

***PRESENCE OR PARTNERSHIP? - VOLUNTARY AND
PRIVATE SECTOR INFLUENCE IN COMMUNITY PLANNING
IN SCOTLAND***

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CHAPTER ONE: ISSUES RAISED BY COMMUNITY PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

- 1.01 The relationships and forms of local public policy making and delivery have been transformed over the last 10 years. Partnership working and collaboration between the public, private and civic sectors are defining features of the contemporary policy landscape. Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) are the central organisational expression of this new system of local governance in Scotland.
- 1.02 Community Planning (CP) involves co-ordinated policy-making and joint service delivery between local authorities and other public agencies, and representatives from the local community, voluntary and private sectors participating as partners in policy making. The development of CP in Scotland corresponds to similar reforms in the other UK nations, such as Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England; Community Strategy Partnerships and the Communities First programme in Wales, and Local Strategy Partnerships in Northern Ireland (Bound, *et al*, 2005).
- 1.03 Like 'partnership', CP is both a noun and a verb: it describes 'a structure or group as well as a way of working together' (IdeA, 2006:17). Among the several aims of CP is the intention to include new voices in local decision making, but how this operates in practice remains unclear. CPPs therefore raise interesting questions about important aspects of local governance, including:
- how do organisations from different sectors and with different remits, perspectives and powers establish effective working relationships?
 - how far is equal or joint policy making possible between organisations with different resources, experiences and capacities?
 - what is the experience of representatives of the voluntary and private sectors respectively in adapting to the their roles as 'insiders' and newcomers to the policy process and the responsibilities of partnership policy-making?
 - is it possible to reconcile efficiency and shared decision-making?
- 1.04 Some commentators are pessimistic about the ability of organisations from different sectors to develop effective partnerships (Sullivan, 2005). In particular, the feasibility of integrating voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) into local governance partnerships has been questioned:

Despite this policy push towards partnership working across sectoral boundaries, the practical experience ... suggests that many VCOs [voluntary and community organisations] and local authorities experience difficulties in their relationships with each other. Whilst some of these difficulties may stem from issues such as power imbalance and cultural mismatch, it seems that

there is also a general lack of mutual understanding, respect and trust. (IdeA, 2006: 9).

- 1.05 Previous attempts to widen involvement and increase partnership in local policy making in Britain have not been wholly successful (Foley and Martin, 2000). In the case of CP, the Poverty Alliance (2005: 3) notes that,

Many community groups and people active in their communities are still to be convinced about the benefits of getting involved in Community Planning. Some do not believe that they will be able to make real change, and that they will have too little power compared to the statutory partners

- 1.06 This study considers these issues by exploring the politics in practice of CPPs and examining how the influence of voluntary and private sector members compares to local authority and other public sector representatives.

PROJECT AIMS

- 1.07 The principal aim of this project is to examine the potentially challenging relationships which CP creates by exploring whether voluntary and private representatives are engaged in genuine partnership or merely symbolic participation in CPPs. More specifically, the aim is to estimate the extent of involvement and influence of voluntary and private sector participants respectively in relation to CP processes and outcomes at the strategic, managerial and operational levels, compared to that of the main public sector CPP members (i.e. local authority, police, fire service, NHS, etc.)
- 1.08 This is a pilot study of a single CPP, and there are therefore limitations to the extent to which it will be possible to fulfil these aims. Nevertheless, some initial insights into the operation of local partnership working are possible, and the feasibility of answering these questions in a fuller study can be estimated.

Project Objectives

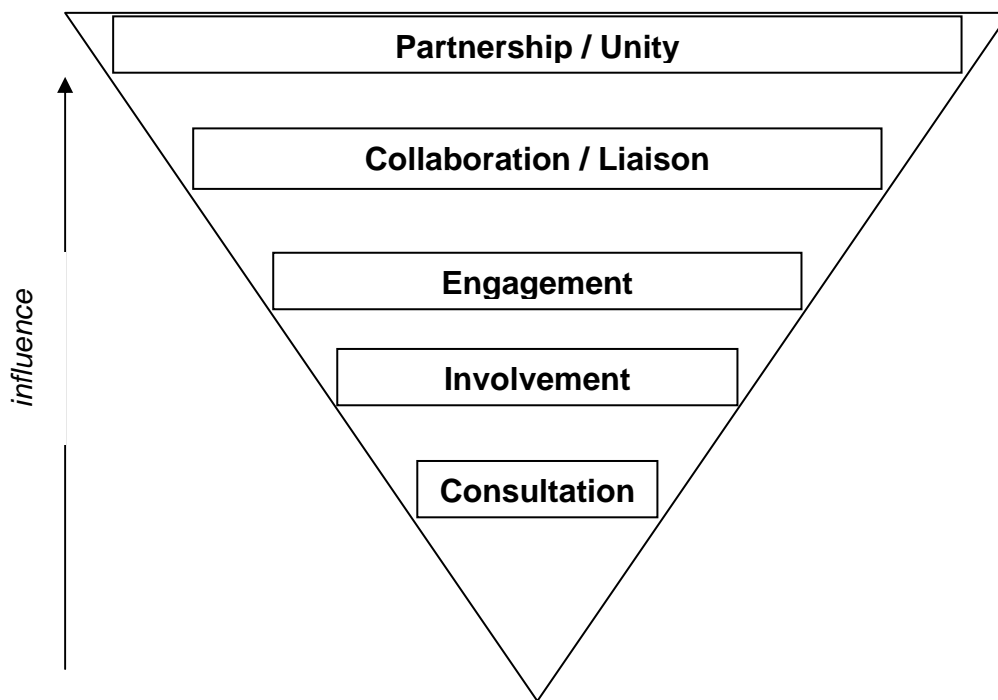
- 1.09 It has been suggested that 'whatever their merits, partnerships invariably conceal implicit hierarchies and a myriad of tensions' (Williamson, 1999: 6). Some members may be more central to the partnership which must negotiate these tensions than others (Maloney, *et al*, 1994). An objective in this project is to explore whether voluntary and private sector CP participants may be counted as core or peripheral members, and examine the suspicion that they have a 'mere presence rather than a voice' in local policy making (Cameron and Davoudi, 1998: 250).
- 1.10 Various measures and indicators of relative centrality and influence have been proposed in the analysis of policy making. A basic distinction may be drawn between 'consultation' and 'involvement', where the former implies merely

providing information to a representative and requesting feedback but carries no commitment to act on this, while the latter entails greater participation.

1.11 Extending this analysis, the following areas of activity and competence may be analysed to assess the extent of any member's degrees of influence within a partnership:

- (i) Strategy - capacity to set priorities and involvement in large-scale system changes
- (ii) Resources - influence over budgets and personnel deployment
- (iii) Implementation - participation in delivery decisions and processes
- (iv) Oversight - extent of management accountability and feedback from delivery issues (Hashagan, 2002)

1.12 A proximate scale of any member's relative integration within a partnership may be constructed from these measures as follows¹:



1.13 It is important not to conflate community *engagement* with voluntary and private sector *participation* in local governance partnerships (Russell, 2005). While both processes share some common issues, including problems of efficacy, capacity and the representativeness of those involved, they are nevertheless distinct (SURF, 2004). This study is concerned with the experience of inter-sectoral organisational partnerships in Scotland, not with citizen or resident consultation processes. The intention is to examine these in relation to findings from research on similar projects elsewhere in the UK (e.g.

LSPs in England), and compare them to recent studies and theories of local governance reform and public sector modernisation.

RESEARCH METHODS

- 1.14 The project involved two methods of data gathering. Firstly, a documentary inventory of a single case study CPP. This included an analysis of the Community Plan and sub-theme strategies, and other relevant CP documents, such as reports, meeting minutes, and publicly available performance monitoring information. These sources provided a profile of the formal CPP structure and operation, including official voluntary and private sector involvement, an initial indication of the CPP's documented performance and any distinctive local issues.
- 1.15 To go beyond these official documents and examine the policy-making processes and outcomes of the selected CPP, interviews were undertaken with a cross-section of senior figures in the main CP partner organisations. Seven interviews were conducted with principal participants from public, voluntary and private sector CP partners.
- 1.16 Interviews were also undertaken with representatives from the local voluntary and private sectors who were not formally involved in the CPP. These interviews sought to explore the levels of awareness, understanding and estimation of CP among local stakeholders who were not participants in the main CP processes. Two representatives from the local business community and one local voluntary sector organisation were interviewed for this purpose. These interviews sought information on the meaning of the term 'community planning' to such subjects, their beliefs about opportunities to influence local policy-making, the responsiveness of local public service delivery agencies to any concerns they have expressed, and their assessment of the representativeness and effectiveness of 'their' CPP representatives. The interview schedules used with different respondents are included in the Annex to this report. Interviews were conducted, between July-October 2007.
- 1.17 Interview data were analysed to identify any recurring themes, associations or differences in views. In particular, data were explored for correlations between respondents' experience or position, and any divergence of opinions between different types of participant which become apparent were noted.

