Developing performance management in a local strategic partnership: context and issues

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to cover problematic issues concerning context, culture, strategy and processes affecting the development of performance management in the City of Stoke-on-Trent local strategic partnership (LSP) between 2005 and 2007.

Design/methodology/approach – The author consulted LSP stakeholders and drew on selected literature on strategy and aspects of soft systems methodology (SSM).

Findings – The paper enables the appreciation of performance management as involving various strategic-related business processes. The development of such processes, in response to central government, represented a rationalising and corporate approach to management.

Originality/value – The paper draws upon different but complementary research approaches and provided an SSM-style conceptual model of a partnership and its focal management set within a complex context.

Keywords Performance management, Partnership, Strategic management, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

The academic research reported here covered the period mid-2005 to mid-2007. The research addressed problematic issues affecting the development of a performance management framework in Stoke-on-Trent local strategic partnership (LSP). The author presents the research findings and refers to stakeholder consultation originally conducted in a separate consultancy exercise in 2005. The academic project did not set out to inform actual LSP policy. Instead, it aimed to provide a clearer understanding of problematic issues and offered a way of thinking about "focal" business activities related to performance management relevant to addressing those issues. In so doing, the paper covers the nature of LSP performance management, the research approach, key problematic issues (concerning management context, culture, strategy and processes), conceptual modelling, LSP practice and coda.

LSPs and performance management

The English LSPs are non-statutory, non-executive bodies aligned with local authority boundaries and promoting collaborative "joined up" working in local services and community engagement (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) was the central government

department created in May 2006 to lead on LSPs as successor to the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM, 2003). DCLG regarded LSPs as crucial in improving local public services and achieving community regeneration through initiatives and services expected to work together harmoniously (Wilson and Game, 2006).

In Stoke-on-Trent, the city council was the "accountable body" for the LSP that implied a need for effective council involvement and management support. However, the city council rated poorly on performance for 2005-2006 under the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). While the implications of the CPA at that time for the LSP were somewhat ambiguous, the Audit Commission findings nevertheless contributed to a sense of urgency about performance in the council and local partnerships. The Local Government White Paper (DCLG, 2006) underlined the urgency with a commitment to a new performance framework for local services and greater public accountability for performance. This included the prospect of a more explicit, coordinated and area-based performance assessment for local authorities and local partnerships for introduction in 2009-2010, known as Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). There was, therefore, a high expectation of improvement (DCLG, 2007a, b). Given this, the city council and local partnerships made substantial efforts to improve performance (Audit Commission, 2008) with the council subsequently gaining the distinction as the most improved in England under CPA criteria, despite serious official misgivings remaining concerning council governance arrangements (Stoke-on-Trent Governance Commission, 2008).

The city, with a population of 238,000, suffered extensive social deprivation (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2004). A local area agreement (Stoke-on-Trent LSP, 2006), discussed below, promised to address deprivation and the need for local service modernisation, and an LSP Executive Board drew upon the talents of representatives from public sector agencies, city council leaders, council members and voluntary, community and private sector groups. These stakeholders in the city's future demanded positive outcomes in jointly developing services for children and young people, safer, stronger and healthier communities, older people, economic development and enterprise (DCLG, 2006).

Effective performance management in Stoke LSP therefore was strategically crucial in pursuing LSP targets expected to "bite" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, p. 46) through a local community strategy, neighbourhood management (Power, 2004) and adoption of best practices in "mainstream" services (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2002). The former ODPM highlighted the strategic role of performance management as involving the review of overall performance, planning improvement, defining targets, measuring progress against objectives, allocating responsibility for action, gathering and analysing data and reporting results to LSP stakeholders (ODPM, 2004, p. 7). The forthcoming CAA envisaged performance managers acquiring and utilising information about performance to improve knowledge to aid-strategic management in improving services and local communities and working collaboratively with various inspection agencies in sharing information and improving processes. However, all of this was problematic for Stoke LSP given the complexity of the LSP and the difficulty of coordinating partners within an effective performance management framework.

