keypoints

What's to stop us?

Overcoming barriers to public sector engagement with local communities

December 2001

The Strategic Action Programme for Healthy Communities: programme summary

1 The programme was commissioned by the Department of Health, and developed collaboratively by the Kings Fund with colleagues from the Universities of Liverpool, Salford and Lancaster. It aims to help public service organisations find ways to develop more effective partnerships with their communities.

2 Communities need support to engage in the process of developing and implementing public sector policies and practices. The programme identifies an equal need for support for the policy-makers and practitioners themselves. Our research suggests that organisational development, and a cultural shift, will be necessary if public service organisations are to build into their mainstream agenda the making of effective, equal partnerships with local people.

3 Such change can only come about by building appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and relationships within organisations. The driving factors are there, and so is the organisational capacity: it is a matter of finding ways to release it.

4 An initial research phase included a literature review, in-depth interviews with public service staff and community members, and a workshop with specialists in community participation. A complex, multi-layered picture emerged, helping explain why organisations find it so hard to engage with communities.

5 The programme team grouped the main factors preventing organisations from forming more effective and equal relationships with communities into the following five 'domains'. The team developed a model of the way that these factors interact with each other to reinforce barriers, which have to be counteracted if efforts to change are to have any impact:

- the community's capacity to engage
- the skills and competencies of staff within organisations
- the professional service culture
- the overall organisational ethos
- the dynamics of local and national political systems

6 In the next phase, action research, the dynamic model was used to develop a tool to help public service staff identify the barriers operating within their organisations. Five pilot sites, representing a range of organisations in five different NHS regions, took part (please see list on final page). At the end of the pilot stage, all participants met to share their experiences of using the tool, to ask whether this detailed study of how the barriers interrelate had enabled them to see where best to focus their energies, and to see how the tool might be made more practical and relevant.

7 In the final phase, the research findings were reported at a national conference. The event was interactive, targeting key policy-makers in the field, and highlighting how information from the programme supports the current policy agenda for promoting social well-being and ensuring local community involvement.

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1 Main lessons from the programme

1 The research conducted during the programme, and the experience of the pilot sites and research team, have highlighted a central tension between the widespread commitment within public service organisations to developing more effective and equitable partnerships with communities, and the significant changes required if this commitment is to be put into practice.

2 The pace of change being expected of the public sector in England does not sit easily with the time needed to effect the fundamental strategic changes that are required if more effective community partnerships are to become a mainstream feature of policy development and service provision.

3 Any learning process aiming to improve partnership working with communities must be sufficiently robust to cope with the complexity and challenges of the wider local and national context of policy change, development and implementation.

4 The links between individual and organisational learning have yet to be elaborated and tested. This is particularly important if the learning is to become 'mainstreamed', and therefore sustainable, within public service organisations.

5 Significant implications for staff recruitment, development and training flow from any initiative to develop organisational capacity to work more effectively with communities.

6 The model of barriers to effective community partnerships developed by the programme, and the general approach embedded within the learning process piloted during the programme, have been largely validated. However, the potential of this approach was not realised during the pilot period, for two main reasons. Firstly, short timeframes and unanticipated external factors caused operational problems. Secondly, the specifics of the process and the tools used were underdeveloped, and require significant revision and further testing in the future, to attain:

- greater clarity about the purpose, returns, resources and time commitments
- more detailed elaboration of the learning process
- more skilled and knowledgeable facilitation
- alternative ways of getting an overview of existing community partnerships
- refinement and further development of the self-assessment workbook
- more direct control of the self-assessment validation process by participants
- a more iterative relationship between learning and action

2 Assets and barriers in organisations and communities

Here we present the findings from the research phase of the programme, founded on the idea that an initial exploration of organisational assets and internal barriers can provide an important first step to realising those assets and removing those barriers.*

The community's capacity to engage

- Statutory sector staff reported that they often faced angry or frustrated people and that 'the community gangs up against public agencies'. In this situation, a defensive response was thought only to worsen relationships. Exploring why the community might feel angry and frustrated revealed how an organisation's working practices can contribute to the problem. To avoid unnecessary anger and frustration organisations need to:

  - provide a clear explanation of how they work, and how community members can gain access to decision-making processes
  - support communities to develop the skills and confidence of their members
  - treat community members with respect, so that they are made to feel like equal partners. As one community member commented:

    'Sometimes we just perceive ourselves to be fodder for another statutory sector initiative.'

