Single Outcome Agreements and Partnership Working in Scottish Local Government

Abstract *Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) are a mechanism to deliver key national and local priorities based on a new relationship between central and local government in Scotland. SOAs were intended to be developed and implemented through partnership working exercised by Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). A survey of the first (2008) SOA participants from local authorities and their Community Planning partners was conducted in 2008, with a particular focus on the interrelationships between the 2008 SOA development process and partnership working at the local level. Findings of this study suggest that there was a positive link between the strength of existing CPPs and partner engagement in the 2008 SOA development. However, partner engagement in the 2008 SOA development process did not affect survey respondents' confidence that the ongoing SOA development and implementation will strengthen partnership working in the long –term. This study also suggests that in addition to the practical difficulties such as the limited time and resource, mistrust between local partners, and local players' scepticism about the central government's intention to free up local government can be barriers to the success of the SOA. Overall, respondents in this study showed realistic but hopeful attitudes to what the SOA was about and what could be achieved through it over time. The information gathered through this study should be merited as baseline data which captured the SOA participants' early experience and expectations.*

Introduction

This study explored early experience from the Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) with a particular focus on the relationships between the SOA development process and partnership working at the local level. It took a form of process evaluation to look at what happened during the 2008 SOA development from the point of view of the various local participants. The SOA development in this study refers to the preparation, negotiation, and agreement of the SOAs by local authorities, their partners and the Scottish Government.

 SOAs are one of the measures set in the Concordat endorsed by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) (2007) to boost a new relationship between central and local government, and to increase benefits for local service users across the Scotland. The original idea of the SOAs was proposed by COSLA in 2002

(COSLA, 2002) when the Local Area Agreements (LAAs) in England were about to start and Policy Agreements in Wales were already in place. Scottish local government and Community Planning partners are to set out the outcomes which they seek to achieve. The outcomes should reflect local needs and priorities which will eventually support progress at national level (Scottish Government *et al.*, 2008). In return, local authorities were promised greater flexibility and responsibility to deliver the agreed outcomes through streamlined bureaucracy and reporting requirements, the increased level of available funding, and reductions in ring-fencing. Soon after the issuing of the first SOA guidance for local government (Scottish Government et al., 2008) in Febraury 2008, the first SOAs (2008 SOAs) were signed off by the Scottish Government and all 32 local authorities in June 2008. (The timescales for the SOAs are presented in Table 1.) The High Level Steering Group[1] (HLSG) was established by the Concordat (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2007) to oversee the development and implementation of the SOAs. By the time when this article is being written, local authorities and their partners were working in the second SOAs aiming to submit them to the Scottish Government by the end of February 2009 in order to finalise them by the end of May 2009.

Community planning was introduced in Scotland in 1998. The working group established to examine the initial phase defined community planning as 'any process through which a council comes together with other organisations to plan, provide for or promote the well-being of the communities they serve' (Leach & Percy-Smith, 2001: 82). A statutory basis for community planning in Scotland is provided by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 (Scottish Executive, 2004a). One of the mechanisms for community planning is Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) which is a strategic partnership constituting local authorities and their main partners at the local level. The agencies which have a statutory duty to take part in CPPs are NHS Boards, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Joint Police Boards and Chief Constables, Joint Fire Boards and the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority (SPTA) (Scottish Executive, 2004a). One of the main aims of CPPs is to work together in providing better public services. Scottish Executive (2004a) notes that CPPs can bridge the link between national and local priorities by collaborating in the delivery of national priorities in a way that is sensitive to local needs and circumstances. CPPs' ideal situation to bring together local partners and identify priority local outcomes was acknowledged from when SOAs were first proposed (COSLA, 2002), but the engagement of CPPs was recommended as a possible option in producing the first SOAs in 2008. Around half of the 2008 SOAs signed off in June 2008 were produced with CPPs (Herbert, 2008). Thus, among all 32 local authorities in Scotland, there were two types of 2008 SOAs

depending on the CPP engagement: those produced solely by Council (Council SOAs) and those produced by Council and their CPP (CPP SOAs).

The Scottish Executive (2004b) states that effective partnership working enhances the performances of CPPs by allowing more openness and engagement, and the maximised contribution of each partner to service delivery and the well-being of communities. They also believe that effective partnership working brings reduced bureaucracy and increased efficiency to each partner organisation. These are the anticipated positive outcomes of partnership working. To be realistic, however, partnership working is about sharing responsibility, and overcoming the differences and the inflexibility created by organisational and sectoral boundaries (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002:1). For instance, Stevenson (2002) found that many Community Planning partners struggled to integrate existing planning systems and other partnership working into the overarching Community Planning framework.

