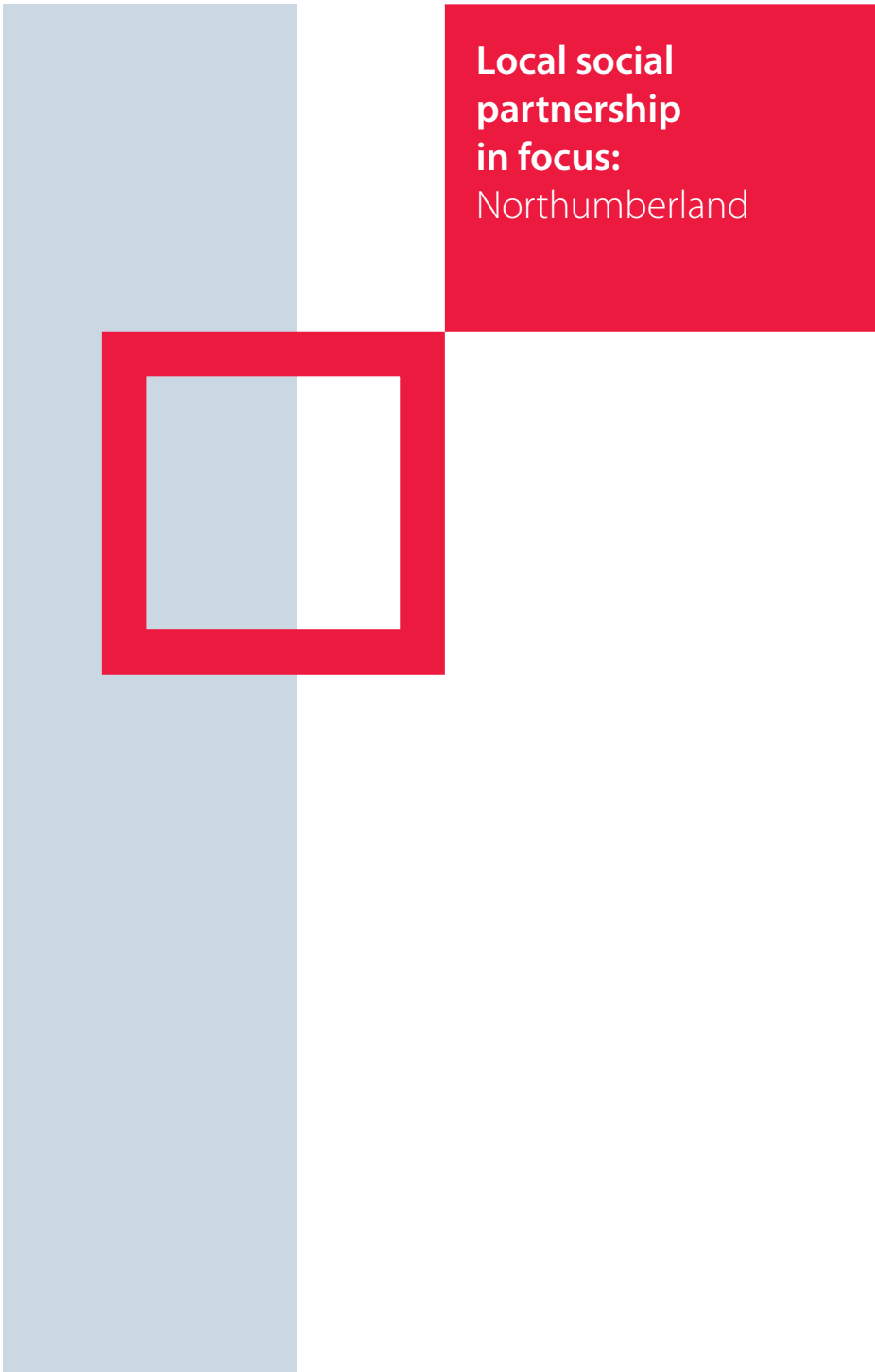


# Local social partnership: effective practice



**Local social  
partnership  
in focus:**  
Northumberland





## Summary

- The local social partnership has extensive representation from the local authority (covering human resources, extended schools, support staff and the school workforce) and unions.
- A written constitution sets out its objectives, membership and processes.
- A proposed agenda for meetings is sent to members for their agreement beforehand.
- Issues are highlighted and workshops developed around them.
- High-quality printed bulletins provide regular communication with schools.
- Comprehensive and inclusive surveys are carried out.

## Effective working

Northumberland's local social partnership was established at the beginning of 2005. Later the same year, it produced its constitution, which defines the partnership's purpose, objectives, membership and working procedures. Its general objective is to: *"work in partnership to promote the benefits of the National Agreement and workforce reform across schools within Northumberland, and monitor and promote compliance with the reforms."*

### Meetings

- The partnership meets at least once every half term, depending on need.
- The agenda addresses local workforce priorities relating to the modernisation of the whole school workforce.
- A draft agenda is prepared and circulated about two weeks before the meeting.
- The social partners have the opportunity to comment on and suggest additions to agenda.
- The agreed agenda is circulated with other documents seven days before the meeting.
- Meetings are deliberately short, starting at about 1.30pm and ending by 3pm.
- The social partners agree among themselves the responsibilities for taking actions forward.

