CHAPTER 8 LOCAL AUTHORITIES WORKING IN PARTNERSHIPS: PANACEA OR FALSE DAWN?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the theory and practice of UK public sector partnerships with the aim of exploring what local authorities and their partners can do to maximise the possibility of achieving positive benefits from partnership working in a recession. It starts by summarising key conclusions from the academic literature on partnerships which spell out and dig deeper into the ambiguity that whilst there are potential benefits from working in partnership, they are not automatic, and partnerships can fail. The chapter considers in detail the initial experiences of a recent development in partnership working, 'Placed Based Budgeting' (or in its earlier incarnation 'Total Place'), created under the auspices of Local Strategic Partnerships and involving the main statutory and voluntary public sector players in a local area. This chapter is therefore an exploration of the issues which must be confronted before whole area partnerships can go beyond hot air and empty window dressing, to enable real changes which result in productivity gains and better public service outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Partnership: suppressing hatred in search of money’ - the opening gambit of the comedian, journalist and social entrepreneur, Simon Fanshawe, in his speech at the 2003 conference dinner of the Local Government Information Unit. At the time he was chair of the Brighton and Hove Strategic Partnership, and to this day he chairs their Economic Partnership. Working in partnerships is an almost inevitable response to an economic downturn and consequent cuts in public expenditure. But are partnerships a panacea for achieving ‘more for less’ from the public purse, or do they herald a false dawn where organisational synergies are confounded by legitimately differing priorities or hostile self serving manoeuvrings?

Many of the potential benefits of partnership working are self-evident – there are economies if premises are shared, if work between agencies is better co-ordinated, and if the users of services are involved in how they are planned and administered. But these potential benefits are often more easily identified than realised. There is resistance to giving up or sharing resources, whether of budgets, staff or premises. Better co-ordination may reduce the workloads of some agencies but it will increase the workloads of others – and they may resist this. Users of services often have aspirations which cannot easily be met in practice. Thus it is by no means certain that partnership working will prove to be a purposeful response to the recession. Depending on the outcomes partnerships are designed to address (the task) and how the partners choose to work with each other (the process), partnership working may achieve ‘more for less’ or ‘less for more’.

This chapter analyses the theory and practice of UK public sector partnerships with the aim of exploring what local authorities and their partners can do to maximise the possibility of achieving positive benefits from partnership working in a recession. It starts by summarising key conclusions from the academic literature on partnerships which spell out and dig deeper into the ambiguity that whilst there are potential benefits from working in partnership, they are not automatic, and partnerships can fail. The chapter considers in detail the initial experiences of a recent development in partnership working, 'Place Based Budgeting' (or in its earlier incarnation 'Total Place'), created under the auspices of Local Strategic Partnerships and involving all the statutory and voluntary public sector players in a local area. This chapter is therefore an exploration of the issues which must be confronted before whole area partnerships can go beyond 'hot air and empty window dressing', to enable real changes which result in productivity gains and better public service outcomes.

2. THE THEORY OF PARTNERSHIPS

Maureen Mackintosh (1992) grouped the benefits of partnership working into three categories:

1. *Synergy*: the partnership can do things that its individual members could not do on their own;
2. *Cultural change*: the culture of some members of the partnership influences others;

3. *Budget enlargement*: the partnership has access to resources that would not otherwise be available.

The first of these is the fundamental argument. It relates to many situations where people can achieve more by working together, from twelve labourers being able to lift a stone that no one of them could life alone, to a highly complex project which can only be completed successfully if it involves a range of professions with different complementary skills. Here though, the assumption has to be that no one partner, nor an outside body, could raise the resources to hire the others – because then there is another possible way of delivering the project, and it is no longer self-evident that partnership is the best way.

The third of these arguments is a special case of the first. It may be that no one body or individual is willing to take the risk of sponsoring an expensive project, but if several share it the project may go ahead. Or it may be that joint work is a condition of funding from some external agency, such as a Government department.

The second of the arguments perhaps provides the rationale for a Government department giving financial incentives to work in partnerships. It is that the culture of some of the partners (perhaps those in the private sector), rubs off on and influences for the better the behaviour of other partners (perhaps those in the public sector). In passing, this can also work the other way, as when partners from the private sector suddenly come to understand what is involved in spending public money, and the accountability and transparency that this requires.