The Case Study Partnership

- 1.18 To preserve the anonymity of participants, it is not possible to provide detailed information on the CPP studied. The limitations of a single case study have been acknowledged. The implementation of CP in Scotland was intentionally non-prescriptive as the consensus view was that appropriate processes would vary in relation to local circumstances, and that statutory guidance should not be overly prescriptive and restrict local flexibility (Scottish Parliament,

2002:13). Inevitably this has led to variation in the format and operation of the 32 CPPs in Scotland.

- 1.19 The manner in which and how well CPPs function varies in relation to their context and historical development. Significant factors include the extent of partnership working and engagement with the voluntary and private sectors before the formal introduction of CP following the 2003 Local Government in Scotland Act. Also, whether the main CP partners share common boundaries (co-terminosity) is important; as is the experience and legacy of local government reorganisation in 1996. Other significant factors include the political composition of the council (e.g. whether it is a coalition administration), the experience and nature of working relationships between senior staff in key agencies and the socio-economic circumstances and demographic profile of the region. Variation in each of these factors will be reflected in the operation and performance of CPPs, and while there are similarities across different Partnerships, each faces its own challenges and opportunities, so that it is necessary to be cautious in generalising about operating processes and experiences.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

- 1.20 The next chapter describes the history and development of CP in Scotland and sets out some of the relevant questions, hypotheses and theories about local governance and partnership working which this research addresses.
- 1.21 Chapter 3 reports findings from the research project in relation to the central question of voluntary and private sector participation in CP, and discusses findings which relate to other issues raised in the literature on local partnership working and governance reform.
- 1.22 Chapter 4 examines the implications of these findings for the practice and theory of CP; proposes recommendations for improving the effectiveness of voluntary and private sector operation within CPPs, and concludes the discussion by identifying further research issues.

CHAPTER TWO: GOVERNANCE, PARTNERSHIP AND TRUST - KEY ISSUES IN COMMUNITY PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

- 2.01 Partnerships involving the voluntary and private sectors have become a defining characteristic of the 'Third Way' in public service reform in Britain (Rummary, 2006). Many of the responsibilities which were previously functions of local government have been transferred to specialist agencies or to partnerships between councils and other local public organisations. This reform of local policy making and service delivery has been described as a shift from local government to local governance (John, 1997). Government refers to 'the formal institutional structures of decision-making' (Southern, 2002: 16), whereas governance 'can be defined as the means by which an activity or ensemble of activities is controlled or directed' (Hirst, 1997: 3).
- 2.02 These developments have led to a proliferation of local partnerships, and one of the objectives envisaged for CP was to rationalise this by assuming an over-arching co-ordinating responsibility for all partnership within a local area. Another motivation was the increased emphasis on 'joined-up' solutions to 'wicked' social problems which lay beyond the competence of single agencies (DETR, 1999).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY PLANNING IN SCOTLAND

- 2.03 The development of CP in Scotland can be traced back to 1995, although some commentaries regard it as a revival of Scottish regional plans of the 1970s (Lloyd and Illsley, 1999). In its current form CP originated in the 1995 Labour Party consultative document *Renewing Democracy, Rebuilding Communities*. Following this publication, the Labour Party invited local authorities to take part in a pilot community planning project; 14 English councils and one Scottish council (Clackmannanshire) participated. These pilots were primarily concerned with developing new approaches to consulting communities rather than establishing partnership arrangements with other public bodies (Scottish Parliament, 2002).
- 2.04 Subsequently, the then Scottish Office and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) established a Working Group to develop the CP agenda in Scotland. The final report of the Community Planning Working Group (CPWG) was published in July 1998, and identified the following aims for CP (CPWG, 1998: para 6):
- to improve the service provided by councils and their public sector partners through closer, more co-ordinated working
 - to provide a process through which councils and their public sector partners, in consultation with the voluntary and private sectors and the community, can agree a strategic vision for the area and the action which each will take in pursuit of that vision.

- 2.05 Following this, a Community Planning Task Force (CPTF) was established, which recommended that councils and their community planning partners should produce initial community plans by late 1999, and that a small number of partnerships should be identified as pilot 'pathfinders'. A report on the experience of these pathfinders concluded that they had achieved some significant successes, but that a number of tensions were also evident; including those between:
- developing a strategic vision and making that vision a practical reality in partners' operation
 - reconciling effective partnership working between organisations and fostering community involvement
 - balancing the local authority's role as a community leader against an emphasis on developing a joint partnership
 - moving beyond developing processes to deliver outcomes (Rogers *et al*, 2000).
- 2.06 Several of these issues remain unresolved in the operation of some CPPs (Audit Scotland, 2006). The Scottish Executive (as it was then known) consulted on CP in 2000 and charged the CPTF with developing recommendations, legislation and guidance for the practical implementation of community planning. The Task Force reported in March 2003, and its proposals informed what became the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) which introduced statutory CP.
- 2.07 The overall aim of the Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) was to enable 'the delivery of public services which better meet the expectations of those who pay for and use them' (Scottish Parliament, nd). The principal features of CP developed to achieve this aim were:
- (i) Community Plans - local strategic visions and corresponding actions jointly developed by CP partners
 - (ii) local authorities to maintain responsibility for community leadership but also assume a statutory duty to initiate, facilitate and sustain CPPs
 - (iii) an obligation upon the main public sector organisations to participate in CPPs (i.e. Health, Police and Fire service joint boards, Scottish / Highland and Island Enterprise, and regional transport partnerships)
 - (iv) involvement of the voluntary sector, business and community representatives in CPPs and policy making.
 - (v) a duty upon Scottish Executive Ministers to promote and encourage CP
- 2.08 The Local Government in Scotland Act defined CP as 'a process by which the public services provided in the area of the local authority are planned and provided... after consultation among all the public bodies responsible for providing those services; and with such community bodies and other public bodies as is appropriate' (Office of Public Sector Information, nd).
- 2.09 CPPs are also the principal delivery agents responsible for interpreting and implementing national policy priorities in the light of local circumstances. CP

therefore is a crucial component in the wider programme of public service reform and local governance modernisation in Scotland (Carley, 2005), and as such, raise several interesting questions about the nature, implementation and effects of this process.

KEY ISSUES OF PARTNERSHIP GOVERNANCE

2.10 There is a substantial literature on partnership working and voluntary and community sector involvement in local governance (Taylor *et al*, 2005). Among the issues and questions raised by this literature are the following:

- do such partnerships have an identity distinct from their constituent members?
- are local partnerships genuine executive decision-making bodies?
- has there been any reallocation of power and resources between partners; e.g. are local partnerships dominated by local authorities, or does sharing decision making entail a reduction in local authority power?
- how open are decision making agendas and processes, and which partners are most involved in shaping these?
- do any partners express conflicting ideas of the sources of legitimacy and mandates for decision making?
- do local partnership lead to new ways of working among members?
- are there any obstacles to shared decision-making?
- is shared decision-making compatible with efficient decision-making?
- how do voluntary and private sector partners respectively represent the diverse range of organisations and interests which constitute their sectors?

2.11 Although some of these issues were not specifically included in the project design, nevertheless, the research allows several of them to be explored. These issues cluster around a number of themes, which are discussed in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

Executive Authority and Corporate Identity

2.12 One of the purposes of CP is to co-ordinate fragmented and sectoralised public services to enable more joined-up policy making and delivery. A sign that this is being accomplished would be if members regard CP as an important key activity rather than a parallel process or structure outside their principal function. For example, in relation to Community Strategies in England, one review found that 'partnership working was viewed as an addition to the "day job" rather than a part of core business.' (Darlow *et al* , 2007: 125). One issue to consider in this regard is therefore whether CP members appear to act to represent their organisations *to* the CPP, or genuinely act as members within a collective partnership. Existing evidence on this is not promising: the Audit Scotland review of CP concluded that links between CP Strategies and member organisations' own plans were not

always strong, and that CP was 'perceived by some participants as peripheral to their core service delivery' (2006, para 115).

