

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 604

Pension, Disability and Carers Service partnerships research

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A report of research carried out by Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Contents

Acknowledgements	v
The Authors.....	vi
Abbreviations.....	vii
Summary	1
1 Introduction.....	5
2 Methodology	7
2.1 Introduction.....	7
2.2 Phase 1 – Scoping research	7
2.3 Phase 2 – mini-group discussions and depth interviews.....	8
2.3.1 <i>Recruitment</i>	9
2.3.2 <i>Encouraging participation</i>	9
2.3.3 <i>Research materials and moderation</i>	10
2.4 Phase 3 – Online bulletin boards	10
2.5 Phase 4 – Development of tracking questions	10
3 Literature review: what makes a partnership effective?.....	11
3.1 Introduction.....	11
3.2 Why use partnerships?.....	12
3.3 Clearly defined objectives	13
3.4 Governance	15
3.5 Clear leadership.....	16
3.6 Systems of accountability.....	17
3.7 Consultation and communications.....	18
3.8 Conclusion	20

4	Understanding the context.....	21
4.1	Introduction.....	21
4.2	Awareness of the Pension, Disability and Carers Service	21
4.3	Interactions with the PDCS	23
	4.3.2 Local partners.....	24
4.4	Trust and confidence in PDCS/TPS/DCS	27
5	Understanding partnerships	31
5.1	Introduction.....	31
5.2	Communication and exchange of information	31
5.3	Equality, mutual interests and shared goals	33
5.4	Ability to influence an outcome	34
5.5	Openness and transparency	35
5.6	Timely consultation processes	35
5.7	Greater understanding about partner organisations	37
6	Current working practices and future challenges.....	39
6.1	Introduction.....	39
6.2	National level stakeholders.....	39
6.3	Local level stakeholders.....	42
6.4	Improving partnerships	45
6.5	Future challenges.....	46
7	Conclusions and considerations	49
8	Tracking stakeholder opinion in the future	53
	Appendix A Discussion guide	57
	Appendix B PDCS Advisory Forum – Terms of Reference (draft).....	63
	References	65

List of tables

Table 2.1	Sample and research activity matrix	9
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List of figures

Figure 3.1	Negative cycle.....	14
Figure 3.2	Arnstein’s ladder of participation	19

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Abbreviations

DCS	Disability and Carers Service
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PDCS	Pension, Disability and Carers Service
TPS	The Pension Service
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

Summary

Research objectives

In order to help the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) understand how best to continue working in partnership with its key stakeholders, the objectives of this research were to:

- explore 'what works' in consultation and partnership activity, through a brief scoping stage;
- examine external organisations' perceptions of the effectiveness of PDCS' consultation, partnership activity and working relationships, and what drives them; and
- help develop a set of questions which can be used by PDCS to measure and monitor the effectiveness of its consultation, partnership activity and working relationships in the future.

Methodology

We undertook a three-phase programme of research, which consisted of the following stages:

- **Phase 1 – a scoping phase of desk research:** a review of relevant recent literature on consultation and partnership working;
- **Phase 2 – a qualitative research phase:** including seven extended (two-hour) mini-group discussions, and a series of six telephone depth interviews with representatives of external organisations. External organisations included national consultation forum representatives and national and local partners; and
- **Phase 3 – online bulletin board discussions:** online bulletin board discussions which included: (a) partners unable to participate directly in the groups and (b) representatives involved in Phase 2 to offer additional views after the event.

Understanding what makes partnerships effective

When properly managed, partnerships between the public sector and the third sector and voluntary organisations can be very effective in delivering services and improving engagement with service users. They can be particularly useful in ensuring high quality service delivery to some groups who may otherwise fall through the net of traditional public service delivery and also in avoiding duplication of services. However, when badly managed partnerships can result in ineffective use of resources and poor service delivery.

Our literature review found that effective partnership working should be based on:

- clear objectives that all partners and stakeholders understand and believe in;
- a structured and clearly defined system of governance – outlining roles, responsibilities and risk management;
- strong leadership;
- a clearly defined system of accountability to all partners and stakeholders; and,
- consultation at the outset of the project and ongoing communications through the life cycle of the partnership.

The context in which PDCS' partners operate

Awareness of PDCS among stakeholders was low, as was expected. However, national stakeholders expressed greater awareness than local stakeholders of the merger of the Disability and Carers Service (DCS) and The Pension Service (TPS). Awareness and knowledge of TPS and DCS individually, and the roles they fulfil, was high amongst all stakeholders, whether local or national.

National partners are generally more satisfied than local partners with their interactions with PDCS:

- National partners were typically satisfied with the regular contact they have with PDCS. They used a variety of channels, and were particularly appreciative of the advisory forum and direct contact with senior level staff. Due to these avenues of communication, national stakeholders felt well informed about developments at PDCS.
- Local stakeholders were typically less satisfied than national partners with the level and nature of interaction. While they experienced almost daily contact over the telephone, they had much less face-to-face contact than they felt they needed. However, when they did have face-to-face contact with outreach workers, for example, they were impressed. They also felt that PDCS could be more proactive in its communications with stakeholders – it is stakeholders who were typically the ones to instigate contact, rather than vice versa. Often, changes to working practices came as a surprise. While appreciating the speed and ease of access to online information, they saw this as a poor substitute for direct contact.

Understanding partnerships

All stakeholders identified communication and exchange of information, shared goals, openness, understanding of stakeholders' organisations and genuine consultation as being key factors in successful partnership working. Regarding consultation, stakeholders understood that all their suggestions and advice would not necessarily be adopted. However, they were keen to have the opportunity to influence decisions and to have feedback on their opinions from PDCS.

Current working practices and future challenges

Amongst national stakeholders, there was a broad sense of satisfaction with the current working relationship with PDCS. Indeed, longer-serving stakeholders felt that it had improved considerably over the last decade. They did suggest, however, that some contacts (such as forums) could be adapted to allow all stakeholder organisations to participate, regardless of resources or geographic location – they were keen to avoid a 'one size fits all' format.

Local stakeholders were much less satisfied and were less likely to feel that they were valued partners than were national stakeholders. This relative dissatisfaction was largely driven by a lack of face-to-face contact and a strong dislike of the telephone call centre contacts. These two factors resulted in a perceived lack of ownership and meant that decision making about cases was poorly understood by stakeholders.

Tracking stakeholder opinion in the future

We would recommend a mixed method approach to future stakeholder research. Our experience with similar stakeholder perception research suggests that a quantitative survey approach would be beneficial. This would provide a robust and representative sample of the views of your stakeholders, while allowing for benchmarking of findings over time and comparisons with other similar organisations. Furthermore, given the success of the telephone depth interviews and the relatively low participation in the online bulletin boards for this research programme, we would suggest a short telephone survey might be the best way to approach PDCS in the future.

Occasional qualitative interviews of group discussions would be important to identify new and emerging issues. Depth interviews also typically prove an excellent way to explore the views of more senior stakeholders.

Key areas on which future tracking could focus include overall satisfaction with the service provided by PDCS, stakeholders' understanding of PDCS, communication with PDCS – preferred methods, frequency and levels of satisfaction, PDCS' understanding of stakeholder organisation, and the key values that stakeholders see as important, such as partnering, listening, feedback, proactivity, clarity of role and ease of contact.

1 Introduction

TPS and DCS—both agencies of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)—merged to form a new executive agency called the Pension, Disabilities and Carers Service (PDCS) in April 2008. To customers and stakeholder organisations, the merger is still largely invisible, since the PDCS has continued to use the existing TPS and DCS brands. In due course, however, it is envisaged that the two agencies will increasingly operate as a single entity under the PDCS banner, helping integrate the two services more effectively.

The newly merged PDCS organisation believes that to be successful in achieving its objectives and delivering its vision of *working together to make lives better*, it will need to work effectively with a greater number and range of partners. There are many benefits of working in partnership, especially with third sector organisations.¹ For example, working in partnership can help the PDCS to reach more vulnerable groups who may be reticent about approaching a government agency. Third sector organisations can help the PDCS learn more about the customers it is supposed to serve. Furthermore, by engaging with third sector organisations it can be possible to determine how national policies will work at a local level, and the PDCS can ask for assistance in ensuring the design of these policies and the application into services is as effective as possible.

However, we have found in much of our past work² that external organisations raise a number of issues in relation to working in partnership with Government. Some are concerned that this kind of relationship challenges their independence. Others often raise the point that they are either: (a) not provided with enough time in which to respond meaningfully to consultations which, in turn, diminishes

¹ The third sector is a diverse, active and passionate sector. Organisations in the sector share common characteristics: non-governmental; value-driven; principally reinvest any financial surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives. The term encompasses voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives and mutuals, both large and small.

² Ipsos MORI report: The relationship between HM Revenue and Customs, its customers and the voluntary and community sector; <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/research/report32.pdf>

the value they can add; and (b) that they are not consulted early enough in the formulation of initial ideas and decisions.

Taking these issues into account, and in order to help the PDCS understand how best to continue working in partnership with its key stakeholders, the objectives of this research were to:

- explore 'what works' in consultation and partnership activity, through a brief scoping stage;
- examine external organisations' perceptions of the effectiveness of PDCS' consultation, partnership activity and working relationships, and what drives them; and
- help develop a set of questions which can be used by PDCS to measure and monitor the effectiveness of its consultation, partnership activity and working relationships in the future.

At this stage this report focuses primarily on the first two objectives, and provides initial recommendations about the third.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

To meet the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1, we undertook a three-phase programme of research, which consisted of the following stages:

- **Phase 1 – a scoping phase of desk research:** We carried out a review of relevant recent literature on consultation and partnership working. This was done for two reasons: to ensure that we were aware of and made the most of existing knowledge of how to make partnership working and consultation effective; to help us identify issues to cover in the main stage qualitative research and inform PDCS' thinking on areas to focus on in the remainder of the study;
- **Phase 2 – a qualitative research phase:** We conducted seven extended (two-hour) mini-group discussions, and a series of six telephone depth interviews with representatives of external organisations. External organisations included national consultation forum representatives and national and local partners. This main stage explored these groups' views on how effective TPS/DCS is in its partnership and consultation activities, and how PDCS might work more effectively with them in future; and
- **Phase 3 – online bulletin board discussions:** We launched an online bulletin board discussion which included: (a) partners unable to participate directly in the groups; and (b) representatives involved in Phase 2 to offer additional views after the event.

In Chapter 7, we provide some recommendations about the approach and the types of questions that could be used to inform future research that PDCS may wish to undertake tracking and benchmarking the opinion of external stakeholder organisations.

2.2 Phase 1 – Scoping research

In any research, there is little point in replicating what is already known. Therefore, we undertook a short initial phase of desk research to add value to the study by

enabling us to review the growing body of recent literature on consultation and partnership working with external organisations.

Once the search was completed, we synthesised the results, summarised key policy developments, identified areas of commonality and difference between existing studies and explored the reasons for any differences. If gaps were found in that information, we redefined our search parameters and gathered data that were missing. The desk research was conducted as an iterative process that was sufficiently flexible to allow us to incorporate additional avenues of enquiry if these emerged in the course of carrying out the research.

We reviewed a range of sources, including:

- relevant research that central Government departments have carried out;
- studies conducted on behalf of, or by, organisations elsewhere in the public sector;
- research carried out by local authorities and the third sector; and
- Ipsos MORI research that is in the public domain, such as our recent work for the Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA).

We assumed a UK-wide scope for the sources we reviewed, and the full bibliography is located in the appendices. We produced a short review report setting out the findings of the literature review on key themes, and the report has been included in this report in Chapter 3.

2.3 Phase 2 – mini-group discussions and depth interviews

The sample of external organisations that the PDCS had available for this research contained up-to-date contact details but was relatively small in size. Given this small sample, a qualitative approach was more appropriate than quantitative for this research. This qualitative approach allowed us to explore the views of partner organisations in detail, providing us with rich information and analysis on the perceived effectiveness of the current consultation and partnership activities being undertaken by the PDCS/TPS/DCS and considerations for the future.

We initially intended to undertake eight extended mini-group discussions. Extended mini groups are discussion groups with five to six participants, rather than eight to ten as in a normal discussion group, and each discussion lasted for two hours rather than the usual 90 minutes. This design was intended to enable us to explore participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to the subject matter in sufficient depth.

