
(External participant)

"Partnerships tend to emphasise the views of services or providers above those of public or customers."
(Internal participant)

95. Many participants felt that it is incumbent on all partners to be more proactive in seeking the views of those who are traditionally less involved. The difficulties of engaging communities and reaching the ‘silent voices’ were perceived to be major challenges for both partners and Executive alike.

“It’s a huge area of weakness for us. As an organisation we understand astonishingly little about customer views.” (Internal participant)

“I think we need to ask ourselves how we can build structures that will give us, as it were, unfiltered understanding of views in society of a variety of issues.” (Internal participant)

Parity of esteem

96. During discussions about inclusiveness, the issue of parity of esteem was highlighted. Several external participants expressed concern about some stakeholders being more equal in practice than others. For example:

“On the parity of esteem question, sometimes it is those who are better at getting the media headlines who appear to be better at influencing the ultimate policy outcome...” (External participant)

97. The concept of equality of status attracted much discussion among Executive partners and there were differing views about whether there could be equality of status among partners. For some, attaching equal status to partners created difficulties and tensions, with the particular requirements of the role of government in decision making being seen as being contrary to equality of status.

“There is a difficulty in delivering equality of status – it is back to the point about leadership and accountability. Ministers are pretty clear that the buck stops with them, and that’s the difference.” (Internal participant)

98. Although these participants were not suggesting a hierarchical approach to partnership, they highlighted potential dangers of endorsing parity of esteem, such as unrealistic expectations among partners about roles and involvement. In contrast, others preferred to adopt a more egalitarian approach, which saw partners’ involvement as more of a level playing field. This egalitarian view resonated with many external participants in particular, but not exclusively.

“It would be much better if we had a partnership of equals, with the Executive contributing as an equal partner.” (External participant)

“I prefer a model where we’re talking about a team. People have particular roles, particular skills and particular needs and requirements. I don’t think we should start from the viewpoint of putting ourselves in the middle because that’s not the way to create a true partnership.” (Internal participant)

The Need for Feedback

99. A number of partners reported frustration at the lack of feedback provided following contributions to Executive consultations or partnership processes. A number of examples were cited where partner organisations and their members had contributed in some way but were left frustrated in the absence of quality feedback. They wanted to hear back about how their input had been used and considered, and whether it had made a difference.

“[There] needs to be a lot of effort put into making the process conducive to people giving their views, and feeling they have gained something by participating.” (Internal participant)

100. While participants recognised that policy processes require government to demonstrate leadership and be able to account for its decisions, it was felt that engagement has an important role yet this role is not being communicated. In particular, it was felt that the Executive needs to be more transparent, providing better explanations for how and why policy decisions are made.

“There is a need to provide feedback so that people can feel confident that the process isn’t escaping into secret tunnels.” (Internal participant)

“We expect them to carry the argument. That is what they fail to do. They decide but they don’t carry the argument. They duck [it]...” (External participant)

The Need for Clarity Over Purpose and Roles

101. Clarity of purpose and roles was singled out earlier as an important feature of successful partnership mechanisms which, it was felt, leads to a shared understanding and minimises confusion and differing expectations. It is likely that in its absence, there may be disappointment and frustration resulting from differing perceptions amongst partners of what the partnership can undertake, and of each other’s roles on it.

102. Another area of ambiguity identified by a few external participants was the role of the Executive in partnership processes. Difficulties in determining the role of Executive staff were highlighted. For instance, one person expressed concern that Executive officials often seem indifferent and tend not to contribute:

“I go to lots of meetings where the Executive are there in mass ranks and who never say anything.. I find that they are all sound people but it is a dampener when you are faced with a line of grey suits who don’t tend to say anything. They are observing and presumably reporting back to their Departments.” (External participant)

103. Another external participant suggested that the Executive is confused as to its role since there are inconsistencies, with some officials appearing willing to contribute to meetings while others are less so. This theme was one which was picked up by Executive staff and a number confirmed this view, suggesting that the Executive does not always see itself as a partner.

104. Equally it was suggested by a minority that the Executive can be confused about the role of particular external organisations or sectors during partnership processes. For example some suggested that the Executive does not understand organisations' legitimate wider role in being able to comment on government actions, and partners described difficulties resulting from them doing so. Interestingly, a number of Executive staff described problems they had encountered as a result of organisations who were part of a partnership process levying criticisms about the partnership independently in the press.

"It tends to destroy the trust and confidence on which partnership depends."

(Internal participant)

105. Again the importance of establishing an understanding of respective roles and additionally the need for 'ground rules' was emphasised.

"There should be ground rules and once you have those I think it works quite well. But if they're then broken ... I think you go back to a much more defensive sort of mode."

(Internal participant)

Resource Issues

106. A substantial barrier identified by the majority of external participants was the resource implications of partnership working. Many spoke of the increase in partnership activity since devolution and the strain it places on their resources. Although broadly welcoming the increase in access and opportunities for involvement, many found it difficult to cope with increasing demands and described ways in which they have had to reprioritise activities at the expense of, for example, maintaining links with Westminster. As well as reprioritising organisational activities and deploying existing resources to meet the demands of further engagement, many also reported having to limit and streamline engagements with the Executive (and other partners) to ensure that mainstream services or activities are maintained. Some participants felt that the Executive could do more to assist partners in engaging with government. The lack of a joined up approach to Executive consultation activity was felt to be a significant factor contributing to the resource difficulties external organisations faced in being involved.

107. Partners were not alone in voicing concerns about the need for considerable resources for effective partnership. Executive staff too indicated that the increased commitment to partnership working required more in terms of their time, resources and business planning processes.

"it [involving others] requires a very substantial commitment of time and resources to make it work."

