

The working of joint arrangements

Recent reforms of local government in England have led to the creation of many new joint arrangements, where district or borough councils work together to provide specific services. However, some types of joint arrangement work more effectively than others. This study, by Tony Travers, Stephen Biggs and George Jones of the London School of Economics, looked at local government in the six metropolitan areas and London to test how existing joint provision works.

- f** There is no powerful evidence that joint arrangements in these areas are any more or less effective at providing services than the elected multi-purpose authorities that preceded them.
- f** The following factors make joint arrangements more likely to be successful: a strong measure of financial independence or a low overall level of expenditure; a statutory rather than a voluntary basis; a level of political agreement between participating authorities; responsibility for technical services rather than for those more influenced by political standpoints; a dedicated administrative structure.
- f** Decision-making also tends to be most effective when joint arrangements are supported by dedicated units. Where joint arrangements rely on 'lead authorities', officers may experience difficulties in combining their dual role.
- f** Voluntary joint committees and agency arrangements are generally more accountable to their constituent authorities than the more powerful joint boards.
- f** Public awareness of the activities of joint boards and committees appears to be very poor. While in some areas, notably South Yorkshire, efforts have been made to publish a guide to these activities, the public generally remains in the dark about police, fire and other joint arrangements.
- f** Although joint committees are often seen by some district/borough leaders as places to send awkward or ineffective members, the professionalism of officers and dedication of most elected members plays a key role in ensuring the success of joint arrangements.

The need for joint working

Local government in Britain remains largely unconvinced of the merits of collaboration with their neighbours to secure effective service provision. Recent years have seen a major growth in local/regional coalitions for such purposes as lobbying for resources and for one-off developments like airports but the suspicion of joint provision in the delivery of statutory services appears to remain strong.

However, the structural reform of local government in 1986 produced a need for many more joint arrangements than had previously existed. The abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC) and the six metropolitan counties led to the removal of seven county-wide authorities. Many functions were passed down to the London boroughs and metropolitan districts which became, in effect, unitary authorities. Other functions were handed to an array of joint arrangements. Some of these were appointed by the Government, others were statutorily required of the boroughs and districts.

The most important joint arrangements within the metropolitan areas have included:

- *Joint boards*: required by law, these have considerable independence, including powers to precept on district/borough councils for resources (that is, setting their own budget and local tax). Many rely on support services, notably finance, from a 'lead authority'.
- *Joint committees*: voluntarily created (though some may be virtually compulsory), these set a levy on the districts/boroughs (which appears as part of the district/borough's own expenditure). They may have their own officers and administrative structure or may rely on officers from constituent districts or boroughs.
- *Agency arrangements*: where one district or borough provides a service on behalf of one or more other authorities.

There are, in addition, a number of informal and *ad hoc* agreements between neighbouring districts and between districts and counties.

Robustness of joint arrangements

A number of factors appear to influence the robustness of joint arrangements.

- *Political culture* It appears easier for joint arrangements to flourish where one political party dominates. In some areas, such as the West Midlands, local traditions of joint working are probably robust enough even with no political majority. In London - where there was no overall political control in any of the joint boards or committees between 1986 and 1994 - a consensual

style of operating emerged, suggesting it is possible to override some political differences. The more 'political' a service is, the more likely joint arrangements are to break up: those dealing with technical services are more likely to survive.

- *Institutional status* Those which must exist by law, such as metropolitan police and fire authorities, are inevitably most robust. Others are far less likely to survive, though some 'voluntary' committees have, to all intents and purposes, been imposed by Whitehall; for example, the Government had to impose 'voluntary' joint committees for waste management in many areas. Once established, those that are genuinely informal are likely to be less robust than those that are, in effect, required.
- *Expenditure* A separate power to precept (in effect, its own separate budget and council tax) tends to enhance joint boards' independence. Joint committees that levy on districts/boroughs (where the spending of the committee is divided up and added to the individual budgets of constituent authorities) are more controversial. Both the method of splitting up the overall cost of the committee and the impact of the expenditure on the capped budgets of constituent councils create pressure on the joint committee. Joint arrangements that have virtually no cost are more robust than those with higher expenditure.
- *Levels of local control* The desire of constituent districts/boroughs to have very local control over a service can have an impact; for example, pressure from individual authorities in South Yorkshire and the West Midlands for individual authority control over waste management undermined the joint arrangement.
- *Competing priorities* Where there are common priorities and all districts are likely to gain from joint action, for example, bidding for European Community funding, joint arrangements are easier to sustain. In other areas, such as trading standards, disagreements between boroughs may develop.
- *Officer networks* The existence of strong and cohesive professional networks has strengthened joint arrangements in all six metropolitan areas and in London.

Are joint arrangements effective?

It remains very difficult to test for effectiveness in such a way as to make defensible comparisons between different authorities or, for that matter, between joint arrangements and directly elected authorities. This study considered four issues: resources; decision-making processes; quality of service outcomes and the measurement of outputs.