Since the SOAs are embedded into community planning, particularly into the CPPs, the SOA development process provided an opportunity to examine whether and how such process was interrelated with various elements for effective partnership working, such as developing collective visions and agreed strategy, sharing information and resources, joined-up working, strengthened accountability, leadership, and trust between partners, etc. Partnership working is a cultural challenge which can be achieved through changes in the attitudes and perceptions of individuals within partner organisations as well as through organisational structure change. For this reason, understanding the perspectives and expectations of the SOA participants is an important step towards the successful policy implementation. This study explored:

- whether and how local partners were involved in the 2008 SOA development;
- practical difficulties experienced during the 2008 SOA development process;
- participants' understandings of the SOA;
- the interactions between the 2008 SOA development process and partnership working;
- how the participants perceived the SOA's long-term potentials.

Research Methods

This paper draws on a semi-structured online survey conducted in November and December, 2008 (Table 1). All 32 Scottish local authorities were approached to check their willingness to take part in this study and to identify the SOA lead officers and other SOA participants. The

degree of co-operation provided by each Council varied. For instance, some provided a list of the SOA participants, whereas some wanted to internally circulate questionnaires to their participants. Six Councils refused to take part in the research. Emails containing an internet link to the survey questionnaire were sent to the 2008 SOA participants in 26 local authorities, such as Community Planning partners from the CPP SOA areas, and senior officers, SOA lead officers, elected members and Chief Executives from the both CPP and Council SOA areas.

Questionnaires consisted of both open and close ended questions to allow respondents to fully express their views through the latter. Each group was sent a slightly different questionnaire because survey participants were assumed to have been in different circumstances depending on their role and the nature of their SOA. SOA lead officers were given the largest number of questions because theirs included the questions about the management of the 2008 SOA development process. The questions were derived from the previous studies, in particular the process evaluation studies of LAAs in England (Office for Public Management (OPM) *et al*., 2005; OPM *et al.*, 2006). Overall, all questionnaires commonly included the sections covering information about respondents (their councils, job titles and their role in the 2008 SOA processes), benefits from the 2008 SOA processes, anticipated long-term benefits from ongoing SOA development and implementation, difficulties experienced during the 2008 SOA processes and their understanding of the SOA.

Overall, 114 people from 24 Councils participated in the survey (Table 2). Community Planning partners who participated in the survey included NHS, Police, Fire and Rescue Service, the Scottish Enterprise, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Transport Partnerships, Community Council Networks, the Scottish Natural Heritage and higher education institutions. Some of the partners indicated that they worked with several local authorities in their region.

Due to its limited scale, we do not claim that the views of survey respondents were representative of those of their peers. Furthermore, considering the extreme diversity of local situations, even with a larger sample size, generalisation would have been less meaningful than it is in normal circumstances. We highlight the fact that respondents to the survey were in the position to be able to provide early perspectives based on their engagement in the 2008 SOA, which should be valuable baseline information for the ongoing development of the SOA. In addition, given the fact that there will be only the CPP SOAs from 2009, the timing of the survey allowed exploring differences between the CPP and Council SOA areas.

2008 SOA Development Process

Breadth and depth of the 2008 SOA participants

All the SOA lead officers in this study indicated that they engaged both senior officers and elected members in their localities. The CPP SOA leaders said that they engaged the voluntary sector (13 out of 14 leaders), the community sector (8/14), the private sector (5/14) and other local partners who were not Community Planning partners (5/14). Darlow *et al.* (2007) identified securing stakeholder involvement as the most significant barrier to the development of policy strategies, in particular at the development stage rather than during the implementation when the working relationships between participants need improvement. In this context, this variety of participants in the 2008 SOA development within the limited timescale would have been difficult to achieve without existing CPP engagement. For instance, CPPs are often chaired by elected members and supposed to include the voluntary and community sectors. In addition to the regular meetings of CPPs, small meetings with individual partners (10/14) or multi-stakeholder workshops (12/14) were held to engage local partners. Notably, the SOA lead officers from the Council SOA areas also indicated that there was a certain extent of engagement with local partners during the 2008 SOA development.

Among the survey respondents (n = 95) who were not the SOA lead officers, 78 per cent thought that they had an opportunity to influence the 2008 SOA development. However, the degree of participant engagement appeared to vary. The following two responses supported this view:

> We were involved almost from the outset helping to raise awareness and understanding of the principles and processes. Engagement took many forms including awareness raising, information giving and gathering, consultation on various drafts and a seminar on the final draft submission. In addition there were opportunities for us to analyse the agreement in order to identify how and where we would contribute or lead the securing certain outcomes. (Community Planning partner)

> There was a sense of limited engagement with the development process for the SOA… (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

Overall, there seemed to be some uncertainties among the survey respondents in identifying their SOA, whether it was a CPP or Council SOA.

Timescale and workload

The most serious difficulties experienced during the 2008 SOA development appeared to be the short timescales. For example, the SOA lead officers and Community Planning partners identified meeting deadlines as the most difficult aspect to deal with. The short timescale was

also the most frequently mentioned aspect in written responses as a reason for not having been able to: (a) build proper working relationships; (b) have full consultations with other participants; or (c) engage communities.

