

How to influence the mainstream



Overview

How to influence the mainstream

Summary

There is increasing emphasis, in regeneration and renewal, on the role of the main programmes (of central and local government and other major service providers), as opposed to small, area-based initiatives (ABIs). There are major obstacles in the way of 'mainstreaming' and 'bending' main programmes, but influence can be exerted through:

- Strengthening policies and strategies which legitimise main programme engagement with neighbourhood renewal
- Re-allocating resources towards the needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods (bending spending programmes)
- Reshaping patterns of main programme service delivery to respond to the needs of local communities
- Making stronger links between area-based initiatives and main programmes

Contents

What's the problem?	3
What's the explanation?	4
What's the policy context?	6
References	6

Attempts over many years to 'bend' main programmes towards the needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods have not proved very successful

What's the problem?

Bending main programmes is not a new idea. The early days of urban policy in the 1970s saw both small-scale project driven initiatives (for example, funded by the 'traditional' Urban Programme), and attempts to integrate provision at the local level (for example, Area Management Trials or Education Priority Areas). In principle, these specific initiatives directed towards areas of disadvantage were backed by the bending of main programmes. In 1977, a major Inner Cities White Paper identified bending main programmes as a central feature of new joint central-local partnerships.

In practice, however, the evidence – from the most recent experience as well as that of the past thirty years - is that it has proved extremely difficult to enforce such 'bending'.

- Evaluation of the 'New Commitment to Regeneration' programme suggested that local flexibility in how main programmes are planned and resourced is very limited, both within and between programmes which are subject to central government control and management.
- Recent research on area-based initiatives concluded that whilst this lack of flexibility may be less real than local organisations believe, there is still relatively little evidence of successful mainstreaming, in the sense of agencies altering their main programmes in response to neighbourhood concerns.
- There is little evidence of main programme organisations adopting examples of innovation from area-based initiatives in their main programmes; and some organisations see special initiatives as a means of supplementing their main programme budgets.
- The Audit Commission has identified similar constraints to mainstreaming, including the inflexibility of organisational cultures in accommodating new ways of thinking and acting. It also places some of the responsibility for the fact that main programme (or 'core') budgets have not focused enough on disadvantaged neighbourhoods on central government, pointing to inconsistencies in central government practices and messages.

It appears that successive initiatives have failed to overcome the obstacles to change. A related problem is that very little is known about actual patterns of expenditure. This is partly because of technical, accounting difficulties in identifying and allocating expenditure on a small-area basis - and partly because of political

	<p>factors which inhibit the explicit identification of unequal spending between wards or neighbourhoods within local authority areas.</p>
<p><i>The desire to see quick-fix results and inflexibility in the agencies concerned are at the heart of the problem</i></p>	<p>What's the explanation?</p> <p>Research has identified a number of obstacles to mainstreaming.</p> <p><i>Short-termism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A focus on special projects - the desire of ministers, programme managers and local communities to see action on the ground, and the associated pressure to spend money quickly, diverts attention from work on the infrastructure which is necessary to bring about sustainable change. • The need to do something 'new' together with the necessity of meeting challenging short term targets, is a strong disincentive to any activity that does not contribute directly to the achievement of these targets • The volume and speed of turnover of initiatives may make it difficult to integrate them into the mainstream • The short and uncertain lifespan of many initiatives means that some staff think of mainstreaming only in terms of securing their own future. <p><i>Organisational Inflexibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak links between the area-based or neighbourhood initiatives and the mainstream agencies often appear to be built in to the design of ABIs. Neither side may see it as their responsibility to ensure that mainstreaming takes place, professional links may not be at senior enough level to ensure that the mainstream is changed, and there may at worst be rivalry and disincentives to sharing between the mainstream and the initiative. • Many cross-cutting initiatives by definition cross organisational boundaries. There is sometimes, therefore, a lack of ownership by any main service provider. • The culture of some parts of the public services is not welcoming to new ways of working. Research has suggested middle