The research approach

Pidd (2004, p. 8) maintains that viewing different approaches that variously employ systems concepts can be conducive to clearer thinking about such complexity. Different approaches can, when taken together, illuminate issues from different viewpoints. It was in this spirit that the Stoke research drew upon two different approaches to aid thinking and analysis.

First, the research referred to selected literature on strategy of the configuration school, represented by Mintzberg *et al.* (2003) and Ghoshal and Bartlett (2005). This literature enabled a better appreciation of interorganisational management contexts of the kind found in LSPs. Mintzberg *et al.* (2003) and Ghoshal and Bartlett (2005) provide conceptualisations and models of organisational systems used as tools of analysis to view the complexity, ambiguity and variety found in organisations. Ghoshal and Bartlett (2005) quantify, model and classify network relationships in a "harder" manner than soft systems methodology (SSM). Despite the danger in this of narrowly categorising types of organisation, their approach nevertheless usefully highlights the context of structures and processes characteristic of networks like the LSPs.

Second, the Stoke research drew upon SSM (Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990). Checkland and Poulter (2006, p. 104) maintain that partial use of SSM can be valuable where there is a need for greater clarity and understanding about problematic situations and complexity. Partial use of SSM in this work involved developing a high-level conceptual model of "focal" performance management processes. The "systemness" in SSM "lies in the process of inquiry" (Checkland and Poulter, 2006, p. 149), so the models in SSM serve "only as devices to structure a debate about change" and explore "purposeful activities" relevant to addressing "problematical situations" (Checkland and Poulter, 2006, p. 149). The concern is with the worldviews of stakeholders and with resulting concepts "relevant to understanding and working in the real world" (Pidd, 2004, p. 12) as opposed to "hard" organisational designs, typologies and solutions.

Apart from reference to the strategy literature and use of SSM-style modelling, the Stoke research involved field research conducted in 2005 (by this author and three fieldworkers). While the fieldwork was non-SSM-based, interviews did cover some themes (culture, politics, choices and structure) found in SSM structured analysis. The Stoke exercise involved discussing critical performance management-related issues with stakeholders and interviews with LSP board members, managers and the LSP chair, the council chief executive and consultants. During 2006, this author attended additional stakeholder meetings, and in 2007 conducted follow-up interviews with LSP managers.

Contextualising performance management

The strategy literature helped to clarify the context of performance management within the wider LSP multi-organisational network. How did performance management relate to the network of actors and wider range of business processes within the network? One way of addressing this question was to regard an LSP network as an organisation set.

Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 345) refer to the "context" of an organisation as "a type of situation wherein can be found particular strategies, structures and processes" (Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003, p. 312). A context combines values and opportunities for choice

(part of business culture), strategy process-related activities, and means of coordination and control. Different types of context pattern as particular configurations of organisational influence, structure and power (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998). Government departments, for example, frequently have "mature contexts" (Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003, p. xiv) where services depend on hierarchical structures, centralised strategic planning, process coordination and performance monitoring.

Context employed in this way is helpful when thinking about single organisations, but is also useful when locating processes within interorganisational networks, where individual network members retain autonomy yet contribute to certain common objectives. Ghoshal and Bartlett (2005), in a study of multi-unit transnational corporations, maintain that interorganisational networks, or organisation sets, usefully model as systems of complex concentrations of power and influence. Ghoshal and Bartlett's (2005) modelling of network density is not adopted here; but what is relevant is their conception of an organisation set as providing a context within which each individual set member enters into multiple interactions with other set members as well as across sets. The set is a context of action, interaction and process (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 2005, p. 95), the systemic analysis of which makes possible an appreciation of complexity and ambiguity free of the constraints imposed by neat categorisations or formalistic structural analysis (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 2005, p. 79).

For the purposes of the Stoke research, the simplifying assumption adopted was that an individual member of an organisation set typically has an interest in retaining the autonomy of their own "internal" management context as described by Mintzberg *et al.* (1998). However, the member might also commit resources to some central effort around shared objectives with other set members. It is thus appropriate to think of certain "focal" (Evan, 1976; Aldrich, 1979) or "coordinating" (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 2005, p. 80) business activities carried out on behalf of organisation set members. Individual set members can join (through representation) and engage in actions both within and without what is here termed "focal management" thereby rendering the traditional conception of individual organisations operating in a bounded "environment" redundant. It is thus mistaken to think of "environment" as "an exogenous entity" that is "reified as a source of undefined uncertainties" (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 2005, p. 79).

