



A critical evaluation of partnerships in municipal waste management in England

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Abstract

Partnership working is becoming popular as a strategic and operational approach to developing sustainable waste management. However, the evidence base to support partnership working is poor and the impact and potential of partnerships in the waste sector has not been analysed and assessed. This paper starts to address the gap in knowledge. It focuses on partnership working for the management of municipal waste, and identifies and characterises a range of different types including partnerships between local authorities and between local authorities and their service providers. Five models of partnerships are presented and illustrated through case studies. The paper is novel in applying an analytical framework for partnership working developed in healthcare [Hudson B, Hardy B. What is 'successful' partnership and how can it be measured? In: Glendinning C, Powell M, Rummery K, editors. *Partnerships, New labour and the governance of welfare*. Bristol: The Policy Press; 2002] to the public service delivery of waste and recycling services. The theoretical concepts of *synergy* and *governance* are used to inform this analysis and discuss the implications arising from emerging trends. Partnerships have defined members, a written understanding, a shared vision and a joint commitment to work together towards common objectives. Findings suggest successful partnerships have developed over the long-term, a *partnership lifecycle* exists where motivations, characteristics and activities change over time. Current partnerships appear to be primarily concerned with meeting targets and delivering efficiencies, which can lead towards more centralised decision making and aggregated services. We suggest that policy rhetoric promoting partnerships for delivering sustainable resource

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management and as a local governance mechanism is not borne out in practice and should be treated with caution.

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1. Introduction

With progressively tighter restrictions on municipal waste disposal to landfill and recycling targets in place, stakeholders in the UK waste sector are seeking to innovate to meet the challenges ahead. One response is the adoption of partnership working as a strategic and operational approach to develop sustainable waste management. For example, two-tier collection and disposal authorities in England are increasingly working together in partnership as well as with their service providers in the public, private and community sectors. Central government is a key force in promoting this approach, and many public service policies are now predicated on partnership working. There is a strong consensus amongst local authorities that partnership working is increasing and inevitable (Wilkinson and Craig, 2002).

Despite the rise of practising partnerships, empirical data characterising partnerships in the waste and recycling sector is largely absent and the impact and potential of partnership working has not been assessed. Consequently, there is little analysis to inform policy makers on key issues such as the nature of types of partnership arrangements, what partnerships are appropriate for particular contexts and functions, and if and how partnerships can demonstrate improved performance and outcomes. This paper provides a start in addressing this gap in knowledge. It draws on findings from a project funded by the ESRC's Sustainable Technologies Programme that contributes to understanding of local authority led waste and recycling partnerships through case studies and interviews with key stakeholders. The aim of the paper is to outline a range of partnership models currently operating, identify their motivations and highlight success and limiting factors. The paper will also discuss some of the implications arising from emerging trends in partnership working and the relationship between partnerships and the uptake of particular forms of technology or systems.

Drawing on theory suggests two overarching roles for engaging in partnership working (Mackintosh, 1992; Hastings, 1996; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Glendinning et al., 2002):

- as a mechanism to deliver *synergy*;
- as a mechanism for implementing networked and local *governance*.

We will use the two concepts synergy and governance. One view of collaboration through partnership is based on the assumption that organisations willing to combine resources to achieve objectives that they would not be able to achieve individually. Benefits of partnership working are often referred to as 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham, 1996) or 'synergy' (Mackintosh, 1992; Hastings, 1996; Mayo, 1997; Lasker et al., 2001). Synergistic benefits are about creating a whole that is more than the sum of the individual parts. It is more than an exchange of resources. Rather by combining knowledge, resources and skills the partnership is able to develop new and better ways of thinking and acting. Hastings

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