Chris Huxham begins her edited collection on ‘creating collaborative advantage’ by pointing out that ‘collaboration is not a panacea for tackling all organizational activities’ (Huxham 1996: 3). She concludes that it ‘is difficult but valuable if done successfully’ (Huxham 1996:176). In the intervening pages her contributors explore the motivations which encourage organisations to collaborate – ultimately different kinds of self-interest, but also an understanding that ‘the really important problem issues facing society – poverty, conflict, crime, and so on – cannot be tackled by any single organisation acting alone’. They explore the tensions, and the difficulties, which arise from inequalities in power between partners, the opportunities partnerships open for ‘transformational collaboration’ to bring about change, and the conditions under which partnerships are likely to be sustainable in the long run.

Similar thinking about the dynamics of collaboration between organisations in the private sector was explored by writers in the field of organisational behaviour such as Rosabeth Moss Kanter of the Harvard Business School who in her book *When Giants* (i.e. very large corporations) *Learn to Dance* (Kanter 1989) suggested that unbridled competition might not lead to the best outcomes, and that companies often have much to gain from working together. She was aware of the problems that this might raise. Thus successful partnerships take time to build and involve a gradual coming together, based on experience. There is often a tension between the pressure for quick wins in the short term and the investment needed to develop their long term potential. She lists some of the ways in which partnerships may fail: absence of a common framework; uneven levels of commitment; shifts in strategy by one or more partner; imbalances in power –

over resources, or information, or who gets most of the benefits; conflicting loyalties – which may be complicated by problems with internal corporate politics; and 'undermanagement' – the lack of an effective administration and sanctions for those who do not carry out their commitments. In a short article in the Harvard Business Review she compared the development of relationships between companies with relationships between people: 'In every case, a business relationship is more than just the deal. It is a connection between otherwise independent organizations that can take many forms and contains the potential for additional collaboration. …. Relationships between companies begin, grow, and develop – or fail – in ways similar to relationships between people' (Kanter 1994:98).

Balloch and Taylor are typical of writers, mainly from backgrounds in community development, who look at partnerships from the point of view of the voluntary sector, noting their potential but also pointing out that 'this ideal is very difficult to achieve … Partnership has largely left existing relationships intact. Partnership working has too often been dominated by the more powerful partners and has not "delivered", especially for the communities and service users who are now a required part of most partnerships.' (2001: 2-8) The sociologist Mike Rowe (2007) has gone so far as to write about 'abusive partnerships', taking various ways in which a marriage may break up and finding very similar behaviour in partnerships. His is just a small part of a large literature, mainly concerned with regeneration partnerships where residents are co-opted onto management boards, which shows that this process is often a sham, puts the co-opted directors into very difficult positions, and does not guarantee successful regeneration (e.g. Taylor 2003; Robinson et al 2005)

Thus when considering work in partnership it is easy to be seduced by the potential benefits, or to fall victim to a communitarian perspective to the effect that if local people are involved then things must be better (for an interesting discussion of some experiences in Australia see Mobray 2005). A long, though often neglected tradition suggests that those who take part in partnership work will have their own agendas, and work to achieve their own interests, and that often these will not coincide with the greater good. Indeed partnerships can be modelled as non-zero sum games, where all the players who take part have a strategy, and when these strategies are put together some get what they want and others lose – even when overall there are net benefits. The spoils, or net benefits, are most likely to go to those with power at the start of the process, and those who negotiate, or present their case, in the most effective manner.

Partnerships which involve central government departments and local government, alongside other agencies, are a special category. Power, in the sense of control of budgets or other forms of patronage, is largely in the hands of the central government players; but their policy objectives can only be delivered by the other partners; hence an elaborate set of procedures is created to try and validate the commitment of the partners and their loyalty to the partnership, strict rules have to be followed before money is released, and there are evaluations, often expensive, of the impact of the partnerships and the projects they sponsor. This process is clear with regeneration partnerships, where there were strict conditions that required partnerships to be formed and to meet if funding was granted under City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget, New Deals for Communities and other forms of support for regeneration. However, while the extra money could make an identifiable difference in the short term, many of the partnerships did not long outlive the funding, and the long-term benefits were often difficult to assess. Ultimately, the multi-dimensional problems they were tackling were too great, the areas covered too small, and the external funding too limited for the partnerships to meet their worthy, but extremely ambitious, objectives (Coulson 2005).