However, during the recruitment for these mini groups it became evident that the national consultation forum stakeholders to be involved in this research were extremely busy people. During the recruitment, whilst we were able to carry

out one mini group with national representatives, feedback indicated that we were unable to encourage sufficient representatives from a diverse range of organisations to carry out the second group, due to pre-arranged work-related commitments. Therefore, we decided to carry out a series of six telephone depth interviews with these people instead, in order to gain their insight and input at a time and place which was convenient for them.

Based on discussions with the PDCS, and in light of the difficulties encountered during the recruitment stage of this research project, we undertook the following activities with external organisations:

Table 2.1 Sample and research activity matrix

National consultation forum representatives	TPS	Group 1 – London
	DCS	Telephone depth interviews with six representatives in London-based organisations
National partners	TPS	Groups 2-5 – East London, York, Liverpool, Fife
	DCS	Groups 6-7 – Cardiff and Birmingham

2.3.1 Recruitment

The PDCS provided us with named contacts and identified the type of partnership and working relationship that each organisation has with TPS/DCS. Recruitment was undertaken by our Field department and we used our experienced and professional recruiters who have experience of undertaking similar studies.

2.3.2 Encouraging participation

Due to the limited size of sample, it was important to have a **number of contingencies** in place. These included being flexible on locations so that if it transpired that we could not get the participation rates needed in one of our chosen areas, then we would look to hold the groups elsewhere. As highlighted above, we also offered the option of telephone depths in place of group discussions if recruitment proved to be particularly difficult.

Incentives were also used to help to secure participation, especially since many participants needed to travel to the group discussion from outside the local area, which will incur travel expenses. We offered an incentive of £50 for each participant which is in line with incentives offered on other similar studies. This incentive took the form of a charitable donation which was made payable to the participant's organisation (or another charity of their choice).

A key factor in encouraging stakeholders to join the research was to convince them of the usefulness of the exercise, and that their participation was valuable and meaningful. Based on our experience, we sent out an **advance letter** as an effective way of doing this, as well as giving organisations the opportunity to opt out of the research if they wanted to. We printed out opt-out letters on Ipsos MORI's letterhead, to emphasise the independent nature of our research

and reassure them of guaranteed confidentiality. Finally, we offered participants the opportunity to see a **summary of research findings** for themselves which, in our experience, provides a strong incentive for participation as they can see that they have been listened to. This was mentioned in the advance letter and at recruitment.

2.3.3 Research materials and moderation

The design of the discussion guide is critical to the success of every qualitative project. The discussion guide can be seen in Appendix A, and it was designed to cater for both: (a) those who have a consultation relationship with TPS/DCS; as well as (b) those who have a partnership relationship with TPS/DCS.

We also asked participants whether they would be happy for Ipsos MORI/PDCS to re-contact them to take part in research in future. This will ensure that, should you decide to run a survey with this audience to benchmark performance, you will be able to access an up-to-date and 'warm' sample file, thus leading to better response rates.

2.4 Phase 3 – Online bulletin boards

The viability of this approach was gauged whilst we were in the field, and participants said they would be interested in taking part. Online bulletin boards were set up to include the views of partner organisations that are unable to take part in the discussion groups in the research and also of gaining the follow-up thoughts of those who have participated. We ran two bulletin boards: one for organisations that have not taken part in the discussion groups, and the second for those which have.

2.5 Phase 4 – Development of tracking questions

Considerations are detailed in Chapter 8, and these will be developed in more detail subsequently. The benefit of this is that it ensures the research is holistic and that the findings from the desk research and the qualitative phase are put to good effect by not only highlighting the key issues regarding partnership working but, additionally, provide a solid foundation for future research.

3 Literature review: what makes a partnership effective?

3.1 Introduction

Working in partnership has increasingly become a central facet in the delivery of public services. There are a number of perceived benefits to working in partnership – such as more efficient use of resources and closer engagement with users. However, these are at times curtailed by poor management, meaning that delivery to service users can be ineffectual and resources poorly implemented. The Audit Commission describe partnership work as a *'potentially powerful tool for tackling difficult policy and operational problems that local agencies face'*.³

It offers a (quite literally) multi-faceted and user-focused approach to tackle the most **complex** social issues facing UK society. At a local level, this is especially true for those groups of society who are harder to reach and hence, are more **vulnerable**. By working with local partners, Government departments can engage with these harder to reach groups and get them involved and contributing to policy making.

The Treasury defines a partnership as *'a group of stakeholders brought together from a range of organisations to be responsible for tackling mainly long-term challenges and opportunities in which they have a shared interest'*.⁴ This definition reflects the changing nature of partnership work from a donor-recipient relationship towards a more collaborative and equitable type of partnerships often when *'both*

³ Audit Commission (1998). *A Fruitful Partnership: A management Paper*.

⁴ Frye, M. and Webb, A. (2002). *Effective Partnership Working*. Report for HM Treasury.

parties join their resources to achieve common benefits'.⁵ Although there is no single consensus on the meaning of partnership, Brinkerhoff has suggested that there are two principal aspects that are necessary for a successful partnership. These are:

- **mutuality** (interdependence and commitment between partners and equality in decision making, rights and responsibilities); and
- **organisational identity** (maintenance of each partner's own mission, strategies and values).⁶

This report presents a review of recent literature concerning partnership working. The first section outlines the merits of using partnerships. The report then turns to the acknowledged aspects that lead to effective partnership working:

- clearly defined objectives;
- governance;
- clear leadership;
- systems of accountability;
- communication; and
- consultation.

3.2 Why use partnerships?

Partnership working can be very effective, when implemented and governed properly. A report by HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office states that '*more effective partnerships lead to greater benefits for people and communities through better policies, programmes and services*'.⁷ However, it is important to consider that in many cases, partnership working may not necessarily be the most suitable approach for tackling a particular issue or improving a service. Partnerships can be expensive to set up and are rarely a suitable response to a short-term problem. It is difficult to evaluate partnership working because there is very little in the way of an evidence base for the effectiveness of the service delivered. Although some evidence of success (or failure) is often recorded at a local level, the evaluation process is often primarily qualitative and difficult to use comparatively.

However, this evidence base suggests that partnership working can be an effective use of resources because it prevents duplication of services offered. Partnerships

⁵ Blagescu, M. and Young, J. (2005). *Partnerships & Accountability: Current thinking and approaches among agencies supporting Civil Society Organisations*. Working Paper 255, Overseas Development Institute.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ HM Treasury/Cabinet Office (2007). *The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration*.

often ensure a higher quality of service provided; especially for those groups in society who often fall through the net of traditional public service delivery. The Ministry of Justice has proposed that more effective partnership working between themselves and third sector organisations will lead to a reduction in re-offending.⁸ An Ipsos MORI report on behalf of HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) suggests that partnership working between the Government department and frontline organisations from the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is effective in engaging vulnerable groups. Service users stated that they felt more comfortable contacting a VCS organisation as HMRC can seem intimidating and '*not on their side*'.⁹ In fact, recent research by the National Consumer Council revealed that some third sector organisations develop better relationships with their users than private companies.¹⁰

A special report by the Local Government Ombudsman makes the important point that it is impossible to 'prescribe a single set of arrangements for ensuring their activities properly reflect the interests of their main stakeholders' for local partnerships due to their diversity.¹¹ However, it is clear from across the literature which has been reviewed that there are a number of key aspects which emerge for making a partnership effective, as discussed in the following sections.

3.3 Clearly defined objectives

Partnerships which are deemed to be effective are those which have a clearly defined set of objectives which all partners believe in and trust. Often, it appears that partnerships are set up without a clear view of the motivations as to why working in a partnership will improve the service which is delivered to service users. Frye and Webb describe the need for a common vision '*which all partners believe and to have confidence in their collective ability to achieve it*'.¹² Figure 3.1 indicates the main processes needed in effective partnership working. 'Direction' is the first step, from which all others follow. It is clear that if the objectives are not defined at this stage that this has a negative implication for the following stages of the project.

⁸ Ministry of Justice (2008). *Working with the third sector to reduce re-offending: securing effective partnerships, 2008-2011*.

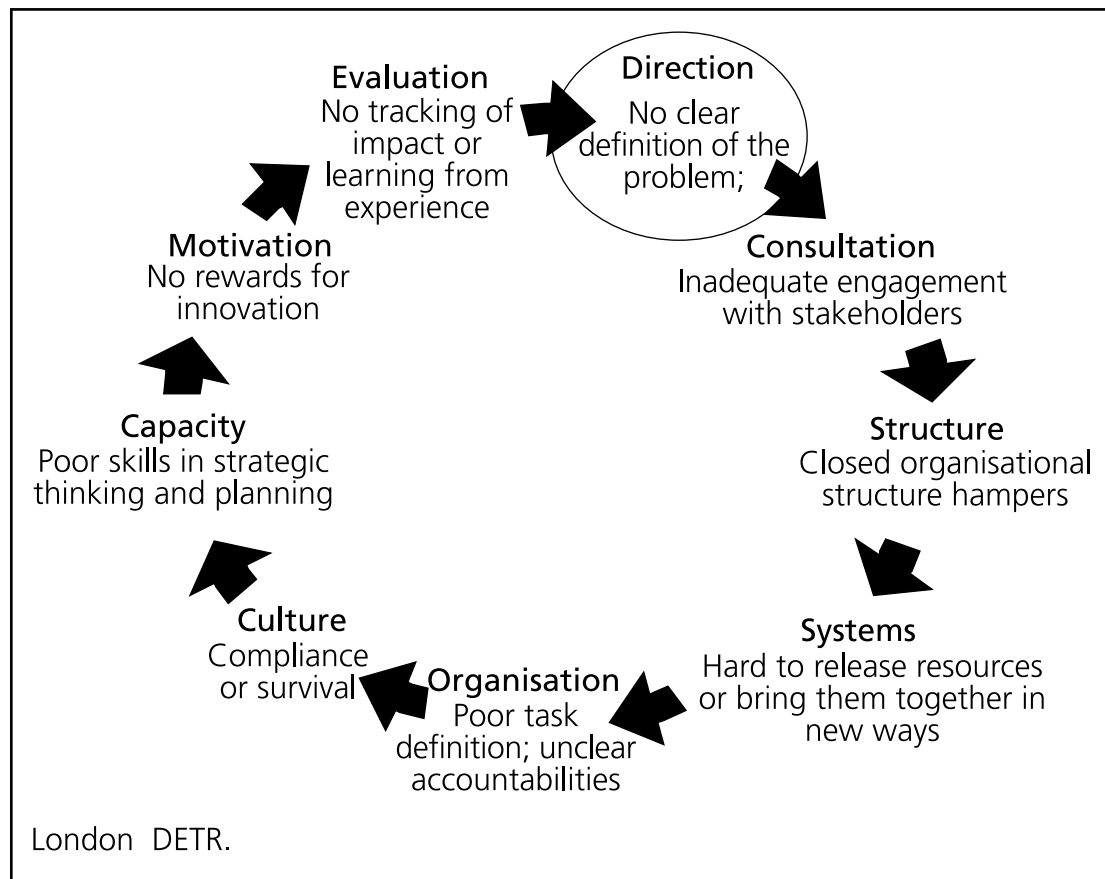
⁹ Hall, S., Pettigrew, N., Robins, A. and Sweetman, R. (2007). *The relationship between HM Revenue & Customs, its customers and the voluntary and community sector*. Ipsos MORI for HMRC.

¹⁰ National Consumer Council (2007). *Delivering Public Services*, referenced in HM Treasury/Cabinet Office, *The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration*.

¹¹ Local Government Ombudsman (2007). *Special Report – Local Partnerships and Citizen Redress*.

¹² Frye, M. and Webb, A. (2002). *Effective Partnership Working*.

Figure 3.1 Negative cycle



As Stewart goes on to explain if there is an absence of defined problems and expected outcomes, these will only be compounded by weak management, a culture of systems compliance, poor motivation and no effective feedback systems.¹³ Put simply, clear objectives start the project on the right footing.

