Strategic Action Programme for Healthy Communities

Draft Report of an Expert Hearing

Held on 9 February 2000, West Midlands Probation Service HQ, Birmingham

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The Strategic Action Programme for Healthy Communities (SAPHC) aims to develop strategies that will improve the ability of the statutory sector to support community-based action for health improvement. SAPHC is funded by the Department of Health, and is being delivered in partnership by the King's Fund with the Universities of Liverpool and Salford.

For background details, information about how the programme is progressing, or to access further copies of this report and other documentation, visit www.kingsfund.org.uk/saphc

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Background

SAPHC is committed to holding a series of four interactive workshops in the course of the project, to inform development and disseminate learning. This first workshop had several aims:

- to obtain information to supplement other areas of our research activity, principally the case studies and literature review
- to involve key stakeholders in the research process
- to test the research team's emerging findings, ideas and assumptions against a wide range of expertise.

The event was designed as an expert hearing, with invited speakers acting as witnesses to provide information from their own perspective – similar to the way that House of Commons Select Committees or debates such as Radio 4's *The Moral Maze* are conducted, but hopefully less intimidating.

Witnesses represented a wide range of sectors and spanned different levels of seniority and professional boundaries, ensuring that a variety of views were obtained. Each witness made a brief presentation to the research team and members of the Department of Health's project steering group. Witnesses were asked to address three questions, on the basis of their own experience and insights:

- What factors constrain the ability of the statutory sector to work in partnership with communities?
- How can barriers to working in partnership with communities be overcome?
- How does working in partnership with communities benefit the statutory sector?

The event was split into two hearings with opportunities in each session for the participants to question witnesses and clarify or debate the issues raised.

Details of witnesses and other participants can be found at the end of this report.

Summary

A number of shared issues and concerns emerged from the day, with many witnesses reiterating and affirming a range of common themes. These themes mainly concern barriers and constraints to effective statutory sector/community partnership. Although witnesses were asked to identify the benefits of working in partnership with communities, very few points relating to this were made explicitly. Witnesses did not always agree, and on closer examination some of the suggestions made for addressing the issues conflict. This report attempts to faithfully record the debate. The points made should not be seen as representing the final position of the SAPHC research team.

Summary of constraints

- The expectation that community level organisations will 'fit in' with the statutory sector – how far are existing structures and styles of working compatible?

- The statutory sector is seen as being risk averse, and either unwilling or unable to respond to communities' suggestions. At the same time, communities' expectations of what the statutory sector can or should deliver may be misplaced

- Everyone – both statutory sector workers and those within communities – is under pressure

- Community development and organisational development could usefully be seen as forming part and parcel of the same approach

- Statutory sector workers often take a simplistic approach to working with communities and need to become more discerning

- Statutory sector workers have trouble understanding and responding to direct citizen action and genuine conflict. Community groups often find it hard to know where to gain access to statutory sector decision-making processes

Constraints and barriers

Witnesses identified a number of factors that were seen as constraining the ability of the statutory sector to work effectively in partnership with communities. These can be broadly grouped as follows:

- **Structures**: the internal ordering of an organisation, e.g. hierarchy and departmental structure.

- **Processes**: patterns of working, organisational procedures, and administrative arrangements, as well as the external factors that drive processes (policy directives and statutory requirements).

- **Culture**: professional cultures, staff attitudes, approaches to and understanding of communities.

Discussion under each of the three headings frequently returned to the issue of organisational capacity – the skills, abilities and practices that underpin the ability of the statutory sector to work with and respond to communities. Witnesses appeared to support the research team's analysis that capacity concerns the ability of players within organisations and communities to act and to respond.

Structures

The most significant structural constraint identified in discussion was the separation of community development and related activity from:

- strategic planning
- wider policy agendas
- other areas of service provision.

There was opposition to the convention of dividing capacity building activity into community development work, on the one hand, and organisational development, on the other. Instead, there was broad support from witnesses for regarding these as two elements of the same process, addressing the same aims. But witnesses reported that, in practice, community development was frequently regarded by both the statutory and community sectors as a distinct field of activity, and as something that takes place at the grass roots rather than at a strategic level.

> *Community development is down on the ground.*

Witnesses said that, often, near-total responsibility for liasing with communities was located with one 'community development worker' or a small team of staff within an organisation. But with staff responsible for community focused work not being routinely involved in strategic planning activity, the opportunity was reportedly being missed for transferring knowledge gained through community development work to inform service and organisational development.