"Focal management", in the sense used in the Stoke research, can provide additional capacity, resources and support for network members, and be empowering as a result. It can enhance the capacity of individual members and provide them with effective support to develop their own objectives and initiatives. Set members might benefit both as direct participants in focal management and as individual set members retaining autonomy, freedom to act and diversity of management styles and approaches. However, if focal management excessively centralises and substantially increases control over individual organisation set members, then it risks becoming a potential barrier to innovation and risk taking.

The approach derived from the strategy literature encouraged thinking of LSPs as organisation sets with focal management representing just such a centralising influence. The LSPs involved multiple stakeholders including central, regional and local government, public bodies, private, voluntary and community organisations. With their interest in shared partnership goals, common targets and performance management, LSPs were likely to develop focal management processes of the kind

shown in the SSM-style conceptual model described later in this paper. That model (Figure 1) depicted LSP focal management embedded within an organisation set and coordinating high-level strategic, policy, planning, control and performance management processes.

The problematic issue of culture

It was possible, for the purpose of analysis, to regard individual LSP stakeholders in Stoke as an organisation set. For example, individual partner organisations in Stoke LSP were involved in focal management through board involvement and performance management, but they maintained their own organisational identities and integrities with stakeholders having varied performance expectations and perspectives as to how the LSP should develop (Talbot, 2006).

A critical issue therefore concerned how to foster a "performance culture" in the LSP. Central government advocated a partnership culture where beliefs, values and behaviours within the partnership would contribute to outcome attainment and better quality services (IDeA, 2007). However, in LSPs this would support central government-influenced target setting through strengthened monitoring and control.

In Stoke LSP, focal management was dependent upon central government and the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) for policy direction. Central government, in its "new localism" approach, encouraged local devolvement in LSPs (DCLG, 2006). However, the GOWM was a key player in Stoke LSP. It managed spending programmes regionally on behalf of nine government departments and ensured that Stoke LSP reflected central priorities. Central government and GOWM influenced the LSP through "enforced choices" (Bailey and Johnson, 2001, p. 216) that
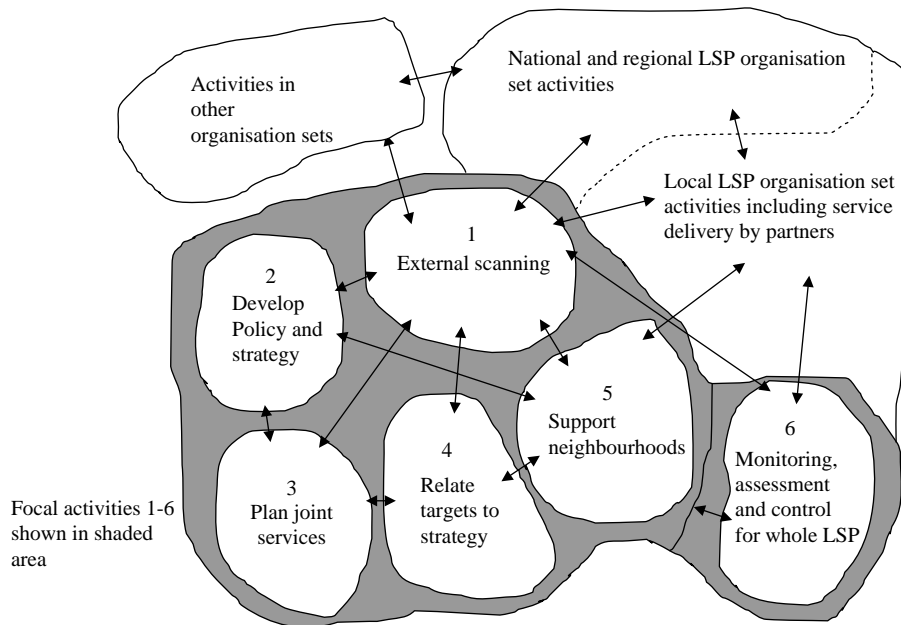