- 2.13 Of particular interest is the authority granted CPPs by members, and whether partnerships possess genuine executive powers. It is interesting to examine whether CPPs operate as information dissemination, consultation or genuine decision-making bodies. The Audit Scotland review observed that large CPP Boards were only able to act as consultative rather than as actual decision-making bodies (2006, para 69). This does not in itself undermine the authority of the CP process, as decisions may be taken by partners at organisational levels below the main CP board.
- 2.14 It has been suggested that genuine partnerships possess some of the qualities of real organisations with a distinct identity and resources of their own separate from those of constituent partners (Southern, 2002). Again, the Audit Scotland review present a mixed picture on this issue: only 22 out of 32 CPPs had full-time co-ordinators (2006 para 92), although this is still an increase on previous years (Scottish Executive, 2003).
- 2.15 One factor which has been observed to inhibit the degree to which partnerships operate as genuine, independent authorities, is the extent to which their members remain separately accountable to central government (Carley *et al*, 2000). As one commentary observed:

Because local agencies work to different central government departments and centrally imposed targets, this may limit the discretion they have locally ... In such situations they felt they had to balance their statutory responsibilities with their local responsibilities to the partnership (Darlow *et al*, 2007: 125)

Shared Decision Making

- 2.16 A Communities Scotland report recommended that in terms of leadership and governance, local authorities 'should play a delicately balanced role in leading the Community Planning Partnership towards independent functioning - gradually achieving a life of its own' (2004: 2). However, this is not easily accomplished in practice - there are obstacles to shared policy and decision-making within CPPs. Many CPPs have developed around existing partnerships, and often these are dominated by public agencies which were already involved in joint policy making and service delivery.
- 2.17 An initial study by the CPTF concluded that 'It appears that there is a very limited extent to which non-statutory agencies, the private and voluntary sectors and the community take a lead in Community Planning' (NFO/System Three, 2001: 14). An early study of CPP membership undertaken by the Community Planning Implementation Group (CPIG) found that local authorities, the health sector, local enterprise companies, Scottish Homes (now Communities Scotland) and the police were involved in the majority of partnerships, and concluded that 'It would be accurate to say that these

organisations represent the core partners for Community Planning in Scotland' (CPIG, 2001). In contrast, the voluntary sector was represented on only 17 out of the 28 CP areas considered, while the private and business sector were represented on 16.

- 2.18 Subsequently, the Audit Scotland review (2006: 15) found that 28 of the 32 CPPs included voluntary sector representatives on their main Partnership Boards, and 20 had business sector representatives². However, there is no indication that the leadership of partnerships has changed. In English partnerships there is evidence that 'the local authority and other local public agencies tend to have dominant roles. The voluntary and community sectors are not, however, thought to fare as well' (Southern, 2002: 21).
- 2.19 Opinion is divided on the influence of the private sector: some studies 'found very little evidence of coherent business involvement' with partnerships encountering difficulties in recruiting local private sector representatives to commit the time and other resources required for participation in governance (Southern, 2002: 26). Other analysis have detected mistrust among the business community about the responsiveness and competence of local government and public agencies which further discourages sustained involvement (Curran *et al.* 2000).

Setting the Agenda

- 2.20 In order for a partnership to be more than tokenistic, it is necessary for its members to be more than merely 'rubber stamps' of decisions already taken (IdeA, 2006). Previous studies of voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in local governance have concluded that representatives of these sectors have often played relatively little part in 'setting the agenda', and 'tend to be consulted at a relatively late stage about a narrow range of options which had already been formulated by other "partners".' (Foley and Martin, 2000: 481). It is important to explore how open to influence the agenda of CPPs are, and whether certain issues are effectively pre-determined before they are raised for formal discussion by main CPP boards.
- 2.21 One previous study of CP in Scotland argued that 'the reality of CP is that most of the activity takes place in subject-specific partnerships below the "strategic" levels, and between organisations with the greatest resources' (Abram and Cowell, 2004: 215). The 'level' at which decisions are taken, and which partners are involved in these decisions are two separate issues: there is no intrinsic problem in CPPs delegating decision-making to operational levels below the main CP board in the interests of efficiency, provided that all partners who want or ought to be involved at these levels are able to participate effectively (Audit Scotland, 2006: para 67)
- 2.22 Potentially more problematic for effective and equal partnership is the possibility that decisions are taken through informal extra-organisational networks. This does not necessarily reflect a deliberate ploy to exclude certain participants from decision-making so much as a tendency to rely on

relationships previously established between key personnel in organisations. However, any such process may not include representatives from sectors which are relatively new to local governance partnerships (Southern, 2002).

- 2.23 It has been the experience of some VCS representatives in English LSPs that they become 'boxed in' and positioned as special interests which deal only with particular issues (e.g. community safety) (IdeA, 2006). It is important to consider whether voluntary and private sector representatives are involved in and able to influence CP policy-making across the full range of issues of interest to them.
- 2.24 An aspiration for CP was that it would contribute to a less bureaucratic public sector and streamline policy-making (Scottish Parliament Audit Committee, 2007). However this is not necessarily an outcome achieved by joining organisations together: consensus policy-making is likely to require more resources to be devoted to consultation and co-ordination, and decision-making can become more complex and slower as a result. Reconciling tensions between representative and efficient decision-making is a challenge faced by all local governance partnerships (Abram and Cowell, 2004). Some voluntary sector representatives have expressed the concern that CPPs' operational timetables do not allow sufficient time for genuine involvement (SURF, 2004).

Mutual Learning and New Working Practices

- 2.25 Among the observed benefits from partnership working in some cases has been a reduction in mistrust between organisations with previously contrasting outlooks and interests. For some participants in LSPs, 'working in cross-sector partnerships had exploded previously held beliefs about other sectors' (IdeA, 2006: 14). An increase in mutual understanding and trust is both an outcome and prerequisite to achieve this increased goodwill. The level of trust within a partnership may be indicated by several factors; e.g.
- whether partners permit or welcome each other to comment on what have previously been their exclusive or primary responsibilities
 - whether partners feel that they can rely on others to deliver on their commitments
 - how far actions can be agreed and taken without resorting to potentially cumbersome formal processes
- 2.26 Growing trust and confidence between partners is reflected in new ways of working, e.g. staff habitually involving partners outside their own organisations in developing or delivering policy (Ross and Osborne, 1999). In contrast, a lack of trust between partners is expressed in members acting defensively to protect their own organisational interests rather than advance those of the partnership as a whole.

Mandate and Legitimacy

- 2.27 The logic of partnership governance 'requires that local government cede part of its powers and role to the VCO sector' (Ross and Osborne, 1999: 58). Local partnerships challenge established lines of accountability and raise potential conflicts over competing ideas of participants' respective mandates and legitimacy. For example, Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in England 'appeared to expose tensions between backbench councillors, who are not on the LSP, and VCS representatives, about who had a legitimate claim to represent the community and its needs' (IdeA, 2005: 8). CP can be interpreted as a dissipation of local authority power, and elected members may feel that their community leadership role has been downgraded by partnership working and the increased role for the voluntary and private sectors in policy-making (Cowell and Abram, 2002). The Audit Scotland review identified that certain elected members regarded CP as 'a threat to their control of services and funding' (2006, para 80).
- 2.28 There is a genuine tension within CPPs between sharing decision-making and the continuing legal and budgetary responsibility which individual members retain for resources and policy. CPPs are not legal entities, but they are increasingly assuming a role in policy and expenditure decisions for which particular partner organisations are legally and politically accountable. There may be an understandable reluctance to fully extend shared decision making where some partners are subject to accountability through inspections or political and media scrutiny

Transfer of Power and Resources

- 2.29 The willingness of local authorities and other public agencies to cede part of their power and control of resources to each other and voluntary and private sector representatives is crucial to the success of partnerships (Foley and Martin, 2000). This in turn may require investment by public agencies to build the capacity of local voluntary, community and private organisations to participate effectively: 'where an area has invested in more effective and inclusive third sector infrastructure and representation mechanisms, there has been greater involvement for the sector' (DCLG, 2007: 13). A further test of commitment to partnership is therefore whether the CPP or public sector members provide any support or resources to enable voluntary and/or private sector members to participate effectively.