Witnesses also questioned whether community level activities – in addition to being sidelined from internal strategies – were sufficiently well connected with wider political and policy arenas. The lack of connection with the local democratic process was highlighted by several witnesses. In the plethora of groups claiming to speak for 'the community', local councillors were seen as increasingly marginalised – particularly evident in the way that primary care group boards were constituted.

The marginal location of some community oriented policy programmes within large Government departments was also regarded as detracting from their efficacy. Such initiatives were occasionally seen from outside Government as the 'poor relation' of larger-scale service-based programmes rather than as a contribution to the delivery of mainstream agendas.

The scale and range of activities undertaken by the statutory sector was also thought to present a barrier to effective statutory sector/community relations. Functions with an enforcement role – such as child protection, the pursuit of rent arrears or parking controls – present a very different face from services with a supportive role, such as welfare advice or adult literacy programmes. While staff may be clear about the different emphases involved in their roles, the willingness of communities to enter into partnership with the statutory sector may be complicated by attitudes of mistrust or resentment.

Suggestions

The participants identified a number of possible ways forward:

- Could more be done to ensure that community oriented work is integrated with other aspects of an organisation, for instance by ensuring that commitments to working with communities, made in the context of partnership discussions, follow through into organisational objectives and, where necessary, lead to structural change?

- Would a shared understanding of the overall aims and values of statutory sector organisations help to identify instances where the actions of one arm or function may conflict with or undermine another? Where it is not possible to reconcile

these tensions, is it possible that acknowledging their existence could be an important contribution to understanding communities better?

- How could the community governance agenda be addressed? Community planning offers opportunities to develop more integrated structures and community oriented services. New political arrangements also present opportunities for elected members to engage more closely with communities, eliciting and representing local views as part of their contribution to scrutinising local services.

- Might there be advantages to relocating relevant units of various Government departments (e.g. the Home Office's Active Communities Unit, and the healthy community strands of the Department of Health) within a single, more tightly focused, unit such as the Cabinet Office?

Questions

Again, the participants' suggestions were in some ways paradoxical. The suggestion to relocate the more community oriented functions of Government and bring them together was made by at least two witnesses, and others signalled their support. But how does this centralising suggestion fit with another expressed aim: that of mainstreaming community focused work? Moving community functions into a discrete unit could contribute to another acknowledged barrier – the positioning of this type of activity as a specialism.

Processes

Participants highlighted the extent to which community level organisations are required to fit in with the financial and administrative framework of the statutory sector. Discussion centred on the different time-scales and degrees of organisation that exist in the two environments, with several witnesses questioning the extent to which these were compatible. A number of practical difficulties were identified, concerning procedures for:

- awarding financial support to community partners

- ensuring efficiency and accountability

- supporting and backing innovation.

Onerous application and accountability requirements were seen as constraining the ability of small or informal community groupings to obtain financial support. Where groups had overcome this, the demands could be considerable when preparing detailed proposals in the absence of financial support and with no guarantee of success.

One witness reported surprise and frustration that, after working with statutory sector organisations to identify a need and putting forward a solution, their organisation had been expected to submit to a process of competitive tendering. More broadly in the case of some quite small-scale programmes, rather than being seen as ensuring probity and best value, tendering processes were perceived as unjust and perverse. Lengthy administrative procedures and decision-making processes were also seen as threatening the momentum of community-led initiatives. Key decision-taking committee or board meetings were considered as taking place quite infrequently by lay standards and expectations.

The demands placed on some initiatives to evaluate their activities were seen as particularly counter-productive, diverting effort and resources from action into assessment. There was a perception that expenditure on community development or related interventions is often more closely scrutinised than investment in conventional service provision. The suggestion was not that resources should be re-routed into interventions of unproven benefit. In fact, witnesses were supportive of the role of appropriate evaluation and impact monitoring in community-based initiatives. But community-based activity was seen as being under greater pressure to prove its worth, leading one witness to accuse funding agencies of 'double standards'.

> *No one really questions spending up to £50,000 developing one woman for a chief officer position in a health authority – even though that woman would probably get there anyway. But spending a similar amount of money on developing people in communities – that's a whole different question.*

The ability of the statutory sector to respond to communities was seen as being constrained by rigid and inflexible administrative procedures. Staff instructed to go out and work with communities were described as lacking the ability to act on the views, suggestions and needs they encountered. It was also recognised that many staff found it difficult to stand and be counted within their own organisations. Challenging established processes, structures or prevailing attitudes was seen as uncomfortable, and made more so by an organisational and managerial climate which did not actively seek constructive criticism. Staff who worked closely with communities were well placed to suggest 'obvious' changes or improvements to services which those more removed might miss.

