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Just good friends. Can localism succeed through partnership?

Introduction

Multi agency partnerships, as delivery mechanisms for localism in the UK during the early 2000s, were in the vanguard of local public service delivery under New Labour (Ellison and Ellison, 2006. P.338). Some multi-agency Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) created at the time still survive in locations in England, in spite of a lack of a robust statutory remit or financial support from Government.   This paper analyses preliminary findings based on informal pilot meetings and a draft outline for semi-structured interviews, that suggest some possible reasons for the LSPs survival, which will be relevant beyond the scope of the literature on partnership analysis and local government. Significantly, there will be further relevance for the wider body of literature on localism in the UK and for group and organisational behaviour, shedding light on the reasons for the long term survival of other types of partnership and organisation. The paper begins by setting out the genesis and background of the LSPs from the Local Government Act 2000 (HMSO 2000), and examines three functioning partnerships in the south of England, plus the disbanding of an additional fourth partnership. The data in this paper is part of a larger, long-term study into LSPs and represents initial, empirical findings from preliminary pilot interviews and observations.

The puzzle is: what are the reasons and motives for the continuation of the LSPs? This question has assumed additional significance in the UK since the devolution of power from central to local areas represented in the policy of localism in the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 (HMSO 2016). It is in the local county and district government areas that LSPs survive, helping to support plans for localism and devolved area status in places such as Brighton in East Sussex. The question to be addressed in this paper is "What factors have influenced the de facto survival of the LSPs beyond the end of their support from government?" The wider study will, however, look at two further questions over the next year:

1. "To what extent have the LSPs in the study retained their original statutory remit?"
2. "In terms of the perceptions of their participants, what impact have the LSPs had?"

History and structure of the LSPs

LSPs are multi-agency partnerships established by the 2000 Local Government Act (HMSO 2000) introduced by the Labour government at the time. The LSPs role was ostensibly brought to an end in 2011 with the Localism Act (HMSO 2011) under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government. The terms of the 2011 Act removed the LSPs statutory remit with the dissolution of the Local Area Agreements or LAAs. The LAAs were three-year rolling agreements between local authorities and central Government, setting out a range of agreed targets to improve local performance via the Sustainable Community Strategies which were managed by the LSPs. Each Local Authority and Primary Care Trust were to determine up to 35 priorities and agree relevant improvement targets for each one. These targets were monitored, and progress against them inspected by the Audit Commission, which was the central Government agency responsible for auditing the performance of local authorities at the time (DoH 2007, national archives). The Audit Commission was abolished in January 2014 (Tonkiss and Skelcher, 2015) with its responsibilities transferred via the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (DCLG March 2014). The Commission's inspection role for LAAs came to an end shortly after the UK Coalition government took office in 2010. Without the infrastructure to support them and monitor progress, the LSPs lost the greater part of their *raison d'etre.*

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LSPs were originally created to address the many interlinked societal problems in local communities that Payne (1998) describes here "…the case for treating social problems in a holistic fashion is overwhelming. People know, in a simple everyday fashion, that crime, poverty, low achievement at school, bad housing and so on are connected" (Payne, 1998, p.12). The response to this was to include representatives from local communities in the membership of an LSP where each voice, whether from government bodies or local people, could be heard in the same forum. Communities were thought to have a closer understanding of the issues they faced than politicians in government. It seemed logical, therefore, that the case for creating LSPs, which were to include members of local communities, could claim a closer relationship with those issues. The LSPs were intended to address complex societal problems; the many disjointed, un-coordinated efforts of statutory agencies; the proliferation of isolated and disconnected community partnerships to become "the partnership of partnerships" (OECD 2006, p.1; Geddes, 2006, p.80; Johnson and Osborne, 2003). They were to lead their localities towards more cohesive goals for improvement.

To be clear, the functions of the LSPs were to
1. Provide a forum to integrate existing plans and initiatives in localities to facilitate easier improvements to health, education and crime
2. To reduce duplication and what [was] viewed as unnecessary bureaucracy
3. Make it easier for partners, including those outside the statutory sector [NGOs, the voluntary sector and ordinary members of communities], to get involved in partnerships and thereby the delivery of improvement.
4. To encourage local authorities to commit themselves to delivering major national and local priorities in return for mutually agreed flexibilities, pump-priming funding, and financial rewards if they met their targets.
5. To narrow the gap between the most deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country, with shared goals of lower unemployment and crime, better health, education, housing and the physical environment.