The Role of Voluntary Sector Representatives

- 2.30 Voluntary and private sector participants in local partnerships face distinctive problems from public agencies in relation to accountability and maintaining legitimacy. Given the diverse views and interests within these constituencies, such partners face considerable challenges in keeping in touch with, conveying the views of and providing feedback to their respective sectors. UK government guidance on best practice in fulfilling these duties in LSPs involves considerable obligations:

The views of representatives carry far more weight where the third sector has demonstrated to LSPs that they have a legitimate and accountable voice, and the sector speaks with more confidence where it knows it has consulted and communicated with as wide a membership as possible... Those who represent the third sector or speak on its behalf ought to be responsible to the local sector. Clear lines of accountability also allow the sector's representatives to speak with real authority (DCLG, 2007: 14-17)

- 2.31 These challenges are compounded by the preference among some public sector partners for participants from other sectors to 'speak with one voice' in representing their sector (IdeA, 2006:16). Although this may be an unrealistic expectation in some cases, this does not always reduce the pressure to fulfil it.
- 2.32 Pressure also comes from outside partnerships: organisations from the voluntary or private sectors which are not directly participating in CP or other local partnerships may feel excluded and ignored. Unless processes are established to maintain dialogue and provide genuine opportunities to influence the partnership, this can lead to local resentment and rivalries (IDeA, 2005)
- 2.33 Fulfilling these duties can put considerable strain on the capacity of voluntary and private sector CP partners. In some cases they also raise pressures between maintaining independence and autonomy against integration, particularly for the voluntary sector. For example, VCS representatives in LSPs are aware of the risk of 'role blurring' and 'going native' (Taylor, 2006: 275). Some VCS members are concerned that they risk losing their distinctiveness by being 'incorporated' within partnerships, perhaps without gaining much power in return (ESRC Local & Regional Governance Seminar Series, 2005).
- 2.34 Such questions indicate the wide range of issues raised by voluntary and private sector participation in CP. The next chapter outlines the main findings from this research project which relate to them.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

- 3.01 As one interviewee in this project observed ‘ “Involved” is a word that can have any number of meanings’ when it comes to the participation of different organisations in CP. The principal aim in this chapter is to report project findings regarding which organisations appeared core to the case study CPP and which were more peripheral, and examine factors associated with any differences in this regard. A second objective is to outline and discuss other findings which illuminate interesting features of local governance partnerships. The final chapter discusses some implications of these findings.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

Degrees of Organisational ‘Centrality’

- 3.02 Respondents expressed a genuine shared commitment to partnership working and believed that there was formal equality among partners within the CPP. Representatives of public sector organisations affirmed their belief in the value of what one described as ‘using the collective intelligence and experience’ of a range of stakeholders ‘to try and come to a solution’ to local issues. Respondents also supported the principle that each member of the main CP board should be granted an equal voice in decision making. Voluntary sector representatives acknowledged the receptiveness of public sector CP partners to input from their sector; and the importance of the voluntary sector to the partnership was formally recorded in its published minutes.
- 3.03 Nevertheless, although all partners may have been regarded as formally equal, in reality they were not, and there was general agreement among interviewees that some CP members were more central to the partnership than others. In particular, the local authority were regarded as the central member of the CPP, and several other public agencies were perceived as more significant players than either the voluntary or private sectors. These other agencies included the Police and Scottish Enterprise, with others being particularly important in certain policy areas. For example, the involvement of Communities Scotland in the CPP was shaped by its responsibilities in cross-cutting regeneration policy.
- 3.04 Most partners accepted the centrality of the local authority as inevitable and legitimate; the community leadership role of the local authority is enshrined in the CP legislation and guidance. In addition, the local authority has a strategic centrality: it is both better able and required to devote more time and resources to CP than other partners. CP is a core business of the council, while it is often only one part of other agencies’ remits. Furthermore, some of these other partners may be required to participate in multiple CPPs.

3.05 Equality of formal participation between organisations in CPPs therefore does not overcome the reality of unequal power and resources. Despite evident commitment to CP and partnership policy making, in practical terms, the requirements of conducting daily business inevitably mean that organisations with a lead responsibility in a particular area focus on those partners upon whom they depend to function effectively. For example, the local authority required co-operation and joint working with the Police and Fire services to an extent that it did not depend upon the voluntary or private sectors. Even though the local authority may be keen to involve voluntary or private sector organisations, in the end it can operate without them, whereas it cannot operate without other public sector partners. Therefore the respective involvement of CP members across the different policy areas of the CPP reflected their relative responsibility or interest in each, and the resources they were able to commit to these. This pattern was reflected in the membership of CPP operational groups below the main executive board level (discussed further below: para 3.22). However, another finding was that the situation was not static - some CP partners believed that their influence in the partnership had changed over time, partly reflecting changes in their capacity for participation. One particular example of this was the growing involvement of VSOs over time.

The Position of Voluntary Sector Partners

3.06 According to Maloney *et al* (1994) the influence of groups within a partnership depends upon what 'currency' they bring to trading negotiations. Taylor *et al* (2005: 7) conclude that assets which enhanced the influence of voluntary sector partnership participants included 'good quality evidence (especially in the environment), the ability to come up with good policy ideas, and the ability to deliver on the ground'.

3.07 Somewhat different factors emerged as significant in the current project. VSOs were perceived by other CP partners as contributing new voices and insights to policy making; as one respondent put it:

I guess they bring in some ways a perspective that might be a little bit closer to some of the ultimate customers ... because in many ways they are quite close to the customers. They inevitably bring an insight into some of the delivery mechanisms.

3.08 While valuable, this might be seen to portray VSOs as a source of consultation and feedback rather than an equal partner in policy making. Nevertheless, the value of the distinctive insights which voluntary sector participants brought to local conditions and priorities was emphasised by several public sector partners.

3.09 Perhaps a stronger role which the VSO were recognised as playing in CP was their involvement in delivering certain services and implementing partnership policy. Several public agencies recognised that to successfully deliver their

policies required engaging with communities and service users, which could be improved through liaison with VSOs. However, the VSO representatives themselves attached more emphasis to the legitimacy and local accountability which they believed they brought to CP. Although this might be interpreted as an alternative way of referring to the distinctive 'voice' which the VSO brought, it is interesting that the VSO interviewees emphasised issues of principle - democratic accountability - while public sector respondents focused on the functionality of the VSO contribution.

3.10 VSO participants possessed genuine power within the CPP; they were not simply a sounding board for the ideas of others. This power was reflected in the VSOs' ability to raise items for discussion, and their right to have any dissent from partnership decisions recorded in minutes. These are not negligible rights. Input to the agenda of an organisation or partnership is a crucial means of influencing policy, although there are certain conditions required for this to be fully effective (as discussed below: see para 3.21ff). There was no evidence that VSOs' input to CPP deliberations were restricted to a limited range of issues; as a senior public sector representative said, 'the voluntary sector could comment on any aspect of the work of the partnership. [There is] ... a desire to ensure that people are there as Board members rather than just being blinkered'.

3.11 The right to record disagreement is also a potentially significant source of leverage. Partnerships generally prefer consensus decision-making, which strengthens the likelihood that arguments will be listened to and efforts made to minimise disagreement. Partnerships may also be reluctant to publicise internal divisions, and therefore willing to negotiate compromises. In some respects, the influence of voluntary or private sector partners may not be manifest externally, but it is important nonetheless, and was recognised as such by those interviewed.

3.12 All respondents commented independently that an important condition for non-public sector CP partners to exercise influence within the CPP was to be 'professional' rather than adversarial in their relationship to partners. A recurring observation was that VSOs in particular had to learn to be 'business-like' to make an effective contribution, and this view was expressed by VSO respondents themselves. One respondent summed up this view:

you don't get anywhere by shouting your mouth off... if you don't work alongside them [CP partners], they don't want to listen... and I think you have got to work alongside them and be one of them, and you have got to be very professional about it.

3.13 It was also widely agreed that previous local voluntary and community involvement had not been satisfactory in this respect, but that the capacity of VSO representatives to participate as effective CP partners had improved after a lengthy period of transition and reform. Unlike some previous engagements with the voluntary sector, current VSO representatives on the CPP were recognised as taking a more strategic and less partisan approach to partnership working. As one interviewee commented, 'we have got to try

and say to the voluntary sector, actually it is changed days now. They [public sector organisations] are prepared to sit down and work with you'. It appears that this research was undertaken at an interesting time - during a period when VSOs were becoming more effective in the CPP.

