

This case study was developed by CAG Consultants for the SDC and has been co-published with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). It is one of a set of case studies that has been produced for the SDC's Capability for Local Sustainability project. For more information on the other case studies and the project as a whole, visit www.sd-commission.org.uk.



Be Birmingham SCS and the LAA

Abstract

Birmingham's local strategic partnership is recognised as the first to lead on the development of a climate change strategy.

Through strong leadership, partnership working and consultation it has developed Vision 2026, an overall community strategy for the next 20 years.

However, Be Birmingham's experience does highlight areas where an LSP with a similar outlook could benefit from more support, including:

- more involvement of the regeneration/development sector;
- greater focus on transport and sustainable consumption; and
- a better understanding of the duty to cooperate.

The issue

Birmingham's local strategic partnership (LSP), Be Birmingham, has made sustainable development across all sectors of the community a priority and it was the first LSP to lead on the development of a climate change strategy

Be Birmingham is also taking a lead on sustainable procurement after it was highlighted as a need for delivering the SCS sustainable community strategy (SCS) and local area agreement (LAA).

Birmingham's sustainable development has to be achieved in the largest unitary authority in Europe, with over one million residents. It is also Europe's youngest city and increasingly diverse, with the highest percentage of young people (0-14 years), which is projected to increase to about 230,000 in 2006, and is expected to be a majority black and ethnic minority city by 2012.

A consultation period on the new SCS ended on 31 March 2008. This has resulted in the publication of Vision 2026, the overall collective vision for the city. It emphasises sustainability issues: economic progress, quality of life and living within environmental limits and is in line with the UK Government Sustainable Procurement Action Plan, 2007.

What Be Birmingham did

Ongoing dialogue and consultation with the community is a key part of Be Birmingham's SCS. The online pledging campaign 'Birmingham Cutting CO2', and funding of Climate Change Faith Ambassadors programme has helped to raise awareness in the wider community.

At an event at the end of May 2008, 'Believing in our environment', 300 members of the faith community made a pledge to reduce their CO2 emissions. This event brought together faith groups from across the city and guest speakers from Friends of the Earth, Midlands Islamic Network for the Environment, Jubilee Debt Campaign and the Hindu Chaplaincy at the University of Birmingham to address the issue of climate change.

Within the LSP, the key factors which enabled the good practice to happen were:

Leadership and advocacy

Leadership by the council and the environment partnership has been vital to Be Birmingham's success. Active engagement and advocacy by the head of sustainable development, and a public relations drive to support the Be Birmingham brand has also helped to build on existing successes within the Partnership.

The head of sustainability post, which was created in 2005, funded by the Environment Partnership and employed by the city council on a permanent contract, was the first amongst LSPs, and has already been replicated in Leicester and Sheffield.

Attitudes, culture and skills

The attitudes, commitment and personal interest of a number of individuals have been critical. It was the partnership's early successful 'speed dating network' approach which, the head of sustainable development considers was crucial in bringing agencies, such as the council, the Fire Service, the PCT and voluntary sector together, as well as the network of more than 130 officers, largely from the public sector who are working on sustainable development.

Informal leadership training has been enhanced by working with Localise West Midlands consultants to raise awareness and capability through interviewing senior executives. There has also been a significant change through the sign up to a more performance-led culture and focus on delivery.

Partnership working has required several structural changes within Be Birmingham. They have set up a Delivery Unit (modelled on the Government's Strategy Unit) to undertake priority reviews and look at underperforming areas, and are undertaking a stock-check of the 'family of partnerships'.

Tools

Be Birmingham has undertaken a number of appraisals of its strategies to consider their alignment with sustainable development principles; including using the Regional Sustainable Development Framework to appraise the SCS.

Resources

The Birmingham Environment Partnership benefits from around £1.7m funding, including private sector contributions and £300,000 Innovation Fund. Be Birmingham have also given the Sustainable Development Team time. BEP are supported by a Head of Sustainability, an Administrator, a Liveability Manager and leads on climate change and sustainable procurement, funded by projects.

The impact

There is now a greater focus on sustainable wealth creation and sustainable growth. 'Creating a vibrant low carbon economy' is now a key outcome which will help to drive the growth of environmental technologies.

To support Vision 2026, new guidelines launched in March 2008 will ensure that Be Birmingham spends up to £6 billion each year of its collective budgets to achieve the city's economic, social and environmental responsibilities.

Lessons

Scrutiny is felt to be one aspect which needs strengthening. Be Birmingham is currently restructuring and reviewing its governance structures and mechanisms for scrutinising partners and the Partnership including around sustainability.

Engagement of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations and the private sector is still an issue for Birmingham. There is a strong presence of the VCS on the Environment Partnership, with 3 out of the 5 core priority group chairs representing the sector. The role of the VCS is evolving from a delivery agent engaged in small projects, to a playing a more strategic role in driving behavioural change.

In 2007 the Be Birmingham Board only included one business representative – the Chief Executive of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The restructuring of the Be Birmingham board and its partnerships will seek to include more business involvement.

Performance measurement of sustainable outcomes has also been a challenge. Be Birmingham are looking at using the 35 LAA priorities (out of 198) national performance indicators to measure quality of life and CO₂ emission and an ecological footprint to measure consumption trends.

Missing capability factors

In retrospect, the Partnership would have benefited from:

- More involvement of the regeneration/development sector;
- Greater focus on transport and sustainable consumption; and
- A better understanding of the duty to cooperate.

Wider lessons for the research

Birmingham's experience has highlighted a number of areas where additional support would have been beneficial to Be Birmingham and other LSPs including:

- leadership training and support networks, together with skills to deliver sustainable outcomes at a local level, especially national agencies e.g. Job Centre Plus;
- a duty on LSPs to deliver sustainable development and tackle climate change – clearly defined and demonstrably resourced;
- greater challenge by Government Offices on LSPs governance arrangements, and capabilities before signing off LAAs;
- greater scrutiny of an LSP's capacity to deliver sustainability to ensure that success is perpetual and not a result of the serendipity of wilful individuals;
- clarity on commissioning and pooled budgets;
- stronger evidence base of what works/what doesn't work to deliver particular outcomes, particularly in relation to working spatially, working with communities of interest, and closing the gap between neighbourhoods;
- more realistic expectations and timescales for change within LSPs from Government;
- effective performance indicators; and
- resources to fund an effective team (comprising of someone working at a neighbourhood level, a lead on climate change, sustainable procurement, and leader to join things up) and to support partnership working.

Data / evidence

Be Birmingham had already been recognised for its capability for delivering sustainable development in: 'An evaluation of sustainability within Be Birmingham' published in March 2007 by Warwick Business School in association with Joan Bennett, which concluded:

"...the Strategic Partnership is in a strong position to raise commitment to sustainable development across all sectors of the community. Its new draft SCS and LAA show even more promise for the delivery of sustainability."

Further information

<http://www.bebirmingham.org.uk>

<http://www.birminghamcuttingco2.org>

<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/publications/documents/sustainable-communities-guide.pdf>

'An evaluation of sustainability within Be Birmingham' by Warwick Business Schools in association with Joan Bennett, March 2007.

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