One example of a partnership, Health for Huntingdonshire, is used in the paper *A Fruitful Partnership*. When the partnership was first set up, there were no clear objectives set. The steering group had a wide ranging composition of representatives from a diverse number of local organisations. Without clear objectives, the steering group did not understand the main aims of the partnership so there was no unified vision of the purpose of having a partnership.¹⁴ This initially led to poor service delivery and use of resources.

A related issue is that an effective partnership relies on all agencies fully understanding the benefits of working in partnership and knowing what the other agencies actually do. As Blagescu and Young highlight, the starting point for

¹³ Stewart, M. (2002). *Systems Governance: towards effective partnership working*. Paper to the Health Development Agency Seminar Series on Tackling Health Inequalities, London.

¹⁴ Audit Commission (1998). *A Fruitful Partnership*.

any partnership should be recognition that partners have different backgrounds and expertise.¹⁵ In research conducted among VCS organisations who work with HMRC, it became evident that there was a lack of awareness of each other's role and work. This was acting as a major barrier in their joined-up service delivery.¹⁶ Agencies need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses that each other bring to the partnership. This should have the implication of building stronger and more trusted relationships between different key players in the partnership.

There is also evidence to suggest that it is not solely the objectives of the partnership itself which are important to clarify at the outset. There needs to be clarity and synchronicity of partners' motivations for working together. Without well thought-out motives shared by all parties, in a report for the Partnership Fund, NatCen argue that partnerships are less successful.¹⁷

3.4 Governance

There is evidence to suggest that comprehensive agreements between partners, detailing roles and responsibilities, and clear organisational structures lead to more effective partnerships. In fact, the Audit Commission reports that Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) without partnership agreements are twice as likely to encounter problems as those with them.¹⁸ The Audit Commission offers the partnership between the London Borough of Islington and Islington PCT as an example of a partnership ruled by good governance. At the inception, a **clear vision** was decided with joint priorities, agreed outcomes and a range of **performance measures**. Formal **procedures for dealing with conflict of interest** between partner agencies were also put in place. These official lines of governance ensured that there was uniformity and structured evaluation throughout.¹⁹

Partnership working can often result in a higher number of risks than individual service delivery. For example, there are risks around failing to align agendas and communicating ineffectively. It is therefore imperative that partnerships have good risk management systems as partnerships can begin with a higher level of uncertainty and lack of clarity about the risks involved. This arrangement must reflect the diverse cultures inherent in different types of organisations and acknowledge the different risks that such organisations will face.²⁰ A clear risk management

¹⁵ Blagescu and Young (2005). *Partnerships & Accountability*.

¹⁶ Hall *et al.* (2007). *The relationship between HMRC*.

¹⁷ NatCen for DWP (2007). *Helping older people engage with benefits and services: an evaluation of the Partnership Fund*.

¹⁸ Audit Commission (2005). *Governing partnerships*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ HM Treasury and Office of Government Commerce (2005). *Managing risks with delivery partners: a guide for those working together to deliver better public services*.

system will expect, monitor and respond to risks across the organisations involved. Another important aspect of governance is the continual review and evaluation of whether outputs and outcomes merit continued involvement of different partners. A recent report concerning partnerships between local authorities and private companies concerning waste management highlighted this need to evaluate ongoing involvement.²¹ The authors comment on examples when such evaluation has not happened. Evaluation is especially necessary in light of the higher level of risk and potential for resource waste.

3.5 Clear leadership

Effective leadership is a very important element in partnership; and often one of the hardest to carry out in practice because by choosing a single leader, there will be at least one (in many cases several) member of the team who are used to leading in their own organisation. It is also often disregarded as an important feature due to the collaborative nature of partnerships. Recognition of strengths and weaknesses of different team members and efficient delegation are important in good leadership practice. In a report by the UK Department of Transport, Local Government and Regions, good leadership in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) would '*inspire vision, enthusiasm and commitment and command trust of other partners*'.²² Hambleton *et al.* have recognised that there are a number of different types of leadership which are apparent in partnership working:

- **Designed and focused leadership:** A high profile leader uses their position to influence and leverage others. The leadership has a clear vision of the future direction of the project and a dedicated budget.
- **Implied and fragmented leadership:** Consensual (and often confused) view of direction for the project. Leadership is low profile, to the point of often being invisible and is, therefore, less transparently accountable. It does allow for joint decision making.
- **Emergent and formative leadership:** Relies on implementation to shape policy, learning as they go along, using ad hoc resources.

For the majority of partnerships, it is expected that designed and focused leadership is the most easily implemented.²³ In a report directly related to LSPs, the Audit Commission comments on the need of leadership which involves

²¹ Slater, R., Frederickson, J., Thomas, C., Wield, D. and Potter, S. (2007). A critical evaluation of partnerships in municipal waste management in England. *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, 51(3), pp. 643–664.

²² Stewart (2002). *Systems Governance*. LSPs are non-statutory, multi-agency partnerships set up in local communities to enable more effective usage of resources to tackle local issues.

²³ Hambleton, R., Sweeting, D. and Stewart, M. (2002). *Leadership and partnership in urban governance*. Final report to ESRC UWE Bristol.

relationship management, trust and openness.²⁴ This highlights the importance of the 'softer' aspects of leadership (such as friendly catch-ups and encouraging team camaraderie) which are vital in an environment when trust and goodwill need to be harnessed. For example, in the Wessex Project Partnership for offenders with mental health problems, there was an atmosphere in which some of the smaller agencies felt threatened by other agencies' involvement and did not wish to transfer information openly. In this situation, strong leadership was vital to develop the intra-team working to enable effective partnership service implementation.²⁵

3.6 Systems of accountability

It is essential for effective partnership working that shared responsibility does not translate into diminished accountability in practice. The Audit Commission defines accountability as:

*'The way in which organisations in all sectors, and individuals in positions of power within them, are answerable in an honest and open fashion to other organisations and individuals.'*²⁶

However, it is important to note that, in practice, accountability is played out in a number of different ways and one of the main issues surrounding accountability in the literature reviewed is the lack of a universal definition of the term. In the literature reviewed, there is some concern that often, there are not adequate measures for accountability on the behalf of service users. The Audit Commission report, *Governing Partnerships – bridging the accountability gap*, declares that the complexity and ambiguity of responsibility structures in partnerships means that there is often weakened accountability.²⁷ In fact, the Local Government Ombudsman special report states that partnership working can lead to questions of where responsibility lies, especially when something goes wrong. The report shows that there are often poor complaints processes in partnership working and that it is often unknown where the '*final buck stops*'.²⁸ For this author, an important measure for ensuring effective partnership work is for there to be clarity regarding accountability established at the outset of the partnership.

Jones and Steward discuss the problems of accountability regarding LSPs. The paper posits that current arrangements for accountability for LSPs are confused because only local authorities have direct responsibility to the electorate and lack

²⁴ Hughes, M. and Kennedy, J. (2009). *Working Better Together? Managing local strategic partnerships*. Audit Commission.

²⁵ Audit Commission (1998). *A Fruitful Partnership*.

²⁶ Audit Commission (2009). *Working better together? Managing Local Strategic Partnerships*.

²⁷ The Audit Commission (2005). *Governing partnerships – bridging the accountability gap*.

²⁸ Local Government Ombudsman (2007). *Special Report*.

powers over public partners to *'make that accountability genuine'*. The argument is that partners should be obliged, via a formal agreement, to follow the lead of the authority to ensure all partners are accountable to their service users.²⁹ Clear joint accountability also has the effect of making partnerships seem egalitarian – reinforcing their collaborative nature and making all partners responsible. Accountability to service users is not the only type of accountability which needs to be considered in partnership-work. Partners are also accountable to each other and often to other stakeholders and funders (especially in the case of third sector organisations). An effective partnership needs full clarification of each of these levels of accountability and the impact that external factors may have on the ability of the partnership to deliver services successfully.

3.7 Consultation and communications

There is a wealth of literature which reviews the need for consultation with stakeholders and service users in the design of policies and plans. In recent years, research has concentrated upon the importance of citizen participation and involvement.³⁰ The Scottish Executive has defined consultation as the following:

*'Consultation is a time-limited exercise when we provide specific opportunities for all those who wish to express their opinions on a proposed area of our work (such as identifying issues, developing or changing policies, testing proposals or evaluating provision) to do so in ways which will inform and enhance that work.'*³¹

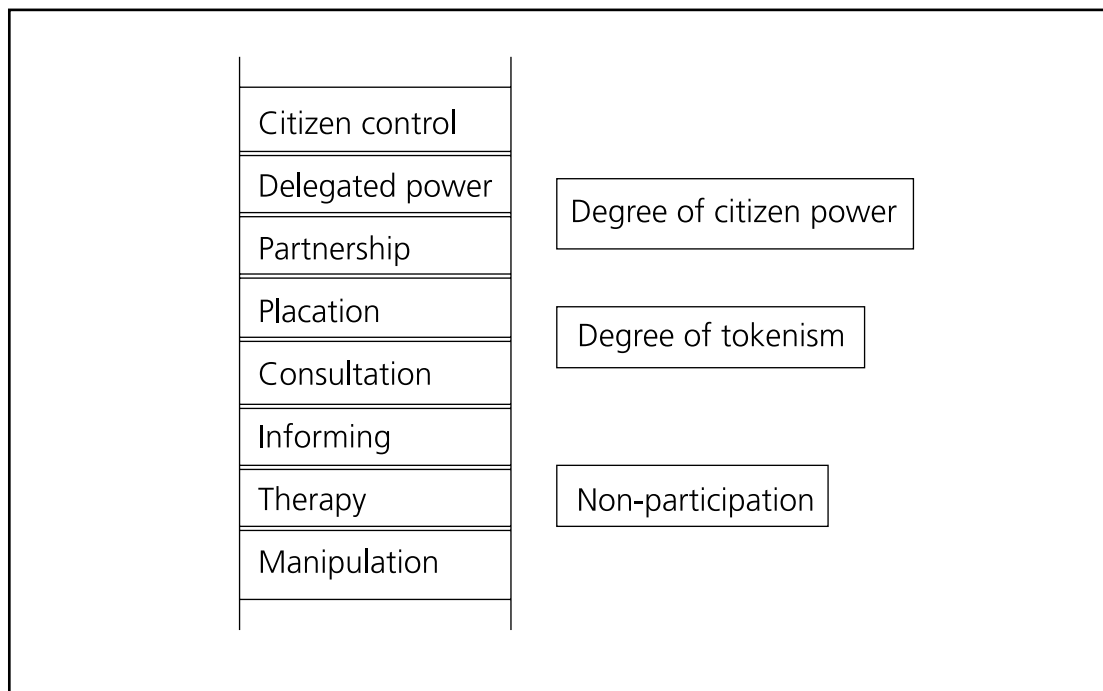
In fact, many local authorities have developed good practice guidance to ensure that they are consulting their citizens on a regular basis and in an effective manner. Consultation must be transparent and enable anyone who has an interest to participate. Further to this, consultation must take place at the outset of the policy design to minimise the perception of tokenism. The importance of consultation has been developed from Arnstein's ladder of participation – a framework for the differing levels of citizen engagement. This is shown in Figure 3.2.³²

²⁹ Jones, G. and Steward, J. (2009). *Accountability in public partnership – the case of Local Strategic Partnerships*. Public Money and Management.

³⁰ See for example the change in emphasis among Local Authorities (for example, in the Place Survey 2008).
[http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/sccwebsite/sccwspublications.nsf/591f7dda55aad72a80256c670041a50d/9f531a54401ae23b802573e5004b8d6e/\\$FILE/consultation%20framework.pdf](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/sccwebsite/sccwspublications.nsf/591f7dda55aad72a80256c670041a50d/9f531a54401ae23b802573e5004b8d6e/$FILE/consultation%20framework.pdf)

³¹ Scottish Executive (2004). *Consultation Good Practice Guidance*.

