

Issues in reaching priority community groups via national grant aid programmes

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Introduction:

Securing a political agenda has become increasingly significant in determining the allocation of public funds to sport (LGA, 1998; DCMS, 1999; Sport England, 1999). Sport for sport's sake has given way to its social benefits: the government's policy agenda on regeneration, inclusion, employment, crime reduction, and health. There has been much debate about whether the government's social agenda is best delivered via area-based or people-centred initiatives and the role that local authorities ought to play in those (Atkinson, 2000; Foley & Martin, 2000; Osborne *et al.*, 2003; Rhodes *et al.*, 2003; Williams, 2003). Lottery funding offers resources to support local small-scale projects via national grant aid schemes. What is the role of local 'gatekeepers' when local groups can apply directly to scheme deliverers for funding? Does this process meet the aim of *extending the reach* of support to deprived communities?

Project

This study considers the national funding of projects run by local groups and the role local authorities might still have in mediating those relationships. With a few exceptions national government does not deliver goods and services at local level. It is dependent upon a local agent. Conventionally this has been the local authorities (Figure 1, model A), but more recently it has increasingly been some local partnership, albeit with the appropriate local authority playing a key role (Figure 1, model B). Thus, Osborne *et al.* (2003: 11) note that 'in England local government has to negotiate multiple relationships to maintain its position and influence'.

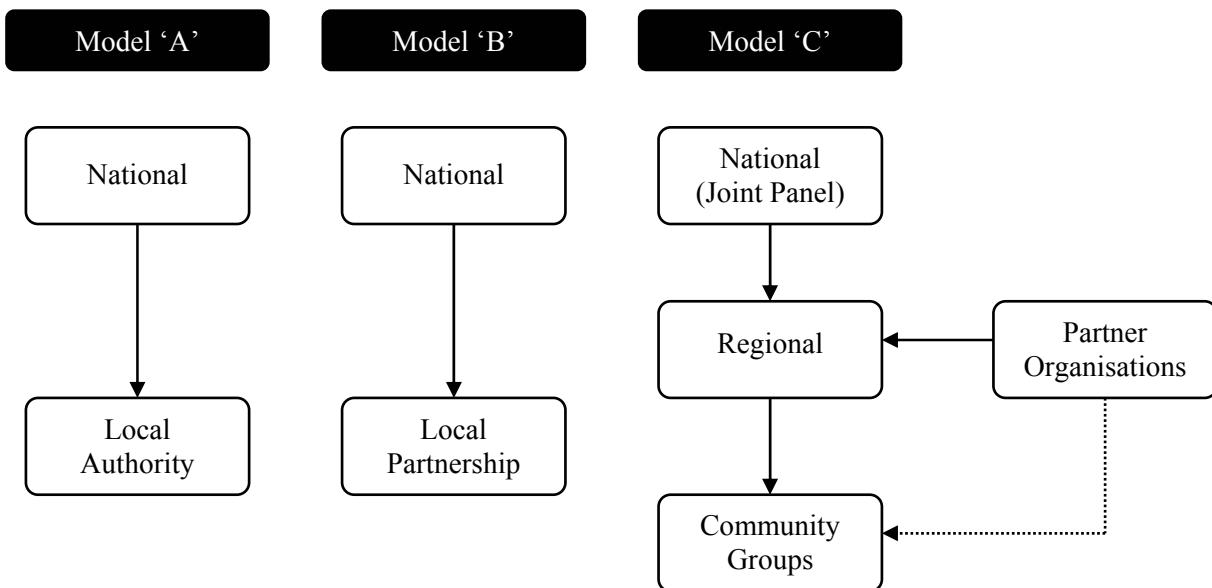


Figure 1: Different funding routes from national to local

The initiative we are concerned with here is rather different in terms of this local/national link, referring to a joint Lottery distributors' scheme offering support toward small-scale community projects. The purpose of the scheme is threefold: to extend access and participation, to increase skill and creativity and to improve the quality of life. The underlying rationale is based on extending the reach by keeping the application process simple, making the scheme easily accessible to community groups and not necessitating the need for organisations to seek partnership funding. Sports clubs and community groups make direct application at a regional level to an award-making panel, to which national agencies have

delegated responsibility for decision-making. As suggested by model 'C' in Figure 1, this means that national agencies have delegated responsibility to their regional arms, which then deal directly with individual projects, leaving local authorities having to find an appropriate role.

Results

A postal questionnaire to a stratified random sample of 2000 community groups achieved a high response level (68%), interviews with key organisations active in the award process addressed roles/delivery and case studies examined overall impact. Certainly the beneficiaries overwhelmingly felt very positive about local impact and their future organisational capacity. However, some local authority staff and others operating at a local level were concerned that (a) a nationally driven agenda was insufficiently sensitive to the needs of community groups (which then had to attempt to 'best fit' its criteria), and (b) that regional disparities in priorities led to a piecemeal approach across the country (similar sports projects could be successful in one region but refused in another). Despite generating significant numbers of new *applications*, could the scheme be said to benefit new *participants*? Within the 'hard to reach' (HTR) communities identified as low in sports opportunities, this national scheme appears to have extended the reach of funding. But by the very definition there are still HTR populations that remain beyond reach. They are in effect still excluded. Despite the good news, many who might benefit remain oblivious or lack of belief in their own organisational merits and are fearful about filling in forms.