(Internal participant)

108. This chapter has focused mainly on the experiences (both good and bad) of partnership working. At the same time as describing these, both partners and Executive staff identified possible ways in which partnership working could be enhanced and improved. In some ways it is artificial to isolate these ideas from the challenges described by participants. Nonetheless, for emphasis we consider these separately in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

- Participants reported significant increases in engagement and relationships between the Executive and partners, and described many success stories. However, many partners were disappointed with some of their experiences of working with the Executive. A number of common frustrations were highlighted which were felt to undermine effective partnership working. Common problems and challenges identified were achieving consistency in relationships, the limits of partners' involvement, getting the composition of partnerships right, the need for feedback, the need for clarity over purpose and roles, and finally the resource issues that increased partnership raises. The perception that a partnership approach is not fully embedded across the Executive was seen to be a real problem by partners and Executive staff alike.
- There was optimism among Executive staff about how current internal change initiatives will improve the way the Executive relates to and works with its partners. This optimism was not shared by all partners, partly because such initiatives are not visible externally.
- While organisations welcomed increased access and opportunities for involvement many find it difficult to cope with the increasing demands on them. Since most engagement with government is likely to be a fundamental core business activity of those organisations taking part in this research, it is fair to assume that other partners, and mainstream delivery organisations, are equally if not more likely to struggle with engaging while at the same time managing core business.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS – SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Introduction

109. A key aim of the study was to explore ways to enhance current practice in terms of partnership working. During the course of discussions about experiences of partnership working, a number of suggestions were put forward by participants to both address concerns expressed and to build on the successes identified. In this chapter we describe some of the suggestions which were made by both external partners and Executive staff.

Suggested Improvements

110. In discussions the following themes for improvement emerged, which are outlined below:

- Early engagement and **continuous dialogue**.
- Opportunities for partners' **input at a strategic level**.
- **Clarity of purpose** and roles.
- Build in **review and evaluation**.
- Widening access and **building capacity**.
- Developing a **culture of involvement**.
- Strategic Executive **commitment to partnership working**.
- A **shared responsibility**.

Early Engagement and Continuous Dialogue

111. Lack of involvement early on in the policy process is a frustration documented in Chapter 3. In addressing such concerns, external participants emphasised the need for more time to allow them to involve their members and provide an informed response.

112. Similarly Executive staff were clear about the need to involve partners in a more proactive way, and strengthening of relationships with partners was seen as one way to achieve this. Consequently the importance of developing ongoing, informal relationships with partners was stressed.

"...Time should be invested in developing personal relationships..." (Internal participant)

"We need to move beyond considering consultation as an adequate form of engagement into more of a continuous form of relationship with our stakeholders." (Internal participant)

113. The need for quality feedback not only at the end but throughout the policy process was stressed by many of the participants. Some participants envisaged partnership relationships as being on-going, two-way dialogue, rather than one-off Executive initiatives which were often seen to be inadequate.

“If you have this constant relationship you can come to a point where you...are building up sufficient understanding of where that thinking is that you know, you don’t need to go through the formal process all the time. There are different ways of doing it.”

(Internal participant)

“In any job people should ask themselves what group of people ought to know them by name, be able to recognise them if they saw them, feel free to pick up the telephone to them and they should ask themselves whether all the members of the group do those things.”

(Internal participant)

Opportunities for Partners’ Input at a Strategic Level

114. Related to the above suggestions, external participants called for opportunities for social and economic partners to have a role in focusing more on addressing strategic issues. A clear view which emerged from the roundtable discussions was that what is missing from the partnership landscape is a focus on some of the big, longer-term challenges facing Scotland. The future of the economy, demography and migration patterns were mentioned as issues which were felt to be largely absent in debates with government generally. In addition to the provision of opportunities for partners to contribute to these debates, many participants felt that partnership should have a more strategic approach at its core. Using expenditure and Executive priorities as examples, one commented:

“Any discussions about the relative priorities of different strands within the Executive budget happens exclusively behind closed doors. We don’t have an open process that leads to people considering before the positions are taken what the priorities for expenditure are...”

(External participant)

115. While some partners saw this being addressed through a more fundamental change to governance models, others saw this being possible through existing lines of partnership and mechanisms across different sectors.

Clarity of Purpose and Roles

116. As noted earlier, clarity between the partners on the purpose of the engagement and on each other’s roles and responsibilities was felt to be crucial to successful partnership working. Highlighted as a relative failing of a number of partnership mechanisms, both internal and external participants were unwavering in their aspiration for clarity. Upon agreement over remit, consideration of the appropriate *modus operandi* was thought to need to follow. In other words, purpose should lead the method and assessment of which approaches or mechanisms are right for the task in hand.

117. Reference to the behaviour of partners was noted earlier and it is worth highlighting this in the context of how roles are defined and how partners should contribute appropriately. Both internal and external participants identified particular problem behaviours which challenged partnership processes. It is very likely that demonstrating a higher level of awareness of how participants expect to contribute to commonly agreed objectives at the planning stage would pay dividends later.

Build In Review and Evaluation

118. Several external participants highlighted the need for building in reviews of partnership processes. The relative absence of opportunities to provide feedback on overall process and outcomes from different perspectives was felt to potentially weaken partnership processes. The need for evaluation was seen in the context of ensuring that partnership processes and the partners involved are still appropriate, as well as assessing the final outputs and outcomes of any given partnership. Speaking about a particular taskforce, one participant stated:

“The ... task force has very little policy influence but it continues to meet and focuses on process issues. It meanders on and nobody has the courage to kill it. It’s not focused on particular objectives, it’s a bit of furniture.” (External participant)

119. To that end, regular joint cross checks against the partnership’s objectives were suggested. If evaluation was standard practice, some felt that this would enable partnerships to drive forward a cycle of continuous improvement. These findings tally with the conclusions from this project’s earlier study of Partnership and Evaluation, which concluded that planning and evaluation in partnership working (and the projects resulting from partnership) were linked strongly to success.