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provide evidence that the organisation is listening and responding to community views. Community members spoke passionately of being involved in numerous surveys, meetings and 'planning for real' events, and seeing no impact several years later

- However, anger and frustration within communities was not always seen as a barrier to effective partnership working. As one senior manager said:

  'We used to get nobody along to the community forum until there was some conflict – and at the next meeting there were 100 people there.'

- What is most important is how the statutory sector responds to the community's anger and frustration.

The skills and abilities of staff within organisations

- Statutory sector staff and community members recognised that organisations often take a limited and overly simplistic view of communities. Communities are often seen as merely collections of problems and needs. Community members then feel that they do not have a right to contribute to solutions or to act themselves to improve their own health. Public service staff, in their turn, feel overwhelmed by thinking that they alone have to solve all the problems. As one manager said:

  'What would I do if I go into a room of 100 people who all want different things and I can't provide them?'

- To begin to change these views, statutory sector staff need to:

  - recognise the community as a resource in itself
  - harness the energy, experience and skills of local people to support the development of solutions, perhaps by employing community members
  - recognise the diversity of views within a community and seek to balance the competing interests of different groups
  - develop a deeper understanding of the

community's history and culture, by spending more time with local people. As one community activist commented:

  'The only time officers get out and mix with local people, have anything to do with them at all, is when they nip out at lunch to buy a sandwich.'

- Making such changes obviously requires support through additional training and encouragement to develop new skills in both statutory and voluntary sector agencies and in communities.

The professional service culture

- The professional service culture was seen to be dominated by issues of power and control and a 'professional view' that communities are lacking in knowledge and skills. Public service staff and community members thought that too much emphasis is placed on professionals' expert knowledge as opposed to 'expertise' gained through people's experience. As one primary care group board member said:

  'The lay views are listened to with interest but they aren't given any weight in decision-making.'

- Changing cultures is an enormous challenge, but to support partnerships with communities, professionals need to develop:

  - respect for and trust of lay views
  - greater awareness of the community's ability to act to improve health
  - greater awareness of internal structures to support strategic partnerships and engagement
  - greater awareness of the benefits of working with communities

Only then can professionals recognise and build on structures and potential solutions that are already there within communities, rather than imposing their own views.

Organisational ethos and political dynamics

- All public service staff reported that they were overloaded with work. This causes stress and a feeling of being 'under siege'. As one senior manager said:

'In addition to being Director of … [a very large service delivery department] … and leading a Community Partnership Forum, at one time I also led on Best Value, I led on New Deal for Communities, I chaired the Drugs Action Team and the Community Safety Partnership.'

- Burdensome regulation by central government was recognised as one of the strategies it uses to minimise political risk. It was also seen to inhibit new ways of working and so block effective community participation.

- If working in partnership with communities is to become a mainstream way of working, the organisational culture and political dynamics need to change to allow staff to:

  - take time to reflect on their practice and develop innovative and strategic approaches to their work
  - take risks in developing new and creative ways of working in spite of the confines of working within a system that ensures accountability for spending public money

Effective partnerships require radical organisational change

- When all of the barriers to partnership working are considered together, as in the diagram below, the full complexity of the problem is revealed. It is clear that radical organisational change is needed if working with communities is to become integral to the way public service organisations function. For long term change to occur, organisations need to:

  - manage conflict more constructively
  - develop more sophisticated skills and techniques for engaging with communities
  - change the dominant professional cultures within their organisation
  - develop a more participatory culture through encouraging innovation and risk taking

- But how does an organisation bring about such change? What support does it need to start and maintain the change process? Findings from the programme suggest that understanding the complex and interrelated nature of the barriers

would help organisations learn how to change to support partnership working. The research team therefore created two organisational development tools, with the aim of helping staff identify the particular barriers operating within their organisations. Evaluation of the work with the pilot sites has shown how the 'tools' might be developed to become more practical and relevant to people on the ground. Detailed findings are set out in Parts 3 and 4.

