Applying LEAP to developing the National Standards for Community Engagement

Introduction
The National Standards for Community Engagement are a set of measurable performance statements describing best practice. They were developed, from the bottom up, involving over 500 experienced community and agency representatives. They have been published by the Scottish Executive\(^1\) and also endorsed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the major national agencies involved in community planning. They are accompanied by a range of support materials illustrating the application of the standards and providing guidance on how to use them.

The development agency for the National Standards for Community Engagement was the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) which is also responsible for the development of the LEAP model. In all its activities the principles and process of the LEAP approach inform the way that it works.

This case study illustrates the application of the LEAP cycle and principles in the development of the standards. As such it demonstrates how LEAP can be applied to policy influence and programme development. It is important to note that, whilst many people were involved in it, the only people consciously drawing on the LEAP framework in this process were SCDC staff.

Identified need

Between 2000-2002 SCDC was the lead agency in a consortium of agencies delivering, on behalf of the Scottish Executive, a training programme for the 61 Social Inclusion Partnerships and Working for Communities Pathfinders\(^2\). The

\(^{1}\) URL: [http://www.communityscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/cs_010771.hcsp#TopOfPage](http://www.communityscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/cs_010771.hcsp#TopOfPage)

Working Together: Learning Together (WTLT) programme, as it was called, involved over 750 participants in 48 different events. The participants were a mixture of staff of the partnerships, staff of agencies involved in the partnerships and community representatives. Approximately a third of participants were drawn from each group. There were three main topics, social inclusion, community participation and partnership working. The experience of the participants of community engagement practice was therefore a dominant theme and discussions revealed a range of weaknesses that were consistently experienced. Areas that frequently elicited negative comment included:

- time scales for community consultation,
- narrowness of the scope offered for influence on policy and practice
- lack of openness in providing access to relevant information
- over formalised participation procedures and unnecessary use of complex language and jargon,
- lack of adequate investment in capacity building for agency staff and elected members to develop the skills to practice in a community responsive manner
- lack of consistent investment in capacity building and mentoring support for community representatives and community led initiatives
- triumphs of presentation about participation over genuinely effective practice
- political and administrative paternalism
- lack of clear constitutional arrangements in partnerships that clarify and regulate the powers, roles and remits of partners
- lack of willingness to put in place procedures to manage the inherent risks involved in the pursuit of more effective solutions to community needs e.g. transfer of assets to community control, community led service provision.

These experiences were also highlighted in research evidence most notably from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation\(^3\) that described the quality of practice as often ‘tokenistic’, having ‘modest impact’ and being ‘focussed on official’s priorities’.

The level of dissatisfaction with the general quality of community engagement was shared beyond the WTLT programme. For example, the Community Development Alliance Scotland\(^4\), an alliance of national agencies, had recognised a need to establish the principles of best practice. Most significantly, when the Minister for Communities established a working group of the Scottish Social Inclusion Network, comprising agency and community representatives, to explore means of community empowerment, the poor quality of community engagement practice became a focus of attention. As lead agency for WTLT, a

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\(^4\) [http://www.communitydevelopmentalliancescotland.org/](http://www.communitydevelopmentalliancescotland.org/)
member of the Alliance and the SSIN working group, SCDC was able to carry forward the concerns highlighted in the WTLT programme and establish broad recognition of the need to be addressed.

**Envisioning and assessing outcomes**

In one sense envisioning the outcomes was easy. Where participants in the WTLT programme had had good experience they were already able to describe the benefits that arose. Indeed, examples of effective methods of community engagement were brought together in a published handbook. A range of literature was also available that provided descriptions of good practices.

Community and agency representatives in the WTLT programme who had identified the common weaknesses of practice knew what they wanted. It was generally agreed that if communities were to be involved, it had to:

- be accessible and inclusive of all interests and age groups.
- relate to things that matter to communities,
- achieve an open and purposeful dialogue,
- lead to appropriate actions to address concerns.

Since constraints on resources were recognised, the assumption was not that communities would necessarily always get exactly what they wanted but that listening and responding, rather than telling and imposing, would characterise the relationship between public agencies and communities.