	<p>managers may be particularly resistant to change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong community leadership can also be a barrier to the spread of good practice. Some communities want to invent their own projects rather than see 'their' neighbourhood money taken over by the big main programme organisations who they do not trust• The absence of adequate evaluation means that it is as yet generally unclear what works and why, and it is difficult to persuade mainstream organisations to take on initiatives where there is no proof that they work better than what has been tried in the past. <p>Mainstream providers have their own internal objectives, targets, and drivers. These vary, and different service providers show different kinds of resistance to neighbourhood influence. These problems may be made worse by the limited ownership of neighbourhood initiatives by national departments and agencies, and a lack of awareness of regeneration and renewal programmes among many mainstream providers.</p> <p>In some partner agencies, the continual pressures of organisational change and restructuring limit the priority given to neighbourhood initiatives. In most main programme departments, the most important thing will be to go for the key political priorities and/or floor targets (waiting lists, crime reduction, records of school achievement). Demanding service targets do not leave time/energy for pursuing new approaches to resource use. Mainstreaming ideas from area-based initiatives, or targeting particular areas, is perceived to jeopardise the achievement of primary objectives and appears to many professionals to be a risky business.</p> <p><i>How might things change?</i></p> <p>In order to influence the mainstream, neighbourhood initiatives and local partnerships might address the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different definitions, interpretations and approaches to mainstreaming in local partnerships• Measurement of the extent and nature of the contribution made by neighbourhood initiatives to floor targets in key mainstream areas• Identification and quantification of the extent of any shift in resources in main programmes, towards neighbourhood initiatives, the impact of these resources on programme content and output, and whether the shift of resources is likely to be permanent.
--	--

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examination of the processes within main organisations through which they can learn lessons from neighbourhood initiatives and if appropriate mainstream and replicate them • Encouragement of the establishment of the database necessary to implement mainstreaming strategies, including information on local service expenditure and quality.
<p><i>Finding ways of ensuring that main programmes and services meet the needs of deprived neighbourhoods is at the heart of policy</i></p>	<p>What's the policy context?</p> <p>'Mainstreaming' is seen as crucial to the sustainability of neighbourhood strategies in the long term. It is recognised that specific initiatives (even those as large as the New Deal for Communities programme, NDC) may provide one-off improvements, but that lasting change is dependent on the engagement of the much larger main programmes.</p> <p>This view has been emphasised in recent years by the Treasury cross-cutting review of Government Intervention in Deprived Areas (the GIDA review), the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, and the Audit Commission.</p> <p>The Government is very keen that the neighbourhood agenda be taken up by all Departments in their core activities and spending. Although the evidence is that nationally driven floor targets can be an obstacle to mainstreaming of local initiatives, the Government is keen that all government departments with a role to play on neighbourhood renewal should use floor targets in a way that supports mainstreaming in neighbourhood renewal. Other current policy initiatives intended to support mainstreaming, include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local service level agreements, between neighbourhood renewal partnerships and the main public service agencies • Local Strategic Partnerships, which have the potential to focus main programmes in line with neighbourhood renewal priorities
	<p>References</p>

- HM Treasury (2000) *SR 2000 Government Interventions in Deprived Areas*.(GIDA), Report of the SR Cross-cutting Review
- www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Spending_Review/Spending_Review_2000/Associated_Documents/
- Audit Commission (2002) *Neighbourhood Renewal Policy Focus*. London: the Audit Commission.
- Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2002) *Collaboration and Co-ordination in Area Based initiatives* London: DTLR. Stewart M., Goss S.,
- Clarke R., Gillanders G., Rowe J., and Shaftoe H. (1999) *Cross-cutting Issues Affecting Local Government* London DETR.
- Social Exclusion Unit (2000) *Joining It Up Locally - The Evidence Base* Report of Policy Action Team 17, Volume 2. London: DETR.
- Spencer K. (1982) 'Comprehensive Community Programmes' Chapter 10 in Leach S. and Stewart J. (Eds.) *Approaches to Public Policy* London: Allen and Unwin
- Webster B. (1982) 'Area management and Responsive Policy-making' Chapter 9 in Leach S. and Stewart J. (Eds.) *Approaches to Public Policy* London: Allen and Unwin.