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From paper to action: setting up local burglary reduction projects

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Introduction

This chapter examines the issues facing Phase I and II RBI projects in translating their paper bids into effective action on the ground. Extensive coverage has already been given to the theme of developing RBI project bids as part of a bidding process, and to developing crime reduction plans more generally (see for instance Tilley *et al.*, 1999, Curtin *et al.*, 2001). This chapter does not intend to retread this ground in any detail. Rather, our aim is to concentrate on what we would contend is a more neglected area of project development. As bid documents for RBI projects were frequently hurried to meet deadlines, or were written by people other than those given the responsibility of project management, the period from bid to action proved to be key in the development of projects. This chapter starts by examining the extent and implications of project change in what we shall call the 'post-bid period'³⁶. It then explores the underlying reasons for changes, conceptualising change as a series of project development tasks that typically had to be worked through. Finally, the chapter examines how experience of change may have been affected by differences in the context within which projects were developed.

Change and delay: the path to action

It would be naïve to assume that any prototype project could roll off the 'bidding line' and move straight into delivering services on the ground. Under the RBI it was found that further project development could be broken down into two distinct types of activity:

- Tasks associated with revisiting and revising the project bid.
- Development tasks that all projects had to go through in preparing for action – such as recruiting staff and purchasing equipment.

Whilst all RBI projects had to some extent worked through the second sort of development tasks, the extent to which projects had to revisit and revise their bids was not so well anticipated. This is apparent from the 20 strategic development projects (SDPs) evaluated by

36 In referring to the 'post-bid' period, we mean the period immediately after confirmation of funding was given to successful applicants. From this point projects were theoretically capable of starting to spend their grant money.

the Southern Consortium. Nineteen were implemented in a different form, or in a different intensity to that originally planned, and one was not implemented at all. Under Phase II of the RBI just under 60 per cent of surveyed project managers claimed that their original project bids were subject to some change prior to any implementation activity.

These changes were not necessarily the result of weak bids nor did it follow that the projects were unsuccessful³⁷. For instance, bids were often revisited because several months elapsed from their submission to their approval. Thus, project participants felt their initial analysis needed updating. Even if the need to revisit a bid was due to the weak construction of that bid, this did not preclude the project going on to implement effective interventions on the basis of sound revisions.

Delays

One unavoidable implication of these changes was delay, which was widespread under both phases of the RBI. Projects under Phase I were due to start in April 1999. Of the 20 evaluated by the Southern Consortium, only five did so. Seventy-eight per cent of Phase II project managers said that they experienced some delay in getting their projects up and running after funding was announced – with the mean average delay being estimated at just over five months. Many Phase II project managers observed that delays were to some extent inevitable, in that most projects required a development period ahead of implementing work on the ground. As one project manager commented, ‘I think really if a project like this were going to be run again there should be a six month lead-in’.

The implications of delay were not uniform. A positive response, as noted in Chapter Two, is that most Regional Government Offices demonstrated flexibility in allowing delayed projects the extra time to complete their programme of work. Unfortunately, a similar flexibility to continue projects was not always available locally, with staff in particular often departing before work was complete. This contributed in turn to a proportion of projects failing to meet their targets and/or failing to spend their full allocated grant budget. For instance, in Phase II of the RBI, 46 per cent of project managers said that they underspent on their budget.

Strict adherence to timetables

Many project managers felt pressured to keep their project on track in terms of the original programme timetable. This was not necessarily a correct perception on their part. For instance the manager in Phase 2-68 described feeling obliged to start spending and to start implementing, with the result that he felt that the project development process was rushed.

³⁷ For details of the effectiveness of interventions see Millie and Hough (2004).

Budget profiles typically failed to account for the likely need to delay significant grant expenditure during the early project development period. In view of the importance of the range of linked tasks underlying this development stage, any rushing or curtailing of these tasks was bound to have detrimental consequences.

Staff changes

The departure of staff who had been central to the development of project bids could also result in change or delay. A typical example from Phase I is Phase 1-8. This project was due to start in April 1999 but drifted during its early months because of a change in police management. The two police personnel who had original responsibility moved posts and had no further involvement. The project was passed onto a police inspector in November 1999. However, it took some time for him to become familiar with the project as a whole, resulting in no police contribution until February 2000. The Phase 2-72 project was effectively 'lost' when the police officer who had developed the project left without any handover arrangements being in place. It was only 'rediscovered' when, a year later, the Regional Government Office asked why no money had been spent.