- 3.14 This requirement to be professional may seem obvious to those in mainstream public sector organisations, but it requires adjustment on the part of some VSOs. The culture and mode of operating among many voluntary organisations are, in the words of one respondent 'organic, amorphous and unstructured'. To operate within a partnership which requires regular and structured processes may not sit easily with VSOs' existing ways of doing things. Other studies of local governance partnerships have recorded some reluctance among VSOs to engage on other organisations' terms, and attachment to 'the old way where they knew where they were' (Taylor, *et al*, 2005: 6). This was not found in the case study CPP, but it raises an interesting issue about the distinctive identity and independence of the voluntary sector.
- 3.15 It has been noted that 'community governance requires a real commitment from local government to build the capacity of local VSOs to participate in planning and implementation fora' (Ross and Osborne, 1999: 58). In this respect, the CPP (principally through the local authority) had devoted considerable resources and assistance to the development of the voluntary sector. For example, the CPP instigated and led the amalgamation of previously separate VSO umbrella groups; used Community Regeneration Fund resources to employ staff in the new VSO representative body, and to support an annual local VSO conference; paid for a consultant to assist in the development of the VS Strategy; partly financed a database recording the scale and form of local VS activity; and supported the local VS strategy group which operated within the CPP. Indeed, the level of support and assistance provided was such that the local VSO representative organisations was virtually a creation of the local authority and public sector partners. This development of the VS demonstrates the local authority's readiness to engage with this voluntary sector, but also raises the question of how far VSOs in this case study were genuinely independent. This issue is discussed further in chapter four.
- 3.16 VSO representatives recognised the benefits of participating in CP. These included not only greater opportunities to influence CPP policy, but also improved contacts with local agencies and increased access to resources which would previously have been beyond them.

The Position of the Private Sector

- 3.17 Although members of the Local Economic Forum (LEF), local private sector organisations in the case study area were less intensively involved in CP than VSOs. There was general agreement among respondents across different sectors that this relative lack of involvement was attributable largely to a low level of interest among private sector organisations; as one respondent noted,

'quite frankly the business community just doesn't want to sit at meetings where they are not earning money'. Respondents from the business sector pointed out that there were few, if any, personal or business benefit from participating in local governance, and that the procedures involved in participating were, in the words of one respondent, 'bureaucratic and time consuming'. This opinion was not voiced as a criticism, so much as an inevitable feature of public policy.

- 3.18 Another potential factor limiting the participation of the private sector in the CPP was the desire to restrict membership of the main CPP board to a 'manageable' number. One respondent intimated that if the private sector were permanent members of the main board, there might be a demand to include other organisations, such as housing associations. The preferred solution was therefore to accord the private sector a prominent role in the LEF, have business sector interests represented at main board level through Scottish Enterprise, and invite local business organisations to address the CPP on an 'as required' rather than permanent basis. This was in accordance with Scottish Executive (as it was then known) guidance on involving the private sector in CP (Scottish Executive, 2004). However, it remains to be seen how private sector interests will be represented following the current Scottish Government's planned reform of local enterprise policy³.
- 3.19 Further factors restricting private sector participation were limited capacity and resources. As one representative of a private sector organisation said, 'we are a small organisation and there is a limit to how many things we can do'. This is a particular problem for organisations which have few full time staff and which rely on voluntary representatives.
- 3.20 It therefore appeared that the business sector was involved with CP rather than being an integral member of the partnership. Nevertheless, representatives of that sector still felt that they had some degree of influence within the LEF and, indirectly, over the CPP, and were able to identify policy areas where they felt they were listened to and their voice had been effective. There were mixed views over the extent to which local private and public sector organisations respectively could or should do more to increase the involvement of business representatives in CP. The current position was described by one private sector representative as 'reasonably comfortable', and no strong desire was expressed for any greater involvement in local governance in its current form. One respondent summed up the overall view: 'I think it would be challenging to engage the private sector as permanent members of the Community Planning Partnership because, in terms of the balance of the agenda, CPP is ... not that they are *not* interested, but it is not their primary interest.' Any significant increase in direct private sector participation in CP would require the partnership to develop new methods of engagement, but the appetite for this was not evident among any respondents. The difficulty of involving private sector organisations in local governance have been noted in other studies (e.g. Curran *et al*, 2000)

Setting the Agenda

- 3.21 In analysing influence within any organisation it is important to identify where key policy decisions are taken and which agents are represented on the relevant groups. The Audit Scotland review of CP found 'broadly similar structures' within partnerships, but also 'wide variation in the size and membership of CPP boards and theme groups' (2006: para 8). Although most CPPs have executive boards, their function varies and not all are responsible for genuine policy-making. In the case study CPP, the main board did operate as an executive body, in the sense that it possessed the final authority for ratifying policy; however it dealt with strategic issues rather than matters of detail. Initiating issues and developing policy occurred in groups below the main board level (as noted in para 2.21 above), and this means that being represented on these sub-groups was important in order to influence policy.
- 3.22 In particular, much of the development of policy and preparation preceding decisions taken by the main board took place within what were known (as they are in several CPPs) as Officers groups and Thematic groups. As one respondent explained: 'The Officers Group is where the bulk of the work gets done and propositions put forward, so [the main Board] would be signing things off, to an extent.' It is therefore important for CP organisations to have a voice at the right level and on the appropriate groups. However, this was a source of influence which VSOs felt they had been denied, until recently. Furthermore, the voluntary sector felt that they 'had to fight' to achieve this representation, and securing it was perceived to have contributed to the increased capacity of VSO representatives to become effectively involved in the partnership.
- 3.23 Participation in Theme groups was equally important to influence CPP policy, as these were described by one participant as 'where a lot of the detail of how the policy is actually enacted, is discussed and played out.' However, not every interested organisation was permanently represented on every relevant group, and both the voluntary and private sectors were members of fewer such groups than several other CP partners. While private sector respondents were relatively unconcerned about this, interviewees from the voluntary sector expressed an interest in greater participation in a wider range of Theme groups. The criteria for membership of Theme groups appeared to be the relative centrality of the issue to the core business of the organisation, balanced against partners' desire to keep the number of organisations represented to what was felt to be a manageable number. There is a risk, however, that organisations not included in groups developing policy on issues where they have an interest may feel that their influence is compromised and the scope of subsequent discussion foreclosed.
- 3.24 One expression of this sentiment was the belief that those not represented on key groups and initial discussions had less opportunity to influence decisions. VSO respondents reiterated a preference for early access to information and input to relevant papers circulated to the main board. As one VSO participant said, 'I think we would like to be more involved in at the earlier stages when it comes to the formation of policy. It would be quite good to be involved in that

earlier stage, so we don't have to be involved more when it is a closed document, which even although it says "draft"... it is harder to change it.' VSOs' belief in the importance of early involvement was shared with private sector representatives.

- 3.25 In part mitigation of this, partners on the main CPP board acknowledged that they had the right to request further time to consider proposals before giving their approval. However, in some cases, the deadline for decisions (such as certain funding applications) did not always allow this opportunity to be exercised in practice. VSO respondents also argued that they required more time than other CP partners to digest and respond to policy issues, as they did not have the management processes nor support staff available to assist public sector representatives with this.
- 3.26 Another factor which influences the relative capacity of CP partners to shape policy is the extent to which they make use of informal relationships and processes to take decisions, and which partners are involved in these networks. This appeared to be an important factor in the CPP; as one interviewee said: 'a partnership meeting it is not very formal... you will see real dialogue outwith the main meeting between people who know each other'. Another participant confirmed this: 'There is probably a limited number of decisions that require input from a wide range of partners. More often than not, I would say, it is two possibly three, partners working together, and so you would set something up to resolve those issues outwith the CPP Board.'
- 3.27 Making use of informal processes and abbreviated communication can be a sign of a mature and effective partnership, but it entails the potential hazard of inadvertently excluding those not 'in the loop'. Reflecting this, some VSO representatives expressed concern that some partnership discussions and decisions had taken place 'behind closed doors' and restricted their potential influence. This perceived lack of transparency could potentially damage relationships within the CPP, particularly among those new to partnership governance.
- 3.28 In addition to Officer and Theme groups, the CPP (like every other) also operated local area groups. There was less concern among respondents about representation on these. This was perhaps partly because communities had greater opportunities for more direct participation in local groups; recognition that these groups had less decision-making power than more central and higher levels within the partnership; and a pragmatic recognition of the capacity limits for involvement.

How Mainstream is CP?

- 3.29 The majority of respondents stated their belief that there was a genuine commitment to partnership working and the principles of CP; both had become mainstream activities for the public sector partners, and were not perceived as extra duties separate from their main roles. This was not so much a matter of policy as simple recognition of the requirements of

contemporary service delivery; as one respondent observed: '99% of probably what we do is some kind of partnership.' Another interviewee observed that there was increasing recognition among CP participants that 'we are going to be able to achieve much, much more if we work in partnership than if we just work on our own individual organisational silos.' Many local policy issues are genuinely shared interests which require co-operation, e.g. transport policy involves the interests of several organisations, not least the private sector. Furthermore, much decision making is necessarily iterative - it requires consultation and agreement over issues which are not the remit of a single organisation; as one interview explained, 'there is some too-ing and fro-ing with some decisions'.