> Main problem is that the whole programme was too rushed and I am not convinced that the Outcomes and targets set were given the consideration that they should have had. (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

> There was insufficient time to train partners in the changes and for them to fully realise the implications of the process. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

All of the Council SOA lead officers in this study thought that the limited timescale was one of the main reasons for not working with local partners.

It is not new for local authorities to be forced out to tackle the large volume of new initiatives and the speed at which they are introduced (Downe and Martin, 2006: 485). Even Sullivan *et al.* (2006: 506) argued that 'local collaborative capacity could only really develop if the regular round of policy initiatives was halted or significantly slowed down'. Similarly, the increased work load appeared to be another main difficulty during the 2008 SOA development. Senior officers felt that the increased workload was the most serious difficulty followed by limited resource and staff. Community Planning partners also identified the increased workload as one of the main difficulties. As Darlow *et al.* (2007) said, they must have felt the SOA development is an extension of community planning duties that is considered as 'an addition to the day job'. Given the fact that all 32 local authorities submitted their 2008 SOAs in time to sign off, the difficulties they experienced during the 2008 suggest that local authorities must have given the high priority to the SOA as the newest arrival amongst other equally time and resource consuming existing policy imperatives. As noted by some of the SOA lead officers, the support from and the cooperation with the Scottish Government officials may have played a critical role in meeting the deadlines.

Scottish Government's SOA Guidance
Cowell (2004: 499) argued that the delayed adaptation, compared to England and Wales, of community planning in Scotland allowed better insights of what community planning involved and more considered policy framework. This was the case with the SOAs (COSLA, 2002). However, quite a few respondents to the survey described the SOA Guidance for the Scottish Local Council issued by the Scottish Government (2008) as late, untimely, changing, prescriptive or unclear:

> The main difficulty however was the late issuing of guidance on the documents themselves. Often the guidance was issued after the work had been done and required a degree of re-working, or would have done if we had followed it strictly. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

> The guidance changed over the course of the development of the SOA, and the Scottish Government departments didn't seem to know what they wanted the SOA to be about and how strategic it should be. This caused great frustration. (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

> In some ways we were all working a little bit in the dark - it is a good thing that there is no one definition of what a Single Outcome Agreement is or should be, but it can make it difficult to develop in a vacuum. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

Another respondent showed a contrasting view:

> Overly prescriptive templates and guidance acted to constrain development of the SOA. The possibility for innovation was limited because of the tightly bound process. (Chief Executive, CPP SOA area)

The lack of interactions between finance reform and other policies is identified as one of the constraints to some of the unsatisfactory outcomes of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda in England (Downe and Martin, 2006: 479). McGarvey (2002: 41) also notes that the finance is the root of the problem which bedevils the central-local relationship in Scotland. For instance, ring-fencing is normally used to control central agendas in local government. However, local government was promised financial incentives such as reducing the level of ring-fencing and retaining efficiency savings as incentives for adapting SOAs. Nevertheless, these incentives did not stop confusion and unnecessary tensions between services caused by the lack of instructions about how the agreed outcomes would be supported by new funding allocation:

> My only concern is that while the budget has been devolved to councils – all departments are fighting for a fair share of the cake. … (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

> 2008 SOA led to "scramble" by partners to include as many of their indicators as they could result in very large documents with many indicators. This was expected as belief built up that if your indicator not in SOA then funding would not be available. (Senior officer, CPP SOA area)

Understanding of the SOA

The majority of survey respondents thought that they had a good level of understanding about how the SOA links with: other policy initiatives such as Best Value, Community Planning (83 per cent); and other policies such as Community Plans and Council Corporate Plans (92 per

cent) (Table 3). These high levels of confidence may have been based on the fact that, as the February 2008 Guidance (Scottish Government *et al*., 2008) clearly recommended, the 2008 SOAs were derived predominantly from existing Corporate or Community Plans. Perhaps due to this lack of originality, only less than a half of respondents (47 per cent) thought that the SOA was a driver of local policy rather than a summary or rearrangement of existing policies and a quarter (26 per cent) disagreed to this idea with another quarter (26 per cent) being uncertain. Some survey respondents expressed analytical and realistic views of the SOA. The SOA was merely described as 'performance regime', 'a simple expression of local priorities' or 'a vehicle for reporting strategic performance on CPP activity'. There was a widely shared notion that 'things were happening before the SOA was introduced':

> The SOA process did not add to the already well developed processes in our locality. The work carried out in the development of the SOA was to take our existing priorities, analysis and performance frameworks and re-interpret them for the SOA Template. (Senior Officer, CPP SOA area)

> I think the SOA is an entirely bureaucratic process that pulls together performance measures that we were collecting anyway. (Senior officer, CPP SOA area)

> The SOA is only one aspect of a joint planning process and must be seen within that context. It provides a performance management framework to gauge progress on our Community Plan and corporate plans. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

> The SOA development process was a natural extension to the work already going on in respect of Community Planning. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