3. THE CHALLENGES FACING LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Local Strategic Partnerships, which from 2001 the government required in all upper-tier council areas, played on a larger canvas. They involved key leaders from the main public sector bodies active in the area, and from important parts of the private and voluntary sectors. If, it was argued, all these worked together, and focussed their resources, they should be able to tackle almost any problem.

As with regeneration partnerships, there were many evaluations of the LSPs. The interim report of one of the earliest of these concluded that progress from strategy to implementation was not easy, with a danger that effort would be dissipated and ineffective because it was too widely spread given the resources available. There was often tension between centrally driven priorities and local considerations, and uncertainty about the ways in which central departments and/or their agencies were expected to relate to the Partnerships. The attitude of the local authorities was probably the most important local factor in the success (ODPM 2005). The final report of this project stressed the importance of money – the most effective LSPs were those with access to a special government fund, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. It highlighted the important role of councillors who were in cabinets, in comparison with the less significant roles of councillors who were not, and recognised that government departments saw LSPs as ways of influencing local government, particularly through Local Area Agreements, introduced from 2004 on, in which government departments, often represented by the local regional Government Office, negotiated targets for improvement with the partners, pre-eminently the council or councils in the area.

The Audit Commission, in a pathbreaking report *Governing Partnerships – Bridging the Accountability Gap* (2005) pointed out that while Local Partnerships are essential to deliver improvements in people's quality of life, they also bring risks, may not deliver good value for money, and their governance arrangements are often confusing. It concluded that clear accountability is needed between partners to produce better accountability to the public, including redress when things go wrong. In particular, Public Bodies should: know the partnerships they are involved in, and how much money and other resources they invest in them; they should review each partnership to strengthen accountability, manage risks, and rationalise working arrangements; establish clear criteria against which partnerships should be evaluated; take hard decisions to scale down their involvement if the costs outweigh the benefits; agree and regularly review protocols and governing documents; and tell service users and the wider public about how key partnerships work, where responsibility and accountability lie, and how redress can be obtained. A final report on this subject, probably the last from the Audit Commission before its demise under the Con-Lib Coalition government in 2010, was downbeat. Its summary includes the following: 'common data quality standards and mechanisms take time to develop', 'performance management and influence has developed unevenly across activities …'; 'most LSPs lack mechanisms for assigning mainstream resources towards achieving the goads of the sustainable community strategy …'; 'few LSPs have assessed the costs and benefits of joint working'; 'national failure to align planning and reporting cycles makes it difficult for local agencies to align performance and resource management systems' (Audit Commission 2009: 4).

Local Strategic Partnerships, therefore, seldom reached the point where partners were sufficiently confident to pool budgets (with some interesting exceptions in the health and social care field), and they did not have the teeth or the backing from central government to force through changes even when most observers could see what was needed.

The farthest this process went was in the last year of the Labour government, when a programme at that time called *Total Place* was piloted in thirteen areas of England. The incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition took time to form of view of these pilots, but could not fail to see their potential benefits, though it narrowed their ambition to focus on financial savings and renamed the programme *Place Based Budgeting*.

4. PLACE BASED BUDGETING: THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE FOR LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The idea of place-budgeting

The idea developed in three English rural counties, Cumbria, Norfolk and Suffolk (Leadership Centre for Local Government 2010). Each of these areas sought to bring statutory agencies together to calculate how much public money was being spent in their county, and how it could be rationalised and spent more effectively. Crucially, partnership working was not seen as a panacea which would resolve all of the 'wicked issues' that cut across agendas pursued by different local public agencies. Rather there was a recognition that such agendas were necessarily contested and complex requiring a new process to 'bring partners together for a countywide debate on important strategic issues, leading to commitment to do things differently' (Leadership Centre for Local Government 2008: 12). Norfolk enshrined the notion of partnership working in an acronym 'LEAPP' (Lead, Engage, Aspire, Perform in Partnership) with the aim of improving outcomes for local people by changing the way public organisations worked not only with each other but also with their local communities.