- 3.30 Darlow *et al* (2007: 125) suggest that in England 'A critical issue is the extent to which community strategies are moving towards being drivers of local policy rather than accumulations of the existing policies of partners.' In the case study CPP, there were apparent links between the Community Plan and the respective corporate plans and strategies of the CPP members. This was not surprising, given the consultation and joint development work which went into the Community Plan, and the rather general nature of the statements in some of these documents. Nevertheless, although committed to partnership working, CP members still regarded the CPP itself as an entity separate from their own organisations; several distinguished between 'we' and 'they' - referring to the CPP.
- 3.31 Although most respondents declared that they would be engaged in partnership working even if it had not become a statutory duty, nevertheless, several agreed that the legislation had been an additional impetus. As one said, 'I don't think there is any doubt that it is taken much more seriously because of the statutory provision.' Partly this was attributable to the additional resources which were dependent upon developing CP, such as the Community Regeneration Fund. To that extent, the case study indicated that statutory CP had been an additional catalyst for joint working, as was found in relation to community strategies in England (Darlow *et al*, 2007: 124).
- 3.32 Respondents reported few occasions where national organisations were unable to be flexible locally, due to accountability to central government. This was partly because the local Community Plan was sufficiently broad to fit in with organisations' plans, and therefore corresponded to national government priorities. CP members also recognised that some partners had a obligations to central government, as several were in this position themselves: 'Our partners understand where we are coming from... we are not the only partner who has direction from a national level that has impact on the contribution you can make at a local level.'
- 3.33 National government influenced the actions and priorities of the partnership in another way - by providing resources for certain policies for which the CPP might apply. Describing how the CPP settled on its priorities, one interviewee explained: 'the amount of time allocated to taking action may change from time to time: for example, if the [Scottish] Executive released funding for a particular issue to be addressed, which means partners are going to spend

more time initially in getting this implemented.' This is not to suggest that CPPs are merely reactive, simply recognition that they cannot afford to spurn an opportunity to bid for resources provided by central government. While this is not direct central government control, it is central government direction of local policy, and the current Scottish Government's commitment to reduce both the number of specific grants and volume of reporting required of local authorities and CPPs will alter the extent to which local partnerships must be responsive to a central government agenda.

Mutual Learning and Trust

- 3.34 The importance of trust between CP partners was widely recognised; as one respondent remarked, 'for me it's a big, big factor - community planning isn't just about the strategy, the structures and the processes, it is about the people and it is about trust.' Several respondents also commented that CP had improved their understanding of other organisations across different sectors. This was valued in particular by those who were previously unfamiliar with the area or local organisations. Other respondents noted that there had already been an history of partnership working prior to statutory CP, and that this experience and established relationships facilitated effective CP. This corresponds to the finding from other studies that CPPs with a history of partnership working (e.g. in Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) or Local Rural Partnerships) have a smoother transition to formal CPPs than others (Communities Scotland, 2005). Reflecting this, respondents in the case could not recall any significant controversies between partners. The transition from SIP status to full CP did involve what one interviewee described as 'very difficult decisions', but did not result in any real serious disagreements⁴.
- 3.35 Some respondents commented that links between some partners were stronger than others, reflecting established overlapping or joint responsibilities. Others observed that the position of certain partners was ambiguous as some had a dual role as both a funder and participant in policy delivery, or duties to monitor certain aspects of partnership activity on behalf of national government. It was felt by some respondents that such combinations of duties could lead to potential conflicts of interest, or inhibit free discussion within the partnership. However, this view was expressed by a minority of respondents. A similar minority of interviewees also expressed the view that while CP had consolidated mutual awareness between organisations at senior executive level, this had not yet cascaded to operational level as it ought.

Mandate and Legitimacy

- 3.36 As previously noted, the central role of the local authority was recognised and accepted by other partners. For example, there was no indication that VSOs challenged the leadership role of the council nor held alternative ideas of direct democracy. For their part, local authority respondents were aware of their distinctive responsibilities - 'keepers of the public purse', as one

respondent put it - and the authority that came from their democratic accountability. Such respondents were clear that the participation in CP of non-statutory organisations from outside the public sector could not be allowed to compromise the duties of public agencies. CP was viewed as a means to improve policy making by drawing upon a wider range of contributors; it was not regarded as a challenge to any existing elected mandate nor legal responsibilities.

- 3.37 Equally, there were no evident signs of friction in relation to the right of VSOs to participate in CP; their legitimacy and representativeness was accepted by other CP partners. This was partly due to the recognised professionalism of VSO representatives noted above; one public sector respondent commented,

The individuals who represented the voluntary sector here I don't sense as being really different - they are representing a different sector but I don't see them as different partners... they have generally been people who have been very experienced and knowledgeable.

- 3.38 Another reason why VSO representatives were accepted as legitimate CP partners was because it was recognised that current VSO representatives had established procedures through which they were representative of and accountable to their sector. This was emphasised by some VSO respondents, as they regarded it as the basis for their claim to participation. This emphasis on democratic structures and formal accountability as the moral and political source of legitimacy has been observed in other studies of local governance partnerships, where the greater importance attached by public agencies to VSOs' practical and technical contributions has also been noted (Taylor *et al*, 2005: 9)

- 3.39 The UK government's framework for effective third sector representation in LSPs recognises that 'it takes time to build representative structures' within VSOs (DCLG, 2007: 10). The difficulty of representing the views of and providing feedback to such a diverse sector were recognised by VSO respondents. It was felt that formal and open accountability procedures were essential to ensure that the wider voluntary sector in the region felt able to contribute their views and influence VSO representation to the CPP.

- 3.40 It is not surprising that the voluntary sector had more formal systems of feedback and accountability than the private sector, which tended to employ more *ad hoc* and informal means of gathering views and disseminating information. As one private sector respondent said, 'consultation is not scientific, but there is a process.' This process included using contacts in local business sector organisations as sounding boards or sources of views, and using networking events as opportunities to gather information on local business opinion. Local business representative organisations also had access to the resources of their national bodies if more systematic information gathering was necessary. However, less emphasis was placed among private sector respondents on formal accountability procedures compared to VSO respondents, which reflects the respective cultures of these different sectors.

3.41 Some public sector respondents distinguished between the relative representativeness of the local voluntary sector and community groups respectively. The professionalism of VSO representatives has already been noted, and this was contrasted favourably by some interviewees with the approach of local community groups and activists, some of which were regarded as confrontational, unrealistic in their expectations, and not genuinely representative of local opinion. Unlike VSO representatives, these groups and individuals were regarded as a potential problem to be handled rather than a partner in CP.

New Working Practices

3.42 Respondents readily identified examples of new working relationships between CP partners. Several organisations had restructured to facilitate partnership working, and the strategic co-ordination of policy had improved. The CPP as a whole was also prepared to consider each partners' separate budgets in allocating resources to joint CP activities. As one respondent put it: 'we will examine, as part of joint working... the total resource available, not just the partnership, but the partner organisations, and how we can make better use of those mainstream budgets'.

3.43 However, some respondents commented that these high level changes had not been fully reflected at the operational level. Converting strategic functioning into local impact was regarded as the next major challenge facing the CPP; as one respondent noted: 'it is all very well having a broad outline of shared objectives, a shared vision for a Community Planning Partnership over a 15 year horizon, but if it is not making a difference to the communities and a difference the people can see week to week, month to month, it is not working. So it needs to be impacting at that local level.' The difficulty of translating reformed processes into observable differences in service outputs and outcomes has been a recurring feature of local governance partnerships (European Institute of Urban Affairs *et al*, 2006)

3.44 Nevertheless, respondents were able to identify several examples of service delivery improvements which were attributable to CP processes. These included new joint policies in health improvement, social services, youth justice, employment training, and services to businesses. These reforms included increased sharing of resources - data, premises and staff. Co-location between agencies to deliver services had occurred in several areas, but some respondents felt that there were limits to how far sharing services was possible when they were already part of central systems within national organisations.