Widening Access and Building Capacity

120. Common to all frustrations noted by both Executive staff and partners was the lack of reach beyond 'mainstream' social and economic partners. There was a view that it would be helpful to take a more innovative view of who a ‘partner’ might be. This was seen in two ways. First there was a view that it is not sufficient to rely simply on the ‘big’ strategic partners and that there is a need to get beyond traditional players to the grassroots level. Secondly, it was noted that the views of citizens and communities were seldom sought.

121. To address the first issue, a number of Executive staff highlighted the importance of building a network of contacts and relationships in different areas. Using the business sector as an example, one staff member stated:

“It is not adequate for example to build a relationship with the CBI but never to have any form of contact with the people who run individual businesses.” (Internal participant)

122. Participants believed that the views of community organisations and the wider public ought to be considered in addition to the views of the established partners. Stressing the importance of widening the circle of involvement, participants suggested that a proactive approach to involving others is required.

“You need a practical approach so it’s not the usual suspects and a few self-selecting others... Something which listens for the small voice,... rather than just swayed by the people that barge in or who already have status.” (External participant)

“You have to ask yourself where they’re to be found in their natural habitat, and go there.” (Internal participant)

123. Mindful of the difficulties in reaching communities and citizens, Executive staff recognised the need to balance the relative contributions of different groups, individuals and sectors.

“We need to try to engineer some sort of processes to balance the effects of inequality of resources. In order to create equality of participation in the dialogue.”

(Internal participant)

124. To ensure that there are opportunities for local participation wherever possible, some suggested that capacity-building processes ought to be supported and a number of suggestions were made by both sets of participants about how the Executive could help this:

- Conducting processes in places that are accessible.
- Providing longer thinking-time in the run up to the process.
- Allowing sufficient time for those who have elaborate obligations in terms of who they need to consult.
- Resourcing partners /communities to be able to engage.
- Considering using surveying techniques and participatory engagement methods as well as usual methods.

“...It may well be that the techniques we use have to be more the techniques of opinion surveying than direct engagement although... some mixture of the two may well be useful.”

(Internal participant)

- Supporting ‘bottom-up’ community development work.
- Joint training between other partners.
- Building on opportunities for sharing good practice within the Executive and beyond.

125. Some Executive participants and partners emphasised that if there is to be a fundamental culture change in how Ministers, civil servants and indeed local government councillors and officers relate to external partners, as well as to each other, a major investment in building partnership capacity across the public sector may be required. This would need to recognise the importance of attributes as much as formally defined skills. Some people suggested that **joint training** would be a useful way develop appropriate these attributes and behaviours.

Developing a Culture of Involvement

126. In addressing inconsistencies in the way the Executive works with partners, Executive participants emphasised the need to develop a culture of partnership working which is fully embedded in the ‘psyche’ of the Executive.

“We need to develop a culture within the organisation which is embedded in the principles of partnership working, which relies on behaviours being rewarded and the developments which support partnership working.”

(Internal participant)

127. To achieve such a shift in Executive attitudes and behaviours, staff felt that the following activities and efforts would be required.

Demonstrating leadership

- Strong leadership provided from the top (Ministers and management), where commitment is both signalled and applied in practice.
- Development of, and building on, existing change processes like Changing to Deliver.
- Reinforcement and creative renewal of messages about change within the Executive to maintain enthusiasm and interest.

Normalising and investing in partnership

- Development of the partnership behaviours which should underpin all engagement.
- Embedding a partnership approach within everyday routines – making partnership no longer an ‘add-on’.
- Identification of relevant interests as a standard process.
- Rewarding of partnership behaviours through personnel appraisal system.
- Enhancing the relevant training provision.
- Utilising a flexible range of involvement methods which are fit for purpose.

Developing relationships

- Investing time in the development of relationships with partners.
- Developing more informal and open relationships with partners.
- More ‘getting to-know-you’ type engagement activity.
- Requiring Executive staff to ‘get out more’ and meet with partners on their own ground.

“We don’t get out enough... Instead of summoning people in to us it would be a lot better if we went out to them for a variety of reasons, whether it is policy, or to see their problems on the ground, or to see the difficulties they face in delivery.” (Internal participant)

“ The very process of being there means you have furthered that engagement.” (Internal participant)

128. Interestingly, many participants stressed that these suggestions applied to partners as well as the Executive. By no means were participants implying that these types of behaviours and actions are completely absent from Executive processes, although they were nonetheless highlighted as vital for improving partnerships approaches. These proposals for change were made in the context of building on what the Executive is already doing. As one participant stated:

“I think generally by sort of signalling that stakeholder work is important through Changing to Deliver [the Executive will make more progress]. There is quite a lot of follow-through on that and that does involve changing but it’s mainly growing from what we’re already doing more of and doing it better.” (Internal participant)

Strategic Executive Commitment to Partnership Working

129. As noted earlier, external participants questioned why internal initiatives (e.g. Changing to Deliver) are not explicitly linked to broader agendas and are largely invisible to the outside world. In a similar way, Executive staff, who were largely optimistic about what Changing to Deliver could achieve, felt that there was a need to publicly signal the Executive's overall strategic commitment to partnership work.

"We have a huge number of concordats and this is where we fall down because you've got to look at a different one every time for a different instance... Are we aware that they are even there? We perhaps need some basic document that sets out our fundamental principles but on the basis that we're going to deliver on them... not just a piece of paper that we've ticked off but actually showing that we're willing to work with it." (Internal participant)

130. Specific suggestions included:

- Developing an overall partnership framework, setting out partnership principles, behaviours and the Executive's commitment to partnership.
- Linking a strategic approach to partnership to the Scottish Parliament's founding (CSG) principles.
- Better linkages being made between existing partnership processes and mechanisms.
- Sharing best practice between different partnerships.