(DETR 2001)

The history of the LSPs is chequered, with some academics questioning their ability to deliver the required co-ordination and performance (Johnson and Osborne, 2003; Geddes, 2006 p.76; Geddes, 2008) which may, in some degree, account for their decline in popularity. Significantly, it was local politicians that challenged their democratic right to exist, (Bound, 2005). In a partnership setting, where both political and community domination was often sought by influential members of LSPs (Audit Commission , 2009) elected members felt that their local democratic mandate was challenged through the bringing together of "… the actions of the council, and of the public, private, voluntary and community organisations that operate locally" (Bound, 2005, p.14). The local authority's ruling party expected to assume control in any setting where they were asked to work with other politicians or partners to challenge performance (Bound, 2005; Geddes 2006; Audit Commission, 2009, p.16; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004, p.15). "The districts and borough councils have a strong concern that their identity and position is going to be jeopardised in some of the joint working relationships" (Audit Commission 2009, p.33). However, the societal problems that LSPs were originally intended to address persist, and so have some of the LSPs. It may be that their strong connections to local communities have some role to play in their survival.

Later, at the time of the removal of the Local Area Agreements in 2011, the Local Government Association's paper, the Local Government Chronicle, commented "Without something like an LSP we may well just get back door deals. We may end up with public services through various contractual arrangements that don't meet or add up. Or we get a dangerous willy-nilly outsourcing of services, a hollowing out of local government's strategic capacity" (McInroy, 2011). It seems that

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five years after McInroy's (2011) comments, some localities have not abandoned their partnership approach through the LSPs, although certainly "the hollowing out of local government's capacity" has taken place (Hastings et.al., 2013).   Early indications in this study are that some LSPs are still very much operational, sustaining their strength and influence, with two openly calling themselves LSPs, and in the case of Brighton in East Sussex, Brighton and Hove Connected (the renamed LSP) have achieved representation on the officer Board for Greater Brighton to establish devolved status for the area, supporting the concept of localism as expressed in the 2011 Act (HMSO 2011).

It is important to define localism as it relates to the LSPs. Localism here refers to central government moving some power away from the Westminster centre towards ever more local layers of democracy to other bodies, local government, parish councils, intermediary groups, local communities and neighbourhoods. It is a policy followed by both the Labour and Conservative governments since 2000. This was the thrust of the Local Government Act 2000 (HMSO 2000) which set up Community Planning and the LSPs to manage it. Indeed, Bailey (2003, p.444) states that LSPs themselves represented the devolution of power away from the centre to establish localism.

Characteristics of long-standing LSPs

This paper conceptualises an 'inside-out' perspective by focusing on those working inside the partnership and their view of what they do for their communities through the LSP. The research records the opinions of participants regarding their role in the partnerships, how they understand their communities, and their observations about their contribution to localism. Part of the 'outside-in' perspective is provided by reviewing the characteristics of other successful multi-agency partnerships to establish whether there are any shared, universally recognised partnership factors that may contribute to long term survival. It is here that the wider research project can show more extensive applicability in the findings, especially if among the disbanded partnerships, an absence of these success factors can be established. In terms of relevance outside the political science arena: the literature on organisational studies that examines group and team dynamics, and the literature on multi-agency partnerships will be able to identify parallels with these insights, throwing light on the key ingredients for group or organisational longevity more generally.

One of the main difficulties in undertaking a review of the typologies and definitions of multi-agency partnership working is that many of them intersect and overlap with each other (McQuaid, 2000. p.2). Armistead and Pettigrew (2004, p.579) identified a series of "behaviours" that constitute 'success' for a Multi-Agency Partnership, which include trust, collaboration, openness, predictability, common goals, communication, clear roles and a shared language. The Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) focused only on a particular set of managers within a particular context, yet in spite of the narrower scope of this research, these characteristics can be found in similar analyses of success factors in multi-agency partnerships (Carnwell and Carson, 2015; Sloper, 2004; Atkinson, et.al. 2005; Cheminais 2008, Tsasis, 2015; Audit Commission 2009). The Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) study shows that the factors that seem make for a successful partnership appear to be qualitative, functional elements located among the individuals present.   The link with the Armistead and Pettigrew (2004) study and this one is in the responses from the pilot interviews in which LSP members identified similar factors for success in their long-standing partnerships. Some respondents identified key characteristics for partnership survival such as trusting the judgements of others, clear roles, common goals, communication and shared responsibility. It could prove to be significant that none have as yet identified the need for a legal or governmental framework for the LSPs, nor have they yet said that money or government funding was a pre-requisite for their survival.