Figure 1.
A model showing high-level focal management activities in an LSP

strengthened the partnership's focal management through top-down influence within the LSP organisation set. There was local management discretion, but accompanied by centrally influenced penalties including greater central control if targets were not met and possible "naming and shaming" (Le Grand, 2007, p. 23). Rewards included local management autonomy, but with local initiatives satisfying centrally determined priorities. "Comprehensive and transparent performance information on local services" (ODPM, 2005, p. 7) ensured that partners were accountable for their contributions to outcomes.

Problematic issues concerning strategy and processes
A "collaborative" culture required more than the commitment of partners to "joined up" partnership and new behaviours. There was also the related need to create an explicit link between partnership strategy and the key business processes that would drive strategy and help pull the partnership together. The ODPM (2005) had recognised the need for coordination between partners as essential to achieving strategic objectives, but research covering over 300 English LSPs, underlined significant coordination problems, showing that LSPs often lacked coherence and thus failed adequately to focus on targets (ODPM and the Department of Transport, 2003, 2005; DCLG, 2006).

Central government emphasised the need for a strategic approach to monitoring and achieving key performance outcomes in local authorities and partnerships, an issue addressed by the new performance framework and associated CAA (DCLG, 2006, 2007a). Performance management had comprehensively to assess progress across partnership processes that delivered strategy. The council's strategic programmes and performance unit (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2006) supported this, but it was difficult to manage strategically if partners monitored progress through their own management systems. It was necessary for service-providers to work in a "joined-up way", sharing information, developing initiatives to improve monitoring by linking their own systems to LSP performance management and overcoming stakeholder confusion about partner roles in the management of business information and "knowledge".

Central government expected local area agreements (LAAs) to improve services through better coordination, by partners agreeing priorities with central government and enjoying a degree of locally devolved decision making. The government's new performance framework (DCLG, 2006) promised to bring further coherence through coordinated inspection and assessment focused on outcomes and a better balance between national and local priorities. However, it was difficult to performance manage when partnership involved complex interdependencies organised around a "matrix of levels and sectors" (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003, p. 15).

Modelling processes
Thinking in terms of an organisation set was useful in identifying and contextualising the problematic issues considered above. However, this did not adequately surface detail about the kinds of focal management activities/processes that LSP managers might regard as relevant in addressing the issues relating to performance management prevalent in Stoke LSP, especially as they existed around mid-2006 to early 2007.

The researcher thus employed SSM-style modelling to aid thinking. When used comprehensively, SSM involves stakeholders interested in organisational improvement in:

- thinking about an initial real-world situation "which some people for various reasons, may regard as problematical" (Checkland, 1999, p. A8) – in contrast to thinking about "obvious" problems with definite "hard" solutions;

- producing "purposeful activity" models judged to be relevant to the situation and used as intellectual devices to address the situation based on declared worldviews;

- using the models to explore and question the situation, comparing with the real world and structuring discussion on desirable and feasible changes; and

- defining actions and acting to improve the situation (Checkland and Poulter, 2006, p. 13).

This is not a fixed order since SSM encourages an iterative and holistic process of creative thinking, action and learning (Chapman, 2002). A full SSM analysis, if employed in Stoke, would doubtless have provided a more refined analysis of the problems confronting Stoke LSP by more fully expressing a "problematical situation" concerning culture, strategy and focal processes. However, given the non-involvement of Stoke LSP managers in the modelling, the exercise necessarily rested on the non-SSM-based assessment of problems as previously described in this paper. Checkland and Holwell (1998, p. 161) regard such single researcher-initiated modelling as appropriate, but it does restrict analytical richness.

The researcher therefore provided a high-level SSM-style "purposeful action" model (Checkland and Coulter, 2006, p. 9) of "purposeful activities" (to use SSM terminology) making up the focal management of an LSP organisation set. The concern was with the critical challenge of how to develop an "integrated" performance management framework (Ashworth, 1999). This meant conceptualising performance management activities/processes as part of a wider set of LSP focal management business processes.