Changes and capabilities to implement the SOA

Survey respondents' understanding of the SOA was also examined through the questions about the degree of changes that would occur to implement the SOA. They, overall, appeared to acknowledge that the SOA would bring changes in their working practice in the future. For instance, more than 80 per cent thought that the SOA would result in a certain degree of change in local funding streams (81 per cent), partnership working (90 percent) and partners' policies (86 per cent) (Table 4). Quite separate from acknowledging the necessity of changes entailed with the SOA, some showed doubt about their partners' willingness to promptly initiate change in response to the SOA implementation, for instance:

> … I see no evidence however, that the top levels of each organisation are seriously considering major change as a result of the SOA process in the short to medium term although they would all support its long term ambition to closer working. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

A considerably high percentage of survey respondents were not entirely sure about the capability of their own organisation to implement the SOA. A third said that they were not sure whether they had adequate resources (33 per cent) or staff (36 per cent). Another third thought that they had adequate resources (34 per cent). Staff adequacy was felt enough by 46 per cent (Table 5). One Community Planning partner explained why the SOA, in principle, should not require extra resources:

> The SOA implementation should reflect core service outcomes and therefore doesn't attract special resources. If implementing the SOA is a separate role, then Community Plan isn't relevant. (Community Planning partner)

It may be true that not all of the respondents asked were in a position to accurately predict any forthcoming changes or estimate the available resource and staff. What gathered through their responses would be an indication of their collaborative capacity such as trust and financial and resourceful capabilities (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

Partnership Working

Partnership Working during the 2008 SOA Development
As observed in the evaluation of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), English equivalent to the CPPs in Scotland (Geddes, *et al*., 2007), the current study suggests that the strength of an existing partnership affected the CPP engagement in the 2008 SOA development process. The following comments by two SOA lead officers from the CPP SOA areas support this view:

> We found the process straightforward as we have a mature partnership.
>
> The development of the SOA within our locality did not pose us any great difficulty. Existing systems were in place to ensure effective partnership working. We already have excellent working relationships with members and the local community.

In a similar vein, the SOA lead officers and Community Planning partners from the CPP SOA areas thought that establishing mechanisms for effective communications with Community Planning partners or working with other Community Planning partners was less of difficulty compared to other difficulties, such as the short timescales and increased workload. The positive link between the strength of existing partnership and the involvement of local partners in the 2008 SOA was further suggested by one SOA lead officer from a Council SOA area who explained that it was premature for them to engage CPP in the 2008 SOA:

> The Community Planning Partnership was not structured in such a way that it could undertake the work properly. We did not want to bring the entire Community Planning Partnership into the process of creating the SOA before the Partnership was ready.

The survey respondents from the CPP SOA areas largely thought that the 2008 SOA development process was beneficial to their partnership working. For instance, 76 per cent felt that the CPP's profile was raised as a co-ordinating and enabling mechanism during the 2008 SOA development (Table 6). The 2008 SOA development was also felt, to 75 per cent, as an opportunity to enable local partners to share an achievable vision:

> .. an opportunity for each stakeholder organisation to look to their own development and business planning in order to better inform their own work and their real contribution to the wider agreement. (Community Planning partner)

> The SOA provides a strategic framework for partners to plan, engage and focus our work with greater certainty than ever before. (Chief Executive, CPP SOA area)

Local councils in Scotland are known to be 'facilitators' of institutions involved in local governance (McGarvey, 2002: 38). Downe and Martin (2006: 473) note that local authorities can exercise their community leadership through facilitating collaboration between partners to set out jointly owned targets with partners. The 2008 SOA was led by local authorities. Therefore, it may not be surprising that 71 per cent thought that the 2008 SOA was an opportunity for Councils to exercise their strategic community leadership role (Table 6). Local authorities' ability to identify community needs is another indicator of strategic community leadership (Sullivan *et al*., 2006: 492). The respondents to the survey who thought that the 2008 SOA development led to a better understanding of local needs and shared visions were more likely to think that the process was an opportunity for local authorities' strategic leadership role ($r_s = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). Nearly two thirds (64 per cent) of the survey participants from all areas thought that local needs were better understood through the 2008 SOA, whilst 14 per cent disagreed (Table 6). The following comments show how the better understanding of local needs was achieved:

> Improved analysis of the statistical trends for the area and understanding by political and management leaders (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

> Enabled departments to reflect on current service delivery and map against SOA outcomes. This identified any gaps in provision. (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

It is notable that the considerable percentages of survey respondents found it difficult to decide whether the 2008 SOA had brought the benefits discussed above (Table 6). This uncertainty about the benefits from the 2008 SOA may have resulted from the relatively short timescale in which the participants could envisage any tangible benefits. Further, as mentioned earlier, there was a wide understanding that the SOA was an extension of CPP activities. It may have been difficult to identify the gains for partnership working which were solely generated through the 2008 SOA development process.