3 A process by which organisations can learn and change

Here we consider what we have learnt about the needed context for organisational learning, and about the overall process that we sought to develop on the pilot sites.

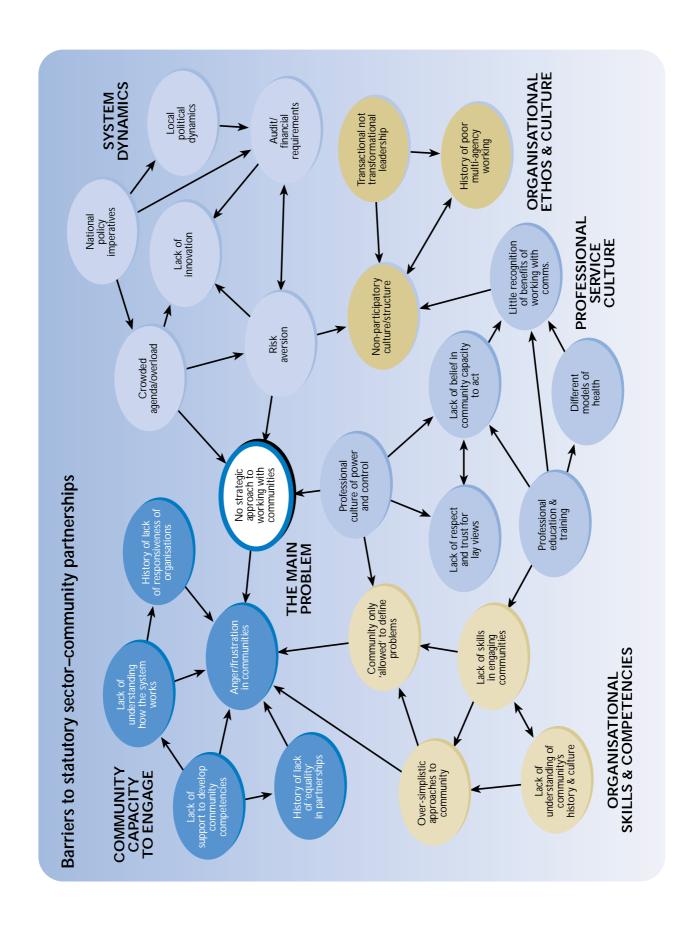### The context for organisational learning

- Pressures on the public sector that had been identified in the research phase were also evident in the course of the pilot work. In particular:

  - A full and rapidly changing policy environment, particularly at national level, meant that the pilot organisations were always facing pressures of time and competing priorities:

    'Once overloaded you stop being effective.'

  - Organisational turbulence led to senior personnel changes and loss of people key to the programme.

  - Front line and middle level staff often struggled to manage heavy workloads to tight timetables, and could feel that doing partnership 'better' would add to these pressures:

    'We have difficulties just keeping up with ourselves. Work here is all about crisis management. There is inadequate sick leave cover and yet lots of people are off. We are slow to fill vacant posts. All of this adds up to overload. At the front line stresses are great – physically threatening.'