The concept was picked up by Lord Bichard in his contribution to the 2009 HM Treasury Operational Efficiency Programme. Partnership working was seen as a critical feature of 'mapping total public spend in a local area and identifying efficiencies through local public sector collaboration' (HM Treasury 2009: 12). He proposed 12 pilot areas, and the government responded by announcing 13, some very large (Manchester City Region, including all 10 district councils in the area, Birmingham, and Kent), others smaller (Lewisham, Bradford, Luton and Central Bedfordshire). The pilots were charged with achieving greater efficiency (reducing costs) and effectiveness (improving outcomes) within an overriding belief that local collaboration between public organizations would create genuine service transformation.

The pilots had little more than nine months to demonstrate what they could achieve and set about the task with considerable determination. The limited timescale inevitably meant that they were essentially based on existing issues and arrangements with all their strengths, histories and limitations. For example, the South Tyneside, Gateshead and Sunderland pilot built on the 'long established' strength of partnership working between the three local authorities and the local NHS to tackle alcohol and drug abuse. The chair of the Total Place executive board wrote 'our ambition is to create a long-term partnership over the next 15 years, which will transform service delivery by putting the customer at the heart of everything we do, at the same time as maximizing efficiency gains' (Smith 2010: 5). The Bradford pilot aimed to develop a gateway which provided a single point of access to integrated services primarily focused on long standing concerns about partnership working to ensure good housing, training and employment opportunities for young care leavers and released prisoners and better coordination between health and social care for older people with complex mental health problems especially when being discharged from hospital. And again, the Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset pilot project stressed a preventative partnership approach to reduce hospital admissions by 15 per cent by helping older people to live longer at home. In contrast, there were relatively few examples of innovative partnership working between organisations not traditionally associated with public partnerships. Thus private and third sector community organisations are notable by their absence from being central to such partnership arrangements, confined in large measure to provider roles such as the collection of second hand furniture for reuse by low income families in Doncaster and proposals to tighten the regulation of, and reduce the percentage of private-rented housing stock in the Margate area of Kent. There are also a lack of examples of working in partnership with community organisations or groups, with slight recognition of the European wide initiatives to foster co-production in strategic planning and public service delivery (Bovaird and Löffler 2009).

A significant feature of a number of the pilots was the analysis of the cost of interventions to the total public purse aimed at punishing or ameliorating the behaviour of dysfunctional individuals or families. In Birmingham the pilot study estimated that three generations of criminal activity by one extended family involved in gangs and gun crime had cost the state £23.8m. This figure only included spending within the criminal justice system (police, courts, prison, probation) and did not take into account spending by central and local government partner organizations on benefits, education, health and housing. A further calculation suggested that a child excluded from school cost the state more than £12,000 extra every year. A third estimate was that the cost of hospital admission and treatment alone for one alcoholic person cost the NHS £34,000 in a single year. Again, benefit, health and housing costs were excluded from this calculation. When such wider partnership costs were included, the annual costs of alcohol abuse in Birmingham totaled around £100m per year (Willis, Bovaird and Jeffares 2010: 57, quoting the Be Birmingham *Total Place Pilot: Final Report* 2010). The overwhelming conclusion from this kind of reckoning was that if early intervention could prevent the individuals and families concerned from getting involved in persistent dysfunctional and criminal behaviour, it would prove extremely cost effective.
Another theme of Place Based Partnerships has been asset management. Thus in East Birmingham, Bovaird (2010a) identified that in two constituencies with a population of around 200,000 there were some 600 public sector properties of which 400 were

commercial. They included a multiplicity of public service delivery points, for individuals needing assistance for benefits, health needs, social services, housing and general advice. Many of the assets were in poor condition being costly to run, poorly located and inflexible. The argument was that if partners pooled their resources by rationalising such assets to create a front office shared services hub, this would not only provide a much improved integrated access point for customers but also realize substantial cash savings. The Kent and Worcestershire pilots also explored this issue and concluded that revenue savings of up to 10 per cent per annum would be possible from reducing the running costs of the public sector estate across the counties (HM Treasury and CLG 2010). The Lewisham pilot took this line of argument further by examining collaborative procurement as well as asset realisation and estimated that this could lead to savings of up to £15 million across partner agencies.