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The research strategy:

The research draws on the overall concept of Corporatist Governance (Pierre, 2011) which necessitates a focus on the role of 'policy entrepreneurs' and the notion of propinquity. Corporatist Governance depicts a local environment in which civil society organisations, local politics and the business community operate, usually within a city (Pierre, 2011, p.53). This is the social context in which many of the remaining LSPs are located in England. A key characteristic of corporatist governance is that it is most often seen at the "distributive" levels of local government (Pierre, 2011. p.50), giving it the additional, local dimension. Corporatist Governance is further defined by the inclusion of civil society organisations in local governance, such as NGOs and voluntary sector organisations. This aligns with the concept of multi-level governance, referred to by Gamble (2000) in which a multi-level polity is set out, stressing the many different types of institutions and processes by which UK societies are governed (p.29). Marks (1993) describes multi-level governance, which arose in direct response to the use of the centralised "Westminster model" of governing, in which statutory (government bodies) and non-statutory governance organisations overlap in local territory. (Marks, in Cafruny and Rosenthal, (eds), 1993).

Corporatist governance includes the role of business organisations such as the British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, representing a major private sector modification to the old order of local governance (Geddes, 2006 p.81). The Chambers of Commerce are often also led by strong local, business and community activists, "at the heart of local business communities" (British Chambers of Commerce, 2016). Pierre (2011) refers to the importance of Chambers of Commerce in urban governance, putting them at the "core" (p.54) of the urban "political economy", whilst Geddes (2006, p. 81) does not think that local partnership recognises the interest of local business, which is palpably not the case in those LSPs within the study. Indeed, the study shows that it is here, within an environment of closely interactive propinquity and corporatist governance, with strongly connected local actors such as those leading the Chambers of Commerce, that LSPs have survived. Not that the Chambers of Commerce are the universal linchpins of LSPs: rather they are representative of that strata of propinquity in which many local members of LSPs are at their most connected, as are local government representatives.

The research further explores the notion of policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984; Bocher, in Aflaki and Petridou and Miles (eds), 2015; Roberts and King, 1991). Policy entrepreneurship refers to those individuals outside government who take a leading role in implementing innovative policy ideas in public practice (Roberts and King, 1991, p.147). Also, policy entrepreneurs mobilise the public and develop networks of actors (Bocher, 2015, p.73), which links very strongly with those key actors within LSPs working to include the public and strengthen networks within the partnerships. Although public entrepreneurs and policy entrepreneurs appear to be similar terms within the Roberts and King (1991) article, the function for policy entrepreneurs is different in that these individuals provide the "ideas and issues, and the technical support for solutions." (Roberts and King, 1991 p.148), which was mentioned in the preliminary feedback from one of the LSP managers in this study "We support them to find solutions" (Chichester LSP). Early, pilot discussions with five of the partnership representatives in the study area indicate that these are well established, creative, local policy entrepreneurs. They present as committed, passionate individuals, with a deep understanding of their communities, keen to resolve intricate social issues in innovative ways. They work to promote interaction between the partnerships and their communities, and facilitate networks within the LSPs. Those who volunteered responses both live and work in the localities which they represent, as in the case of retired police officer, Councillor David Simmonds of Adur and Worthing Local Strategic Partnership, Waves Ahead, who said in 2016 "It's never been a funded LSP but the willingness to volunteer is greater than ever. It's because of the strength of our relationships. We have connections throughout the community ……, but it does depend on the individuals involved." This is a phenomenon that has been observed before in a study of 330

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European rural development partnerships, which concluded that it is key individuals within the partnerships that are essential to its success (Esparcia, Mosely and Noguera, (eds) 2000, p.112).

Furthermore, the concept of Propinquity (John, P. in Davies and Imbruscio (eds) 2009, p.21) refers to a small number of urban actors who interact frequently within a locality, creating a close network of connection to each other. Propinquity denotes that "closeness" and the frequency of interactions between actors, describing the close relationships between strongly connected local activists, which seem to be a recurring feature of the LSPs within the study area. Although John (2009) is more concerned with propinquity due to its methodological advantages, it is a significant feature of local politics and LSPs when considering the many interactions between these community, NGO and government representatives. Luke Burton of Surrey County Council said "partnership working at this level is all about the local leaders and the relationships they have with each other" " (2016). Bearing in mind the significance of propinquity in this paper and in the wider study, a picture is beginning to emerge of strongly committed, highly creative local leaders and activists working closely in an environment of corporatist governance to co-ordinate both technical support and creative solutions to issues of local importance. This may have implications for other organisations and groups supporting localism in the current programme of establishing devolved local governance in England, especially in terms of the pattern of relationships that appears to be developing within and among the three functioning LSPs at this preliminary stage.

Methods
In terms of research methods, the research uses a mixed qualitative methods approach; semi-structured interviews and Non-Participant Observation (NPO). NPO provides the opportunity for immersion in the activities of the partnerships in the study, enabling the research to be undertaken in the most natural settings: the groups and communities involved. For this study, NPO is undertaken with the permission of gatekeepers, or managers of the LSPs who have obtained the agreement of the partnership members to host a researcher. During the first, informal NPOs, members of the partnerships in the research area occasionally felt constrained by a researcher in the room who did not participate at all in sometimes highly emotive discussions about urgent community issues. Informal feedback from LSP managers indicates that this is not a significant problem and can be mitigated by the researcher occasionally offering information updates for partnership members as the study progresses.