Barriers to statutory sector–community partnerships

SYSTEM DYNAMICS

- Local political dynamics
- National policy imperatives
- Audit/financial requirements
- Lack of innovation
- Crowded agenda/overload
- Risk aversion

THE MAIN PROBLEM

- No strategic approach to working with communities

ORGANISATIONAL ETHOS & CULTURE

- Transactional not transformational leadership
- History of poor multi-agency working
- Non-participatory culture/structure

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE CULTURE

- Little recognition of benefits of working with comms.
- Lack of belief in community capacity to act
- Different models of health
- Professional culture of power and control
- Lack of respect and trust for lay views
- Professional education & training

COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO ENGAGE

- History of lack of responsiveness of organisations
- Lack of understanding how the system works
- Lack of support to develop community competencies
- History of lack of 'equality' in partnerships
- Anger/frustration in communities

ORGANISATIONAL SKILLS & COMPETENCIES

- Community only 'allowed' to define problems
- Lack of skills in engaging communities
- Over-simplistic approaches to community
- Lack of understanding of community's history & culture

- A heavy emphasis on performance management and audit could be felt as constraining:

  'I feel very performance managed.'

- People increasingly feel that they are being scrutinised and in danger of being blamed if they give the 'wrong' answer – they don't want to be the ones that 'let the cat out of the bag'. Junior staff often want to check with their managers to see if what they wanted to say was OK:

  'The [organisation] has to do more to create a non-blame culture that would empower staff to say the critical things.'

- The pilot process as a whole largely validated the programme's model of the barriers and constraints operating on public sector organisations working with communities. In this context two kinds of tension were evident:

  - There was a genuine commitment to, and understanding of, the value of working in meaningful partnerships with communities alongside some examples of good practice, but this contrasted with a recognition that the organisations concerned were not particularly client- or community-centred.
  - There were many good examples of partnerships and community engagement with the statutory sector agencies, and a lot of work being focused on further developments in this area. The statutory organisations were respectful of the richness and diversity of their local community landscapes, but this presented difficult choices regarding whom to work with and when:

    'Of course everyone in this organisation aspires to greater community involvement but we feel unable to do so within the current policy agenda … when we are trying to meet government targets and performance standards.'

Developing the learning process

- The pilot sites participated in a joint endeavour with the programme research team to develop a process for building organisational capacity to work more effectively with active communities. This involved testing a process of organisational learning and change, including the use of specific tools. This was initially based on the programme research on barriers and constraints described in part 2. It was also informed by principles of adult learning and 'whole systems thinking'. These principles influenced the 'who' and 'how' of involvement, and shaped the tools to be used. There were intended to be four stages:

Stage 1: Establishing the learning environment

- Clarity of purpose is essential, but alongside this people need to remain flexible, adaptable, and make time to maximise the opportunities for learning that the process can generate. Difficulties arose during the pilot because the research team could not accurately predict the time input that would be required:

  'Time was always an issue for us – there was never enough time to consult enough people. We had to move swiftly through so many issues we never had time to unpick their complexity.'

- Consistency of attendance is essential to the learning process. At some sites it was difficult to sustain the discussion generated and to develop the understanding that this could give rise to, because attendance at meetings was uneven.

- Consistent with whole systems thinking, the stakeholders who formed the learning groups must represent different levels within and across organisations and communities. Where groups reflected the full range of organisational and community perspectives, the richness and relevance of the learning were recognised and it was easier to discuss and plan future action. On the other hand, where this was not achieved the learning was inhibited and this gave rise to some frustration.

- The stakeholders must find ways to build safe space for all participants to contribute fully. This is particularly important in groups that include people from different levels in organisations as well as community activists. In the right circumstances the learning can be considerable, but underlying power relationships should never be ignored. The diverse and sometimes

Stage	Tasks at the pilot sites
1	**Establishing the learning environment.** Project set-up, including defining the organisation(s) involved; recruiting the self-assessment group members; learning about the barriers model; understanding the self-assessment process and clarifying roles
2	**Choosing and mapping the case study partnership(s).** Reviewing existing community partnerships and selecting a case study partnership to focus the learning
3	**The self-assessment exercise.** Dialogue, verification of and reflection on assumptions, using the self-assessment workbook as a prompt to explore the relationships between organisations and the chosen community
4	**Moving to action.** Next steps

hierarchical decision-making structures within organisations could inhibit the process of learning and change. As a consequence staff at all levels could devalue their skills and friction could develop around decision-making and responsibilities with respect to partnership work:

'The benefits of working together were incredible as we learnt so much from one another and we began to value ourselves in new ways that increased our self-esteem.'