- *Resources* Some joint arrangements find it easier than others to raise resources. Precepting authorities are in a stronger position than those levying on the budgets of constituent districts/boroughs. The autonomy of fire and police precepting authorities is further enhanced because they have separate, identifiable Standard Spending Assessments (government measures of need to spend, used for the calculation of Revenue Support Grant). Precepting authorities also have separate capital guidelines.
- *Decision-making* This tends to be most effective when joint arrangements are supported by dedicated units. Where joint arrangements rely on 'lead authorities' for support, officers may experience difficulties in combining their dual role. Leadership can also affect decision-making: chairs who assume a powerful role may strengthen the effectiveness of joint bodies. The quality and stability of membership are also important: in some areas, joint arrangements are seen as places to send awkward members, though in others members have real concerns for the service. Finally, members of voluntary agreements often feel less prepared to take decisions without referring them back to their home council. Such a fragmented approach almost certainly impedes the efficiency of the decision-making process but may also improve its quality by increasing local consultation.
- *Service outcomes* There is no convincing, comprehensive evidence to suggest that joint working significantly reduces overall service quality, although testing for such quality and effectiveness is not simple. Performance measurement in services such as fire, waste management and trading standards does not provide specific evidence about the successes or failures of joint arrangements. Comparing the previous, directly elected, multi-purpose, county councils and the more recent joint authorities is even more precarious.

Accountability of boards and committees

There are two main problems: first, there is no direct link with the electorate; second, there is a lack of expertise at district/borough level. The ability effectively to scrutinise and hold another body to account depends on a knowledge, understanding and awareness of the issues involved which districts and boroughs often lack.

Joint boards are often accused of being too independent of their constituent districts and boroughs. The Local Government Act, 1985, put a number of checks in place to secure the accountability of joint boards, including the possibility that constituent authorities could recall members (though there is no evidence of this ever

having occurred). Districts and boroughs ask few questions of joint boards. In many places the receipt of minutes and an annual report represents the full extent of contact. Where there is a lead authority, it can provide a direct link between constituent councils and the joint arrangement. Co-ordinating committees offer another way of overseeing the activities of joint boards and committees.

Voluntary joint committees and agency arrangements are generally more accountable to their constituent authorities than the more powerful joint boards.

Accessibility

Evidence from several polls suggests only a tiny proportion of the public is aware of the vast majority of joint boards and committees; for example, a MORI survey for INLOGOV in 1987 found only four per cent of respondents who were aware of abolition knew the police service was the responsibility of a joint authority. In 1990, a Department of the Environment survey showed that in metropolitan areas, 86 per cent of respondents believed the police service to be the responsibility of either the district councils or central government.

Although awareness of metropolitan counties was never particularly high, a comparison of awareness surveys undertaken before and after abolition suggests the introduction of joint arrangements further reduced already poor levels of public awareness.

Joint boards and committees have taken a number of steps to improve public awareness, including promotional campaigns and the publication of annual reports. The West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority has established a Community Relations department to provide a co-ordinated approach to the fire service's local work. The London Fire and Civil Defence Authority has undertaken a survey of public awareness of fire safety, so as better to target resources. A model annual report is produced by the South Yorkshire Joint Secretariat which details the role and functions of all South Yorkshire joint authorities. Attempts at a higher profile have been made elsewhere, such as the formalising of the West Yorkshire Co-ordinating Committee through the creation of the Association of West Yorkshire Authorities.

Many joint boards and committees have developed devolved management structures. For example, most fire brigades are arranged on a divisional basis to allow local public impact on the service. Single points of access are being developed in some areas, usually in shopping streets or in the main reception area of civic centres. A number of waste regulation authorities undertake comprehensive publicity and consultation exercises with the publication of their draft plans. Formal consultative mechanisms have been established in West Yorkshire through local liaison groups

established when landfill sites are proposed. A similar local consultative process has been set up by the London Waste Regulation Authority.

There is no hard evidence that joint boards and committees are notably less accessible than the counties that preceded them, though they have proved incapable of generating a high local profile. This lack of public awareness means accessibility is limited compared with directly elected district and borough councils whose profile is raised by elections.

The future for joint arrangements

This study suggests many joint boards and committees have successfully provided local government services in recent years.

Joint boards are relatively robust because they must exist by statute. This powerful legal status may secure effectiveness at the expense of accountability. Where a government is absolutely convinced provision must take place across several districts or boroughs, a joint board with separate funding powers is the best solution. But local authority freedom is reduced by the imposition of such boards.

Joint committees are generally less robust than statutory boards, though the government may, effectively, impose such committees. Voluntary committees are fragile, and have financial arrangements that may undermine their robustness. However, where authorities are free to create or abolish joint committees, they are likely to be accountable though perhaps less accessible than their constituent districts and boroughs.

Agency arrangements are widespread and largely voluntary. They exist because their constituent authorities perceive advantage in joint working of this form. This suggests that as long as they remain effective, they will remain robust. However, they are contractually rather than directly accountable.

Accountability Accountability of joint boards and committees could be improved by: having them directly elected (ie they would become single-purpose authorities); having them partly elected and partly nominated; or having particular district/borough

members identified at the time of their election as candidates for joint authority membership.

The professionalism of officers and the legal pressures on elected members to secure reasonable provision have ensured that joint boards and committees have delivered functions not markedly different from what went before. Services may be marginally less accountable and less accessible, but there is no evidence they are less effective.

About the study

The study was undertaken on the basis of interviews and questionnaires completed by senior local authority officers and members throughout England. This research was backed up by analysis of earlier studies of joint provision.

Further information

The full report, *Joint Working Between Local Authorities: Experience for the Metropolitan Areas* by Tony Travers, Stephen Biggs and George Jones, is published by LGC Communication in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £6.50).

Related Findings

The following *Local and Central Government Relations Research Finding* looks at related issues:

- 23 The impact of population size on local authority cost and effectiveness (Apr 93)

The following *Summary* is also relevant:

- 2 Local government: the lessons from other countries (Mar 95)

For further details on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line for publications queries only; an answerphone may be operating).



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