The assumption that community representatives are financially naïve was disputed. It was argued that, although their approach may have been different from that of statutory sector agencies, community-based organisations were often motivated by strong notions of responsibility. They could play a greater role in ensuring that interventions were planned appropriately, met genuine local needs, were delivered in a sensitive manner and ethically administered.

> *Huge sums of money are being spent on ineffective or inappropriate services. But it isn't a scandal – because the public accounts committee is in the picture about it.*

Administrative procedures were seen as constraining the ability of community level organisations to introduce innovative responses to locally identified situations. This might lead to the suppression of alternative approaches and solutions. The necessity of securing financial support from statutory sector sources was seen by some witnesses as imposing conditions and objectives which may not be fully compatible with the aims of community level organisations. These organisations were said to feel under pressure to accept conditions imposed upon them by sponsoring organisations. Where this was unchallenged, community level organisations were described as 'colluding' with the statutory sector, relinquishing their distinctiveness and becoming almost an off-shoot of the sponsors concerned.

Wider aspects of organisational and professional culture were also seen as being important. The culture of statutory sector management was described as being particularly risk averse, contributing to a reluctance to embrace solutions put forward by community organisations.

> *Risk aversion is valued by managers – it helps partnerships to run smoothly!*

The desire to ensure probity and the most efficient use of resources was seen as sometimes running counter to the need to back innovation and new approaches to situations. One witness outlined the approach taken by 3M's Innovations Committee as a possible way of squaring this circle. Under this scheme, new ideas generated by employees are considered by a specially convened panel, which might decide to award a small amount of support to enable the ideas to be worked up into a more developed proposal, or might give approval for them to be tested in a limited way so that costs and benefits can be more accurately appraised.

Suggestions

Participants made a number of suggestions that would directly address the difficulties identified above. They wondered:

- Whether organisational processes within the statutory sector could be simplified where appropriate, to relax application and accountability requirements, and enable greater rapidity and responsiveness to community initiatives where smaller sums of money are concerned?

- Could practical and financial support be made available to community level organisations to assist them in developing proposals for local action and negotiating application procedures?

- How could staff within statutory sector organisations make more use of the contribution that community representatives make to drawing up locally appropriate monitoring and accountability arrangements?

- What procedures could be put in place to enable staff working with communities to bring suggestions for improving or even reorienting services to the attention of the people within the organisation with the power to act on them?

Questions

The points made above address deep-seated issues, some of which may be amenable to change while others may remain an unavoidable feature of large-scale public service provision. However, some issues were raised but not resolved in the course of discussion:

- How can the right balance be struck between accountability and innovation?
- What is the right balance of investment in evaluation, and how can community groups be persuaded of its value?
- If application procedures are made more user-friendly, how can statutory sector agencies be sure that funding is still used to stimulate new ideas and is not restricted to a limited pool of activists?

These issues will be considered in more detail as the programme develops.

Culture

A number of related points were made by witnesses, concerning professional cultures and staff attitudes, as well as levels of understanding about communities.

Several witnesses highlighted the tendency of many statutory agencies to take a superficial approach to working with communities. Simplistic approaches to community involvement were criticised, such as repeatedly approaching the same small pool of individuals (the 'usual suspects') for their views – which may result in a biased impression being formed and few fresh ideas being generated.

There was also a perception that statutory sector agencies seldom invested sufficient effort in digging deeper, to get below the surface of communities and identify a fuller range of players and interests.

> *You wouldn't look at a group of GPs and think 'They all think the same, because they are GPs' ... I am a lot of other things besides being a resident of a poor community.*

The consideration given to balancing 'small p' political considerations in the professional environment was often lacking in the statutory sector agencies' dealings with communities. Yet, understanding local politics was seen by witnesses as being essential to genuine partnership.

As well as the political environment, witnesses also identified a need for statutory sector staff to develop a realistic impression of the physical environment of an area. One witness outlined how the staff's preconceptions about the level of personal risk associated with an office relocation had undermined relationships with local people, who felt insulted that staff had received personal safety training before they took up positions in an office based on a local estate. Staff perceptions were felt by local people to be disproportionate – as well as showing a lack of sensitivity to people going about their daily lives in the area.