Partnership Working in the Long Term

> There is potential for the SOA to have a far greater impact on partnership operation in future years. (Senior officer, Council SOA area)

As this comment conveyed, the long-term benefits of the SOA in relation to partnership working appeared to be largely acknowledged. For example, survey respondents agreed that the SOA would, in the long-term, stimulate joined-up local governance (83 per cent), joined-up action and delivery (79 per cent), information and data sharing (74 per cent), trust building (72 per cent) and collective accountability (66 per cent) (Table 7). Community planning is about building 'common accountability platforms' (Craig, 2003 in Cowell, 2004: 498), but the limited accountability has been a main concern in partnerships (Davis and Daly, 2004: 183) and in Scottish local governance (McGarvey, 2002: 33). Accountability was identified as one of the most challenging areas in the LSPs in England (Geddes, *et al.*, 2007: 104). Likewise, respondents in the current study considered collective accountability between partners as the least convincing aspect that can be improved through the implementation of the SOA over time.

Since not all of 32 Councils did engage their local partners in the 2008 SOA development, it was an opportunity to examine whether the CPP involvement in the 2008 SOA had any effects on the survey respondents' confidence in improved partnership working in the long-term. Although respondents from the CPP SOA areas showed more positive attitudes than their counterpart, there were no apparently significant differences in their responses to the long-term benefits of the SOA on partnership working.

Community elements in the 2008 SOA

The 2008 SOA was meant to be a product of a 'strategic activity', which involves local government and key organisational partners (Sullivan *et al.*, 2006: 506), and written based on existing Community or Corporate Plans. However, it still requested to explain community

involvement in such existing plans. One SOA lead officer from a CPP SOA area obediently stated this instruction to point out the community element embedded in the 2008 SOA:

> Whilst local communities weren't directly involved in the development of the document (2008 SOA), the principles and priorities on which it is based were drawn from an earlier scenario planning exercise that had already influenced both the council and the community planning partnership strategic vision.

Some other survey participants more critically noted the scarcity of community elements in the 2008 SOA:

> I think it (2008 SOA) is viewed as a Local Authority summary document, and does not receive any significant importance in the wider community. (Senior officer, CPP SOA area)

> To many communities, SOA is seen as a bureaucratic exercise with insufficient 'bottom up' input. (Community Planning partner)

Reflecting this critical view, less than a half (46 per cent) thought that the SOA was owned by all stakeholders including communities. Even worse, only 25 per cent thought that the SOA would help to increase the public confidence in local government in the long term. However, 62 per cent were optimistic about the possibility of the ongoing SOA development and implementation as a way to improve dialogue between local government and communities (Table 8). 'Citizen' involvement is known to be particularly difficult in a partnership working context (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004). The latter result reflects 'a vague anxiety' that local authorities and Community Planning partners feel when confronting the constant need for more community engagement in the core arenas of strategic and collaborative governance (Cowell, 2004: 515).

Relationships with the Scottish Government

The central government's continuous interference in local governance was identified as one of the main constraints to the development of local partnership working (Sullivan et al., 2006: 506) and therefore the modernisation of local government (Downe and Martin, 2006: 482). Arguably, the Scottish Executive was condemned for increasing the level of interference and scrutiny of local government since devolution (McAteer and Bennett, 2005; McGarvey, 2002). In addition, McGarvey (2002: 46) argued that, even though their approach is 'light touch' compared to the UK government, the Scottish Executive had prioritised national interests over local discretion. The 2007 Concordat (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2007) expects 'a fundamental shift in the relationship between the Scottish Government and local

government'. Survey respondents rated the effects of the SOA on 'new relationship between the Scottish Government and local government during the 2008 SOA development and in the long-term. Some 67 percent agreed that new working relationship was established between localities and the Scottish Government through the 2008 SOA development process. Slightly more respondents (76 per cent) agreed that this new relationship would be possible as a long-term benefit (Table 9). There were, however, some doubts about the Scottish Government's commitment to free up local government and their partners, and respect local needs as promised in the Concordat (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2007):

> Having started the process, the Scottish Government should resist the temptation to micro-manage the authorities and should allow innovation to develop. (Senior officer, CPP SOA area)

> The real benefit will not be realised until central government reduce the burden of centralised prolifery of planning control and allow local government room to develop the SOA to reflect local needs. (Senior officer, CPP SOA area)

> The SOA is wide ranging and strategic with allowance for local flavouring. It is aspirational yet achievable provided the localised requirements are recognised. (Community Planning partner)

> If the spirit of Single Outcome Agreements is adhered to, what will be important will be local priorities rather than national initiatives …. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

Buy in to the SOA

As a way to look at whether survey participants buy in to the SOA, respondents were asked about what can be achieved through the SOA and a willingness to include their funding streams. One of the focal aims of the SOA was to improve the quality of life and opportunities in life for people in Scotland. Although one third (29 per cent) said they were not sure, two thirds (66 per cent) believed that this aim would be achieved in the long term. Various degrees of expectations were expressed in written responses:

> I think a key achievement for the SOA should be the move to outcomes focused delivery and a move away from measuring the day to day but instead to look at what differences we will make with and for people and communities. (Community Planning partner)

> In my view it has the potential to reinvigorate the true spirit of community planning - ensuring all public services in a local area are working to the same agenda and delivering benefit to local citizens and communities - things that

make a real difference to people's lives and expectations. (SOA lead officer, CPP SOA area)

Six out of eight Chief Executives in this study said their councils were willing to include funding streams to implements the SOA. Community Planning partners were less enthusiastic. Only a half (55 per cent, 16) said 'yes' to the same question with 38 percent (11) being unsure. Williamson (2001: 123) suggests that sustaining partnership working depends on whether and how partners perceive the advantages that the joint working will bring. In a similar vein, it may have been difficult for them to discern the direct merits of the incentives (more flexibilities and freedom in finance and management) offered through the Concordat which were largely addressed to 'local authorities'.

Conclusions

As one respondent articulated, producing a 2008 SOA document is only the tip of the iceberg compared to what comes with and indeed what have already existed before the inception of the SOA in partnership working at the local level. McGarvey (2002: 30) pointed out that central and local relations in Scotland are relatively small scale and personal compared to their UK counterpart. He goes on to say that they are a key partner to each other to deliver their commitment to make a difference to the lives of ordinary Scottish people. In introducing the SOA, local authorities responded to the Scottish Government's call for collaboration with commitment. Even though the breadth and depth of partner engagement varied, all 32 local authorities produced the 2008 SOAs as scheduled in spite of the limited time and resource constraints, and the unsatisfactory guidance issued by the central government. Unlike MacKie's (2004: 357) argument about Scottish local government managers' lack of fundamental knowledge and understanding of the public policy process, respondents in this study demonstrated: (a) a realistic view about how the SOA should be operated in combination with community planning; and (b) a balanced view about the scale of changes which are required to implement the SOA. Furthermore, despite the relatively large percentages of indecisive attitudes, respondents to the survey were largely hopeful and optimistic about the long-term benefits of the SOA. These attitudes can be a positive indication for the successful implementation. However, there was a sign of mistrust between local partners about capability and willingness to collaborate. As McAteer and Bennett (2005: 298) reported about the mistrust between different levels of government in Scotland, some also showed scepticism about the central government's commitment to free up local government and the balance between national and local priorities. Given that trust between partners is a vital element for partnership working (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002: 50), strengthening trust will be another significant influencing factor for the success of the SOA.

Collective accountability, in this study, was identified as one of the least convincing aspect that would be improved over time. Likewise, in their key messages published with the second SOA guidance for CPPs, the HLSG (COSLA, 2008) asserts the need for creating effective mechanisms for joint accountability. They suggest that the Scottish Government would resolve tensions between the pre-existing accountability and new accountability for the SOA. Although this measure can be a strategic intervention, there is a risk of adding a temporary, central intervention. Since collective accountability can be both a tool for the SOA and a beneficial outcome of the SOA, genuine joint accountability can only be achieved through developing cultural and organisational collaboration over time. Like community planning (Stevenson, 2002), the SOA should be a long-term process. It may have been premature for survey participants to recognise any tangible or added values that can be attributed directly to the SOA. As a result, a perception was widely shared that things were happening in prior to the SOA. In their brief, the SOA team at the Improvement Service (2008) pointed out that because of the costs of the collaboration, without added value, the positive outcomes of partnership working would have negative value. The various participants in the CPP SOA areas during the 2008 SOA development could be one example that would have been difficult to achieve without partnerships. It will be important for the SOA participants to find ways to bring added values through the ongoing SOA in terms of partnership working as well as service delivery outcomes.

The 2008 SOA was intended to be Council SOA and the CPP SOAs were voluntarily produced. Despite, many Council SOA areas were reluctant to participate in the current study which could suggest the existence of unnecessary competition and tension between local authorities. This study suggests that the 2008 SOA was an opportunity for local authorities with stronger CPPs to engage partners in the development of the documents which partially confirms the positive relationships between the strength of partnerships and the effectiveness of partnership working in policy development and implementation (Geddes *et al*., 2007: Gillanders and Ahmad, 2007). However, difference between CPP and Council SOA areas appeared to end there. CPP engagement did not affect the confidence level of survey respondents in the SOA's long-term influence on partnership working. In other words, respondents from the CPP SOA areas were not particularly more optimistic about the long-term benefits of the SOA than their counterpart. Furthermore, regardless of their CPP engagement, some survey respondents considered the 2008 SOA development as 'experience for the 2009 SOA exercise' or 'a pilot run'. Whether and how early CPP engagement in the 2008 SOA affects the implementation and further development of the SOA should be examined in future studies which will be valuable evidence of tangible benefits of the

partnership working in policy development and implementation. Another question rises in relation to the feasibility of including all 32 Scottish local authorities in its first SOA. A few local councils had an opportunity to exercise the SOA document development as a pathfinder before the launch of the 2008 SOA, which placed them in a better position. Nevertheless, there was no evidence how their experiences were fed into the real 2008 SOA development for the others. No matter how small the Scottish local government is, it still requires extra time and resources if they are forced to take part in policy initiatives that is rapidly evolving. If the Scottish approach to developing SOA is based on 'action learning' (COSLA, 2008), the cost and time effectiveness of the simultaneous learning and working process should be justified.