³² <http://www.partnerships.org.uk/part/arn.htm>

Figure 3.2 Arnstein's ladder of participation

At the lower levels of the ladder, there is 'non-participation' on the part of the citizens or service users. Levels three and four are when participants are able to have a voice, without the power to ensure their voice has influence. From partnerships upwards on the ladder, the participant begins to have responsibility and decision-making power.³³

Effective communication with partners and consultation with stakeholders is particularly important for Government departments who partake in partnerships. The literature suggests that knowledge sharing and the implementation of objectives based on this knowledge is often not based on full consultation at the beginning of the project life cycle. Consultation with community leaders and small-scale voluntary organisations can offer '*real insight into the challenge facing individuals and groups in a specific area – they are able to offer a grassroots perspective*'.³⁴ For many commentators, this consultation is needed before a partnership is set up to ensure that the proposed purpose of the partnership is well received in a local community. The Ministry of Justice has also called for consultation with third sector organisations to understand the needs of service users, share good practice and for help to design services. Additionally, this report draws on the importance of dialogue throughout the partnership work across the range of funders, commissioners, providers and partners on what works and

³³ Although it is worth noting that in more recent literature, consultation is deemed to be a more interactive process – hence, placing it higher in the ladder.

³⁴ Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (2004). *Getting engaged: achieving closer working relationships between companies and local communities*. CAF Research and Policy Briefing.

what does not. This will have a direct effect on the quality of the evaluation of the work.³⁵ Furthermore, commentators cite the need for consultation to ensure the diverse range of voices in the third sector are heard and that their views directly feed into policy and partnership objectives.

Two-way communication is also vital to ensure equilibrium of power in partnerships. VCS workers commented that they did not feel that HMRC respected their views or believed that they had specialist knowledge of which HMRC were not aware.³⁶ The literature generally commented on the need for fluid knowledge sharing, rather than the process which is often currently in place in which Government departments consult third sector organisations using prescribed questions.

3.8 Conclusion

There are a wide variety of factors to consider when trying to ensure effective partnerships between Government departments and other organisations. It is a difficult balance to ensure that there are fixed systems of accountability and governance but yet allowing the partnership to be fluid and allow innovation and on-going improvement. Effective partnership working should be based on:

- clear objectives that all partners and stakeholders understand and believe in;
- a structured and clearly defined system of governance – outlining roles, responsibilities and risk management;
- strong leadership;
- a clearly defined system of accountability to all partners and stakeholders; and
- consultation at the outset of the project and ongoing communications through the life cycle of the partnership.

³⁵ Ministry of Justice, *'Working with the third sector'* (2008).

³⁶ Hall *et al.*, *'The relationship between HMRC'* (2007).

4 Understanding the context

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines:

- awareness of the PDCS, its role and its recent merger;
- current ways in which partners interact with and find out about the PDCS and its services and their views on these experiences – this will inform the most effective communication channels for partnership working, as well as providing a context to what elements of partnership working they feel the PDCS currently does more or less well; and
- levels of trust and confidence in the PDCS/TPS/DCS.

4.2 Awareness of the Pension, Disability and Carers Service

Local partners were generally less aware than national partners of the service the PDCS delivers or of its specific role. They suggested that the PDCS' role should be about processing people's applications for Pension Credit or benefits for disabled people and carers both fairly and quickly. Additionally, some stated that it should work to ensure that all those entitled to State financial support are claiming the maximum amount possible.

'I think [their role is] to work in partnership with as many organisations and statutory bodies as they can so that they can get the referrals through.'

(Fife TPS local partners group)

National partners were more fully aware of the DCS and TPS as individual entities, due to their access to them in national forums and the personal contact points they have developed. In contrast, local partners tended to think of both agencies as part of the DWP or at least a single Government department.

'To us, it's the DWP, full stop. Then you come across Pension Service people, they will still call themselves Pension Service people, I don't think the staff know that they're part of a different structure.'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

'I had to look on the website yesterday because I didn't know. I'd never thought of it in terms of PDCS, I've always thought the DWP.'

(Cardiff DCS local partners group)

Local partners tended not to be aware of the structure and were generally not aware of the merger. Some felt that the structure and make up of PDCS/TPS/DCS is constantly changing, and that they are generally not informed about these changes. This is due to the limited contact they have with TPS/DCS staff, and because the staff they are in contact with have their own specific remits. This makes it difficult for local stakeholders to get a sense of PDCS acting as one coherent whole and exacerbates the feeling among such stakeholders that staff are not aware of the 'big picture'. As such, this leads to stakeholders feeling that they are not fully informed about or engaged with PDCS, meaning that they do not see their work with PDCS as an effective partnership.

'They work in boxes, some of the Pension Service staff are really lovely people but they're not part of the bigger picture and they have their targets. And if it's outside of their target they won't come to the meeting. So you can't talk holistically about Disability and Pensions, if they're a Pension Service all they're interested in is Pension Credits, full stop.'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

The national partners tended to be more aware of the merger, and they acknowledged that little has changed in relation to the way the organisation works. For example, working procedures for the partners do not seem to have changed – they are still giving the same advice to their service users in relation to which organisation they speak to.

'It still, in terms of dealing with its customers, deals with them as the Pension Service or the Disability and Carers Service.'

(London national partners group)

Of those who were aware, some thought the merger is a good idea in principle, but these benefits have yet to be seen. There was a range of advantages mentioned by national stakeholders. These included: being more joined up at national level; improved efficiency in the administration of benefits where there are overlapping customers across TPS and DCS; savings made in overhead costs; and the potential for improving delivery of disability benefits through local pension distribution network.

'If someone is entitled to Pension Credit and has some other issues...he can contact one department instead of two departments, it's really easy.'

(London national partners group)

However, participants also felt that the merger will raise significant challenges: how does the PDCS relate to other DWP departments such as Jobcentre Plus? How will the IT and data systems be merged? If the customers ever find out about the merger, will they have increased expectations relating to the smoother processing of their benefits claims?

'A general problem of DWP agencies...a lot of the working in them is in silos so, within the Pension Service the stuff to do with your Pension Credit and the stuff to do with your State Pension...they're trying to integrate all these things but, traditionally, they have worked down these lines of these particular benefits.'

(London national partners group)

Despite there being some awareness at national level, most participants felt that the merger, or the decision to keep the brands separate, had not been explained to them properly. In some cases, this meant that stakeholders felt somewhat ignorant of changes at TPS/DCS, leading to some confusion. Indeed, some national stakeholders were aware of the merger but continued to receive personal correspondence, in their capacity as customers rather than partners or stakeholders, from the separate bodies, further increasing the confusion.

'This may be my ignorance but, I wasn't aware of any explanation of why they wanted to merge the organisations.'

(London national partners group)

'I don't think...I got an in depth explanation of what the overall ideal vision would be, whether in time this would move towards a branding, merging of the two as well, or whether...this was the final merge.'

(London national partners group)

4.3 Interactions with the PDCS

This section outlines how national and local partners interact with the PDCS, and presents their perceptions of these experiences. It deals with national partners and then local partners separately.

4.3.1 National partners

National partners have regular contact with the PDCS through a variety of communication channels and, generally, were satisfied with the interactions they had had. For instance, many spoke about the quarterly national advisory forums, and annual meetings which included presentations from Government ministers.

The advisory forum meetings are perceived as very useful in hearing about what is going on.

'Over the years, especially since the development of the forum, DCS have come to understand our client group a lot more and they are always willing to work alongside us to achieve the best result for our clients. Thus the relationship of 'them and us' has started to erode.'

(Bulletin board participant)

These partners also stated that direct contact with senior members of the advisory team is an important factor in feeling that the relationship with PDCS is an equal partnership and that their views are taken seriously. Direct contact of this sort has been helped by having consistent personnel being involved in their work over a lengthy period of time.

'There are individuals at the PDCS forums...named individuals that we can go back to, and I know that if I send them a case study...it will be dealt with or it will be channelled through to the appropriate sections.'

(London national partners group)

As a result of both of these mechanisms, national partners feel informed and updated about the latest news, or at least know who to contact if they have any questions. This is reflected in later chapters on partnership working.

4.3.2 Local partners

Among local partners, actual contact with the PDCS departments is varied. It included:

- contact with the DCS/TPS on a nearly daily basis, generally by telephone on behalf of their service users. To help facilitate this, they called the national call centre rather than a specific named adviser;
- more sporadic face-to-face contact with local outreach staff/visiting officers;
- attendance at networking events such as National Carers Week, which was generally their only opportunity to meet the high level staff; and
- using the website.

Local partners explained that, in general, they tend to contact the DCS/TPS to find out about issues of interest, rather than the other way round. This means that changes would often come as a surprise, or that they would hear about them through another partner, rather than from the PDCS/TPS/DCS directly. This has important implications for their perceptions about partnership working, and their accounts of experiences of consultation in so far as it leads local stakeholders to feel that communicating with them is not a high priority for PDCS and that they are not truly equal partners.

'Word of mouth or you ring up and you ask for something and they say, "oh it's not that any more..."'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

Local partners spoke negatively of the **telephone system**. The options on the call centre telephones were perceived as too demanding for their clients to understand. They also felt that staff in the call centres were often unsympathetic, inflexible and sometimes unknowledgeable about the claim system. In relation to these issues, they thought that the service quality depends heavily on the individual you speak to, and there is inconsistency in service provision.

'You get somebody [on the telephone] who'll do their utmost to help you. And you'll get somebody who'll promise to ring you back in an hour and they won't help you with anything for three days.'

(Cardiff DCS/TPS local partners group)

'There was a situation last week with, not Pension Credit, with State Pension. A young woman rang and gave me a direct line to deal with a particular situation. I was highly impressed with her taking an initiative...but that's just a one off.'

(York TPS local partners group)

This highlights one of the key issues for local stakeholders – the perception that, when dealing with the PDCS call centres, the organisation can be somewhat 'faceless' and that there is no-one to take ownership of cases. As we have seen, face-to-face or named contact is greatly appreciated by stakeholders and is felt to underpin successful partnership working. This lack of ownership was felt to be a consequence of the type of staff they believed were employed at the call centres – not fully-trained and engaged professionals but, rather, people who do not intend to stay long in their role, are not engaged and lack the knowledge to provide satisfactory assistance to stakeholders.

'With the call centres, I think they must have a high turnover of staff. I think a lot of people come out of the college or use it as summer jobs.'

'Yeah. Sometimes they don't know what they're talking about.'

(Two local stakeholders, Cardiff)

Other local partners noted that these call centre staff tended to lack expertise about the various conditions the partners work with, including often hidden conditions such as Myalgic Encephalopathy (ME). Participants also thought that the helpline staff lacked training and experience as to how to deal with some issues. For example, in Liverpool participants cited a lack of understanding of priorities, so that elderly people facing a crisis or recently bereaved, were not put ahead of claims that were routine.

Local partners also described inconsistency of claim outcomes, and thought decisions were largely based on whose desk it lands on despite the complex application procedures. Again they are generally being more negative about the central staff that they have to telephone than the ones they meet face to face.

'So you wonder if that first person isn't getting it right, perhaps they won't get it right all the way along the process.'

(Cardiff DCS/TPS local partners group)

Local partners are generally more impressed with the **local outreach staff**, who they interacted with the most. They were positive about visiting officers, who were seen as more approachable and professional and it was this attitude that ensured that a few local partners felt they had a good rapport with them. Those stakeholders who had the benefit of this sort of direct contact felt much more informed about events at PDCS and reassured that their cases were being dealt with in an appropriate manner, increasing their sense of being a partner with PDCS. However, there is a perception that the TPS/DCS/PDCS do not have enough of these staff. There is a sense that there is a lack of resource in this area and that such outreach workers would do more if they had the time.

'It's a fact that we all cover such a wide and diverse area and [the outreach worker] is the common denominator within...He's very proactive but he's just a one man band.'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

Many stakeholders had accessed information **online**, via the **DWP website**. Those who had used it were very impressed because it was seen to provide quick access to all the relevant forms and was thought to be up-to-date. Stakeholders often preferred it to long phone calls with long periods of being kept on hold. In many cases, stakeholders agreed that the website was accessible and a useful source of information.

'Their website is pretty good actually, the DWP website...yeah, it's quite clever actually.'

(Cardiff DCS local partners group)

However, amongst local partners, there was sense that online information cannot be a substitute for human contact. As was apparent throughout the research, stakeholders, whether local or national, expressed a strong preference for direct contact. This helped them feel that someone had ownership of their cases and made communication easier, both factors which influence whether or not the working relationship is seen as an effective partnership.

