Implementing Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Appendix 3 – Lessons from Population Needs Assessment in Local Government

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Local authorities regularly carry out public consultations as a means of identifying and prioritising service-specific needs but it is only since the Department of Health’s Commissioning Framework for Health and Well-being, published in March 2007, that all local authorities have been required to carry out a comprehensive health and well-being needs assessment. The majority of authorities and PCTs are still in the early stages of assembling the data, using the minimum dataset guidelines. This may prove to be an easier exercise for local authorities who can refer to various national and local statistical databases, surveys and consultations that are routinely carried out. For PCTs, however, who may do little commissioning of research beyond community health, this may be a steep learning curve.

Strategic planning through the assessment of residents’ needs is perceived as a given in local government, particularly at Unitary and County Council levels, although generally this takes place at the departmental rather than corporate level. It can be both local and regional, spatial and organisational, intra and inter-authority. However, the potential impact of local needs assessment can be restricted by the shifting demands on local authorities, changes of central government policy and the length of time that may be needed to effect a consensus which may span more than one political administration. As one commentator notes:

“The purpose of strategic planning is to encourage thinking about your organization's "big picture" - its broad goals and priorities, and how well they are being achieved. Unfortunately, the emphasis on possessing a strategic plan has come into some disrepute in recent years since research has revealed that many of them are never implemented and that others prove to be useless in organisations faced with rapidly changing, difficult to predict, environments”

(Voluntary Sector Knowledge Network, undated).

In many cases, by the time a local strategic plan has been out for consultation, challenged, changed, re-published and debated further, the timescales within it have been
diminished and the impetus has been dampened. This is more likely to be the case with spatial strategic planning than with organisational strategic planning, although this, too, may be hampered by the length of time to which the strategy applies.

In a statement outlining the future roles of newly restructured local authorities (see http://www.communities.gov.uk/news), Local Government Secretary, Ruth Kelly, stated that:

“Our goal has always been to ensure that the services on offer to our communities are responsive, effective and efficient. We have always made it clear that the status quo is not an option. In some areas new unitary councils may be the way forward, and in all continuing two-tier areas councils must improve the way they work with each other.”

(26/1/7, Department for Communities and Local Government)

The press statement continued:

“Those future unitary local government structures must: provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership; deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment; deliver value for money and equity on public services.”

One English authority that has already addressed the requirement for a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment is the Metropolitan Borough of Bury. The Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government (IDeA) cite Bury’s Strategic Community Needs Assessment as an example of good practice (www.idea.gov.uk). Bury adopted a “Whole Systems/Toolkit” approach, working with the local PCT to obtain a 10 – 15 year assessment of health and wellbeing needs both in the present and the future (CPC Limited 2007). This will then form the basis of joint commissioning strategies and action plans.

**Approaches to needs assessment**

Bury’s whole systems/toolkit approach, mentioned above, consists of three phases:

1. An audit of who holds what information, where and in what form

2. An assessment of the needs of the different groups within the community done by:
   a. Analysis of population
   b. Service use
   c. Prevalence of certain conditions or by age

3. Action planning to meet these identified over the short, medium and longer term.
The approach is in toolkit form to flex with emerging trends and build upon work that has already been undertaken by, and between, partners to consolidate current intelligence and identify any gaps.

As such, the toolkit is split into three distinct phases which are:

- **Audit** – collate, and acquire where necessary, information sources and community intelligence on resource usage and need, including consultation with the community.
- **Community Needs Assessment** – develop a detailed understanding of need over time, patterns and trends, dependencies and other influencing factors.
- **Strategy Derivation** – based upon the needs assessment, generate and evaluate what and how services should be planned and commissioned to meet future needs or, indeed, redesigned to meet current need.

**Figure 1** Toolkit approach used for Bury Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
Peterborough City Council with Peterborough PCT has published the following diagram to show the desired inputs and outputs of a Strategic Needs Assessment.

**Figure 2** Peterborough’s JSNA Process (Liggins et al 2007)

**Involving service users and the public**

Consultation methods vary, dependant on several factors such as time, budgets, target groups etc. Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, in its 2007 Consultation Strategy, cites four factors necessary for effective consultation and to minimise risk (Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council 2007):

- A commitment from councillors and the corporate management team to ensure the required resources are available.
- A willingness from staff to follow the policy and Statement of Required Practice
- Sharing of the outcomes of consultation.
- Regular and appropriate feedback to consultees.

The risks are given as:

- Lack of feedback from stakeholders on which to base decisions.
- Inappropriate use of limited resources.
- Failure to meet satisfaction targets.
- Failure to ensure residents feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area.
Solihull MBC has also established 5 categories of consultation, indicating the situations in which they would be applied and likely methods used:

1. Information gathering - used when testing satisfaction with services to inform plans or information gathered for future use. For example, satisfaction surveys.
2. Seeking views – seeking general views to help make a decision or when planning service changes. Example - workshops with customers about their experiences.
3. Making choices – the service is changing, there are different options and views are sought or asking people to vote/make a choice before making a decision. Example – a traffic calming survey.
4. Generating ideas – an issue is at an early stage, as yet there are no definite options so help is needed to generate ideas/options. Example – workshops and drop in sessions with customers.
5. Participation/joint decision making – to jointly agree what needs to happen and how. Decisions will be made together. Example – a working group of residents agreeing the plants and flowers in a local park.

Summary

Joint/Corporate Strategic Needs Assessment is informed by departmental strategic planning and corporate strategy, both of which depend on:

- Strong strategic leadership.
- Informed community involvement.
- Democratic accountability.
- Improved representation.
- Stronger partnership working.
- Effective boundary spanning.

References

[http://www.bury.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/6B24FD06-7E74-4015-8071-7BCD7D2A7E8D/0/SCNAfinalreport.pdf](http://www.bury.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/6B24FD06-7E74-4015-8071-7BCD7D2A7E8D/0/SCNAfinalreport.pdf)


[http://www.solihull.gov.uk/Attachments/ConsultationPolicy.pdf](http://www.solihull.gov.uk/Attachments/ConsultationPolicy.pdf)

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