A Shared Responsibility

131. While much of the discussions with both sets of participants focused on the role of the Executive, participants considered that responsibility for making partnerships effective ought to be shared. For example, a number of strategies were suggested which would assist in developing effective partnership working. These included:

- Partners adopting a less adversarial mindset.
- Partners taking responsibility for choosing their priorities, rather than trying to respond to everything.
- Partners co-operating more with other social and economic partners as well as with the Executive.

"Bringing something constructive to the party is something we need to work on a wee bit more... choose your priorities and be clear what you're bringing." (External participant)

SUMMARY

- At the same time as describing difficulties participants identified possible ways in which partnership can be enhanced and improved. Recognising that the Executive is moving in the right direction, a number of suggestions were put forward. To address the problems of inconsistency of partnership behaviours, it was suggested that the Executive needs to develop a culture of involvement which is fully embedded across the Executive.
- Participants were clear about the need for early engagement and continuous dialogue, clarity of purpose and roles and for evaluation and review to be built into partnership processes.
- The opportunity to be involved in discussions about overarching strategic issues affecting Scotland was highlighted as a gap in the partnership landscape which partners would like to see addressed.
- Partners too – not just the Executive – saw the need to take responsibility for the requirements that partnership work brings in terms of investment, commitment and resources. Widening access was considered important, however, it was recognised that developing a greater culture of involvement requires building capacity both within the Executive and partner organisations across different sectors. It was felt that a stronger strategic commitment to partnership working from the Executive would be desirable, in order to help create both a clear rationale and an operational framework for partnership working.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS – VIEWS ON NEW MECHANISMS FOR WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

132. One of the aims of this research was to seek to identify whether the Executive's partners consider current partnership mechanisms to be sufficient, or whether they believe that new mechanisms are required in Scotland. Therefore, during the interview stage participants were asked their views on existing relationships and about possible new mechanisms.

133. The roundtable discussions with external participants provided an opportunity for debate around current mechanisms and consideration of some possible options for future partnership working in Scotland. The views elicited from these methods were diverse.

134. Following a short consideration of external participants' views on existing bilateral relationships and on whether new ways of working are required, the remainder of the analysis in this Chapter highlights the discussions – mostly of external participants – around new mechanisms.

Views on Current Partnership Working Mechanisms

135. Participants generally described their current bilateral relationships with the Executive in positive terms. As illustrated earlier, participants referred to a range of types of engagement, from one-off meetings to regular involvement in, for example, working groups, forums and taskforces. Broadly speaking, many of these engagements are governed around two types of arrangements for relationships:

- Formal, structured mechanisms.
- Informal, ad hoc arrangements.

136. These types of arrangement are not exclusive and are to a large extent complementary. Those partners who have written agreements with the Executive also tend to have a range of ongoing informal contacts, although these are likely to be significantly informed by the formal framework.

137. For many participants involved in the research arrangements for relationships are, to some extent, structured around formal, written agreements: examples include the STUC/ Executive Memorandum of Understanding, the Compact between the Executive and the Voluntary Sector and the Civic Forum/ Executive Concordat. In participants' comments on the effectiveness of these agreements, a strong belief emerged that they have brought significant benefits and have improved relationships with the Executive. Some of the benefits of having the written agreement in place were said to be:

- **Improving existing relationships** with Divisions and Departments.
- Helping to **forge new relations** with Departments and Divisions that are not a normal point of contact.
- Leading to stakeholder **participation in new areas** policy.
- Facilitating a **consistency of approach**.
- Leading to the **recognition of the role of partner organisations** in the work of government.
- Helping to foster **mutual respect** for each other's positions between the Executive and partners.

138. Providing a mechanism for improving and building on existing relationships, establishing new links and addressing the inconsistencies in approach to partnership were the main reasons why some formal partnership agreements were seen to be necessary.

"The agreement [–the Executive/ STUC Memorandum of Understanding–] has helped us build effective links to other Departments for the first time. We are able to point to real positive outcomes" (External participant)

"I mean that [the inconsistency] actually was one of the reasons why we kind of put the Memorandum of Understanding together in the first instance with the Executive. It was a recognition that there was good relationships in some areas, but it wasn't consistent and we wanted to try and address that and that's going some way toward it, ... but I wouldn't say that we're there yet. There's still a lot of work to be done." (External participant)

139. Inherent in the formulation of such partnership agreements is the expectation that partners on both sides will take responsibility for actions and for delivery, and a number of participants commented on this.

"There's an understanding that the trade unions believe that the Executive will deliver on that and they expect us to deliver our side of it. And so that's mutuality, it's trust, it's respect and it's honesty and I think that's where we come from and that's the skills that are required for a partnership." (External participant)

140. While the development of bilateral partnership agreements was felt to have brought significant benefits for organisations and the Executive, there were some reservations about their effectiveness.

"I've yet to be convinced that all Departments are taking the MoU seriously" (External participant)

"I've yet to see [Compact] working... There is a desire to have it in place and to see it working but I'm not sure it's working as it was intended to" (External participant)

141. Even if agreements were to work consistently, one participant commented that it would be impossible for their organisation to meet the likely demands resulting from an increase in engagement.

“You just can’t do everything and actually ironically, if the Memorandum of Understanding was working consistently across all Departments, we couldn’t resource our side of it.” (External participant)

142. Participants who were not covered by a formal bilateral agreement, and who mainly represented the business sector, questioned the need for such agreements. Broadly speaking, business participants regarded formal bilateral agreements for the sector as unnecessary for two reasons. The first being that the sector already enjoys sufficient access to Ministers and civil servants, the second that the sector is able to gain benefits without having a formal partnership structure.