The resulting model, shown in Figure 1, did not depict the actual focal management of Stoke LSP, nor did it represent an "ideal". Instead, Figure 1 was a conceptual device that showed the kind of high-level purposeful activities relevant in addressing problematic issues. Indeed, the thinking suggested the centralising nature of the worldview of current managers. Advocates of decentralisation would likely come up with something quite different and less amenable to the centre.

The model therefore was an aid to thinking – not "fixed" or definitive and not an organisational structure chart. It was subject to redefinition – the elements of the model might change, boundaries be revised and relationships explored in more depth as thinking progressed. Figure 1 showed high-level purposeful activities dividing into sub-activities at a second level. The high-level activities defined broad areas of business activity (such as "supporting neighbourhoods" in Figure 1), while second-level activities (shown in Table I) provided enhanced detail. The high- and second-level activities were, for the purposes of this research, taken to be equivalent to business "processes" as commonly understood by managers (community interventions,

	High-level activities (1-6) and their expansion				
1. External scanning	2. Developing policy and strategy	3. Planning joint services	4. Relating targets to strategy	5. Supporting neighbourhoods	6. Monitoring, assessment and control actions for whole LSP
1.1 Identifying and assessing government policies affecting LSP including LAA	2.1 Defining and agreeing LSP policy commitments	3.1 Oversight and involvement in strategic planning and commissioning for joint services	4.1 Reviewing and assessing targets against all relevant plans and strategies (LSP and partners)	5.1. Engaging with local partnerships and local community	6.1 Monitoring and assessing all LSP/LAA activities, indicators and outcomes including service delivery activities and outcomes in wider organisation set
1.2 Obtaining and analysing and social and economic data	2.2 Defining and agreeing LSP strategic objectives and targets	3.2 Producing joint service operational plans and publishing locality commissioning plans linking to 5.1-5.3	4.2 Utilising data from activities and actions in 1 and 6	5.2 Coordinating and planning neighbourhood management activities	6.2 Initiating and monitoring control actions
1.3 Obtaining and analysing information on community engagement and feedback	2.3 Managing board-level knowledge provision		4.3 Reviewing resources committed to strategy	5.3 Supporting and monitoring partnership initiatives at ward level and producing ward level plans	6.3 Monitoring and assess efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness criteria
1.4 Obtaining information about partner feedback and organisation set activities					
1.5 SWOT analysis					

Table I.
Expanded focal management activities for a conceptual LSP

planning and so on as part of neighbourhood support). The model did not show "smaller" discrete actions.

The researcher arrived at Figure 1 by employing the SSM mnemonic, CATWOE, to depict an LSP focal management system integrating performance management activities. In modelling such a focal management system, local communities were the "customers" (C) while other partnership stakeholders were "actors" (A).

The initial situation confronting managers posed "a need for systematically managed business processes". A desired transformation (T) was to a situation where managers could claim that the "need for systematically managed business processes has been met" (a discernable T change). The change envisaged coordinated processes to align stakeholders, manage information, drive strategy and so on. The processes included those associated with performance management.

The researcher assumed a realistic worldview (W), namely that of "performance managers", as the basis of T. This worldview was of "systematically managing business processes through partnership working and community engagement" and the owners (O), a partnership board, work with other stakeholders to achieve T under environmental constraints (E) such as limited external resources and political pressures.

A tentative "root definition" derived from CATWOE described "an LSP board-owned focal management system, operating with a view to external conditions, that through partnership and community engagement, systematically manages business processes to meet strategic policy objectives". High-level activities, numbered 1-6, that might achieve this were shown in Figure 1 and sub-divided in Table I into various second-level activities/processes. Resources devoted to performing the activities in the system would come from organisation set participants.

The high-level activities 1-6 in Figure 1 were those associated with focal management (shaded area) in an organisation set of LSP service provider partners, community groups and government bodies. Essential performance management-related activities were 1, 2, 4 and 6, although more broadly, performance management involved having an overview of all the activities/processes shown in Figure 1 and Table I including those in the wider partnership organisation set. Figure 1 shows a conceptual depiction that helped illustrate activities in a situation where there was a need to manage strategic outcomes across a range of partnership activities. The similarities between this partnership model and Checkland and Poulter's (2006, p. 118) model of a health organisation underlined the formal organisational essence of this kind of arrangement.