'The benefits and carers services, that number has always been the same and when you go there the whole system is quite helpful and they put you through in the past. But if you go into the main system of the benefits, because it's all online and there is no offices open to the public or anything, that has a very different feel to it.'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

Some local partners were less certain about contacting PDCS by **email**. This was often because they were only provided with generic email addresses rather than

a named address. Consequently, they were unsure as to how quickly someone would deal with their query, if at all. As a result, stakeholders preferred to make contact by phone. Despite the misgivings about the call centre, this was seen as the only way to ensure that cases were being dealt with.

'Phone really is the preferred option in a way because you know that you've got through even if you don't actually get a response, emails, I don't know, we don't have any sort of direct email addresses because it's a call centre.'

(York TPS, local partners group)

Similarly to the national partners, local partners highlighted the importance of having **personal contacts** within TPS and DCS offices. Being able to build up rapport with individuals who they can exchange information with was believed to be very useful when interacting with the PDCS, as it aided communication and provided reassurance about someone at PDCS taking ownership.

'We have consistently asked The Pension Service to provide us with named manager contacts, or supervisor contacts, for the residents that we're covering in Waltham Forest. And that has been stonewalled consistently.'

(East London TPS local partners group)

4.4 Trust and confidence in PDCS/TPS/DCS

At the national level, trust and confidence in the PDCS/TPS/DCS is high. The organisation was seen as better than some other organisations or Government departments, such as the Department of Health, because the PDCS is believed to consult them on key issues and, furthermore, has taken the time necessary to build a good rapport with its partners. The only thing that undermines the way the organisation is perceived amongst national partners is that it is perceived to be very bureaucratic though some did state that this is a natural consequence of the fact that it is a very large organisation. However, the result of this was thought to be that it is very difficult for the PDCS to make decisions quickly.

Generally, however, national partners spoke favourably about the PDCS and stated that they found the information provided to them by it credible, in that it provided explanations of decisions that had been taken and provided useful background information to help stakeholders in their own work.

However, there was a difference in opinion amongst local partners. Local partners explained that they trusted the local outreach officers whom they had regular contact and, consequently, are able to build good relationships with. They tended to be more cynical about staff working centrally though. This is often driven by the fact they have face-to-face contact with the former. Such direct contact can, however, help avoid any cynicism and improve stakeholders' views of central staff. For example, one participant in the Birmingham group went on an organised visit to Jobcentre Plus/benefits contact centre and was impressed just because he got to meet the people face-to-face who he normally phones.

'I think I have every confidence in a person that I meet face to face, who is like [the outreach worker], who takes the time and trouble to explain things and says that things aren't perfect, and that I can relate to. I have no confidence in the system at all because I suspect that there's an agenda for them and we only get to know what we're supposed to know.'

(Birmingham DCS local partners group)

Positively though, there was a perception among local partners that the extent to which they trust the PDCS has increased in recent years. This was because its staff were thought to be more focused on working collaboratively with partners than previously. Evidence of this was given in the fact that PDCS staff now take the time needed to explain complex issues (such as policy changes, or amendments to how services are delivered) in a clear way. In addition, there is some level of consistency in the contacts provided which helps partners to build up a level of rapport with the PDCS. They stated that this was in contrast to their manner previously when it was thought to be difficult to acquire a dedicated named contact. This led some to believe that the PDCS did not want to engage with them and, consequently, drove mistrust.

'You couldn't get their name, you couldn't get any kind of direct contact person, you couldn't get all of these things...But now it's humanised and I think that has increased their credibility.'

(York TPS local partners group)

'Them being something along the line of customer friendly these days... I think that has increased their credibility considerably. They are customer friendly, they don't use a whole load of...jargon, they will come out and explain things.'

(York TPS local partners group)

It became apparent from our research that trust was also linked to perceptions about the amount of knowledge that a member of staff at the PDCS has around the issues they are dealing with. Local partners were more likely to be confident in someone who illustrates some expertise in specific issues, such as brain injury or mental health problems.

'First line of contact has to be somebody who has respect for people. It's got to be someone who knows the issues.'

(Cardiff DCS/TPS local partners group)

However, local partners thought that there were more steps that needed to be taken in order to build trust. For instance, some stated that the PDCS/TPS/DCS is often not proactive enough, not only in its dealings with stakeholders, but also with customers. There was frustration with the 'arms length' approach, whereby less direct communication was preferred to more immediate approaches.

'This is the problem – they send out letters rather than actually phone the person.'

(Cardiff DCS/TPS local partners group)

Local stakeholders, in particular, found it frustrating that they were rarely given ample warning of events that may prove beneficial to their work with PDCS. While they did not feel that there were ulterior motives in this poor communication, it contributed to the sense that PDCS did not truly value them as partners.

'It's always like, "oh, I've found this, can you help out", rather than, "we are going to be going to this great big event on Monday week, would you like to come along?".'

(East London TPS local partners group)

Local partners in Birmingham also stated that they would have more faith in the work of the organisation if they thought it was making more of an effort to ensure that all those who are entitled to State financial assistance are claiming what is owed them. There was a sense among these partners that, currently, the organisation waits for customers to come to it with a claim rather than it getting the message more widely known about what help is available for those in need.

5 Understanding partnerships

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses conceptual perceptions about what the PDCS' stakeholders, at both a national and local level, think makes a good working partnership. The issues explored in this chapter link back to those outlined in Chapter 3. Stakeholders highlighted the following overlapping issues:

- communication and exchange of information;
- equality, mutual interests and shared goals;
- openness and transparency;
- greater understanding about partner organisations;
- ability to influence an outcome; and
- timely consultation processes.

These are discussed in more detail below, and any differences between national and local stakeholders are highlighted where appropriate.

5.2 Communication and exchange of information

Communication and regular exchanges of information was seen as crucial by both local and national partners. All partners stressed that feeling listened to is vitally important in consultation and partnership working. In most cases, stakeholders felt that this was an approach that they had successfully adopted themselves with other partners and that could be easily used to improve their partnership with PDCS.

'Regular exchange of information, maybe having regular workshops and things like that. I think we're all in the habit of attending various workshops related to our own roles or our own targets.'

(Birmingham DCS/TPS local partners group)

This was a particularly important issue amongst local partners, in several respects: Firstly, local partners stated that partnership requires **knowing who you are dealing with and who you are talking to** in order to build rapport, ensure clear communication and be assured that your views were being listened to. It also provided a sense of ownership – that there was someone looking after your issues at the partner organisation.

Secondly, they believed that a partnership is based on a **two-way exchange of skills and information**, from Government departments to local stakeholders, and vice versa. For instance, local organisations felt that they have a vast amount of expertise at the grassroots level. This expertise lies in relation to understanding the groups and communities who are customers of the PDCS, and the disabilities and age related issues which affect them. Consequently, they felt that Government needs to engage with these partners to learn from this expertise. At the same time, it is important that Government informs stakeholders of any changes to policy that might affect them. Lacking this information, stakeholders may give the wrong advice to clients, meaning that they do not receive the benefits that are due to them.

‘So there’s kind of creative stuff that’s done at a grass roots level if you like, and they seek out ideas about how best to target pension take up. And they’ll go around different sheltered accommodation units doing little take-up drives. So I think, locally, the staff are very clued up and quite good.’

(East London TPS local partners group)

In the Liverpool group, local partners explained that the exchange of information should also include providing feedback about referrals from agencies (this helps with the charities’ targets or, at the least, provides them with an evidence base) and the sharing of best practice.

‘We also work with The Pensions [sic] Service, they deliver an outreach session once a week from our practice. They help us with queries, and they save us time in this regard. We can refer people to them, and they can help that person much more easily.’

(Liverpool local partners group)

Thirdly, related to this, they believed that a partnership needs to be based on **clear and systematic avenues of communication in both directions** between government and partners. Stakeholders liked to know that their views were listened to, no matter whether specific suggestions were ultimately influential. Furthermore, clear communication from PDCS made stakeholders feel that the partnership was valued. Without clear two-way communications, stakeholders felt somewhat dictated to.

‘And this is where it’s more like dictating people.’

(Fife DCS/TPS local partners group)

5.3 Equality, mutual interests and shared goals

Being treated as a **valued and equal partner** is vital. Partners at all levels stated that they did not want to feel that they are being dictated to but, rather, consulted and involved around areas of mutual interest. At the root of this is the importance of developing a two-way relationship based on equality and shared gains, where benefits are gained for all partners in the relationship.

'A partnership is an arrangement where two people bring something different that's mutually advantageous.'

(East London TPS local partners group)

'The most important aspect of partnership is mutuality – having an equal amount of success for both partners.'

(Birmingham DCS/TPS local partners group)

'Well, partnership, the very word implies a sort of two-way thing, that...all the parties have got something to contribute and so it's pretty important that the partnership ought to operate in that way.'

(London national partners group)

National partners also explained that this is driven by sitting down and creating the aims of a partnership together for mutual benefit – almost all stakeholders, local or national, felt that shared goals and mutual aims were foundations of effective partnerships.

'I was going to say one of the...key things to forming a partnership is that both partners are involved in creating the aims of the partnership... The parameters, what's important for it to be looking at and what's it not going to be looking at. And I think what we touched on earlier on is that the Government, the departments form an idea that they want to form a partnership, what it's for, what they want to get out of it, and then they go and find a partner...without [the partner] having the opportunity to really shape what the project's going to be about.'

(London national partners group)

This involves making the effort to draft a memorandum of understanding about what the partnership is about together. Doing so ensures that each partner is aware of their own responsibilities within the working relationship, clear rules are established and all those involved know what they are expected to contribute to the partnership. Formalising the partnership in this way ensures buy-in from all those involved and reduces the potential for misunderstanding.

'We've actually been involved in a few joint working ventures, with the Department of Health and people like the Local Governor Association and the Association of Directors of adult social services are other charities involved. It's always been quite successful in getting quite a good collaboration right from the start...I think that has come from the fact that, even before we set out what the objectives would be, we sat around a table discussing what it is that we want to get out and how we were going to go about it. Then there were clear rules assigned to different partners about how each partner could contribute, so that there wasn't just one partner doing everything and others maybe getting a free ride. There was a purpose for everybody being there and everybody was aware of what their role would be.'

(London national partners group)

'There should be some sort of memorandum of understanding between partners, on what basis you're doing...what are the objectives, how are you going to achieve them. There should be a written understanding of all the responsibilities of the partners.'

(London national partners group)

5.4 Ability to influence an outcome

Stakeholders, again at both local and national levels, explained that consultation and partnership working should take place around **decisions which they can influence**. The ability for partners to influence the outcome of a decision making process is crucial. This allows stakeholders to feel valued and ensures their buy-in. Without this, they may feel disengaged from the process. Lacking involvement in this way increases the likelihood that they will be unable to help their customers. Stakeholders explained that the PDCS would need to listen to what is said and consider implications for change. It also means that there is little point in trying to initiate consultation or partner-based relationships about issues where key decisions have already been made and agreed before they are brought to the table for discussion. Being consulted on a predetermined agenda is frustrating and demoralising for partners, so consultations ought to be undertaken early in the decision-making process. Stakeholders were often cynical about 'tokenistic' consultation, where they felt that PDCS was merely paying lip service to their opinions.

'It is Government policy that statutory agencies should work in partnerships, so one of the reasons they're doing it is because...they have to get Brownie points for it.'

(London national partner)

This, therefore, could involve an approach to partnership that is focused around specific niche interests. In this manner, Government could consult and develop partnerships around focused areas of interest and invite assistance and input where third sector organisations can bring their expertise to the table to have an impact on the outcome.

'Involving VCS staff and volunteers in the training of call centre and other staff would be cost effective and improve services.'

(Bulletin board participant)

5.5 Openness and transparency

Another inter-related issue is the need for **openness and transparency** on behalf of all parties involved in partnership working.

'I think there needs to be clear guidelines to clients. Clients should have some, a publication which will direct them to where they go. That doesn't mean to say they've got to actually get there, but at least they know who deals with what.'

(Cardiff DCS local partners group)

This was particularly important for national partners involved in advisory forums for the TPS and DCS. There are various advantages of this:

- if the PDCS is open and transparent then they will know about policy issues well in advance of changes affecting them in their jobs, allowing them to adapt and maintain the highest level of service to their customers; and
- partner organisations will know what issues are open for proper discussion so that: (a) they do not waste unnecessary time trying to create change when there is no possibility of that happening; and (b) they focus limited available time providing opinions that can have a proper impact on the outcome.

