

Briefing Note 1/01

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Introduction

Various authors have commented on how difficult it is to set up and maintain good partnership arrangements for multi agency projects (eg The Audit Commission, 1998; Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994). In this briefing note we consider what practical lessons may be taken from the burglary reduction experience to ensure that partnerships exist in more than just name and have a chance of being effective. Our focus is on organisational and managerial issues rather than on impact, which will be considered in subsequent papers.

Summary of key points for action

- Joint ventures should be adequately resourced. This should at least involve allowing staff time to fully participate in partnership meetings and mandating operational staff to prioritise the work involved.
- Responsibility for setting and keeping to overall objectives should be separated from responsibility for implementation. This is most easily accomplished by setting up a steering group to oversee the project.
- The steering group must be genuinely consultative and representatives from statutory organisations should be senior enough to make decisions about resource allocation.
- The implementation leader and his or her team should report to the steering group but not run it, to ensure that the steering group acts as an independent check on progress.

Partnerships to reduce burglary

The idea of partnership is not new but, with the advent of a government committed to ‘joined-up working’, came the idea of putting such arrangements on a statutory footing. This was to be achieved through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, in particular sections 5,6 and 17.

In 1998 the Home Office announced that £250 million would be spent on developing and implementing an integrated approach to reducing crime and making communities safer. The first strand of this ‘Crime Reduction Programme’ funded 63 strategic development projects in areas that had consistently experienced at least twice the national burglary rate over the past three years. Crime and Disorder partnerships were expected to run the projects. Thus, to be eligible for funding, projects were expected to have the support of the police and the local authority; and in the case of two tier authorities to show both district and county support.

By Autumn 1998, when invitations to host the first burglary reduction projects were issued, some areas had just begun to set up partnership arrangements. Others, with a strong history of multi-agency working, had relabelled and modified an existing forum. This meant that the 20 projects¹ being evaluated by the team led by South Bank University responded to the invitation in a number of different ways:

- 5 built on existing working relationships to set up projects which involved a high level of multi-agency working. These projects were a natural extension of work that was already in progress in an area, but with a new twist or dimension. An example of this is a West Midlands based project (Fordbridge), where changes in policing are combined with outreach work with young people in the community. The police are involved in the latter but are not in the lead;

¹ The High Wycombe project was originally funded as two separate exercises but was run as one project from the outset.

- 5 other projects were purely police initiatives. However, this was not necessarily a reflection of poor multi-agency relationships. In some cases, this was regarded by the police and local authority as the most appropriate response to the local problem e.g. the plan to refine police intelligence gathered from crime scenes (Hillfields, Coventry);
- all of the remaining projects set out to develop a complex strategy that relied on multi-agency co-operation without a strong history of multi-agency working. The most extreme example of problems that can arise was a project where the police, with the formal backing of senior members of the local council, put forward a plan which depended on high levels of multi-agency support. It was clear from our first visits that no agencies apart from the police were prepared to be involved in implementing the plan, despite the local authority having signed up to the bid. Unsurprisingly, 18 months on very little progress has been made.

Getting the management and administrative structure of the project steering group right is critical to success (Crawford, 1995; Sutton, 1996). Partnership projects seem to work well when responsibility for setting and keeping to overall objectives is separated from responsibility for implementation; and each player is clear about the role they are to play and how far their responsibilities extend.

The role of the steering group

The steering group's job in multi-agency projects is to decide what needs to be done and when, and agree the membership of an implementation team, including an implementation or project manager. At key stages in the implementation timetable, the steering group should monitor progress, query any lack of progress and advise the project manager on how to overcome particular obstacles. In some cases they may be able to take action within their own organisation to facilitate progress (eg a housing department manager checking on the reason that issuing a contract to fit locks has taken longer than expected). This means that representatives from statutory bodies should be senior enough to be able to make decisions about resource issues.

It is also important that the steering group's discussions be genuinely consultative and not simply a rubber stamping of whatever the implementation group have managed to accomplish. One way of achieving this is to include local residents and voluntary groups so that they feel ownership of an initiative.

The Plymouth development project group is an example of how to achieve an open but decisive balance. Here the police and local authority are trying to reduce the high levels of burglary in 'houses in multiple occupation' - bedsit land. The steering group is attended by representatives from a broad spectrum of interest groups ranging from the police and local authority to a range of voluntary groups who, unsurprisingly, air quite diverse views about how to achieve reductions in burglary and, indeed, the nature of the burglary problem itself. The full range of opinions is minuted and considered, but strong leadership and a clear shared vision of ultimate objectives mean that decisions are then reached and acted on.