'I feel that some individuals in this [stakeholder] group genuinely believe that the community has capacity, but not all. Would they, especially the junior staff, feel safe to be honest about what they really feel?'

- Piloting a learning process could give rise to frustration and confusion on the sites as the research team itself grappled with the inevitable uncertainties associated with the development of a new learning process. The programme team itself was not always clear about how the process should develop. Confusion and uncertainty were also created by switching around the process and were a cause of frustration:

'Whilst we accepted our position as a 'pilot' and that things would change as a result we did feel that the process became unclear at times and certainly had changed since the beginning of the project. We might have been less frustrated had we not become confused and uncertain.'

- The learning group must remain willing and able to manage the flexibility and adaptability any learning process requires. This is particularly important in view of the many complex issues involved in effective partnership working with communities. Good systems of communication, feedback and facilitation are needed to minimise such risks as the process losing direction, or a tendency on the part of organisations to react to uncertainty by trying to impose too much control or opting for simplistic technical fixes.

Stage 2: Choosing and mapping the case study partnership(s)

- The mapping component of the pilot work was developed with the objectives of:

  - describing the organisation's existing range of community partnership activities, and selecting one or two case studies that could best meet the overall aims of the pilot
  - reviewing the resources – human, financial, estates and equipment – currently invested in working in partnership with communities

- A mapping tool was prepared, having two sections: (1) to record the aims, structure, duration and so on of partnership activities and the resources invested; (2) to record the actual level of community participation. Guidance was given on the type of communities that might be included, but it was not intended that the tool should be used too rigidly.

- It was suggested that the mapping be carried out in two phases: (1) a rapid overview, to help select a suitable community partnership for study; (2) a longer examination, to provide more comprehensive and detailed information on the range and nature of community partnerships across the organisation.

  - Application of the mapping tool varied considerably between sites, and did not adhere closely to the original plan. All five sites held some discussion of partnership activity across the organisation; two formally reviewed this in detail.

- It was concluded that:

  - clarity of purpose, criteria and method are prerequisites for mapping
  - mapping could be undertaken as a rather bureaucratic task and does not always prompt the hoped-for degree of reflection about partnership working
  - a process aiming to obtain a strategic overview of partnerships could be preferable to a mapping exercise as such. The part that such an overview of partnerships with the community plays in the overall organisational development process, and its interrelationship with the learning that occurs with the self-assessment workbook, need to be given much more consideration
  - any inherent drawbacks of mapping partnerships per se are difficult to disentangle from factors relating to the novelty and pilot status of the project, and to the complex and changing nature of the organisations involved
  - pilot sites should have as much ownership of the process as possible, with effective facilitation available as needed
  - the value and content of a more detailed assessment of partnerships should be decided by the organisation

Stage 3: The self-assessment exercise

- A substantial element of the pilot work was a process of structured learning using a self-assessment workbook. This involved the stakeholder groups addressing a series of questions to assess their current performance in community partnerships, followed by an attempt to validate their views.

- The self-assessment process succeeded in providing space for reflection:

  'We were able to lift our eyes above the parapet of everyday work. We had very important discussions about what we understood by 'health' and by 'community capacity', and about our commitment to partnership working.'

- The process resulted in raised awareness on a number of levels:

  - It created a context within which the pilot organisations could critically assess the quality and equity of their current work with communities.
  - It enabled them to develop new ways of thinking about the diverse communities they serve, moving away from the stereotypical categories that tend to predominate.
  - It also revealed the number and complexity of the barriers that stand in the way of effective partnership working.