5.6 Timely consultation processes

National partners felt that consultation processes are vital around key policy issues and changes to any of the documents or processes which affect their work. However, research participants felt that it is important that: (a) there is **sufficient time** for national partners to contribute properly to these processes; and therefore (b) these **consultation processes start early on** during the policy making process.

'Consultation events are well organised, but it is the outcomes of the consultation process that are more important.'

(Bulletin board participant)

This is especially the case where national partners are expected to consult with the PDCS' customers, and where national partners are umbrella organisations or membership organisations (e.g. the Princess Royal Trust for Carers), or where national partners have their own local organisations (e.g. CAB). They explained that it is timely to undertake consultation throughout these networks as there are many disparate parties who have valid opinions to offer and whose perspective needs to be considered. As this process can often take a considerable length of time, it is important to get this under way as early as possible in the decision-making process.

'I think the point there about giving national organisations time to consult their local organisations is a big thing because a lot of national organisations, like The Princess Royal Trust for Carers has 145 independently run carer centres, who all have their own chief execs, have their own board of trustees etc, and they send a memorandum of understanding for part of our network. Now our role really at the national level is to represent this network, so for that to happen to we need to get the consultation document, we need to read it, summarise it, bring out key points then get it out to our network to have a look at...all of that can take months basically.'

(London national partners group)

Local organisations considered that consultation is important too, but have less experience about being consulted on issues that impact on their work. On the other hand, the partners who attended the Liverpool group explained that they felt somewhat 'consulted out' and that the important issues, like a preference for local services rather than national helplines, and the problems with short-term funding for local organisations, were already well known, and felt that further consultation on these issues was unnecessary. Local partners saw **consultation as useful** only when it has a **clear objective and is actually involving them in the development of local services and determining local goals**.

In these circumstances, local partners felt that **the range of local organisations involved in consultation should be broadened** to include groups run by the elderly, for example, such as the local Pensioner's Forum or Older People's Voice.

When undertaking consultations, national and local organisations thought that a varied range of consultation approaches should be involved to keep people interested and make sure that the consultation process is accessible. Local partners in Liverpool suggested that qualitative consultation was more productive and more appealing, and that sending out a questionnaire would not encourage the elderly, for example, to take part, due to potential difficulty in reading such material and returning their responses. A group discussion environment would be likely to encourage people like this to offer opinions that might otherwise be ignored. This sentiment was echoed by national partners as well.

'The consultation event starts, I always find it quite interesting and stimulating to be honest. I always go having read the paper, got some thoughts together and thinking that I've already probably got the key points out of it and then, especially maybe some of the smaller ones where you're round the table, six, ten people, a facilitator, where there's a good environment for discussion, the things, the things people say, just speaking to other people from other organisations can really prompt things.'

(London national partners group)

5.7 Greater understanding about partner organisations

A **greater understanding** of the intricacies of the third sector was highlighted as crucial to successful partnership working by both local and national stakeholders. Participants explained that partnerships could be better served if PDCS had a clearer understanding of how the third sector operates and the interdependencies between public and third sectors. The complexity and diversity of the voluntary sector means that the public sector needs to invest more time in understanding its peculiarities in order to work out what each partner needs and to ensure that the working relationship truly succeeds.

'I think that's the general point about what sometimes doesn't happen with Pension Service or other Government departments, it's not fully understanding who their partners are...charities are groups, often rather complex organisations and all work in slightly different ways...I've got a feeling that a lot of people don't really understand the voluntary sector very much and could do a bit more.'

(London national partners group)

Local partners agreed, stating that they thought that senior TPS managers should spend time on the ground to get a better sense of the issues facing the partners before developing partnerships. Members of the Birmingham group stated that the Government needs to recognise third sector partnership as a business model, rather than seeing it as *'a pain in the side'* as they currently do, and realise that public and third sector are **interdependent** and that Government needs to invest in these organisations to ensure that they are able to take part in partnership working and consultations effectively and to their maximum potential.

6 Current working practices and future challenges

6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses national and local perceptions about their experiences of current working partnerships with the PDCS/TPS/DCS. It highlights the successes and the gaps, as well as the key challenges and expectations highlighted by each group of stakeholders.

6.2 National level stakeholders

Amongst national partners, there was a general perception that they are happy with their current experiences of working with the PDCS/TPS/DCS, and that there has been an improvement over time.

'We get...weekly updates on various things that are happening or feedback on reports or complaints that we make. So the interaction...has improved, it is very good. We can generally get to the bottom of an issue a lot quicker now than we could have done originally.'

(National partner)

One of the main factors influencing this was the belief that the National Advisory consultation forums – including the old DCS and TPS forums, but also including more specific forums such as the Family Carers Advisory group – are extremely useful events, for several reasons:

- members of these forums see the same person from PDCS that you can get hold of at any time and they have been able to build a relationship;
- there have been consistent PDCS/TPS/DCS staff involved in these forums over several years which means there is no need to cover old ground;
- the forums presented an opportunity for stakeholders to keep up to date with changes to policy and practice, as well as engage in dialogue about the pros and cons of proposed changes; and

- stakeholders are able to ask for clarification on legislation and what this means for certain cases relevant to their work.

'So you can really see the effect that your comments have had, and you get a reasonable explanation if your comments haven't had an effect, so that's what is particularly gratifying about working with that particular forum.'

(National partner)

In addition to this, a terms of reference document was recently circulated in relation to the new PDCS advisory forum which brings together the old DCS and TPS forums. This was perceived as useful as it outlined roles and responsibilities of both the PDCS and the national stakeholders. A copy of the terms of reference is located in Appendix B.

'There are national guidelines...There are draft terms of reference for the group that have just been issued to us. So for example...it says things like, "allow members three weeks to provide their comments where possible, a minimum of two weeks". Providing members with dedicated email address and telephone number which members can raise any issues or queries.'

(National partner)

There was also a sense that national stakeholders felt that the DCS/TPS/PDCS is better at engaging with stakeholders than other departments. One national stakeholder explained that in contrast to the Department of Health (DH), PDCS provides more face-to-face contact through workshops and consultation.

'So I suppose the Department of Health...the way they do things is very different, they've got quite different...responsibilities but they don't seem to rely very much on workshops and meetings and having to actually be places.'

(National partner)

One national stakeholder felt that this was driven by the detailed approach to gaining feedback from the national stakeholders involved in the Advisory Forums. These stakeholders felt that the forums granted access to key decision makers within PDCS. While not all suggestions were taken on board, stakeholders really valued the access to the process and the opportunity to contribute.

'I'm on various different forums and groups and they do excellent work and I like to think that we can add into that work. That leads into smaller breakaway groups, workshops, and that's where you really see an effect. Either we can have an effect or we can have it explained to us why this has got to be the way forward...That's quite a valued thing that I can go along and know that the person I'm talking to has the power to say to me, "well actually yes, this is valid", or "yeah, we can see your point but this is why we've got to go along another route". And I think that's a marvellous thing.'

(National partner)

In spite of the positive messages highlighted by national stakeholders, there was some scepticism about partnership working as a concept. Rather than being driven by experiences with the PDCS/TPS/DCS alone, this related to attitudes held in relation to Government more generally. As is discussed elsewhere in this report, there is a general sense of frustration with a perceived 'target culture' within Government that is alien to voluntary organisations. There were several issues mentioned in relation to this which inhibited the development of mutual goals in partnerships between TPS/DCS/PDCS:

- some perceived that policy making within DWP is very secretive, in so far as it is perceived to be less collaborative than other Government departments:

'We, as an organisation, deal with a lot of Government departments and we think that the DWP in its policy formulation is much more secretive than a lot of other Government departments. A lot of Government departments hold discussions with outside organisations when they're formulating policy in a way that DWP rarely do.'

(London-based national partners)

- the PDCS was believed to be working towards different targets to its third sector partners. Indeed, in some cases, stakeholders felt that PDCS conflated their own targets and the aims of the stakeholders' organisations, something which stakeholders found frustrating and somewhat patronising:

'And we said "that isn't one of our priorities". The targets were about pension credit take up, which is fine, which we want to achieve, but we don't look at it as, this is our aim,...they just think that Help the Aged's target is to help DWP achieve their targets.'

(London-based national partners)

- partnership was not seen as a traditional way of public sector working:

'The skills of PDCS in working that way [in partnership] are not very well developed...it's not a traditional civil servant mode of operating.'

(London-based national partners)

- there was thought to be a natural imbalance of power between Government and third sector organisations:

'Clearly Government departments have got to try and deliver what the Government wants...and I think it's inevitably an unequal partnership. If you're a voluntary agency and you're dealing with a Government body, the nature of the two organisations is different.'

(London-based national partners)

- some perceived that partnership working can fulfil a tick box exercise rather than being really taken on board by Government departments. That is, PDCS may want to be seen to be working in partnership with them, rather than actually working in partnership. Stakeholders feel that both they and PDCS would benefit from actually fulfilling the aims of true partnership working:

'So as long as they're holding the meetings, that's showing they're doing it. This increasingly applies to local authorities, who are being expected more and more to do, to work in partnership so there's a sort of ticking the box element to it.'

(London-based national partners)

- third sector organisations stated that they do not have the capacity or resource to concentrate on partnership working to the extent they need to ensure it is useful and beneficial – being used as 'window dressing' by a Government department keen to earn 'Brownie points' is a waste of stakeholders' already-scarce resources:

'There are capacity issues...certainly, charities do want more partnership working and that is likely to happen more at local level as well. But when you get into local level there's even less capacity and there's even less slack that people can take on these extra things as well as their day job. So there has to be a recommendation that if they are going to expect more partnership working and there is a benefit to them from involving voluntary sectors, then they maybe have to invest in the voluntary sector to ensure it's got the capacity to do so.'

(London-based national partners)

6.3 Local level stakeholders

This section discusses, in detail, local stakeholders' views of the PDCS, how that partnership works and what improvements they would like to see. While broadly positive about working in partnership with PDCS, local stakeholders highlighted specific issues which the national stakeholders did not. One key issue included a lack of face-to-face contact, which, to local stakeholders, diminished the amount of ownership their contacts at PDCS had over certain claims. As discussed in Chapter 4, face-to-face contact was seen by most local stakeholders as vital to successful partnership working as it improved communication between partners.

In particular, the stakeholders in the Birmingham discussion group highlighted their work with specific outreach workers. These contacts were particularly appreciated in that they came to visit partner organisations directly, rather than requiring that the stakeholders go to the PDCS. In addition, this face-to-face contact led to more direct contact between stakeholders and PDCS – a lack of direct, named contact is seen as a distinct impediment to good partnership working, as is discussed below. Furthermore, face-to-face contact assured partners that someone at PDCS had ownership of certain cases – a perceived lack of ownership was also considered to be another key impediment to effective partnership working.

'He was extremely helpful and put time aside to a group of advice workers in Birmingham from a range of third sector agencies, including statutory social workers. We got him to come out to user groups to explain particularly around Disability Living Allowance. This year he updated everyone in terms of the access [to] the information, the internet and the leaflets. Instead of just coming in saying, "oh, here's your leaflets", he actually did the whole run through of the benefits for people who were new to our sector.'

(Local stakeholder, Birmingham)

However, as discussed below, such outreach to partners is relatively rare and serves to highlight some of the key issues that stakeholders felt need to be dealt with in order to improve partnership working with the PDCS. While the above quotes highlight some key ways in which stakeholders are made to feel that they are truly partners with PDCS, this feeling was relatively rare amongst local stakeholders. Many stakeholders felt that they were not truly equal partners with PDCS – equality of all parties involved being considered a crucial element to effective partnerships as discussed in Chapter 5.

For example, the York group did not consider themselves truly to be in partnership with TPS. They regarded partnership to require knowledge of who you are dealing with or talking to and did not feel that this was applicable with regard to their relationship with TPS. Some in the East London group had a sense that they were working for, rather than with, TPS.