The Limitations of Placed Based Budgeting

However, whilst the pilots trenchantly analysed such potential cost savings, they were less successful in putting them into effect. Identifying potential savings such as these is one thing; making them a reality is often a much tougher challenge. To achieve most of them, the state will have to 'invest to save'. Thus to provide services under a single roof will usually require a new building. Ultimately there will be income from selling the land released by the existing premises, but this is an uncertain and unpredictable process in the present climate. To keep families from involvement in crime in the future will require investment in young families now – and it will not prevent the state having to deal with other more established families who have not had that kind of support, whose members commit crimes or get involved with drugs. It is very doubtful if alcohol abuse can be lessened without concerted policy and tax changes at national level – which would have to be introduced in the face of determined negative lobbying by the drinks industry.

If the money is available, the partners will have to work together to spend it, and there are entrenched competing interests, for example between doctors and social workers responding to crises whilst their colleagues are trying to create the conditions that will lessen the chances of crises in the future; or between retributive and restorative approaches to criminal justice; or the different attitudes to childcare of teachers (stressing educational steps and achievement) and social care (the need to provide for working parents). Much of this kind of partnership working will only be possible if the principals involved are willing to change policies, or at least to consider their policies in the light of hard evidence, including evidence of costs.

Evidence from the Place Based Budgeting pilots suggests that whilst it is relatively easy to get partners to share analysis of population needs assessment and costs, tensions and problems arise when they start to consider the possibilities of working differently and more collaboratively. When the seemingly straightforward process of getting county and district local authorities in an area to agree a single phone number and web portal for all local government services in Kent is described as having 'proved an uphill struggle', how much more difficult will it be to create 'a completely different way of working [with] the focus on changing the culture within public services, rather than fixating on financial outcomes' (Smith 2009).

An example of what is involved comes from Birmingham's investment in preventative and targeted parenting programmes, working with the parents of pre-school children identified as being at risk of developing conduct disorders. The analysis found that the cost of public services for 28 year olds who developed conduct disorders in childhood was 10 times higher than those with no behavioural problems. An immediate issue though is how accurately the pre-school children who are most likely to have social and behavioural problems in their 20s can be identified. The report estimated that the cashable benefits to the city council alone of the programme were between £61million and £92 million over a 15 year period. The pilot aimed to develop a common understanding across partner agencies including health, education, police, youth justice and voluntary organisations and its conclusions demonstrate the hurdles that will need to be crossed to make the project a reality. These include not only the investment of resources taken from existing service delivery for the uncertain prospect of future gains but also the need to change established practices and their associated cultures in partner organisations.

> 'The proposal requires the co–ordination of resources currently deployed to supporting parents around the [early intervention] approach – although widely used in Birmingham it is not the only programme supported by the partners to the Children's Trust. During the pilot phase resources will be required to establish an infrastructure to engage the practitioners and community, forge relationships with providers and pilot the approach before it can be adopted as

> business as usual. The detail of the budget will depend on the size of the area chosen … and the reconfiguration of current investment.'
>
> (Be Birmingham 2010: 49).

Such reconfiguration of current resource use across a partnership is problematic at the best of times. When faced with the prospect of significant reductions in public sector budgets, it is likely to meet with suspicion and resistance. It is not surprising that the announcement of impending grant cuts of up to 40% was met with press reports that 'Joint working takes back seat for health bodies as they hang on to ring-fenced budgets in preparation for Spending Review' (*Municipal Journal* 10th July 2010: 1).