Discussion:

Suggestions were made regarding the decentralisation of the scheme with a role for local agencies (particularly local authorities) in decision-making, begging the question of what exactly is the role of national development agencies in delivering schemes of this nature? National organisations working through their regional 'arms' cannot reasonably be expected to have the kind of detailed knowledge of local communities that allows them direct routes through to HTR communities. Rather, it is the role of community 'gatekeepers', such as local authorities, to be proactive in their promotion of the scheme. Better use could be made of *community* networks to access the HTR, as opposed to the more traditional *sports* networks. Community workers and local groups suggest that multi-lingual promotion should be targeted at youthworkers, community centres, resource centres, and community elders/leaders. Media routes mentioned were local free papers, local radio and the internet (with clear links to community organisations). Community representatives recommend a 'bottom up' approach via targeted marketing rather than blanket scheme promotion, as the most effective way of extending the scheme's reach.

This study addresses the question of how social agendas can be addressed by national agencies providing funding direct to local projects and identifies a critical role for community networks and local authorities especially as community facilitators, particularly for the HTR groups. While the funding scheme in question may have evolved in 'relative' isolation from these local agencies (i.e. the absence of an obvious national/regional to local link) in reality it has always relied heavily on local authority networks (particularly sporting ones) to promote and assist projects. To extend the reach any further, a 'community development' approach necessitates involving the people themselves actively in defining both their needs and the solution to those needs (AMA, 1989). It is about community self-help mutually organised with enabling agents or professionals. This can only be done at local level with a strong involvement by the local authority and its agents and voluntary partners working 'on the street'. Benefits will accrue both to national agencies in terms of addressing the social inclusion agenda, and similarly to local authorities as a tool in local community building. Although the actual funding mechanism is unlikely to change (application by local groups) since the government rightly sees this scheme as making Lottery funding *directly* available to and benefiting local people, there is clearly a case in stating more overtly (Figure 2, model D) the role of local authorities and other community organisations as facilitator agencies within the whole process.

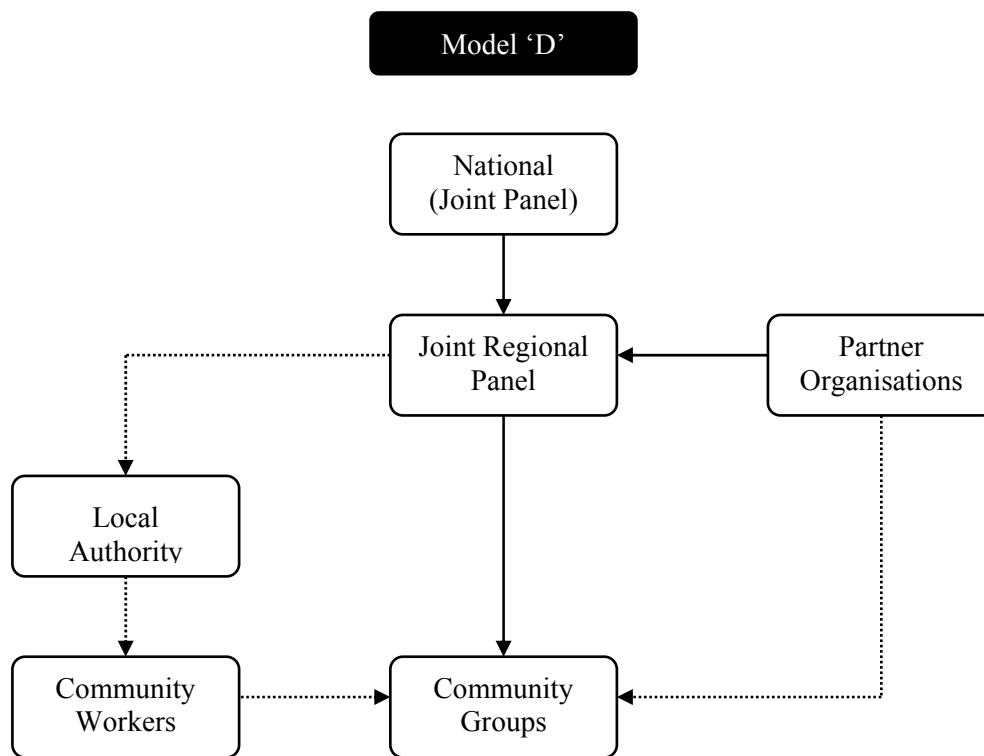


Figure 2: National to local delivery incorporating Local Authority facilitator role

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