



PARES Strategic Dialogue 2012 29th March 2012, Brussels

**Local and regional partnerships:
Recommendations to employment services**

BACKGROUND

The PARES (Partnership between Employment Services) initiative is part of the Europe 2020 strategy. The initiative supports EU-level dialogue to promote cooperation between different forms of employment services (public, private and non-profit) and to identify where they can deliver complementary services, with the ultimate objective of improving the functioning of labour markets in Europe. PARES Strategic Dialogues (SDs) provide a forum for relevant stakeholders to discuss specific issues within this remit in order to develop consensus based recommendations targeted at policy makers and/or practitioners in order to take the issue forwards.

This second PARES SD dealing with *“Working in partnership at the local and regional level”* was held in Brussels on 29th March 2012 and brought together representatives from a wide variety of actors including public employment services, private employment services and federations thereof, local/regional authorities and national ministries as well as the European Commission and OECD (LEED programme). Discussion focused on key questions such as why use local and regional non-contractual partnerships to deliver employment services, what their focus should be, the role of the different actors, and how to ensure good governance for effective partnerships?

This document presents a series of recommendations for employment services and relevant actors which are derived from key consensus observations from the meeting. These recommendations will be presented at the next PARES conference in autumn 2012.

NO ONE ORGANISATION COVERS THE FULL RANGE OF COMPETENCES

Consensus observation:

The primary justification for establishing partnerships is that no one organisation has the full range of competences necessary to deliver the entire package of services needed to help particular client groups. This is particularly true at local level where problems are closely linked to local circumstances and may not match national priorities.

The first step in forming a partnership is for one or more organisations to recognise their own shortcomings and realise that working with others could help to provide better, more comprehensive and coherent services, and produce better outcomes for clients. Although local/regional partnerships are commonplace in some countries, in others they hardly exist and building partnerships will require a mentality shift, which will take time.

Recommendation:

Local/regional units of employment services of all types should undertake a process of self-examination and attempt to diagnose weaknesses in service delivery from the perspective of the client and the whole chain of support that they might need. Then take a look around and ask yourself questions such as: who else is providing services to the same clients or others with similar needs; to what extent do these complement or overlap with your own services; would it help the client if these services were better co-ordinated; do other actors have information about clients that would be useful to us, or vice-versa? If this review reveals any possibility that collaboration with one or more local actors could be of benefit to clients then initiate dialogue with the relevant organisations to discuss the possibility of working together.

ESTABLISHING A FAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENT FOR LOCAL/REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: LOCAL AUTONOMY

Consensus observation:

Specific local needs are often disregarded in national policies; local/regional partnerships are generally established in response to particular local/regional problems. The impetus to initiate partnerships should, therefore, come from local/regional actors (i.e. bottom-up approach rather than top-down). National level policy recognising the value of local/regional partnerships and giving local units the freedom to operate within partnerships is crucial to facilitate this process but must be flexible and not prescriptive. Ultimately, the decision to initiate a partnership and the subsequent structure and operational model of any partnership that is developed should be determined at the local/regional level in a way that best suits the problem at hand and has the best chance of delivering results.

Recommendation:

Heads of public employment services, ministers responsible for local/regional government and heads of other national level bodies with local units working in the field of employment or related services (e.g. health, social services) should review their policy regarding the autonomy of local units in relation to working in partnership with other actors in the local arena and the specific objective of improving services and outcomes for clients.

Ideally such a review would result in the issue of some form of statement/guidance directed at local units that:

- **recognises** (either generally or in relation to specific functions or client groups) the potential value for local units of working in partnership with other local actors offering complementary services;
- **encourages** local units to consider if, and how, partnership arrangements could improve the quality of services for clients;
- and **provides a framework** within which local units have freedom to initiate and develop partnerships.

In considering the degree of autonomy that local/regional units should have in relation to partnerships, policy makers should note that the OECD-LEED programme has identified six areas in which there needs to be flexibility at local level:¹

- ***Programme design***: local units need a degree of freedom to either design local programmes or adapt national programmes to suit the local situation;
- ***Budget control***: local units should have enough flexibility in how they spend their budgets to accommodate spending on partnership activities;
- ***Performance management***: notwithstanding central targets and performance measures, local units should be allowed to set local targets in agreement with local partners – common targets contribute significantly to a common understanding of what has to be achieved;

¹ This is compatible with the trend to decentralisation and management by objectives as currently observed in Public Employment Services. See: European Commission 2011: Decentralisation of Public Employment Services (Hugh Mosley), (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/keyDocuments.jsp?pager.offset=0&langId=en&mode=advancedSubmit&policyArea=0&subCategory=0&year=0&country=0&type=0&advSearchKey=pesreports>)