“I think [the fact] that we can achieve positive outcomes without a formal agreement demonstrates that it is unnecessary”. (External participant)

143. In discussions about the need for bilateral partnership agreements, a number of potential disadvantages were highlighted by those opposed to such types of ‘contract’:

- Formalising relationships which are currently informal but productive could **destroy trust** and jeopardise current terms of engagement.
- Existing partnership agreements have **not necessarily resulted in a consistency** of approach across Executive Departments.
- They could lead to a **tick box, inflexible approach to engagement**.
- Partners could risk **losing their autonomy** to comment on government actions.

“At the end of the day we don’t need a formal structure... that would kill trust, kill relationships, kill consultation”. (External participant)

144. Many of those within this group tended to emphasise the need for informal approaches to developing relationships rather than formal arrangements. It was felt that informality reflects the strength of a relationship and that many positive outcomes have been achieved through this approach.

145. However, despite portraying a largely negative view of formal agreements, a minority of business representatives suggested that their sector should be open to reviewing the position in the future.

Is There a Requirement for New Partnership Mechanisms in Scotland?

146. Although the main focus of the research explored existing relationships with the Executive, participants were also asked specifically about whether there is a requirement for new partnership mechanisms. It is worth noting that many had not considered the concept of new mechanisms in any depth prior to the research while for others, the establishment of a Social and Economic Partnership (SEP) was a key strategic aspiration. In addition, consideration of new mechanisms in both the interviews and roundtable discussions was limited. Therefore it is important to be cautious in interpreting views. Nevertheless opinions about new mechanisms were notably different. Reflecting these differing views, three core groups can be identified from the analysis:

- **Advocates:** This grouping represents those who clearly articulated that they would like to see a new mechanism established in Scotland. Under one third of those interviewed stated that they thought a SEP structure would be beneficial to Scotland. These participants were more likely to represent the Trade Unions, although not exclusively.

“We need institutions and processes that will achieve unity and consensus across economic and social affairs in Scotland... There is currently a lack of strategic dialogue”.

(External participant)

- **Opponents:** This grouping consists of those who clearly stated that they do not wish to see a SEP structure created in Scotland. Around one third of those interviewed opposed the creation of a SEP mechanism and again this group tended to be dominated by one particular sector, this time business, although again not exclusively.

“We don’t like the European social model at all and would like to see it abolished. We certainly don’t want it replicated in Scotland”.

(External participant)

- **Ambivalents:** Representing the largest category, this group consisted of those who did not state a clear view either way and were generally undecided or unsure about the need for new mechanisms. This category encompassed a range of opinion, from those who tentatively supported a new mechanism to those who were more cautious.

“I’m unsure about the need for new mechanisms and importing something from somewhere else into Scotland for the sake of it”.

(External participant)

147. In discussions about new mechanisms a range of arguments were cited in support of, or in opposition to, the creation of new mechanisms. These were highlighted by all three different groupings in discussions and are summarised by arguments for and against below.

Arguments for the Creation of a Social and Economic Partnership (SEP)

148. Highlighted by both ‘advocates’ and to some extent ‘ambivalents’, the points to emerge in favour of a SEP can be summarised under two main themes:

- There is a need to create a forum for social partners for **strategic discussion** and for improving policy development.
- A SEP mechanism would **build better relationships** and would address cynicism.

Opportunities for strategic discussion and improving policy development

149. Many of those in favour stated that currently there are no opportunities for partners to engage with each other in strategic dialogue about social and economic issues and that there is an underlying need for this to happen in Scotland.

“We’re in danger of just ad hoc bits and pieces of work being taken forward without it being properly directed and I think that’s what a Social and Economic Partnership would be about.”

(External participant)

150. Participants often viewed the political system as a whole, appraising their relationship with the policy process in terms of both the Executive and the Parliament. While the opportunity of providing evidence to Scottish Parliamentary committees was praised, some felt that this did not go far enough and the creation of a SEP would allow partners to be involved in regular dialogue about overarching social and economic issues. These issues, it was felt, tend to be ignored largely by current committee structures.

“We went in and gave our evidence... and then the committee went away and mulled it over and came up with something, presented that to the Minister then the Minister decided what he was going to do. I mean I’m not saying that that isn’t one reasonable process for doing these things but it’s not necessarily the best one in terms of something like a [X Strategy]. If it is going to be delivered in partnership effectively it should be constructed in partnership as well, arguably.”
(External participant)

151. A number of potential benefits were thought likely to accrue if a new SEP mechanism were to be implemented:

- There would be more **consensus** around social and economic policy.
- It could potentially be used for **blue skies thinking**, especially about the future.
- It would lead to better and **more transparent policy-making**.
- A forum would give partners **more direction over early stages of policy** development.
- Partners would be able to **set the agenda**.

152. In addition to collective benefits of a SEP, a small number admitted that it would also lead to greater influence for their organisation.

“The main reason why [we] would want to see meaningful social and economic partnership is one: quite openly, that it increases the influence which [we] can have.”
(External participant)

Building better relationships and addressing cynicism

153. Another major benefit that the idea of a SEP was thought likely to bring was the prospect of improving relationships between social partners and government. These benefits were envisaged in a number of ways.

- It would **build trust** between Ministers and social partners.
- It would **tackle cynicism around politics** in Scotland.
- It would demonstrate willingness to **share power** and would send a positive message about how business is done in partnership.

154. Despite citing positive arguments in favour of the idea of a new mechanism, there was no real consensus among ‘advocates’ about the nature and role of a SEP. When questioned, participants tended not to describe or define specific roles. Some referred to models elsewhere in Europe on which it was felt a SEP in Scotland could be modelled. However, since many of these mechanisms are concerned with issues which are reserved in the UK, participants were not altogether clear about how a SEP model would operate in a devolved Scotland.