It is for this reason that at least one senior local authority chief executive has argued for a single accounting officer for all the public spending within the council's boundaries. Bovaird (2010b: 16) has suggested that 'there is now good reason to argue that the 'prime responsibility' of public sector expenditure in local areas now no longer lies simply in Whitehall departments, but rather in the Partnerships of public sector agencies at local level'. But that would mean the Home Office, Department of Work and Pensions, and Department of Health all ceding policy-making powers to either a local government chief executive or a local partnership body. To expect this kind of change to happen voluntarily is to ask a great deal; the immediate reaction of senior officials to requests for collaboration is to ask what is in it for them, and only to collaborate wholeheartedly if they can see an obvious benefit. But that may not be there. The savings may accrue to other partnership members: a kind of 'prisoners' dilemma' where the best results arise if all parties collaborate, but at least some of those involved will be better off by not getting involved. If this kind of change is to occur, the financial incentives will have to be very strong indeed, whether or not there is a single accounting officer, and there will have to be some direction and support from the Centre. Simpler changes may be easier to engineer: more use of existing premises, such as better equipped GP surgeries; more use of the internet or video links rather than maintaining networks of local offices; the use of school buildings, especially after 5.00pm; information services, payments, and deposit and collection of forms through the network of post offices; more use of premises owned and maintained by the voluntary sector; joint commissioning, especially where it makes immediate sense, as in many current cases involving health and social care; joint marketing of services, jobs and opportunities; and the removal of requirements to collect data which is not subsequently checked or used.

The difficulties even of measures such as these should not be underestimated. They all require a movement of resources from one account to another which is unlikely to be achieved without encountering and overcoming overt and covert resistance. Such a process involves much more than simply reallocating resources between partners as Kanter (1989: p.116) recognised when she pointed out that 'relationships and communication and the flexibility to combine resources are more important than the formal channels and reporting relationships represented on an organisational chart.' It requires the creation of trust and as with individuals, it is a slow process to build up trust levels between two institutions, and a very quick one to lose it. Willis (2006) in his study of four long term children's and adult's services partnerships found that the 'must do - can do', performance culture can drive partnerships to work towards task achievement before they have established the basic building blocks of a sound inter-group relationships It is therefore critical to create space for senior managers to step back from day to day pressures and begin the process of developing a better understanding of individuals' roles and responsibilities and differences in organisational culture. Similarly, the ‘Calling Cumbria’ report concluded that:

> ‘effective work across boundaries is founded on shared enthusiasm, common information, open connections, honest relationships. This sustains the commitment and trust without which we get endless set piece meetings, forests of paper, tensions between individuals, drawbridges between organisations and conversations going nowhere. It is a fantasy to think that places are not contested spaces and that effective partnerships are a panacea.’
>
> (Leadership Centre for Local Government 2008: 4).

This issue was specifically considered in the research by Willis and Jeffares (2010) which aimed to examine the mind sets of people involved in the Place Based Budgeting pilots and to understand whether there were fundamental differences in the ways in which significant actors viewed public service partnerships which might provide at least part of the explanation of why it is difficult to translate good ideas and intentions into collaborative practice. A shared understanding of, and respect for, legitimately different perspectives on joint working was seen as a fundamental prerequisite for effective collaboration. On the optimistic side, the research showed that there was a significant degree of broad agreement on key elements of partners’ views and in particular the importance of leadership, cultural change, a customer focus and getting more for less.

However, it also revealed important differences in the degree to which local people should be empowered to design and develop services (the co-production model); the centrality of the financial analysis; whether existing knowledge about needs and what works was a sufficient starting point; and perhaps most fundamentally, scepticism about the extent to which partnership working is an essential requirement to success.

5. CONCLUSION

In times of recession, when budgets, including council budgets but also those of other public agencies, are squeezed, proposals to work in partnership are an inevitable response. The theoretical literature on partnership working summarised at the start of this chapter brings out the key point that while there are almost certainly reasonable scenarios where major savings, and probably also service enhancements, can be made, actually achieving them is far from an easy or automatic process. Partnerships are not a quick fix, or a panacea. They take time to build, and work best when all the partners can see clear benefits. If there are uneven levels of commitment, competing loyalties or differing levels of budget pressure (all highly probable in Local Strategic Partnerships) they may stutter or fail. They can be influenced by money, especially in the short term; but if long term benefits are to be realised they require pro-active and far-sighted leadership, willing and able to stand up against short term vested interests resistant to change (including, on occasion, central government departments).

The experiences so far of the Place Based Budgeting partnerships reflect these general points. There are many almost self-apparent potential benefits, and in the future there will be considerable pressure to achieve them. But it is not an easy process, and the partnerships concerned will need time to build up trust, without expectations that the returns will be quick or easy. Without fundamental changes in public sector culture and inter-organisational relationships, many of those potential benefits will not actually be realised.

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