- The research team underestimated the amount of time required for the process to fulfil its potential as a learning opportunity that engaged with the richness and complexity of the challenges identified.

- The range and diversity of staff resources already available to public sector organisations that wish to improve their relationships with communities were made visible. For example, self-assessment highlighted relevant capacities and qualities and pointed to the potential contribution of staff throughout an organisation in improving community partnerships. Conversely, it showed how this capacity was frequently undervalued by middle managers and pointed to the needs of all staff for appropriate training in order to realise their full potential. Many assumptions are made about front line staff in particular.

- For some participants the self-assessment process focused too narrowly on barriers and constraints, to the neglect of assets and opportunities. Similarly, for some the language in which it was written was off-putting. The self-

assessment process also laid bear the failures of some previous partnerships between statutory organisations and communities, and pointed to the depth of distrust that could be felt by community activists towards the partnership agenda:

'A lot of people are fed up, people in the streets, shops, some talk of conspiracy … We wonder if all this talk of partnership working is really about passing more of the dirty work on to the community?'

- Most of those involved felt that the process helped them value community involvement more than they had done in the past.

Stage 4: Moving to action

- None of the pilot sites managed to complete the process as originally planned. Time ran out as the sites moved on to think about their plans for future action. The pilot sites were left facing two major challenges:

  - Firstly, the piloted learning process will require significant refinement in the future. It did result in individuals learning a great deal. However, one challenge will be to find out how to transfer individual learning to organisational development and action:

    'It has helped me understand more about my own implicit assumptions but it is not clear whether this is true for my organisation.'

  - Secondly, a fundamental shift is required if agency–community relationships are to improve. An exchange between a community activist and a manager involved in the process highlights the profound changes required and the dilemmas posed for staff:

    'We have good staff but they are up against the complexity.'

    'Your staff are good but coming from a council environment they are 'praying at the same church'. They need to be encouraged to work outside that church.'

    'But many have to go back into that church.'

    'Then that's the problem.'

- Some senior managers recognised the fundamental nature of the organisational changes that are needed and expressed a commitment to strive for change:

  'We need to be more concerned with the impact of our activity. We need to take more risks. We still have to deliver certain basic services but the big challenge is to contribute to a co-ordinated strategy working with our communities rather than against them. But we have the will to attempt.'

4 Appraising the overall self-assessment process

How the process worked

At the first workshop with the learning group the programme team presented the model of organisational barriers to engaging effectively with communities, as described in Part 2, to prepare the group for the process of analysis and reflection that was to follow. Additionally, the group had to select a case study partnership as a focus for this work, as described in Part 3. The self-assessment process then began in earnest, with these five objectives:

1 To introduce a workbook – a series of questions clustered into four sections, directly related to the barriers model, and designed to facilitate a dialogue between group members about possible barriers within their organisations.

2 To introduce a verification process designed to test the assumptions that had emerged from the group dialogue. The group would discuss the ways in which these assumptions could be examined and validated. The purpose here was to allow the group's own views to be challenged.

3 To feed the results of the validation process into the debate and provide an opportunity for a second dialogue and more time for reflection, in order to draw out learning points concerning the barriers. The questions to be answered at this stage were: What is your organisation doing well? What barriers are operating within your organisation? What areas does the organisation need to tackle to improve its capacity to work with communities?

4 To develop an organisational action plan to take forward the learning from these processes from the individual members of the group to the wider organisation, and to address any significant barriers to community engagement identified.

5 To test out the means of facilitating such organisational self-assessment

Improving the process

Preparing for the self-assessment process

The experience from the pilot sites highlighted the importance of being clear about and prepared for the self-assessment process – particularly in relation to the expected benefits for the participants and the time and energy required. It is important for the process to deliver benefits to the participants from each meeting in order to maintain commitment to the exercise over other work pressures. It is also important to understand the rationale behind the process and the model, and the organisational context in which the process is being conducted. It has been suggested that a checklist of requirements for organisations to sign up to when they get involved could be useful.