Staff turnover and insufficient handover were common problems throughout the RBI, and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Some bids were developed by 'bid specialists' who passed on the task of managing the project to a new member of staff after the grant was secured. In other cases, personnel who won bid monies were then promoted and 'moved on' as a result of their success.

Managing projects can require different skills from those required for submitting a bid. As a result, it can sometimes be to the advantage of projects to have different people responsible for each stage of project development. However, the experience of the SDPs evaluated by the Southern Consortium suggested that this was not always the case. While a change in management did not necessarily result in a shift in project focus, it invariably led to a drift in implementation.

Tasks associated with revisiting and revising the project bid

To recap, there were two types of development task associated with RBI projects once the grant had been awarded. The first covers tasks associated with refining or revising the project bid itself. Many of these were tasks that people had assumed would have been substantially completed as part of the bid writing and submission process. These tasks were:

- checking realism;
- costing;
- checking that the original focus was sensible;
- verifying commitment;
- verifying capacity; and
- consulting with the community/estimating demand.

Checking realism

Project managers sometimes had to address at the start of the funded project period problems relating to parts of the 'paper' bid being unrealistic or assumptions being untested. For instance, Phase 1-14 had to drop one of its interventions as suitable equipment proved to be unavailable. It had intended to use a microchip tracking system known as 'Stealthguard' to trace stolen goods. However, following funding approval, the project managers discovered the system was at that time still in development. A different example from Phase II is provided by Phase 2-58. Here, plans to fund the fitting of locks on residential doors within the target area proved unrealistic when it was found that the door frames were too weak to properly support the locks.

A lack of realism in paper bids was noted as a problem by the Phase 1-18 project manager who believed that this was at least partly due to a 'very rushed' bidding process and that he had received little guidance on how to put an application together. He also considered that the general feeling, with regard to bidding, was one of 'let's get the money and then work out how to spend it'.

Costing

Realism was also sometimes lacking in the estimation of costs put into bids, a process hindered by the insufficient bidding time available. Cost errors could be significant. For instance the Phase 2-46 project manager found that security doors – that the project had estimated at £300 a unit – in fact cost double that amount, leading to this part of the project being abandoned.

Some projects deliberately under-costed administration in an effort to be competitive. In other projects, the amount of administration required – and with it the associated costs – came as a unwelcome surprise. Other unexpected costs typically included the need for further crime analysis to facilitate the targeting of interventions and identifying and appointing a contractor to undertake work.

Under Phase I of the RBI, a fixed grant of £60,000 allowed little room for manoeuvre when it came to costing work. As a result, some projects had to change focus due to their initial expectations being unrealistic. Once it was realised how comparatively little could be done with this amount, some SDPs shrank somewhat in coverage. For example, Phase 1-8 changed from an estate-wide focus to concentrating on a single street.

However, most of the Phase I SDPs evaluated by the Southern Consortium were able to lever in other finances to support such extra costs. Of the 20 sites evaluated, the most robust cost data were collected for eight projects. For these, non-Home Office funding supported nearly four-fifths of the SDP crude costs (Bowles and Pradiptyo, 2004).

Checking that the original focus was sensible

Bids sometimes contained interventions that were found to be unsuitable after funding was awarded. Conversely, on other occasions the target area itself was deemed ill-suited to the proposed interventions. Most projects under the RBI had to work with the funded target area and did not have the flexibility to change this post-bid. Exceptionally under Phase I however, some projects were allowed to effectively extend their activities beyond the target area. For example, project Phase 1-4 was expanded from its original focus. This project was entirely concentrated on improvements in police intelligence-gathering and analysis. As the same approach could be used across a larger area, for little extra cost, it was decided to extend the scheme from its original target area to cover the rest of the police Basic Command Unit (BCU). A similar pragmatic decision was made once implementation began in Phase 1-5. Again this was a single intervention project, this time based on a drugs arrest referral scheme for burglary offenders. As the project progressed, it was discovered that the scheme could not gain enough clients from either the original target area or the original burglary focus. The local health service provider was also not prepared to prioritise type of offence over need for treatment. So it was decided to extend eligibility to all offenders from anywhere within the city. Although funding was for a burglary project, in this instance it was entirely sensible to expand coverage to other offence types.

Verifying commitment

In some bids, such as Phase 2-66 and Phase 2-40, the commitment and role of many agencies named as partners in the bid proved to be little more than untested assumptions. Even where some initial commitment had been made by agencies named in the bid, much remained to be done in the post-bid period to firm up that commitment and clearly communicate and clarify the role of each participant. This situation was exacerbated by the

long delay between bid submissions and the approval of funding, with the strength of initial commitments naturally weakening over time.