Witnesses also reported that they believed statutory sector staff found it difficult when they encountered community representatives who were not expressing or acting upon their concerns in a way that conformed with expectations. Direct citizen action was often misunderstood, with the community representatives involved being regarded as disreputable or even dangerous. One witness described how the response of a group of concerned residents to growing problems with street drinkers had led to them being branded as 'vigilantes' and shunned by the police and community safety partnerships. But closer examination revealed that they were doing nothing more extreme than sitting in the areas where the drinkers congregated and asking them to move on – peacefully, and with considerable success.

Gaining a better understanding of the area was seen as being of benefit to the statutory sector, as it would generate a more accurate understanding of local situations and how these could best be addressed. This deeper understanding was also seen as boosting the credibility of the statutory sector by reinforcing its position as a public service, owned by and serving the community.

It was apparent that some groups of staff engaged with communities more effectively than others did. Health visitors in particular were viewed by witnesses as working in a way that led them to develop a deep understanding of local issues, and these practitioners were also seen as gaining acceptance and having their contribution valued by communities. By contrast, senior staff from other professions were described by witnesses as doing little to familiarise themselves with the communities where they were based:

> *The only time some officers get out [of the office] and mix with local people, have anything to do with them at all, is when they nip out at lunch to buy a sandwich.*

The words 'honesty' and 'respect' surfaced frequently in the course of witnesses' presentations. There were calls for statutory sector agencies to approach communities with more respect for the way that things already operated, rather than adopting an overly interventionist approach. And there was criticism of the tendency of statutory sector agencies, and the professionals within them, to undervalue or dismiss the contribution of lay people and their skills and insights. One witness reported that she had only achieved credibility in the eyes of local agencies when she became associated with a local project – yet her views should have been regarded as valid in their own right, based on a recognition of her status as an individual and a community member.

The apparent acceptance of this situation by many staff – especially the 'fact' that the statutory sector has no money to invest in anything other than core services – was challenged by several witnesses. There was broad support in the discussion for the witnesses' contention that many statutory sector staff seemed to have lost their public service orientation – instead of feeling that they worked 'for' the community, workers often seemed more closely identified with working 'for' the council.

Suggestions

Participants felt that several areas were worth further investigation. In particular:

- Could a requirement for key staff members across a range of organisational levels to 'walk the patch' promote better engagement with local people and help to foster a better understanding of an area?

- How far could secondments between and across statutory and community sector organisations help to orientate staff about local situations and different organisational cultures?

- Can any key features be generalised from the fact that some groups of staff – for instance health visitors – appear able to form effective community links?

- What forms of professional training and development would enable staff to more readily recognise and acknowledge the assets that communities possess?

- Should formal support be available which recognises that staff may need skilled assistance to bridge the gap between organisations and communities, especially when conflict or hostility is encountered? Could the availability of appropriate mediation and facilitation support services be explored?

These issues will all be used to inform the development of future phases of the programme.

List of participants

Expert witnesses

Mr David Black, Public Health Researcher, Communicable Health

Mr Brian Derby, UK Public Health Association

Mr David Lloyd, UK Health for All Network

Mr Bren McGowan, UK Health for All Network

Ms Su Maddock, Director, North West Change Centre, Manchester University

Rev. Andrew Mawson, Director, Community Action Network

Mr James Smith, Director, School for Social Entrepreneurs

Ms Gerry Stone, Local Action Co-ordinator, Institute for Public Health Research & Policy, University of Salford

Ms Julia Taylor, Co-ordinator, Liverpool Healthy City Action Team

Ms Maggie Winters, UK Public Health Association

DoH Steering Group

Ms Jeni Bremner, Health Policy Officer, Local Government Association

Ms Chris Dowse, Senior HAZ Development Manager, Department of Health

Ms Jane Doyle, Government Office for the North West

Mr Martin Harrison, Healthy Communities Policy Manager, Department of Health

Mr Martin Gibbs, Head of Social Exclusion Co-ordinating Unit, Department of Health

Mr Clive Stevens, Team Leader – Healthy Communities, Department of Health

Mr Charles Woodd, Active Community Unit

Dr Brendan Yates, Consultant in Public Health, South & West Regional Office: NHS Executive

Research team

Ms Natasha Gowman, Research Officer – Public Health, King's Fund

Ms Louisa Hernandez, Project Assistant – Public Health, King's Fund

Professor Chris Jones, Department of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work, University of Liverpool

Ms Sonia McEwan, Administrator, University of Liverpool

Dr Chrissie Pickin, Honorary Senior Fellow, Institute for Public Health Research & Policy, University of Salford

Professor Jennie Popay, Director, Institute for Public Health Research & Policy, University of Salford

Dr Kristina Staley, Project Officer – Public Health, King's Fund