## Effective communications

### Bulletins

The local social partnership started sending bulletins to schools early in 2006. The bulletins address specific areas on which schools need further briefing and act as reminders. They are issued as and when required. The first bulletin was entitled: 'Ten things you should know about planning, preparation and assessment.'

The subject matter for bulletins is agreed at the meetings and will be an issue that schools will need to address. The writer is the person with the most relevant experience in that area. Before being printed, the bulletin is circulated among the social partners for their comments and agreement. The bulletins are printed and laminated to a high quality and sent out to the schools. Although this is a relatively expensive process, the social partners want the bulletins to be noticed and read.

## Surveys

The local social partnership uses surveys to discover how schools are coping with aspects of workforce reform overall and to highlight any issues. Its last survey on the National Agreement took place in spring 2007: questionnaires were sent out to all school workforce members' home addresses – via their unions – across the county. The questionnaires had been developed by a working group including the local authority, NASUWT, ATL, UNISON and NUT.

This survey received a good response rate of almost 15 per cent, based on a sample of 500 schools. The questionnaires were sent back to the local authority for analysis and the school workforce adviser then fed back a summary of the report to school advisers, the senior people in the School Improvement Division. The analysis was shared with the social partners at a meeting and led to a discussion of issues including:

- work/life balance
- leadership and management time for teaching staff
- teaching heads
- support staff pay
- small schools, and
- sustainability.

A summary of the survey findings was published in the September 2007 bulletin and was the catalyst to an examination of work/life balance. The bulletin aimed to focus school staff on this issue, mentioning that further support would be forthcoming in November. Schools were invited to show their interest by signing up for free work/life balance workshops. The workshops included a session for governors and promoted the development of a range of working practices that are effective in raising standards and tackling workload. The local authority is now part-funding schools to enable them to gain the Investors in People accreditation in work/life balance.

Other planned bulletins will focus on cover and a survey of support staff roles in remodelling.

## Overall effectiveness

There are no formal means by which the local social partnership can monitor its own effectiveness. However, the response rate to the survey should provide some indication of its ability to generate feedback. The questionnaire was 'local social partnership' badged, indicating a reasonably high degree of recognition.

## Quotes

*"Equality of status is central to effective working relationships within the Northumberland local social partnership. By striving for a clear focus on the strategic issues around implementation and monitoring of the National Agreement within the wider workforce reform agenda, its work is recognised and valued by schools and partners alike. The regular bulletins provide feedback on this focus and offer two-way communication with schools."*

Alan Johnston, School Workforce Adviser, Northumberland local social partnership

*"I view the model established by Northumberland local social partnership to be a clear example of collaborative working at its best. All views are valued; every effort is made to reach consensus. This work is underpinned with a united belief that it is important that we make a difference, a difference that will improve the working life of ALL staff in schools, and so have a positive impact on our children."*

Vin Wynne, NUT representative, Northumberland local social partnership

*"As a trade union representative, it has been a welcome change to usual business to try to be proactive and improve the work/life balance of staff in all our schools. There has been a genuine attempt by all participants to try and make a difference, even where differences of emphasis have been identified. The group is inclusive of all interested parties, opinions are respected and discussions are given an effective lead and support by the local authority. There has been free access to headteacher training on workforce reform issues for all members to further build trust within the group. It is, pleasingly, not just a talking shop but has conducted valuable research and made considerable efforts to provide information to staff in the schools."*

Richard Woolhouse, ATL representative, Northumberland local social partnership

*"In a year when the impact and sustainability of workforce remodelling is being embedded in school self-evaluation, much has been brought out in the open about the concerns about leadership succession planning in our schools. The support the local social partnership has been able to provide as schools face growing concerns in this respect has been huge."*

*"To have an effective local social partnership – which regularly communicates with schools, relaying pertinent surveys within an LA that provides follow-up workshops on issues identified – has been hugely beneficial to the whole workforce."*

*"Since its birth, the local social partnership has been particularly supportive with job descriptions and person specifications as we moved towards reviewing staffing structures, giving schools legally grounded documents that are good models to work on in their own setting."*

*"Many schools have positively engaged with the specific work/life balance agenda during this year of leadership within Northumberland. Many are now engaged within partnerships and as individual schools on growing our future leaders."*

Sally Lamb, Headteacher, St Michael's CoE First School, Alnwick, Northumberland

*"The local social partnership bulletins have been a very effective way of communicating with the whole school workforce and keeping all staff informed of issues around the National Agreement. The fact that they are on coloured paper has made them stand out on staff noticeboards and they have been a prompt for discussion among all staff. There is a genuine belief among staff that action is being taken to improve the working life of everyone working in school."*

Lynn Blain, Headteacher, Ponteland First School, Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland

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