In the post-bid period, there was a frequent need to more clearly delineate roles and responsibilities at both an intra- and inter-agency level. For example, Phase 1-19 was funded on the basis of a formal agreement between the police, the local authority and the relevant Regional Government Office. However, it became apparent that agreement from the local authority was based on an understanding that the police were fully funding the project, with support from the Government Office. The police believed that the local authority was committing tangible resources to the project's management. It took a while for these conflicting expectations to be resolved. From Home Office funds being made available in April 1999, there was no tangible implementation until November 1999 and only in December 1999 did the local authority commit staff resources and actively support the project.

Verifying capacity

A related issue is the capacity of participating agencies. Assumptions about the capacity to deliver sometimes proved to be ill-founded. For example, in Phase 3-3, in excess of £80,000 had been allocated to the Youth Offending Team to work with young offenders. However, the team did not have the capacity to undertake this work within their existing level of staffing. The option of recruiting another member of staff was discounted when it became clear that, by the time such a recruitment process had been completed, there would be insufficient project time left to actually deliver the work. In Phase 2-70, an intervention to install police alarms had to be abandoned when it became clear that the police had no additional capacity to respond to any increased demand in alarm calls.

Consulting with the community/estimating demand

Throughout the RBI programme, applicants were encouraged to consult with relevant communities when formulating their bid. However, the timetable for bidding rarely afforded projects the opportunity to do this in the bid application stage.

RBI project participants frequently found consulting with communities to be problematic and time-consuming. For instance, projects were often at a loss about how to identify and contact the 'community'. Even when contact was made, nurturing and expanding these contacts took time and considerable persistence. For instance, in Phase 2-75, after an initial community meeting attracted just seven attendees, the project manager tried to generate interest through time-consuming and relatively unproductive door-knocking and letter-writing.

Gaining contacts through existing community organisations later proved more useful, with community meetings subsequently having between 65 to 85 attendees.

Projects, such as Phase 2-66, admitted that in constructing their bid they had to make assumptions about community need and receptiveness. However, these assumptions were sometimes misplaced. For example, the experience of the community consultation carried out in project Phase 1-8 led to a complete change of project emphasis. The original hope was to implement a programme of high visibility policing (HVP). However, this was identified by residents as an unwanted intrusion. Police/resident relations were not good and the tenant perception of policing was generally poor. It was thought that HVP would not be possible until some trust between the two groups had been established. Knowledge of how the community will react to a particular strategy is important so as to ensure successful implementation.

Projects that failed to consult the community therefore risked basing their work on mis-assumptions about there being a demand for their services. But projects leaving such consultation until after the bid application stage could also feel constrained to restrict consultation to seeking input and approval for a pre-determined programme of work. For instance, Phase 2-64 spent nearly six months undertaking a public consultation exercise. However, the manager did not feel that the exercise contributed a great deal as it merely served to confirm that the community was happy with the services on offer.

Development tasks that all projects had to go through

Whilst many RBI projects were delayed through having to revise or refine the project bid, there were also a number of development tasks that all projects would face after confirmation of funding. These tasks were:

- recruitment of staff;
- training of staff;
- setting up implementation procedures;
- acquiring equipment and premises;
- managing procurement and financial processes; and
- developing innovative practices.

Recruitment of staff

If projects had to formally recruit staff through advertising and holding interviews for posts, then the time required to complete this process was often substantial, typically taking three to four months. Job specifications and adverts had to be developed. Moreover, if projects were recruiting staff under local authority rules and procedures, then vacancies often had to be advertised internally first within the local authority.

Delays could often become extended if problems arose with the recruitment process, or if staff were required with skills that were in short supply. For example, Phase 1-18 planned to run an intervention using 'rangers' to support the local police and act as a visible contact point on local estates. Problems in recruiting a company to provide the rangers meant that implementation did not begin until eight months after the start of the project. This was despite the tenders being sought from established security companies. For the Phase 3-1 project it took nearly a year for the project to fill its full complement of specialist posts. Whilst generally, projects recruiting staff through temporary secondments had the potential to get staff in post quicker, this advantage did not always materialise.