These outcomes of good community engagement, or their absence, were already apparent in the direct experience of those that were involved. Whilst it would always be important to ensure that attention was given to shared evaluation based on collecting evidence from all stakeholders, the criteria for judging performance were already apparent. In LEAP terms, the critical steps would be establishing and implementing an action plan to bridge the gap between the desired outcomes and the predominantly negative experience of current community engagement.

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Developing an Action plan

LEAP sets out three components of an action plan: identifying who will contribute and with what resources (inputs), identifying how the action will be conducted (process) and identifying precisely what will be delivered (outputs). In this instance the building of an action plan went through two phases reflecting all of these components. Each one could be described as completing a mini LEAP cycle within the overall cycle of the whole process.

In the first phase the key forum was the SSIN community empowerment working group. Here the SCDC representative put forward the proposition that the shared desire for better outcomes from community engagement could be enhanced by establishing agreed ground-rules or standards for its conduct. In this he had the backing of the Community Development Alliance Scotland and could draw directly on the evidence from the WTLT programme. Within the working group community representatives, in particular, were supportive of the idea. The working group agreed to test out the desirability of this approach by presenting a draft proposal at a consultative event with a range of community representatives. In the light of their endorsement of the idea a proposal was developed, presented to and subsequently approved by the Minister for Communities.

In the first phase the inputs came directly from a range of sources, the SCDC representative, other members of the working group, community representatives at the consultative event, civil servants advising the Minister and the Minister herself. Indirectly there were also inputs from CDAS, from the participants in the WTLT and even more remotely from those conducting research that was drawn on to highlight the issues that needed to be addressed. The process was one of dialogue, debate and consultation leading to a specific output – a proposal to the Minister for the development of the Standards project.

At the second phase SCDC was commissioned to work with Communities Scotland to develop the programme. The goal was described as: ‘to develop a set of standards that will form the basis for a compact between representative community sector organisations and government and non-government agencies operating in communities’. This was seen as having particular relevance in the context of community planning and community regeneration policies.

This second phase began by establishing a more elaborate operational plan. This set out the inputs, processes and outputs that would be delivered. In terms of

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A consultation event on this proposal, involving 30 representatives of community agencies in East, South and North Ayrshire, was held on 22 July 2002.
the process it stated: ‘In summary, the project will adopt a participatory action-research approach…’ This was described as: ‘leading to the development and application of a user led set of standards and associated guidelines for the engagement of agencies with communities.’ Here the specific outputs were being identified. It went on to state:

‘The standards will be developed with a view to their being agreed and endorsed on the one hand by the Scottish Executive, CoSLA and key agencies, such as health boards and enterprise companies, and on the other by representative organisations of the community, such as the SIP representatives network and the Communities Against Poverty Network’.

This aspect of the plan not only illustrated who the stakeholder were with an interest in community engagement but also recognised that if standards were to be adopted by them they all needed to be actively involved in the process of their development. It was argued that:

‘The strength of the proposed standards and guidance will be that they are embedded in the experience of communities but developed in collaboration with agencies that have a good practice track record. In seeking to establish a consensus between stakeholders, the project will enable a national debate leading to the endorsement of the standards and guidance that will be owned by both communities and agencies across Scotland.’

Implementing and monitoring the action plan

The implementation of the action plan involved a series of developmental steps, over two years, falling into two broad stages focused respectively on development of the standards and pilot testing them in practice. Within these there were clear milestones involving delivery of specific outputs that could readily be monitored. There was also a commitment to ensuring that all the necessary inputs were made to the participatory process to which the project had committed itself.

In the first stage the initial commitment was to ensure that the issues to be addressed were fully appreciated from the perspectives of community representatives and agency staff. Accordingly, ten focus groups were conducted, six in different types of geographical location from inner cities to remote rural communities and four with specific interest groups – Black and ethnic minorities, young people, older people and disabled people. The output from this was clarification of the definition and scope of the problems to be addressed. The next step was to invite participants who had been involved in the focus groups to come together in as series of working groups and conferences that would prepare draft standards that would address the difficulties that they had
identified. The output from this was initial draft standards. In turn these were presented to three national consultative conferences conducted in different parts of Scotland. The participant’s comments were then used to amend the draft standards. At each stage SCDC and Communities Scotland reported to an advisory group made up of representatives of national community organisations and agencies with a commitment to good community engagement.

Throughout the first phase both SCDC and Communities Scotland were monitoring not only whether the outputs were delivered but also whether the identified stakeholders had actually been adequately involved in the process of focus groups, working groups, conferences and advisory group.