- *Identifying clients*: although there may be national policy regarding target groups and eligibility criteria, local units are best placed to identify who is most at need in the local area and need some scope to extend/adapt national criteria;
- *Staffing and outsourcing*: within agreed budget restraints, local units should have the freedom to staff their unit according to local needs and, if necessary, to outsource functions for which there is inadequate internal competence;
- *Collaboration*: local units should have the freedom to collaborate with any relevant actor in order to establish effective partnerships.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS: CLEAR FOUNDATIONS AND MUTUAL TRUST

Consensus observation:

Partnerships at local/regional level are founded on mutual recognition of the need to find solutions to particular local/regional problems. It is absolutely crucial that partnerships are founded on clear objectives and targets and that all partners buy-in fully to these. This requires that all partners are able to agree a strategy that is in line with their own interests as well as those of the client(s). This, in turn, means that each partner has to recognise that other partners may have a different agenda and that some compromise may be necessary. Ultimately, the success of a partnership depends on the full commitment of all partners and trust between partners.

Recommendation:

The preparation phase of a partnership is vital and should not be rushed. It is important to involve all partners in dialogue and ensure that all are clear as to the objectives of the partnership, agree the approach and their individual role. Once agreed these should be formalised in a partnership agreement to be signed by all members.

The objectives of the partnership should be set SMART², all partners should agree on how they define the quality of their partnership. Protocols for dissolving the partnership should be agreed in the preparation phase.

WHO TO PARTNER WITH?

Consensus observation:

Partnerships are not formulaic and have to be customised to suit the objectives and the local situation. It is important to involve all relevant actors.

Recommendation:

The actors responsible for initiating the idea of a partnership should take steps to identify all local actors who might have some relevant input to the issues to be addressed and ensure that they are encouraged to participate in preparatory dialogue. If key actors are reluctant to participate then the viability of the partnership should be seriously questioned.

WHO SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD?

Consensus observation:

² SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely

Although all partners should have equal status within a partnership, good governance requires effective leadership. Experience suggests that shared leadership does not work and that one organisation should take the lead.

Recommendation:

Partnerships should be led by a single partner, which should be the organisation carrying the most risk. This is not necessarily financial risk, but the organisation likely to bear the highest cost of failure in terms of liability to deal with clients that are not successfully placed/trained/etc. This might be the PES or the municipality.

ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

Consensus observation:

Employers are key to the placement of clients. It is crucial to engage with employers and involve them in partnership activities as much as possible. Yet employers, particularly in smaller enterprises, often do not have time to participate in activities not directly linked to their business, which can limit their level of engagement with a project.

Recommendation:

Partnerships should recognise the need to maximise employer engagement and take appropriate steps to sell the project to employers and ensure their involvement. Simple steps, such as organising events to suit the schedule of employers (e.g. early morning breakfast meetings) can help to increase engagement.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION:

Consensus observation:

Simply building a partnership is no guarantee that clients will receive better services or outcomes. Partnerships must keep an eye on their goals and outcomes and constantly question the value of their very existence.

Recommendation:

Functional partnerships should include in their partnership agreement mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation. At a minimum there should be an annual review of objectives and targets and an assessment of performance. An external evaluation is recommended to assess whether the partnership really adds value and to avoid partnerships self-perpetuating by setting targets that are too easily met; do not adequately address the problems at hand; or, institutionalise "mission creep".

Partnerships should make sure that performance/outcomes can be traced back to their activities.

In general, partnerships should be conceived with a limited lifetime. Partnerships that have achieved their goals or which no longer add value should be dissolved.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL/REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Consensus observation:

Although the objectives, structure and strategy of every local/regional partnership are tailored to unique local circumstances and may not, therefore, be readily transferable, there are always lessons that can be learnt from the experience of others and more efforts should be made to facilitate mutual learning.

Detailed case studies can be very extremely useful in providing examples of how partnerships work, the types of services they deliver, the types of partners that need to be involved, etc. and it would be helpful if more case studies were readily available. However, in terms of gaining real practical/operational advice there is no substitute for direct contact with members of existing partnerships. A simple directory of partnerships with basic details of main partners (including contact details), targets and objectives would help people interested in establishing partnerships to find existing examples of partnerships with relevant experience and allow them to make contact. A further step would then be for exchange visits to give staff practical experience of how the partnership operates.

Recommendation:

Within the context of the PARES initiative, the European Commission should:

- o support the implementation of a website offering access to a range of case studies and other materials related to local/regional partnerships;
- o consider working more closely with the OECD LEED programme in order to avoid duplication of effort and promote exchange of information on partnership case studies
- o consider establishing a European directory of local/regional partnerships in order to facilitate direct contacts between actors looking to establish or further develop partnership.

For more information on the PARES initiative, please contact DG EMPL C3:
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