The workbook as a tool for self-assessment

- Overall, the workbook was thought to provide a useful tool for triggering dialogue about the organisation's capacity to engage with communities, but pilot sites felt it would benefit from further development. It was too long and repetitive.

- Participants helped to identify the questions that seemed to stimulate most learning, to enable a more refined version to be produced. However, pilot sites also found that sometimes the workbook detracted from the main objective, when answering the questions became more important than using them as prompts for dialogue and learning.

- The potential of the verification process to stimulate further learning was recognised by the pilot sites, but they thought the process could be improved by giving more consideration to capturing the data and by ensuring the data were used directly and positively in the learning process.

- Some sites had employed independent researchers to capture the verification data, and subsequently asked whether their organisation would have learned more by taking direct responsibility for this task.

The role of the facilitator

- The pilot sites had differing views about the value of the facilitation provided to their site. Facilitation was deemed very important to the success of the process, and the sites have provided feedback concerning both the role and needed qualities of the facilitator. In particular, the facilitator needs to be:

  - experienced in public sector working as well as in working with communities
  - sensitive to the opportunity costs to participants of spending time on the self-assessment process
  - skilled in process facilitation

- Some sites recommended that facilitators could be found from within their own organisations. If so, the facilitator would need to be equipped with knowledge and understanding of the barriers model and the research that underpins it. Any future development of the self-assessment process would need to identify potential facilitators and develop a training process, informed by a clear competency framework, to develop their attitudes, knowledge and skills in this area. The workbook could be developed to give better support to the facilitation process and have less of a role at the organisational level.

Benefits to the pilot sites

- Overall, the pilot sites found that the self-assessment process helped to:

  - challenge attitudes and existing ways of working with communities
  - strengthen relationships with other statutory services
  - reinforce the value of community involvement

- clarify the level of support needed by the statutory sector to develop its capability to support community engagement

- There were differing views on how valuable the process was in moving from individual learning to organisational learning. Some sites felt the process had facilitated more meaningful partnerships on the ground; others felt it had not. Some felt it was too soon to say.

- Views of the potential of the process to develop knowledge about the chosen community and the skills needed to work in partnership varied across the sites. Most felt that it did not identify the types of learning experience that would have the most potential for changing professional behaviours.

- For most participants the lack of time to develop action plans following the process had made it less useful for them. However all sites would recommend that others use the self-assessment process – particularly if the process were developed as suggested and if there were effective facilitation.

Conclusions

The overall conclusion was that the self-assessment process can contribute to organisational development. However, the process needs refining, in particular to address the following issues:

- Greater clarity is required about the purpose, outcomes and time commitment from the outset – a checklist could be useful here.

- The composition of the stakeholders' learning group is very important to its success, and must ensure diversity of perspectives and representation at all levels within the organisation concerned.

- The role of the facilitator is central to the success of the exercise. A competency framework and training plan for facilitators should be developed.

- The focus of the exercise should not be the workbook but dialogue prompted by a series of trigger questions put to a group.

- The process should provide time for more reflection, supported by good quality facilitation.

- The process should involve a more realistic timeframe, to ensure that action planning is achieved and to reflect a more iterative relationship between learning, action planning and implementation.

- Moving from individual learning to organisational learning is crucial, and requires further support and guidance.

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The Strategic Action Programme for Healthy Communities: programme team

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Pilot sites

Brighton & Hove (now City) Council
Merton, Sutton & Wandsworth Health Authority
Milton Keynes Primary Care Trust
North East Derbyshire Primary Care Group
North West Development Agency

Note

The pilot sites applied to participate in the programme, and in the process were asked to demonstrate a positive commitment to improving their work with communities. Each site also received a small grant to help provide support for their participation, usually in the form of research expertise.

Further information

For further information about the Strategic Action Programme for Healthy Communities, see the project web site: www.kingsfund.org.uk/epublichealth/html/ strategic_action.html