The views expressed through this study do not sufficiently include those of elected members. The difficult relationships between elected members as advocates for democratic accountability and other key players advocating participatory accountability through community planning initiatives have been observed (Orr and McAteer, 2004; Geddes *et al*., 2007: Laffin, 2008). Partnership working exercised through community planning reflects ideals of participatory democracy and equality between partners (Balloch & Taylor, 2001:2). For these reasons, the ways in which elected members are involved in the SOA and their attitudes towards it will have key influence on the accountability issues arising from the SOA implementation. Another interesting study topic is related to the so-called low priority outcomes such as environmental issues, which already raised concerns during the 2008 SOA development due to the uncertainties in funding allocation. The ways in which the SOA affect the delivery of the low priority services need further attention since they are likely to have long-term impacts on the quality of life for local people.

Whilst acknowledging its limited scale and depth, this study attempted critically explore early experience from the 2008 SOA and the expectations of the SOA in the long-term. This study helped to understand how local government responses to the central call for wide support and collaboration and how such process reflects the surrounding issues in partnership working at the local level. This study provides valuable baseline information for the SOA as a long-term development process.

Notes

1 The HLSG consists of senior representation from the Scottish Government, COSLA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), Audit Scotland and the Improvement Service.

References

Balloch, S. & Taylor, M. (2001) *Partnership Working: policy and practice.* The Policy Press: Bristol, UK.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) (2002) Outcome Agreement: The Scottish Model. Online. Available:
http://www.cosla.gov.uk/attachments/execgroups/mg/mgloascotmod.doc   Accessed   19 January 2009.

COSLA (2008) *Single Outcome Agreement (SOAs) Guidance 2009 & Key Messages.* Report. October   2008.   Online   Available: http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/core-programmes/single-outcome-agreements-/
Accessed 19 January 2009.

Cowell, R. (2004) Community Planning: Fostering Participation in the Congested State? *Local Government Studies*, 30, pp.497 – 518.

Darlow, A., Percy-Smith, J. & Wells, P. (2007) Community Strategies: Are they Delivering Joined Up Governance? *Local Government Studies*, 33, pp.117 – 129.

Davis, H. & Daly, G. (2004) From Community Government to Communitarian Partnership? Approaches to Devolution in Birmingham. *Local Government Studies*, 30, pp.182-195.

Downe, J. & Martin, S. (2006) Joined up policy in practice? The coherence and impacts of the local government modernisation agenda. *Local Government Studies*, 32, pp.465 – 488.

Geddes, M., Davies, J. & Fuller, C. (2007) Evaluating Local Strategic Partnerships: Theory and practice of change. *Local Government Studies*, 33, pp.97 – 116.

Gillanders, G. & Ahmad, S (2007) Win-Win? Early Experience from Local Area Agreements. *Local Government Studies*, 33, pp.743 – 760.

Herbert. S. (2008) SPICs briefing: Single Outcome Agreements. The Scottish Parliament (08/47). Online. Available: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-08/SB08-47.pdf Accessed 07 November 2008.

Improvement Service (2008) *Single Outcome Agreement Briefing*. Report. Online. Available: http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/core-programmes/single-outcome-agreements-/ Accessed 19 January 2009.

Laffin, M. (2008) Local government Modernisation in England: A Critical Review of the LGMA Evaluation Studies. *Local Government Studies*, 34, pp.109-125.

Leach, R & Percy-Smith, Janie. (2001) *Local Governance in Britain*. Palgrave: Basingstock, UK.

Lowndes, V. & Sullivan, H. (2004) Like a Horse and Carriage or a Fish on a Bicycle: How Well do Local Partnerships and Public Participation go Together? *Local Government Studies*, 30, pp.51 – 73.

Mackie, R. (2004) Local Government Management Development in Scotland: A Study of Public Policy and its Implementation, 1967-2002**.** *Local Government Studies*, 30, pp.345 – 359.

McAteer, M. & Bennett, M. (2005) Devolution and Local Government: Evidence from Scotland. *Local Government Studies*, 31, pp.285 – 306.

McGarvey, N. (2002) Intergovernmental Relations in Scotland Post-Devolution. *Local Government Studies*, 28 (3), pp.29-48.

Office for Public Management (OPM), University of the West of England & Warwick Business School (2005) A process evaluation of the negotiation of pilot Local Area Agreements - final report. Online Available: http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/process Accessed 19 January 2009

Office for Public Management (OPM), University of the West of England & Warwick Business School (2006) Local Area Agreements Research: Round 2 Negotiations and Early Progress in Round 1. Online. Available
http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localareaagreements2
Accessed 19 January 2009.