Table I expanded (sub-divided in more detail) the high-level activities shown in Figure 1 as second-level processes. These focal activities grouped second-level processes, each of which required further expansion in any further research.

The delivery of "mainstreamed" services such as economic development, community health, policing and so on were assumed to be non-focal activities located in the wider context of the organisation set. In reality, the police took part in strategic working groups and other focal LSP activities; but the police, not the LSP, actually performed policing activities in neighbourhoods. This meant that service contributions to LSP shared targets and other activities were often difficult to monitor through LSP focal management. Similarly, problematic second-level activities/processes (shown under high-levels 3 and 5), but not modelled in detail in this

research, were strategic service planning, neighbourhood management, various ward level initiatives and actions, and links with other partnerships.

Comparing the model with practice
How did the conceptual model in Figure 1 and Table I compare with practice in Stoke LSP following the publication of a LAA and into 2007? The research revealed that practice was indicative of the rationalisation of the LSP with actual processes becoming more identifiable with those in the conceptual Figure 1. In 2005, Stoke LSP reviewed its management and structure for the implementation of the LAA. A more clearly defined focal management approach emerged bringing together activities similar to those in Figure 1, suggesting emerging/strengthening focal processes. Activities included those of a new executive board (comparable with high-level activity 2 in Figure 1), strategic "block groups" that involved partners in discussing strategy and setting local priorities (high-level activity 2), performance management (high-level activities 1, 2, 4 and 6), and joint service planning (high-level activity 3).

Information was more accessible, with enhanced oversight of service delivery outcomes by partners in the wider organisation set. The council's Corporate Performance and Programme Unit reported performance on outputs to LSP strategic block groups responsible for particular targets. A Knowledge Management Unit, also serving other partnerships in North Staffordshire, reviewed and reported on LSP outcomes. The LSP sought to improve targeting with managers measuring targets and employing an electronic performance monitoring system that provided capacity to align actions with corporate objectives across partnership organisations. At the time of research in 2007, an LSP Performance Management Manager served the executive board and LSP Director within this framework.

The LAA proposed eventually to focus on 35 tightly monitored key indicators within a framework of a central government "single set" of 198 indicators (DCLG, 2006, 2007a). The police were exemplars with highly effective monitoring that enabled LSP board members quickly to access the impacts of crime reduction initiatives. Voluntary and community organisations used diverse approaches, but local groups had opportunities to improve their role in target management in accordance with central government attempts to ensure that resources produced tangible results in communities Neighbourhood Renewal Unit – NRU (2007).

The context was one of an increasingly formal pattern of focal activities/processes with performance management expanded to cover partnership-wide activities. The Stoke LAA established a Partnership Development Group and a Steering Group for enhanced strategic alignment and links between local plans, processes and services. It strengthened various strategic block groups so that the LSP could deliver its local neighbourhood strategy in synchronisation with the North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership to which the LSP linked from May 2007. A joint Planning and Commissioning Group comprising senior officers from partner organisations also produced performance management information and recommendations to the executive board (Stoke-on-Trent LSP, 2006).

Coda

The Stoke case illustrated the development of a stronger corporate performance-focused and strategic knowledge-based approach around the kinds of activities shown in Figure 1. Policies reflected enforced choices from the centre supporting an improved and fit for purpose LSP. Partnership managers needed to assess performance and risks continually to improve processes to align partners to strategy. As the partnership became increasingly "organised", it fostered shared managerial competencies between partners.

Stoke LSP in practice became more "organised" through developing focal management within the LSP organisation set. The prospect was that as Stoke LSP developed around the LAA and forthcoming CAA, the more "corporate" it was likely to become. Developing a focal management capability within the LSP thus represented on-going rationalisation to encourage strategic alignment (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) and collective effort of partners with performance management integrated within a coherent set of partnership processes.

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