Arguments Against the Creation of a Social and Economic Partnership (SEP)

155. Arguments against the creation of a SEP mechanism were cited by both ‘opponents’ and to some extent ‘ambivalents’. The views which emerged focused on two key areas:

- Existing multilateral and bilateral **mechanisms are already adequate**.
- There is **scepticism about the need** for a SEP mechanism.

Existing mechanisms are adequate

156. This view tended to dominate arguments against the creation of a SEP. Many participants felt its creation would be unnecessary, the case had not been proven and there was no real need for new arrangements given existing structures. Furthermore, it was felt that any new mechanism would clutter an already full partnership landscape.

"I think anything that starts up yet another committee or grouping is simply adding to the bundle of groups that are already there." (External participant)

157. A number of participants went further and suggested that there is a need to review the purpose of existing mechanisms as it was felt that sometimes mechanisms continue beyond their useful life.

"One of the main aspirations of Community Planning was to rationalise the number of partnerships and de-clutter the partnerships that exist... so anything at all that somehow gets us away from the hundreds of these partnerships that exist now and have existed for a long time ...actually some of them are not in any way effective at all." (External participant)

158. A minority were against approaches described as "statutory" and critical of anything that got in the way of existing informal relationships which sectors have with the Executive. For example, one business participant argued:

"...anything that interrupted bilateral [relationships] – the right of organisations to make their own representations – would never work." (External participant)

Scepticism about the need for new mechanisms

159. There were a number of sceptical points made, including:

- The idea of new mechanisms is characteristic of the type of scheme which **would be 'delivered' to partners** rather than based on mutual consensus.
- New mechanisms **would be largely symbolic**, a way of government congratulating itself on bringing people together.
- **Partnership isn't working at a local level yet**, so is unlikely to at a national level.
- A SEP **would encourage greater influence of trade unions**.
- It is **unclear what purpose** a SEP mechanism would have.
- Setting up a SEP **might open up new problems**.
- It is **not possible to import a social partnership model wholesale** – what works elsewhere would not necessarily work in Scotland.

General Observations on the Way Forward

160. Despite clear differences in views about the creation of a SEP mechanism, some common themes did emerge from the interviews and roundtable discussions.

- A clear view emerged that **what is missing is a focus between partners and government on the big, long-term challenges facing Scotland**. In general there was a desire for partnership to ‘shift upstream’ and consider strategic questions as well as operational/ delivery issues. This view was particularly apparent during the roundtable events.
- There was a strong level of agreement that however the SEP policy discussions proceed, **decisions will need to be genuinely co-owned** and generated by the partners rather than an Executive initiative that would feel imposed.

“Let the idea emerge from a genuine search for mutual interests with the social partners, because if it’s seen as just another product that’s been delivered to us, I don’t think they’ll take kindly to that.” (External participant)

- There was a **wish to avoid too much structure and formality**. The creative tension arising from a degree of fluidity and uncertainty in the first 4 years of devolution was considered by some to have been, on balance, an advantage – allowing for organic development of ways of working – although one downside was the lack of read across from one area of public life to another.
- There was felt that **there is currently an unhelpful amount of partnership “clutter”** at both local and national level, drawing unevenly on the resources of different partners. This was mentioned both as an argument for (it could assist rationalisation) and against (it would simply add to the clutter) a new mechanism.
- **Internal Executive participants were generally not convinced** that fundamentally new ways of working are required and were sceptical over the creation of a new SEP mechanism. The views of internal participants were sometimes coloured by previous, largely negative experience of large multilateral partnership mechanisms. The overall view was that such mechanisms can struggle to justify the resource required to sustain their activity.

SUMMARY

- Partners were in the main content with their existing bilateral relationships with the Executive, although a number of problems were highlighted. Many external participants felt that partnership agreements had brought about significant benefits for their sector, although there were concerns that such ‘contracts’ had not been universally applied across the whole of the Executive.
- There was no clear consensus on the development of new Social and Economic Partnership (SEP) mechanisms. Participants from the trade union sector were clearly in favour of one, while those from the business sector were generally against. Many of those supporting the concept did not propose specific models but rather concentrated on the underlying principles.
- It is likely that the breadth of discussions about the concept of new mechanisms reflects the early status of the debate in different sectors rather than a strong consensus for change across the social and economic partners. Nevertheless, the case for establishing a multilateral forum for ongoing discussion of the big strategic issues appears to have some weight.

CHAPTER 6: OVERALL FINDINGS

Introduction

161. This report presents qualitative findings from the interviews and group research activities which were carried out by a Scottish Executive team in early 2003. While the sample was limited, some clear themes are apparent. This chapter seeks to draw together some of the key findings from the research.

Strong Commitment to Partnership Working

162. The first clear finding emerging from this study is that, in the main, partnership in Scotland is working. There is strong commitment to it, it is being taken forward in a variety of new and dynamic ways, and it looks set to be an increasingly significant feature of the policy landscape. We found an overall commitment to partnership working among partners and the Executive, along with a desire for further improvement.

A Diversity of Views on Partnership

163. Even within the limits of the sample used for this study, there clearly is a wide diversity of perspectives on partnership working. Some interpret partnership in a broad way – from informal conversation to working groups to high level set-piece forums, while others define it only as narrowly conceived formal standing mechanisms. Furthermore, these different positions are not aligned with any particular classification of the participants. For example, frustrations that things post-devolution were not moving as fast as they would like were expressed by both Executive and non-Executive participants. At the same time, a number in both groups also expressed some doubt about an apparent ‘fashion’ for partnership for its own sake.