The Future of Community Planning

3.45 Respondents were favourably disposed towards CP and partnership working as these operated in the case study area. CP was recognised by all as both

- 3.46 At the same time, it was also recognised that further improvements in how the partnership functioned and delivered services were required. Respondents were generally open minded about the precise nature of the reforms necessary, but none suggested radical amendments. The possibility of increased VSO and private sector participation and influence were accepted by most respondents, although opinion varied on the capacity of these respective sectors to contribute much more to the partnership.
- 3.47 In terms of developments at the national level, respondents expected the Scottish Government elected in May 2007 to persist with CP in some form. Some respondents observed that the principles of CP accorded with the current government's statements on public service reform. Respondents agreed that CP had become an integral part of how local public agencies now operated. As one respondent said:

I think the genie is out of the bottle. I don't think you can go back to everybody working in single silos. So whether you call it Community Planning or whatever you call it, I think the whole business of joined up working or joined up service delivery is here to stay because it makes sense in efficiency terms

CONCLUSION

- 3.48 The research perhaps reached no surprising conclusions about which organisations appeared to be most central to CP, nor some of the main reasons for this. What is perhaps more interesting is the apparent gap between mainstream partners' willingness in principle to engage with voluntary and private sector CP participants, and the practical conditions which limit the extent of these groups' respective influence within the partnership. The net effect of these conditions is that CP in this case study represents a more inclusive system of decision-making, but not a significant shift in power among local stakeholders. Voluntary and private sector representatives have more than mere presence in the CPP, but they are junior members of the partnership. In terms of the relative scale of influence set out in Chapter 1 (para 1.12), VSO participants may be ranked as collaborators with the CPP while private sector representatives are engaged. Furthermore, to accomplish these respective statuses each were required to operate according to terms set by the established public sector partners. This was not a source of controversy within the CPP; in fact, relationships between most organisations across the different sectors were good. However, the extent to which CP in this form represents a significant development in local governance is questionable. This, and related issues will be considered further in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

4.01 Community Planning in Scotland has been an incremental development rather than a radical departure in policy. This has the advantage of minimising disruption but is unlikely to produce either a step change in performance or otherwise dramatic outcomes, particularly among partnership which existed long before the 2003 Local Government in Scotland Act. Consequently, this research found a CPP which was comfortably adjusting to the demands of partnership governance, albeit with some of the tensions to be expected when a range of organisations across different sectors work together. Nevertheless, although undramatic, this study revealed some interesting aspects of the practicalities of local partnership working. Four issues are considered in this chapter before some recommendations are offered which might enhance relationships within local partnerships.

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PARTNERSHIP GOVERNANCE

Complexity

4.02 Theories of how CP does or should operate inevitably entail abstraction and generalisation. Although necessary, what is lost in this process is the significance of the context in which CP takes place. CP is an improvised process, created through relationships and implemented by individuals embedded in specific relationships shaped by local history and circumstances. For example, the everyday requirements of CP are undertaken by participants in the midst of existing work commitments, duties and priorities, and reflect these conditions. To understand how CP operates as an activity and what it delivers, it is necessary to consider these relationships, contexts and demands. Accounts of what CP is or should be which abstract from this messy, improvised and inter-personal practical reality lose something of their accuracy and validity.

4.03 One approach to reconciling the competing requirements of abstract theory and specific practice is complexity theory (Seel, 2000). This perspective proposes that organisations should be thought of as 'organic' rather than rational-instrumental problem solving systems (Sanderson, 2006). The complexity approach proposes that organisations are characterised by the following features:

- the organisation as a whole has 'emergent properties' (resulting from interactions within it) which are not reducible to its separate components. These components exist in dynamic interaction and understanding outcomes from this requires a whole systems approach

- organisations are in a state of constant disequilibrium and instability; changes in the operation or outputs of organisations are driven by relations of inter-dependence, are adaptive and non-linear
- there is no proportionality between actions and outcomes: the changes which result from actions are not always those expected, and small interventions may produce large consequences
- consequently complex systems 'defy the standards of the positivist canons of prediction and explanation' (Reed and Harvey, 1996); the political and normative dimensions of organisational operation cannot be neglected.

4.04 Complexity theory offers a more appropriate approach to the study of CP than a technocratic approach to policy analysis (Schwandt, 1997). CPPs do not conform to a prescribed blueprint, least of all partnerships which have evolved organically and incrementally. Complexity theory looks beyond formal procedures and focuses attention on the human relations which are the reality of how organisations operate and interact. One example of the contrast between formal processes and subjective perspectives is how some CPP participants understood the regulation and monitoring systems to which they were subject. Traditional organisational theory would regard these as forms of centralised technocratic control. However, while concerned about the volume of reporting involved, some CP participants regarded such compliance regimes as a means to assist improved practice and accomplish aspirations, rather than measures of surveillance and accountability.

Pragmatic Partnership

4.05 The complexity approach emphasises the importance of understanding how different participants regard CP in order to explain how partnerships operate in practice. The main public sector organisations in this study regarded CP instrumentally - they focused on delivery, and saw it as a means to an end rather than of value in itself. Partnership was valued not because it enhanced democracy but only in so far as it contributed to better performance and outcomes. There was no interest in radical reforms to decision-making processes nor developing alternative forms of democratic engagement. CP was regarded as a policy-making and implementation mechanism, and anything distracting from that was dismissed.

4.06 There was no evidence of dissent from this view among VSOs nor private sector participants. Nevertheless, even in these pragmatic terms there was a tension between partnership decision-making and administrative efficiency. For example, the understandable interest in keeping CP processes business-like and outcome rather than process focused, limits the scope of discussion and some partner's capacity to influence decisions. A genuine tension exists between these conflicting demands, but the evidence indicated that the 'bottom line' of getting on with business is prioritised.

The Power and Influence of the Voluntary Sector

- 4.07 Identifying the relative power and influence of different CP partners is not straightforward. There are few overt manifestations of power - neither force nor coercion was evident in relations between organisations. There was a largely shared but unspoken understanding of respective rights and relative capacity among partners. This had evolved through iterative adaptation and mutual adjustment rather than either being articulated in formal procedures or the result of overt conflicts and power struggles. This corresponds to the conclusions of Taylor *et al* (2005: 9), who found that the 'policy process appeared to be less rigid than had been anticipated, with a more porous policy environment, [this] suggests a need for a fairly complex methodology for assessing [the] effectiveness [of VSOs]'.
- 4.08 While the impact of VSOs on longer-term strategic policy within the CPP was difficult to estimate, one evident counter-effect was that a condition of VSOs being regarded as a serious and effective participant and exercising voice was that they had to accept the terms of engagement of mainstream partners and become 'business-like'. A potential paradox of VSO involvement in CP is that they are more likely to be taken seriously and exert influence to the extent that they become similar to the main public agencies. Indeed, in the CPP studied, the voluntary sector representative organisation effectively had to be reconstituted by the CPP to make it fit for the requirements of partnership.
- 4.09 Some of the literature on local governance partnerships assumes a degree of difference and even antagonism between government / public sector organisations and VSOs, and an inherent conflict between public 'professionalism' and the community orientation of voluntary organisations (ESRC Local & Regional Governance Seminar Series, 2005). This overlooks the fact that elected members of councils are likely to have strong community links, and that many VSO representatives are full-time professionals. Furthermore, senior VSO representatives selected or elected to a CPP board are not the sort of people likely to seek to develop a radically different system of governance. This does not imply that they are unrepresentative of the voluntary sector, but it does suggest that there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that they will have a markedly different outlook from representatives of other sectors, and this was borne out in this research project.
- 4.10 This raises the question of how distinctive the voluntary sector really is as a CP partner. As one interviewee commented, there is the danger that VSO representatives 'become almost the professional face' of the sector and separate from those 'on the ground' but outside the CPP, which might be perceived as compromising their independence and stifling an alternative and independent viewpoint. These are sensitive issues within the voluntary sector, but an inevitable consequence of increasing VSO participation in local governance (Lewis, 2005). Participants in this case study generally believed that VSO representatives provided a distinctive contribution to policy debates, but it is clear that such representatives face a difficult juggling act - they must become and behave like the public sector partners while remaining responsive and accountable to a voluntary sector which may retain an outsider's orientation towards public policy.