A further problem was staff availability. Most projects at the set-up stage required a considerably greater investment of staff time than was needed once implementation was properly under way. For instance in Phase 2-69 the project took up to 50 per cent of the part-time manager's time at the start of the project, but only about five hours a week thereafter. The problem for some projects was that they had not anticipated the changing level of staffing required at different stages of the projects. However, in many cases – in a testament to the dedication of those involved – serious delay was only avoided by project staff working well beyond the bounds of their scheduled working day during peak project periods.

Training of staff

Once staff were recruited, further time was needed for training. However, the majority of Phase II project managers thought training was largely 'on the job'. This often consisted of little more than relying on their existing skills and learning as they went along. Some managers were more fortunate in having access to informal mentoring from partners, or benefiting from a formal handover period. Others under Phase II were able to draw on the experience and advice available from similar projects that had been run under Phase I.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, formal training from the support consultants was not always available, or was not always accessed, by projects during the start-up period. Moreover, some felt that the training that was provided was too generic, and that grounded training

that was more directly applicable to the context within which they were to be working would be more valuable. Many clearly felt as well that a structured acquisition of required skills at the start of the project would have been helpful. Many managers lacked experience in their new role, and seconded or part-time managers rarely seem to have received in-house training to prepare them for their new position. For instance, the police manager of Phase 2-72 observed that the police service was often at fault in promoting officers on the basis of their potential to fulfil a more senior role, but not actually giving them training ahead of time to undertake it:

We do need much more training in basic management, of having strategic awareness, setting your priorities and also, you know, not being deflected from what your priorities are.

This was a view shared by the police inspector who managed the Phase 1-10 who felt that, in the absence of in-house training, police-based project managers would have benefited from some standard guidance on all aspects of project management.

Setting up implementation procedures

The apparent simplicity of many project interventions – such as fitting locks to doors – belied the frequent complexity of the supporting procedures required to administer them. For example, an initiative that sought to target-harden burgled dwellings may have needed to go through the following:

- procedures were needed for identifying victims;
- if victim details were coming from the police and were being given to a third party, then procedures were often needed to be in place to ensure compliance with data protection legislation;
- procedures then needed to be in place for determining who contacted the victims and how, and then who assessed their security needs; and
- in turn, consideration was required as to how these needs were to be communicated to whoever was physically undertaking the target hardening.

An intervention such as alley-gating³⁸ often required an even more intensive process of development before the substantive work could be done. Procedures may have been needed for instance for – piloting prototype gates, consulting and gaining the consent of

38 'Alley-gating' refers to a situational crime prevention intervention usually employed in areas of terraced housing where offenders exploit alleyways that run along the backs of rows of houses to gain access to properties. The intervention typically entails blocking access to these alleys with locked gates and giving keys to each household that backs onto the alley.

residents and/or landlords, enquiring about and obtaining planning permissions, for distributing and replacing keys, and for ongoing maintenance.

Acquiring equipment and premises

A related aspect of developing procedures was the acquisition of necessary equipment and premises. This not only related to procuring equipment for interventions such as locks and bolts, but also the purchasing of core equipment for administration such as computers and phones. Moreover, many projects needed to find and equip office or other building space for their activities.

Managing procurement and financial processes

Phase II project managers observed that skills relating to procurement and financial management were often in short supply. From the outset, it took some time to become accustomed to the processes and bureaucracy surrounding the spending and claiming of grant monies. The project grant-holder would typically be a participating agency's finance/resource department, thus adding an extra tier of complexity to financial management. In particular, many police financial departments were unused to handling VAT and paying for services 'up front'.

The often unusual and ad hoc activities of these types of projects sometimes created difficulties for financial officers used to dealing with a narrower and more predictable range of expenditure. For example, the Phase 2-64 project manager wanted to purchase a pair of curtains for a victim who could not afford them – and who was therefore providing offenders with an easy target in terms of displaying non-occupancy. However, the manager found it hard to convince his financial resource unit that he was not misusing funds.

The majority of projects also had to act through the procurement framework of a participating agency. Whilst better supported projects were often able to directly hand over much of this work to finance or procurement officers within these larger parent organisations, in other cases managers had to largely learn the rules and procedures for themselves. The procurement process generated a number of common challenges for such managers.

- Drawing up a work specification – 'invitations to tender' normally detail 'what' and 'how much' work is wanted from the contractor. However, managers generally found it difficult to forecast how much of a service they would need at the start of their projects.