Orr, K. & McAteer, M. (2004) The Modernisation of Local Decision Making: Public Participation and Scottish Local Government. *Local Government Studies*, 30, pp.131 – 155.

Scottish Executive (2004a) The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 - Guidance for Community Planning. Online. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/04/19168/35271 Accessed 19 January 2009.

Scottish Executive (2004b) The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 - Community Planning Advice Note. Online. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/04/19167/35255

Scottish Government & COSLA (2007) *Concordat between the Scottish Government and local government.* (Scottish Budget Spending Review November 2007). Online. Available: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/923/0054147.pdf Accessed 19 January 2009.

Scottish Government, COSLA, Audit Scotland, Improvement Service, & Solace (2008) *Single Outcome Agreements: Guidance, Format & Indicators for Scottish Local Government*. February 2008. Online. Available: http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/core-programmes/single-outcome-agreements- Accessed 19 January 2009.

Stevenson, R. (2002) *Getting "Under the Skin" of Community Planning: Understanding Community Planning at the Community Planning Partnership Level.* Local Government Report Commissioned by Community Planning Task Force. Online. http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/10/15602/12055 Accessed 19 January 2009.

Sullivan, H. & Skelcher, C. (2002) *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in public services*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Sullivan, H., Downe, J., Entwistle, T. & Sweeting, D. (2006) The three challenges of community leadership. *Local Government Studies*, 32, pp.489 – 508.

Williamson, V. (2002) The potential of project status to support partnerships. In *Partnership Working*, eds. Balloch , S. and Taylor, M. The Policy Press: Bristol. pp.117-142.

Table 1 Timescales for SOA development

May 2002	A proposal for the development of SOA by the Scottish Executive and COSLA
November 2007	Concordat between the Scottish Government and COSLA
February 2008	Publication of *SOA Guidance, Format and Indicators for Scottish Local Government*
End of March 2008	Deadline for draft 2008 SOAs
End of June 2008	Scottish Government and all 32 Councils sign off 2008 SOAs.
October 2008	Publication of *SOA Guidance for Community Planning Partnerships*
November 2008	Current study
December 2008	Current study
End of February 2009	Deadline for draft 2009 SOAs
End of May 2009	Deadline for singing off of 2009 SOAs

Table 2 Survey Participants (n = 114)

Council SOA		Partnership SOA	
SOA Lead Officer	5	SOA Lead Officer	14
Senior Officer	14	Senior Officer	31
Elected member	2	Elected member	8
Chief Executive	1	Chief Executive	7
-	-	Community Planning Partner	32
Total	22 (19 %)	Total	92 (81 %)

* Total number of Scottish local councils 32

Table 3 Understanding of the SOA's link in a wider context (%, n = 114)

	Very limited	Limited	Not sure	Good	Very good
With other policy initiatives (Best Value, Community Planning)	0.9	10	6.4	50	32.7
With other policies (Corporate Plan, Community Plan)	0	5.5	2.7	44.5	47.3

Table 4 Potential changes from SOA implementation (%, n = 114)

	No change	Minor change	Major change	Not sure
Change in local funding stream	1.8	40.9	39.7	14.5
Restructuring of partnership working	2.7	50	40	7.3
Change in local partners' policy	1.8	51.9	33.6	12.7

Table 5 Availability of resource and staff to implement SOA (%)

	No	Not sure	Yes
Adequate resources (n=99)	32.3	33.3	34.3
Adequate staff (n=98)	18.4	35.7	45.9

Table 6 2008 SOA's effects on partnership working (%, n =114)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
*Raising CPP's profile	3.3	9.8	10.9	52.2	23.9
*Sharing achievable visions between CPP partners	1.1	6.5	21.7	53.3	17.4
Council's enhanced community leadership role	0.9	8.8	19.3	58.8	12.3
Better understanding of local needs	1.8	12.3	21.9	57.9	6.1

* These two questions about CPPs were asked only to CPP SOA areas. (n = 92)

Table 7 Potential long-term effects of the SOA on partnership working (%, n =114)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
Improved joined-up local governance	0	2.7	14.5	65.5	17.3
Improved joined-up action and delivery	0	2.7	18.2	63.6	15.5
Improved sharing of information and data	0	6.4	20	57.3	16.4
Building trust between local partners	0	2.8	25.7	61.5	10.1
Increased collective accountability	0	4.5	30	47.3	18.2

Table 8 Effects of the SOA on the relationship with communities (%, n = 114)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
SOAs are owned by communities.	4.5	29.1	20.9	39.1	6.4
Improved dialogue between Council and Communities	1.8	7.3	29.1	52.7	9.1
Improved public confidence in local government	1.8	14.5	58.2	20.9	4.5

Table 9 Establishment of a new working relationship between central and local government (%, n = 114)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
During the 2008 SOA development	0.9	2.7	29.2	53.1	14.2
In the future	0	2.7	20.9	60	16.4