164. Furthermore, it was found that individuals’ own positions were sometimes not wholly consistent, indicating how people often adopt different stances in different contexts. This may be seen to highlight a lag between theory and practice. For example, a significant majority of participants were enthusiastic proponents of greater multi-lateral joint working and sharing agendas, but many also saw partnerships that they are involved in simply as a way to further their own, sometimes fixed, agendas. In the same way, some participants expressed the view that they understand that government will listen and discuss but ultimately will make decisions that not all the partners might agree with, but said that if they have had a ‘fair hearing’ then they would be satisfied. Yet the same participants also cited residual dissatisfaction around instances where they had failed to gain the outcome they had wanted.

165. For the Executive, tensions arise around managing the need to view partners as equals. It was widely stated that the Executive should seek to involve partners earlier on, and to share the thinking and policy development process. However, there is a potential tension between Ministers' democratic accountability for decision-making and the desire to involve partners more with decision-making. The need for the Executive to share more in their processes was set against the need for partners to act responsibly within partnerships – it was felt that it should be a two-way process. For example, 'leaking' to the press was often felt by Executive participants to be a damaging tactic sometimes adopted by partners, which can lead to Executive counterparts being more cautious and more reluctant to be fully open. Equally, Executive leaks have the potential to damage trust and openness between partners.

166. Despite being critical of current partnership relationships, participants were committed to the ethos of partnership. Those who expressed more satisfaction with current arrangements or the general direction of policy-making were often more limited in their expectations of what partnership was, or indeed could be. Thus much of the discussion around partnership has to be set in a context of a range of differing expectations.

A Period of Transition

167. We are currently in a post-devolution transition period, with new opportunities created by having a Parliament, an Executive and enhanced machinery of government in Scotland, and the corresponding growth of policy activity in other sectors. The study found that, as could be expected, such a transition has created a high level of dynamism and fluidity in relationships and partnership arrangements in the policy landscape.

168. While there appears to be broad agreement that we are in a period of opportunity for change, the nature of that change is very contested, as is the vision of the future which underpins it. In the field of partnership and governance, this vision can vary considerably. At its most ambitious, partnership suggests a trusting and equal space where policy is co-produced, where a partnership becomes more than a sum of its parts and people take on the concerns of each other in a mutual, mutable process. At the opposite end of the spectrum, partnership can be seen simply as a way of formally ensuring that fixed positions are heard and seen to be heard in a process owned and controlled by the government.

Future Development of Partnership Working

169. While many external participants welcome increased access to, and new ways of working with, the Executive, many are disappointed at the lack of consistency in approaches to partnership working. The view that a partnership approach is not fully embedded within Executive culture led many participants to suggest that the Executive should signal publicly its commitment to partnership working. Without such a commitment, the Executive's position on the ethos of the CSG principles is seen to be unclear.

170. Despite some criticisms, there appears to be broad agreement that the Executive is moving in the right direction. Executive staff involved in the research were optimistic about the opportunities new change initiatives will provide in terms of enhancing and improving the way in which the Executive works with and involves others. However, many partners were unsure about the nature of such change initiatives, although they were encouraged about their potential and saw opportunities for strategic involvement of partners. At any rate there is a sense that there is a need to consolidate existing partnership arrangements, recognising that in recent years there have been considerable developments across policy areas and sectors, and that partnership working needs to be given time to develop.

171. Within discussion about the possibility of there being new mechanisms, there was considerable disagreement about the best way to proceed. A small minority did not want there to be any changes to current partnerships. Some felt that the fluidity and diversity of current arrangements would be best left alone, as it allows things to grow and change and fit the different circumstances that arise across the range of situations where partnership is applicable. This 'ad-hoc variable geometry' was seen to this group to be an organic situation which would become less workable if formal mechanisms were imposed. Yet a small number felt that introducing new mechanisms would help both to signal the importance of partnership and to crystallise and streamline current arrangements. Broadly, business interests were most reticent about formalised multilateral systems, while trade union participants were most enthusiastic about formal mechanisms.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

172. This chapter seeks to draw out some of the implications and possible conclusions to emerge from the findings of the research undertaken.

Strategic Considerations

173. There is a range of different interpretations of the **meaning of partnership**. It would be helpful to promote a broad view of partnership in order to maximise the benefits of the partnership approach in a range of policy development and service delivery areas. The Executive should be looking to take a lead in seeking to demonstrate the relevance of partnership working to public policy across the board.

174. The Executive's **commitment to partnership** is sometimes felt to be unclear. How the Executive sees its own role in partnership can also be an area of confusion. It might therefore be beneficial for the Executive to develop a clear, strategic vision of how it sees the role of partnership, and to make explicit its commitment to partnership working. This message could then be articulated clearly and promulgated throughout the Executive and partners alike. Executive staff might benefit from the corporate leadership that this would provide. External partners would also have a clearer sense of the parameters of partnership – where they stand in relation to the Executive and what they can expect.

175. There is some ambiguity about the extent to which working in partnership can and should extend towards power-sharing. Discussion of partnership begins to expose some deep differences of opinion in relation to governance issues. Greater involvement in developing policy raises important issues around **democratic accountability**. In the context of the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) principles, this represents complex challenges in terms of participation, access, accountability and democratic legitimacy. In post-devolution Scotland, we are still in the early stages of this debate on governance, and the more widely it takes place – from Executive and Parliament, social and economic partners, to communities and civil society – the more fruitful the dialogue will be.

176. There is currently limited cross-fertilisation between the different partnerships that the Executive has with individual sectors and organisations. Thus there is scope for greater **bench-marking** and sharing of good practice, and perhaps even for rationalisation of partnerships. Both the Executive and partner interests would benefit from greater knowledge of the broader partnership landscape, so there might be a case in the first instance for the Executive mapping the main relationships across the different sectors in order to improve communication about partnership activity. Greater co-ordination of the Executive's overarching approach to partnership would help facilitate clearer messages in this regard.