Project management

Previous research such as that by Bennett and Durie (1999) stress the importance of burglary prevention projects having strong leadership. We have also found that in all projects (multi-agency or not), the personal qualities and abilities of the project manager seems to be *the* factor which determines whether implementation is successful. In many cases, implementation seemed to have been achieved largely because of his or her imagination, stamina, networking and management skills, and dogged determination. This is clear, not only from observing the projects which have made good

Partnerships and implementation

Officially all of the projects we have been monitoring have had over 18 months to implement the project plans they submitted to the Home Office. In practice, 4 have completed all they set out to do, 6 are still aiming to implement all or most of their original plans, 6 have completed some interventions and abandoned the idea of doing more, and 4 have made very little progress. The five projects which were totally dependent on the actions of one agency have been amongst those to make the most progress. However, three complicated multi-agency initiatives have also been completed (with two others likely to do so) and it is worth examining the circumstances in which this has been achieved compared with projects where less progress has been made, to identify lessons for good implementation.

Strategic and operational support

It may seem obvious that partnership relationships need to work well at the strategic *and* operational levels to be successful (Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994). At the very least senior managers must be prepared to resource joint ventures, even if this is limited to allowing their own staff time fully to participate in partnership meetings and mandating operational staff to prioritise the work involved. This has only happened in five of the schemes we are evaluating. Elsewhere, police and other agency staff are conducting burglary reduction work in their own time because they believe in the value of what they are doing. Unsurprisingly, because project implementation has had to be fitted in around other commitments, progress has been slower than planned; and managing the implementation has taken its toll on many project managers who feel demoralised by the lack of recognition they get for their efforts. In some cases, their managers seemed to have little knowledge about what they were trying to accomplish. This suggests that successful inter agency relations are dependent on good *intra* agency communications.

progress, but from the way progress faltered when two project managers left in areas which had strong multi-agency working and careful handover arrangements. The importance of making the right choice of project manager and ensuring that he or she is allocated sufficient time to manage implementation cannot be overstressed. Eight of the projects we are evaluating are led by detective chief inspectors or detective inspectors. In two projects this seems to have played a considerable part in hampering progress, because detectives are unable to ring-fence their time to devote to project management. Most commonly, they may suddenly have to spend all their time on a major crime investigation.

Regardless of the project manager's skills, it is inappropriate for him or her to chair steering groups. In at least six cases, where this has happened, the chance to seriously cross-question him or her about progress does not arise readily. There has been a much greater tendency for parts of the original project plan to be dropped or revised in these projects with little comment or challenge by the rest of the group and implementation progress has also been slower.

It can sometimes seem rather artificial to set a formal agenda when members of a group are well known to each other, particularly when the group is small. However, agreed written objectives, formal agendas and minuted meetings help to keep discussion focused and reduces the opportunities for vociferous individuals to use meetings to promote personal agendas. This also means that, while a project's objectives may get changed or dropped, this happens after a full discussion by the entire group. Documenting decision making also facilitates hand-over when staff move on. This is important given the frequency with which project managers changed and that the reasons they moved on were the usual ones of promotion, retirement, organisational restructuring etc (ie not directly related to the project). In fact, at least a third of the projects we are evaluating have had a change in project manager since the original project plan was formulated; and one of these has had three managers.

Depending on the action required, the implementation team may be drawn from a single organisation or a few key agencies because responsibility for such action naturally falls to them. One of the main things partnership working is expected to do is to move away from the idea that the agency that spots the problem has to provide the solution. This has certainly not always happened in the burglary projects where, for example, the police are taking the lead in installing security gates in two areas rather than the local council because they saw that this was what was needed. While both projects have been successfully implemented, the cost in police time is considerable and questions of who should maintain the gates need to be resolved.

There is no reason to suppose that a small implementation team would be any less effective than a team representing a dozen agencies; indeed, management of such projects may be easier in terms of allocating responsibilities and keeping tabs on progress. However, small implementation teams sometimes assume that they should share responsibility for progress rather than working to a single project leader. Progress is rarely as good under these circumstances as when a single project leader has responsibility for implementation formally identified as part of their job description. Torquay's burglary reduction initiative is assigned to only 3 individuals whose time is committed to a number of other tasks, but with a very committed community safety officer leading the project, it has achieved all its implementation targets within the 12 month period. Three other projects with dedicated project managers have also made good progress in sticking to their original plans and overcoming implementation problems.

Conclusions

Choosing the right project leader and giving them the space to manage effectively are probably *the* key ingredients to ensuring successful implementation.

Currently good partnership arrangements seem to be operating because of the personal skills and commitment of key individuals. If partnerships are to become widespread and to contribute to concrete reductions in burglary or other forms of crime, senior managers in all the agencies involved in partnerships need to support, encourage and resource partnership working.

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