'We've had issues over the last year due to staff shortages and maternity leave, so we've been passing work on to The Pension Services [sic], which suited us fine at the time. I don't think The Pension Service have ever passed anything the other way. It seems as though what they actually want is a feeder system.'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

However, other stakeholders were less cynical and felt that their views were sought after and were influential. This was particularly the case when considering their work with local TPS representatives, which they felt to be a good example of PDCS taking them seriously and the resulting collaboration resulting in new and effective ways of helping their customers.

'So there's kind of creative stuff that's done at a grass roots level if you like, and they seek out ideas about how best to target pension take up...So I think locally the staff are very clued up and quite good.'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

Stakeholders in the York group expressed their dissatisfaction with their experience of the call centre, suggesting instead a shift away from 'Slumdog Millionaire call centres' and to a more 'human' service. They envisaged a more locally-focused TPS service to improve partnerships, incorporating a particular person or team that has responsibility for certain geographical areas and is familiar with the issues and people involved. Other stakeholders echoed this perspective. Those in East

London expressed a strong desire for personalised contact and decentralisation in order to establish a clearer link to decision-making.

'A named team leader and supervisor that you can go to on a direct line and speak to them about the claim and discuss the ins and outs of it.'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

'Either they decentralise the services, so that they're based in the regions, or they have direct contacts for the particular regions so that they can reproduce with this national body the kind of relationships that exist on the ground with local government agencies that work well.'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

Individual accountability in the decision-making process was felt to be crucial as this would really help stakeholders, who often felt that their input disappeared into a 'black hole'.

'The decision makers are not local, they're central, and they hide behind emails, phone lines, answer services, you know.'

(East London TPS local partners group)

'You need to have a team leader, you need your officer to take ownership of claims.'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

In Fife, local partners explained that a shift of contact from local offices to a central office had meant a loss of personal contact. In the past the local office was able to inform them who would be contacting their user/customer. This was lost moving to a central call centre, and highlights the importance of personal contact.

'It was really good when it was all a locally based office. When they brought it to the smaller [central office], it was a nightmare getting anything from them. It's gotten better now because we've built up new local contacts but for a while it was awful.'

(Fife TPS local partners group)

As a result of this, there are different perceptions between the central PDCS and the local agencies, leading to a two tier relationship. Many find the local agencies to be helpful but inconsistent, while the central one is seen as bureaucratic, mainly because you have to go through the telephone system.

'And certainly we are aware, through our own national organisation, of discrepancies in interpretation of what The Pension Service are and do between say, Lanarkshire, Aberdeen and Fife. And it seemed to be driven by different agendas, different targets.'

(Fife TPS local partners group)

'There's the local pension service, which is quite responsive to elderly residents' needs and they hold surgeries and do home visits and they will provide quite a good service. And then there is the centralised service which, in our experience, offers quite a poor service...it's almost like a two tier relationship.'

(East London TPS local partners group)

6.4 Improving partnerships

Despite these concerns, stakeholders were optimistic that things could be improved and keen for their relationships with PDCS to truly meet their definition of a partnership. At a very basic level, some stakeholders suggested that simply presenting a more friendly and accessible face to clients and stakeholders would help – for example, phoning people rather than sending out letters.

Other stakeholders provided more detailed suggestions about how best to improve their partnerships with PDCS. Almost all stakeholders, local or national, stressed the importance of communications. Some felt that this lack of communications leads to an unnecessary conflict of interests between the voluntary or third sector and a Government department, with the prevalent 'target chasing' of Government bodies contrasting with the way stakeholders' organisations work.

'There's a conflict of interest. They have targets to meet, and they're constantly asking us for referrals, whereas we, as a voluntary sector organisation, we need to be able to say to funders, "we've done this", "we've done that", "we've created this income gain".'

(Local stakeholder, East London)

Many stakeholders echoed this view and suggested that greater effort be made to understand the culture of their organisations, perhaps through job swaps or secondments. These would have distinct added advantages, such as contributing to the training of case workers in specifics of certain conditions. This could, in turn, help with the processing of claims.

'Well I think the professional exchange days need to be one model but actually six month secondments and things like that.'

'So if they're going to be experts at benefits then they need to be working with those providers and...like you say, seconded.'

(Two local stakeholders, Birmingham)

This suggested a real desire for PDCS to appreciate the culture of stakeholders' organisations. There was a perception that the Government's agenda does not necessarily fit well with the objectives of these organisations.

'There are mechanisms there for them to take part but they only come when their target driven issues are on the agenda. When it's my issues on the agenda...they don't turn up for those bits. They want our support for their targets but they don't necessarily want to meet our agenda. And I understand it because they would say they have pressures on their time.'

(Local stakeholder, Birmingham)

Other specific suggestions for improving partnership working, from several different groups, was that PDCS could have better follow-up procedures in place, something that is an integral part of the voluntary organisations' work. For example, some stakeholders discussed how they have scheduled times to recontact customers after an initial contact. The perception among stakeholders is that this does not necessarily happen at PDCS yet would be greatly beneficial to customers and the PDCS' own records.

'But that's something that has to be built into our structures as a voluntary sector organisation. We go out doing Attendance Allowance or something. When we make our records we flag up our feedback.'

'Yeah, I think that's the element that is missing from their service.'

(Two local stakeholders, East London)

6.5 Future challenges

A number of challenges were highlighted by national level stakeholders. The predominant message, however, especially amongst DCS Advisory Forum members, was *'to keep up the good work'*. However, other national stakeholders raised some more testing issues.

Firstly, they stated that the PDCS needs to develop a **greater understanding of the third sector**. They believed that this would help the PDCS to understand the challenges that its third sector partners face in finding time to contribute to decision making, and may, therefore, illustrate why greater time is required for consultation.

'It is a complex thing for the PDCS staff because voluntary bodies are often quite complex and of course they're not all the same, so there's a big range of ways that they operate...I don't know whether any voluntary bodies are really well resourced but some are relatively well resourced and some are really very, very under-resourced and so their capacity to take things on and the speed at which they can deal with things is quite variable. There needs to be an understanding of that.'

(London-based national partners)

Some interviewees explained that this should be done through PDCS policy makers actively going out and asking third sector organisation employees about their working practices, and this would need to be done across several organisations as each is different. During a depth interview, another national partner representative

highlighted that this can be done through means of interaction that already exist:

'In fact, although it's [the internet] not as good as face-to-face meetings, it's a darn sight better than no contact at all...I think it's another arm of consultation. It's not to replace anything but it's to add to what we've already got.'

(National partner)

The rest of the challenges cited related to opening up channels of communication, and providing earlier and clearer notification about some reports and news.

Secondly, some believed that the **effectiveness of two-way communications with the PDCS needs to be improved**. For instance, some national stakeholder forum members explained that whilst it is easy to raise complaints or issues with the TPS/DCS, it is not always clear to what extent these have been taken on board, who is responsible for dealing with them, and what actions have been taken. At the root of this is making sure there are clear two-way communications at all stages.

Thirdly, there were anecdotes around problems of **transparency and openness**. Partners feel they are not fully aware of the range of pilots, research initiatives, policy changes and projects under development or underway across PDCS and DWP and as a result don't feel able to contribute to development or share in delivery and learning sufficiently. The suggestion here is to develop a more systematic approach, telling organisations in advance what reports or pilots it is doing and when publication can be expected. This will help improve transparency, but will also help spread learning across the sectors.

The final challenge raised is to provide **more information about the content of the advisory forums in advance** so stakeholders can have more progressive discussions when they're at the meetings.

'From our point of view...we do get agendas in advance, but often we don't get them with the complete papers that are going to be presented on the day. So if we had those and worked through them, I think that would be hugely more useful.'

(National partner)

7 Conclusions and considerations

As expected, awareness of PDCS among stakeholders was low. When prompted, national stakeholders expressed greater awareness than local stakeholders of the merger of DCS and TPS. However, all stakeholders, local and national, expressed a high level of awareness and knowledge of TPS and DCS individually.

National partners were generally satisfied with the regular contact they have with PDCS. They used a variety of channels, with particular enthusiasm for the advisory forum and direct, senior contact. As a result of this, they typically felt well informed.

The picture is more varied with local stakeholders. While they experienced almost daily contact over the telephone, they had much less face-to-face contact than they would like. However, when they do have face-to-face contact with, for example, outreach workers, they are very impressed. Typically, they are the ones to instigate contact, rather than vice versa, and often find that changes to working practices come as a surprise. While appreciating the speed and ease of access to online information, they see this as a poor substitute for direct contact.

Both sets of stakeholders emphasised the importance of direct contact to feeling that they are considered to be partners of PDCS. However, while national partners feel consulted and important to PDCS' decision-making, local partners are much more cynical, especially about staff who work centrally and who they rarely meet.

All stakeholders identified communication and exchange of information, shared goals, openness, understanding of stakeholders' organisations and genuine consultation as being key factors in successful partnership working. Regarding consultation, stakeholders understood that all their suggestions and advice would not necessarily be adopted. However, they were keen to have the opportunity to influence decisions and to have feedback on their opinions from PDCS.

Amongst national stakeholders, there was a broad sense of satisfaction with the current working relationship with PDCS. Indeed, longer-serving stakeholders felt that it had improved considerably over the last decade. Minor concerns were that communication continued at the current levels and that some contacts (such as forums) were adjusted to ensure that all stakeholder organisations – small as well as large – could fully participate.

Local stakeholders were much less satisfied and were less likely to feel that they were valued partners than were national stakeholders. This relative dissatisfaction was largely driven by two factors:

- lack of face-to-face contact, though this was greatly appreciated when available; and
- poorly received telephone call centre contacts, which resulted in a perceived lack of ownership and gave an opacity to decision-making.

Key recommendations for each stakeholder group would be as follows:

- National stakeholders – keep up the good work, avoid complacency in current approach, and small adjustments so as to avoid a ‘one size fits all’ to stakeholder partnerships. These could take the form of more visits to stakeholders’ organisations or holding forums in more areas of the country rather than just London – these moves would be appreciated by smaller stakeholder organisations whose resources may not allow them to attend certain events.
- Local stakeholders – greater direct contact between stakeholders and central staff and more clarity around decision-making as these are key drivers of satisfaction.

Most important factors in partnership working

- And what areas does the PDCS need to concentrate on?
- To summarise...

	National partners	Local partners
Doing very well – but need to maintain performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising partnership • Equality/mutuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-way communication (outreach workers)
Doing well – but some scope for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timely consultation process • Two-way communication • Ability to influence outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency and openness • Timely consultation process
Need to improve – as a priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency and openness • Understanding partner organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to influence outcomes • Understanding partner organisation • Two-way communication (centralised service) • Equality/mutuality
Need to investigate – views not shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising partnership • Clear leadership

8 Tracking stakeholder opinion in the future

In this chapter, we discuss the development of potential ways for PDCS to track stakeholder opinion in the future.

From our research, we have found that there are common characteristics within public sector organisations whose stakeholders would speak highly about them. We have identified three elements that we feel to be important building blocks to effective stakeholder relationships: **communication, staff and leadership**.

Good communication is central to good stakeholder relations. As discussed in this report, it is important that your stakeholders feel that their views are listened to and acted upon – or to know why their advice has not been used. We find similar opinions across many of the other Government departments and public sector organisations that we have conducted research for.

Feeling well-informed is critical to advocacy. Stakeholders who feel informed about what an organisation is doing are far more likely to speak highly about it. Contact and communication should be **regular and consistent**. There is often a clear link between regularity of contact and how favourably performance is viewed.

Typical questions we may ask around this issue may include:

Which of these phrases best describes the way you would speak of the PDCS to other people?

I would speak highly of PDCS without being asked

I would speak highly of PDCS if I were asked

I would be neutral towards PDCS

I would be critical of PDCS if I were asked

I would be critical of PDCS without being asked

How well informed do you think PDCS keeps you about the areas which you work with them on?

Very well informed

Quite well informed

Not very well informed

Not at all informed

Perceptions of the quality of an organisation's employees have a strong influence on the way that organisation is viewed by its stakeholders. Stakeholders want to feel that they are dealing with **experienced and knowledgeable staff**. Stakeholders also value consistency in the people they deal with so that they have a consistent point of contact and are able to engage with someone who knows their agenda.