177. Despite the range of experiences and partnerships, some **generic principles and good practice** emerged through the research process. This could be capitalised on more. It might be useful for it to be drawn together into one place, as a general framework for partnership working, which could be referred to or used as a touchstone for a variety of partnerships. This would need to have a light touch, but could include a generic set of guidelines – for example the need for joint development of the terms of the engagement, clarity over roles and remit, and the need to mutually evaluate any given partnership regularly against its aims. Of course, if such a framework were to be developed it would need to be done in reference to, and draw on, existing sources and expertise.

Cultural Change

178. Commitment to partnership at the surface level is easy. However, in order to make that commitment real there often needs to be change at a deeper level. Investment of staff, time and resources is often a requirement of partnership working if it is to be successful. True partnership is embedded culturally, rather than added on as an after-thought, and there still appears to be a need across organisations and sectors for capacity-building for this.

179. There is no one size fits all model of partnership that can be adopted across different Executive departments, policy areas, sectors or circumstances. Therefore it is appropriate for a range of different methods to be able to be utilised and to be seen to be legitimate. Partnerships should be **fit-for-purpose**. Both the Executive and partners have been seen to be open to new techniques and to innovate in some situations, yet can also both be prone to falling back on traditional modes of operating which may no longer be the most appropriate approach. Therefore, the Executive and other partners should continue to proactively explore the use of a range of different techniques and approaches to working in partnership

180. Regardless of the variety of different mechanisms or arrangements for partnerships, there are some **partnership behaviours** which can be applied universally. These are often what determine the success or effectiveness of any given partnership relationship, and there is some way to go in building these up. Good partnership skills, attitudes and behaviours need to be recognised and promoted across the board.

Scottish Executive Internal Change

181. This study finds strong endorsement of the messages for change which are already permeating the Executive. Changing to Deliver and other related workstreams represent key **drivers for change** within the Executive, and are already reaping rewards. It will be important for this momentum be maintained. External interests appear to be largely unaware of either the existence of the internal change programme in the Executive, or of its detail, but express interest in knowing more. Communicating its messages more widely and would help to inform stakeholders of what is being done, and of the corporate commitment to such change. It was clear throughout the research process that external interests have valuable insights into the way the Executive works, so ensuring their future involvement in Changing to Deliver would also ensure that the programme's benefits are maximised.

182. The benefits of partnership working to the **policy development process** can sometimes be lost or go unrecognised if partners do not see the part their involvement has played. This applies not only in terms of formal feedback on how consultation responses have informed policy decisions, but also at informal levels in terms of ‘showing the thinking’ more generally. The Executive has already made moves to improve the feedback loop and to open up its processes, and this should continue to be built on. Involvement of external interests should be brought into the policy development process as an integral part of the work that officials do.

183. Currently, partnership often fails to succeed in **including community interests, users, silent voices and citizens** in the broadest sense. This is recognised as a real challenge to all organisations, and perceived as a weakness that the Executive and partners need to continue to seek ways to address. Involvement of people who are not in organised groups or self-selecting can be done through for example citizens’ juries, surveying, visioning groups or deliberative polling. This should complement other forms of consultation with ‘core’ partners. There is still much to be done. It is also recognised that there is a need for greater capacity-building in communities to help people be empowered to take part in decisions which affect their lives.

Improving Partnership Working Mechanisms

184. There is a great deal going on in terms of partnership working across different policy areas and sectors. Much **improvement activity** is already being taken forward, for example the reviews of the Voluntary Sector Compact and of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Executive and the STUC. Participants stressed the point that upheaval and a culture of constant change is not helpful when things are actually working, and new processes often take time to reap rewards. This is particularly true of partnership working arrangements. Therefore in some cases there is no additional action to be taken, and partners and the Executive should simply seek to consolidate existing partnership arrangements.

185. There are some areas for **improvement of existing partnership arrangements**. These tend to be specific to particular partnership arrangements. Where this is the case, it is likely that improvement is most effectively channelled through existing processes in the first instance.

186. There is a sense from the study that partnership mechanisms which are set up to tackle particular issues should have a limited life-span, as these types of partnership can outlive their usefulness if and when policy priorities develop and circumstances change. It would therefore be useful for **partnerships to embed evaluation processes** as standard, for example to periodically review their aims and operations to ensure continued relevance and effectiveness. Sometimes ending a partnership will be the most appropriate action to be taken.

187. The study registered a view shared by many that partnership is only sought by the Executive at the operational/ delivery level, but that they wished for partners to be involved further ‘upstream’ in the process. They asserted that there is a gap at the level of **engaging partners on the strategic issues** that face Scotland. It might be worth consideration being given as to whether such a gap exists, and to providing such a joint opportunity for partners along with the Executive and Ministers to discuss the high level strategic issues facing Scotland.

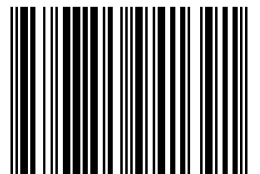
188. This study found a lack of consensus around whether any **new mechanisms or systems** for partnership working would be desirable. This may be partly due to the small size of the sample but also because the debate is still in its early stages. Whether participants were positive or negative often turned on considerations such as how any new mechanism might be designed, how it would fit with other arrangements and how its aims would be constructed. It was emphasised that, regardless, the quality of engagement and the need for it to add value should be the central considerations in any such debate. It seems from the views gathered that the door is certainly not closed to such a debate in the future. However, it would be very important that it be conducted in an open, inclusive and constructive way. Partners would need to be involved from the beginning in order for any possible outcomes to be widely owned and endorsed.

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