- Drawing up an invitation to tender – the technical and procedural aspects of this were often time-consuming.
- Identifying suitable prospective tenders – often managers did not have the option of simply contracting on a single-tender basis, but identifying suitable tenders could prove difficult. A strategy that helped circumvent this was to utilise the existing contractor contacts found in partner agencies. Nevertheless, in some projects choice was still often limited. This had obvious implications when it came to ensuring value for money from the contractor, and generally exerting financial control.
- Drawing up a suitable contract – some projects were locked into contracts that were insufficiently watertight, leaving them poorly placed to ensure that the contractor delivered what was required.

Innovation

The Home Office brief for SDPs was for them to be designed with innovation and evaluation in mind (Tilley *et al.*, 1999). Those that followed this brief had to be flexible as new ideas were tried and tested. If some proved impractical or ineffective, then good projects made changes on the basis of what they had learnt. Planning for innovation should also allow for a certain degree of failure. For example, in Phase 1-14 whilst problems were encountered in implementing some of the ten interventions contained in the original bids, the project adapted to the problems encountered by developing a number of new and subsidiary interventions. For instance, plans in the original bid for reducing offending through high visibility policing and the eviction of persistent offenders, were extended during the course of the project to include the use of comparatively new Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and an initiative to tighten up bail enforcement.

Where interventions were based on the deployment of innovative equipment, the development and acquisition of such equipment was invariably time-consuming and – as in the earlier ‘Stealthguard’ example – promised technological innovations were not always developed soon enough to be of use. Furthermore, whether innovation centred on equipment or operational practices, establishing effective procedures to guide that innovation could be problematic. For instance, the Phase 2-65 project manager wished to make use of an innovative tracking device. However, to purchase this equipment the project had to go through the Force’s internal purchasing department. It then transpired that central Force policies in the use of tracking devices only covered their use in relation to tracking vehicles. The project consequently faced having to get these policies amended. As the project manager observed:

If you put funding in at the ground level, it means the divisions themselves have the opportunity to develop new ideas and it's increasingly difficult for the centre to control and manage these ideas.

Projects with a head start

There are obvious advantages in projects being built on existing capacity and expertise. Nearly 60 per cent of sampled project managers under Phase II claimed that their project was built upon a pre-existing partnership group. However, the skills, experience and capacities of these groups, and the extent to which they offered their projects substantive support, varied markedly. Even in the absence of partnership, skilled project managers could link their projects into the work and capacities of other organisations and existing projects. Being able to do this was dependent on the manager having enough local grounding to know what the local opportunities were in the first place. With many projects being managed by new and relatively inexperienced staff, this was not always the case. Projects founded on existing structures and capacities benefited from:

- Building on pre-existing skills and experience together with available knowledge of best practice.
- Good relations and trust between organisations and with the community.
- Pooled resources, including administration, premises, and training.
- Needing less time to get the project 'up and running'.

Project Phase 1-17 was able to start promptly simply because it was an extension of an existing scheme. Similarly, Phase 1-14 could start promptly because it had already conducted a pilot in the three months leading up to the scheme.

There are also disadvantages associated with building on pre-existing partnerships or projects. There is a frequently observed tendency for such projects to simply 'roll out' or 'take off the shelf' (Ekblom, 1998) existing interventions that are not properly tailored or adapted to the new problem or area being dealt with. This is not inevitable, with Phase 2-60 benefiting from the infrastructure and knowledge of having operated a similar set of interventions before, but then utilising the RBI money to improve and adapt them to the RBI targeted area.

Conversely, prior associations can also come with difficulties. Project Phase 2-48 was obliged to deliver its interventions through those agencies which formed an active local partnership. However, the manager felt that one partner was relatively ineffective and that their role would have been better performed by someone else.

Summary

Projects under the RBI were born into a wide variety of contexts. Some enjoyed a significant head start, whilst others faced far more challenges prior to any effective delivery. However, with the notable exception of accounting for the relative size of the burglary problem from Phase II onwards, the RBI programme made no differentiation between the advantaged and disadvantaged. Projects were allocated funds through a standard grant formula, and had to spend their funds over the same amount of time. Whilst, under Phase II consultancy support was available for all projects, limits on the type and amount of help that consultants could provide meant that this support was often insufficient to fully redress the range of challenges faced by the more 'disadvantaged' projects.

This chapter examined how projects translated their paper bids into effective action on the ground. Key considerations were tasks associated with revisiting and revising the project bid and development tasks that all projects had to go through. Whilst some of these tasks could have been anticipated, those associated with revision of bids were less easy to foresee. For many projects this contributed to sizeable delays that had repercussions to effective and timely implementation.