Local Business Community Involvement

- 4.11 The business community had a lower level of involvement in CP than VSOs in this case study. This partly reflected capacity limitations, but the private sector were generally less interested in involvement *per se*, or in democratic processes and accountability than the voluntary sector. Private sector participants took a more instrumental approach towards local governance, and were primarily concerned with seeing their interests addressed. In this case, the private sector did not regard themselves as a partner in local governance so much as an external lobbyist or (what they believed *ought* to be) an important client.
- 4.12 It appears that there may be a limit to the extent to which the private sector can reasonably be expected to be involved in CP. Unless very significant reforms were made to how the CPP operated, private sector involvement was probably running close to capacity in the case study partnership. This was recognised by participants: none expressed great concern about the level of private sector participation nor pressing demand for reforms to increase it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE REFORMS

- 4.13 The case study CPP examined in this project was generally functioning well in terms of processes and relationships. It was not possible on the basis of the data gathered to assess whether CP contributed to improved service outcomes. Neither is it possible on the basis of a single case study to propose general practice reforms which will be relevant to all CPPs. Nevertheless, some lessons may be inferred from this study about ways to improve relationships between partners and enhance the effectiveness of voluntary and private sector participation in local governance.
- 4.14 A general implication of complexity theory is that while organisations may be moved in particular directions, attempts to impose centralised control are unlikely to be successful. The key to enhancing partnership is to focus on the informal aspects of inter-relationships within and between organisations and develop effective networks and communities of practice. Creating opportunities to bridge boundaries and strengthen interconnections between sectors, encouraging learning through experimentation, reflective practitioners and sharing knowledge are the means to build trust and spread good practice. To achieve this, it is first of all necessary to appreciate the importance of the 'assumptive worlds' of different participants, i.e. their outlooks, priorities and concerns.
- 4.15 In fairness, the case study CPP appeared to possess many of these attributes and encourage these practices, particularly between mainstream public sector partners with long-standing relationships. However, some CP members were concerned about what they perceived to be a lack of clarity about decision-making processes and limited transparency of how the partnership operated.

- 4.16 Possible reasons for this have been outlined in Chapter 3 (see paras 3.26-3.27). It is in part an inadvertent outcome of using informal processes and relationships rather than following clear procedures to achieve outcomes. It is also an example of CP as an *ad hoc* and learning-by-doing process, in which practice emerges through experience of what works. In the case study partnership it appeared that involvement in particular decisions, Themes or Officers groups was greatest among those partners with the greatest responsibility in each area. This reflects the highly instrumental and outcome oriented approach of the main partners: they were not interested in 'due process' *per se* but in effecting change and getting things done. Consequently, it might not occur to some partners that there would be any need to involve more than what they perceived to be the core interests in an issue. A consequence of operating in this way is that while some partners are not deliberately excluded, neither are they actively sought out for inclusion. This can appear exclusionary to those not familiar with how the partnership operates, and they may assume that what is merely an unsystematic process is an intentionally closed one. In particular, there is a potential cultural clash with VSOs, where open discussion is more highly valued as important in itself in decision-making.
- 4.17 One possible way to reduce this potential tension would be to ensure that systematic induction is provided for those unfamiliar with CP processes and partnership working. The case study CPP did provide briefing and background information for participants, but some would have benefited from a more formal process. CP members might also appreciate further clarification of the decision-making processes, operation and lines of accountability of CPPs. However, it is important that any such guidance does not become an over-prescriptive and rigid 'rule book', as this would undermine the creativity of inter-relationship working.
- 4.18 All respondents in the case study agreed that the potential to influence proposals at the initial stages of development was important, and that to achieve this required early access to information. However, not all felt that this was currently provided. The capacity limitations of both the voluntary and private sector to respond to issues raises a possible tension between fully involved and democratic decision-making and administrative efficiency. Partners from these sectors may require more time than others to digest, disseminate or decide upon new issues, and this could considerably slow the policy making process. This appears to be an inherent tension between the respective requirements of participation and efficiency. Retaining voluntary and/or private sector questions and items as a standing agenda item - rather than raised as occasional special issues - may be a compromise which best accommodates these opposing pressures.
- 4.19 The difficulties and limited additional benefits of significantly increasing the involvement of the private sector have already been noted. Further formal engagement with the private sector would require resources and time which could conflict with the speed and efficiency of policy making and delivery. Therefore effective and proportionate engagement with the local private

- 4.20 One specific proposal raised by some participants was to invite specialist private sector representatives to address the main CPP board on particular issues where further information or expertise was required. Participants generally were willing to accept this as an interesting proposal, but felt that the practicalities required further examination.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- 4.21 This pilot project was intended in part to road test the research design and identify issues requiring further exploration. The difficulty of identifying and exploring power relations between participants when these are rarely expressed overtly suggests that an alternative or additional research method may be required, e.g. ethnographic analysis or participant observation. However, the practical difficulties of applying these methods in the case of inter-organisational relations are considerable.
- 4.22 The findings discussed here certainly require further testing against a wider range of cases. In particular, the case study may have been an especially harmonious partnership and therefore unrepresentative of general experience, although no other studies have uncovered acrimony in a significant number of CPPs (Audit Scotland, 2006). An expanded study would subject findings to more rigorous testing reflecting a wider range of local conditions, e.g. urban and rural partnership; those with varying levels of deprivation; and more and less experienced and established partnerships. Additional interviews with more CP participants and stakeholders, and exploring the perspectives of community activists and actual unpaid volunteers rather than professional employees of VSOs might also provide a different picture of CP. Such groups may be considered real outsiders rather than partners in CP, and therefore challenge the consensus which has built up around the nature of contemporary local governance partnership working in Britain.

ANNEX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions asked of all participants:

The operation of the Partnership

1. Why were the current issues and theme policies selected as priorities?
2. On which policy issues has the Community Planning Partnership (CPP) spent most time?
3. Have there been any controversial issues that the CPP has had to deal with?
4. How far has the Partnership been able to develop joint decision-making?
5. Are there any obstacles which limit the scope of shared policy-making?
6. Is there anything that have you learned about other organisations as a result of Community Planning (CP) that you didn't know before?
7. What examples are there that member organisations have changed how they operate to implement CP?
8. What factors or circumstances do you think are most important to effective partnership working?
9. What examples are there of how CP has improved the quality of local services?

The role of the voluntary and private sectors

10. What (if any) are the main benefits of voluntary and private sector representatives participating in CP?
11. Are there particular policy areas where voluntary or private sector influence is particularly significant?
12. Have private and/or voluntary sector CP representatives been able to participate effectively in CP?
13. Does the CPP provide any support to assist the participation of private or voluntary sector members?
14. Do you have any suggestions about how the effectiveness of voluntary or private sector involvement might be enhanced (if necessary)?

Public perceptions of Community Planning

15. What do you think is the level of awareness or understanding about CP among local residents?

Future developments

16. Do you believe that CP is here to stay?
17. What do you think the future holds for CP locally? Nationally?
18. What is your impression of current Scottish Government thinking about the importance of CP and future developments?

Specific questions asked of voluntary sector CP Partners

1. Are voluntary sector representatives involved in policy debates across the whole range of CP responsibilities?
2. Are there any particular examples where influence was felt and evident (and where it would not have been before CP)?

3. Are there particular policy areas or themes where voluntary sector influence is greatest or least?
4. Are there areas or issues where you have not been able to influence policy as you hoped?
5. Are there informal networks outside the formal CP process which are important in determining policy? If so, can voluntary sector organisations get access to these and influence policy?
6. Do voluntary sector representatives feel that they have sufficient information and time to influence CPP decisions?
7. Are there any costs involved in being a member of the CPP, e.g. time commitments?
8. How do you represent the views of a diverse voluntary sector?
9. How do you provide feedback to the voluntary sector and/or communities?
10. How do you avoid losing your distinctive voluntary sector identity within the CPP?

Specific questions asked of private sector participants

1. How much formal involvement does the private sector's have with the local CPP?
2. How does the private sector get their interests represented to the CPP?
3. Would the private sector prefer to have greater involvement in CP?
4. What are the private sector's main priorities for local policy?
5. Are there any obstacles faced by private sector CP participants which prevent their involvement in the Partnership?
6. Are there means outside the formal CP process which are important in communicating the views of local business to the council and other public organisations?
7. Are there more effective ways the CPP or local council could consult with the local business community?
8. What is the local business community's opinion about the responsiveness and effectiveness of local government?

Specific questions asked of voluntary sector non-CP Partners

1. How familiar are you with the term 'Community Planning'?
2. What does 'Community Planning' mean to you?
3. Are you familiar with the local Community Plan?
4. What are the local voluntary sector's main priorities for local policy?
5. How much awareness or understanding do you think there is of the CP process among your stakeholders / the local community?
6. Do you feel that you are to influence the CPP?
7. How effective do you think it is to have voluntary sector representatives on the CP Board?
8. Would you prefer to have greater involvement in CP?
9. Are there more effective ways the CPP or local council could consult with the voluntary (and/or community) sector?

NOTES

¹ This is derived in part from the familiar 'ladder of participation' (Arnstein, 1969).

² 20 CPPs had community sector representatives on their main boards.

³ See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/This-Week/Speeches/enterprise-networks/>

⁴ SIPS were phased out and replaced by CPPs in 2004/05 in accordance with the then Scottish Executive's Community Regeneration statement, *Better Communities In Scotland - Closing The Gap* (2002)

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