Typical questions might include:

Thinking about PDCS staff, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither/nor, tend to disagree, strongly disagree

PDCS is approachable and accessible at senior level

PDCS is approachable and accessible at working level

PDCS has sufficient numbers of staff

PDCS staff have sufficient experience

PDCS has credible and knowledgeable staff

While your partners' views on PDCS' leadership were not fully shared with us and will need further investigation, our wider stakeholder work finds that those organisations that rate best among their stakeholders are those with the greatest clarity of purpose. Critics typically mention that they are unclear about the role of an organisation or the value that it provides.

Some questions around leadership may include the following:

<p>How well would you say that you understand PDCS' current objectives and priorities?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Very well</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Fairly well</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Not very well</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Not at all well</p> <p>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</p> <p>Strongly agree, tend to agree, neither/nor, tend to disagree, strongly disagree</p> <p style="text-align: right;">PDCS has a clear role</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Takes a strategic approach</p>
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In light of the findings and conclusions outlined in the previous chapter, the key areas on which future tracking could focus include:

- advocacy of PDCS;
- overall satisfaction with the service provided by PDCS;
- stakeholders' understanding of PDCS;
- communication with PDCS – preferred methods, frequency and levels of satisfaction;
- PDCS' understanding of stakeholder organisation; and
- the key values that stakeholders see as important, such as partnering, listening, feedback, proactivity, clarity of role, and ease of contact.

Several methods of tracking stakeholder opinion are available, each with distinct benefits and drawbacks. These include both qualitative (discussion groups, depth interviews) and quantitative approaches (online or telephone surveys).

The findings of this and other research suggest some important considerations:

- Discussion groups: While these were extremely useful in exploring stakeholders' views on partnership and working with PDCS, there were difficulties in getting stakeholders to agree to meet in a specific time and place, particularly more senior stakeholders. Furthermore, this approach is perhaps not best suited to tracking opinion ongoing.

- Telephone depth interviews: This has proved an effective way of talking to stakeholders. Most are happy to provide half an hour of their time to discuss their work with PDCS at a time convenient to them. This approach also allows issues to be explored in detail.
- Online bulletin boards: Although the stakeholders attending the discussion groups agreed to take part in the bulletin boards, actual participation levels were very low. We would not recommend proceeding with this approach.

We would recommend a mixed method approach to future stakeholder research. Our experience with similar stakeholder perception research suggests that, in order to track opinion in the future, a quantitative survey approach would be beneficial. Given the success of the telephone depth interviews and the relatively low participation in the online bulletin boards, we would suggest a short telephone survey might be the best way to track stakeholder opinion in the future. A quantitative approach would provide a robust and representative sample of the views of your stakeholders, while allowing for benchmarking of findings over time and comparisons with other similar organisations.

However, occasional qualitative interviews of group discussions would be important to identify new and emerging issues. In addition, depth interviews often prove a better way to explore the views of more senior stakeholders.

Appendix A

Discussion guide

Pension, Disability and Carers Service Partnerships Research

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
<p>(1) Introduction and warm-up</p> <p>Thank participants for agreeing to be interviewed – mention that the group should last up to two hours</p> <p>Research commissioned by The Pension Service (TPS) or The Disability and Carers Service (DCS) to understand how stakeholders from external organisations perceive them as a partner to work with.</p> <p>Stress there are no right or wrong answers – we are just interested in finding out their views and opinions. Re-iterate there will be a chance for them to shape the agenda of the discussion and that they will receive a short management report summarising the overall findings.</p> <p>Reassure participants of confidentiality – MRS code of conduct.</p> <p>Permission to record – for analysis purposes only</p> <p>Names, their role, involvement with The Pension Service (TPS) or the Disability and Carers Service (DCS).</p>	<p>Warm up – explain the purpose of interview.</p> <p>Also covers general rules, insofar as there are any, and the information we are required to tell participants under the MRS Code of Conduct.</p> <p>Please note that while the PDCS was formed in early 2008, many stakeholders will still be far more familiar with the two preceding bodies which merged to form it – The Pension Service (TPS) and the Disability and Carers Service (DCS). Groups will be composed of stakeholders from either the TPS or the DCS, so best to refer to the original body throughout.</p>	<p>10 mins</p>

Continued

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
<p>(2) Awareness of TPS/DCS and the services they offer</p> <p><i>NOTE TO MODERATOR: in the main participants will only refer to DCS or TPS – not PDCS as a whole, and only a few might work with both. Some comparison between the two could be important, so please bear this in mind when you ask these questions.</i></p> <p>Tell me what you know about TPS or DCS (as relevant) and the work it does.</p> <p>Probe on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are its main roles and responsibilities? • What services does it offer/deliver? • Which customers does it serve? • If delegates know how to make contact to refer customers, and/or to raise service issues/ improvement ideas. <p>As far as you know, what are its main roles and responsibilities? And how far do you think it meets these?</p> <p>Where are there gaps in your knowledge about what it does? What impact does this have on you and the job you do? Why do you say this?</p>	<p>Aim is to explore whether participants are more familiar with the TPS or DCS.</p> <p>If needed, continue to use the old 'brand' throughout.</p> <p>This section looks at how participants understand the TPS/DCS' role and how it goes about delivering its services.</p> <p>Note: most important part is the first question about knowledge and subsequent probes. Stuff on role, responsibilities, etc is nice to have but not essential.</p>	<p>15 mins</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Continued</p>

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
(3) Experiences and perceptions of the TPS/DCS		20 mins
<p>What interaction do you have with the TPS/DCS?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probe on different contact options: personal (who do they speak with? Is it the same person each time?), email, letters, trade publications • Probe on regularity • Probe on preferred form of contact • Probe on ease of contact and how this varies according to channel • Probe around which issues they communicate about <p>Tell me about your overall impression of the TPS/DCS and its work with you...</p> <p>What aspects of the TPS/DCS's work do you feel are particularly positive? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • probe for examples <p>And which are particularly negative? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • probe for examples <p>And which aspects of the TPS/DCS' work have changed recently?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • probe for examples • what impact has this had on you and the work you do? 	<p>This section looks at how regularly participants contact the TPS/DCS, who they speak to and how they go about doing so.</p> <p>This section looks at general views of TPS/DCS just to get an overall feel for participants' perceptions.</p> <p>Get examples.</p>	
(4) Trust, confidence and advocacy of TPS/DCS		10 mins
<p>To what extent do you think the TPS/DCS is credible? Why do you say that? Can you give me some examples of when it has demonstrated this? What could be done to improve this?</p> <p>How credible is it compared with other organisations that you work with? Why do you say this?</p> <p>How far do you trust the information you receive from the TPS/DCS? Why is that? Can you give me some examples?</p> <p>How does this compare with information you receive from other organisations? Why do you say this?</p> <p>What could be done to improve this?</p>	<p>The section explores the extent to which participants see the TPS/DCS as credible and how far they trust the information provided by it.</p>	

Continued

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
<p data-bbox="240 383 687 450">(5) Understanding partnership and consultation</p> <p data-bbox="240 495 759 562">In the context of your own organisation and experience:</p> <p data-bbox="240 568 703 636">(a) tell me what you think makes good partnership working...</p> <ul data-bbox="288 642 820 958" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="288 642 783 741">• probe around clearly defined objectives, governance, clear leadership, systems of accountability, communication skills <li data-bbox="288 748 491 781">• any examples? <li data-bbox="288 788 820 855">• Which organisations do you think does this well? <li data-bbox="288 862 783 929">• And which organisations do not do it so well? <li data-bbox="288 936 699 969">• Where does TPS/DCS fit in here? <p data-bbox="240 976 703 1043">(b) Tell me what you think makes good consultation</p> <ul data-bbox="288 1050 820 1364" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="288 1050 775 1149">• probe around tokenism, participation, communication skills, being listened to, issues where consultation is needed <li data-bbox="288 1155 491 1189">• any examples? <li data-bbox="288 1196 820 1263">• Which organisations do you think does this well? <li data-bbox="288 1270 783 1337">• And which organisations do not do it so well? <li data-bbox="288 1344 743 1364">• Where does the TPS/DCS fit in here? 	<p data-bbox="831 383 1193 517">This section explores what participants think makes good partnership working and consultation is.</p>	<p data-bbox="1230 383 1337 416">15 mins</p>

Continued

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
<p>(6) Views on current working relationship with TPS/DCS</p> <p>How well do you feel that TPS/DCS works in partnership with you? Why? Any examples?</p> <p>What does it do well? Why? Examples?</p> <p>What does it do less well? Why? Examples?</p>	<p>This section explores participants' views of their working relationship with TPS/DCS.</p>	<p>15 mins</p>
<p>(7) Looking at the future: expectations and improvements</p> <p>Compared to the current situation, what do you think needs to change in order to build better relations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you say that? • Probe for examples of things that could be changed <p>Are there any examples of best practice in your work with TPS/DCS?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can these be transferred to other areas? • Anything else? <p>What else does the TPS/DCS need to work towards in its relations with you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any key objectives that are missing at the moment? <p>What other issues should be included in its vision? Why is this so important?</p> <p>What difference do you think this would make?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you? • For customers? 	<p>This section follows on from the previous section and examines any gaps in TPS/DCS' aims and objectives.</p> <p>This section asks participants to consider what could be done differently to improve the working relationship between themselves and TPS/DCS.</p>	<p>20 mins</p>

Continued

Description	Comments	Time (mins)
<p data-bbox="240 383 512 421">(8) Vision and values</p> <p data-bbox="240 465 735 562"><i>Moderator to explain TPS/DCS' vision, objectives and priorities in working in partnership</i></p> <p data-bbox="240 607 826 674">How far are you aware of these issues? How would you like to be made aware of these issues?</p> <p data-bbox="240 719 826 846">To what extent does TPS/DCS 'live' its values in working with them? Why do you say this? What needs to change so that this is the case in the future?</p>	<p data-bbox="831 383 1225 488">This section is not crucial – only ask about this if there is spare time.</p> <p data-bbox="831 533 1225 757">When explaining the values and vision, please refer to the accompanying document – please note that recognition will be low as very little has been communicated to stakeholders about this.</p>	5 mins
<p data-bbox="240 853 432 891">(9) Conclusion</p> <p data-bbox="240 936 826 1070">Of all the things we've talked about today, what do you think is the most important message that the TPS/DCS should take about how it works with its partners?</p> <p data-bbox="240 1115 826 1435">We are planning to set up and run some online bulletin boards which will enable you to provide us with any follow up thoughts or case studies that you didn't get a chance to talk about today in detail. They will internet based discussions taking place over a period of five days, with a moderator, and you would each have your own username and password, and would be able to contribute in your own time. Is this something that you would consider using? Why (not)?</p> <p data-bbox="240 1480 826 1547">Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you think is relevant?</p> <p data-bbox="240 1592 746 1619">Thank and close – permission to recontact.</p>		10 mins

Appendix B

PDCS Advisory Forum – Terms of Reference (draft)

The PDCS Advisory Forum is PDCS' main consultation mechanism. PDCS will consult with the forum on change initiatives and service delivery issues. Membership of the forum is intended to represent a broad range of PDCS customers, including older customers, disabled customers of all ages and carers.

PDCS will:

- provide early consultation on change initiatives and service delivery issues affecting older customers, disabled customers of all ages and carers;
- use the forum to provide a focus on the take up of Pension Credit;
- provide opportunities for members to contribute to specific research activity where appropriate;
- hold meetings quarterly and publish a rolling schedule of meetings;
- give members the opportunity to raise agenda items for meetings;
- produce agendas grouping together items relating to disabled customers/carers and older customers respectively, thus ensuring members only need attend for slots relevant to their customer base;
- arrange for any special requirements to be met to allow all members to participate fully in the process;
- undertake ad hoc consultation activity outside of the quarterly meetings where it would be appropriate to do so and will consider the most appropriate medium for this, eg. email, meeting, workshop etc;
- allow members three weeks to provide their comments where possible and a minimum of two weeks;

- provide members with a dedicated email address and telephone number by which members can raise any issues, questions or concerns, and PDCS will commit to responding to these;
- keep members informed by issuing newsletters and email communications.

Members will:

- actively and honestly represent their organisation and their customers;
- contribute topics for agendas;
- attend meetings and provide input to items under discussion;
- respond to items issued for review/discussion outside the meetings within the requested timescales;
- assist in research activity where resources and other commitments allow.

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