Once the draft standards had been prepared, the next stage was to test them. This was done over nine months in six sites. All but one of the six original geographic areas continued their involvement into phase two and an additional pilot was established with a focus on Black and ethnic minority engagement. The contexts for the pilots ranged from the complexity of the whole of a local authority area community planning partnership, through to local interagency regeneration and community planning initiatives, to neighbourhood projects. Communities Scotland assessed the proposed sites to ensure that the standards could be tested at different levels of complexity and in different styles of engagement.

The process of the pilots was one of participatory action research, in which the participants making the inputs were identified local stakeholders in community engagement. The outputs of the pilots fell into three categories. First, they directly influenced the content of the final version of the standards. Second, they provided the basis for case studies. Third, their experience informed the development of guidance on implementing the standards.

Throughout both phases of the process, a newsletter was sent by Communities Scotland to all those involved in the consultation process to keep them informed and to alert them in good time to the next stage.

**Evaluation and a new LEAP cycle**

Throughout the development of the standards both SCDC and Communities Scotland, with the help of the advisory group, were assessing the issues that were arising. SCDC prepared interim and final evaluative reports based on the evidence gathered in the pilot stage that identified a range of issues that would be likely to affect the implementation of the standards.

In relation to the outcomes sought – relevant, effective, efficient, inclusive, participatory, responsive, action oriented engagement - it was apparent that the
application of the standards could make a significant difference to the quality of practice at a number of levels. The pilots had shown that the standards could assist in:

- planning engagement that would achieve these outcomes,
- assessing the readiness of agencies to do it well,
- monitoring and reviewing both the quality of the process, and progress towards the goals of engagement
- evaluation of the suitability of different engagement methods for different purposes
- providing a ready reference point to enable all participants to assess and comment on the process in which they were involved

In terms of their potential the standards had been demonstrated to have the capacity to assist in the improvement of practice. Those who had been involved endorsed them as a useful and empowering tool. On the basis of this evidence the Scottish Executive and a range of national agencies were keen to endorse and see the standards promoted.

But the pilots also highlighted a range of challenges that would need to be addressed if these outcomes in the specific contexts of the pilot projects were to come to characterise the conduct of community engagement between public agencies and communities across Scotland. Key concerns identified were:

- Overcoming practical problems of disseminating awareness of the standards across the vast range of services and policies in which they are potentially relevant
- Making sure that relevant people don’t just know about but understand and have the skills to apply the standards
- A widespread culture of organisational resistance to participatory practice in public services
- A persistent scepticism among community and agency representatives who have been the victims of poor quality engagement in the past

What was being identified was a new set of needs that required further visioning of outcomes. What were identified would be best described as intermediary outcomes that could lead toward the ultimate outcome sought i.e. best quality community engagement by all agencies in all communities in Scotland.

In proposing a dissemination and support programme SCDC identified a series of new intermediary outcomes that should be sought. These were:

- Public bodies and partnerships that must engage with communities through Community Planning\(^8\) understand and are committed to promoting and using the Standards

\(^8\) [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/localgov/cpsg-00.asp](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/localgov/cpsg-00.asp)
• In their designated role (set out in the Working and Learning Together guidance) as facilitators of community engagement and capacity building, Community Learning and Development partners and their staff understand, apply and champion the use of the Standards.
• Community organisations and their representatives in regeneration areas (including those with a thematic focus) are able to use the Standards to support their involvement particularly in the context of Community Planning.
• All target groups for the Standards support programme will appreciate how they can work together to use the Standards to plan, conduct and evaluate both formal and informal approaches to community engagement in a range of contexts.

Postscript
Approval for funding of a support programme for 2005/06, focusing on these outcomes, was established with Communities Scotland and a new round of action planning commenced. This time the inputs were to come from a team of SCDC staff and associates working collaboratively with lead officers of community planning and community learning and development partnerships, focusing on a process that emphasised training and consultancy support to local champions of the standards. Outputs took the form of specific events and some additional support materials. Continuous feed in of monitoring information enabling evaluation against the outcomes has been built in to the programme.

At the time of writing, the story of the National Standards for Community Engagement is therefore a continuing one in which the LEAP approach provides guiding principles.

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9 http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/social/walt-00.asp