Both NPO and semi-structured interviews are used in the study to determine what, if any, functional, operational or structural role the partnerships in the study area may have in supporting localism and the perception of this role by partnership members. This will help to determine the nature of any value in their existing and potential contribution to localism, and their perceived contribution to the resolution of so-called "wicked" (Rittel and Webber, 1973) or complex societal problems. Methodologically, the concept of Propinquity supports the exploration around the number of interactions between key local actors (John, 2009).

Non-participant observation at the meetings for the LSPs shows widespread inclusion of local representatives at statutory (such as the Police, National Health Service and local government) and societal levels. In Chichester, Adur and Worthing, and Brighton (see map below) current representation constitutes a very similar range to that set out in the original DETR guidance in 2001, (No. 9 DETR, 2001), showing which members of the community should be part of the LSPs. This document required that statutory representatives should be "decision-makers" (DETR 2001) which meant that Directors of key local government services such as Social Services and Education, plus others such as the Police, Fire and Rescue, Health, Housing and Community Safety were required to attend alongside elected representatives, local authority managers, Faith groups, community

representatives from schools and parent groups, and other community activists. Appendix 1 shows the current membership constitution of each partnership by organisation.

Fig. 1. Map showing the geographical locations of LSPs ⬤ in the study area, covering West and East Sussex.

Case Selection

Bearing in mind the overarching research question: "What factors have influenced the de facto survival of the LSPs beyond the end of their support from government?" and the need to represent the wide variety of surviving partnerships, the determining factors for partnership selection were

1. Deprivation/relative wealth
2. Demography
3. Location and size
4. Political influence

All factors are related and the first and second are especially significant in the selection of cases. In respect of describing demography, deprivation and wealth in localities, the Barnett Formula (Edmonds, 2001) must be discussed. It is used in the UK to calculate the amount of government grant each local authority should receive. However, it is based on relative population estimates derived from the 1888 Goshen formula (Spinner Jnr, 1973), which is widely viewed as inappropriate because the formula takes no account of the individual needs, or the demographic profile of the population in localities. Because it is based on historical population estimates, areas that now have more people tend to receive less per capita than those with fewer people, such as in the devolved regions of Wales and Scotland. Grants cover only those services and obligations for which each area is responsible. The Barnett formula was recently criticised in the 2014 Scottish Referendum debate as unfair because Scotland, per capita, receives more money than the more densely populated areas south of the border (Telegraph July 2016). This is important because LSP local authority areas are still dependent on the Barnett formula allocation, and the variation in wealth and demography is often at its most obvious when examining areas of multiple deprivation in localities where there are large concentrations of people, such as Adur and Worthing in West Sussex. However, the purpose of selecting such characteristically different localities was not merely to demonstrate the variety of partnerships in terms of population size,

demography, control and geography, but also to highlight operational and structural approaches between partnerships, identifying significant factors in their survival, irrespective of their location, political constitution, demographic profile, deprivation or relative wealth.

Location and size are also important to demonstrate the scope and reach of each partnership. Whether LSPs are rural or urban, structural and operational factors seem to feature in their survival, notwithstanding the significance of the locality and sphere of influence. Political influence also has a key role to play. Remembering that LSPs were a New Labour initiative, two Conservative authorities within the study area are examined. One has retained its LSP and the other has not. The dynamic of local authority officer/member relationships, rather than party politics, in the partnerships may emerge as a significant issue in determining the nature of multi-agency joint working in the area.

There are three functioning partnerships in this pilot study paper and one local authority which has disbanded its LSP, making four locations in all. Each is different in terms of demography and each partnership is linked to the local authority in varying degrees. However, identifying the impact of structural and operational factors on the LSPs will help determine whether these have influenced the survival of each, in spite of their location, size and configuration. In the case of the disbanded LSP, the managing local authority still undertakes multi-agency partnership working, but not under the LSP name. Investigating the means by which this local authority manages multi agency issues through partnership may throw light on essential features for longevity in multi-agency groups without the LSP appellation

Four locations were involved in the pilot study.

Brighton and Hove Connected (renamed LSP) Political leadership of local authority: Unitary	Waves Ahead, Adur and Worthing LSP Political leadership of local authority: Conservative	Chichester in Partnership. Chichester LSP Political leadership of local authority: Conservative	Horsham District Council – LSP disbanded Political leadership of local authority: Conservative
Situated in a large city in East Sussex. Selected because of its size and location in a large urban conurbation. Brighton residents' age profile shows a significant concentration of young people, balancing the proportion of over-65s. With a total	Covers a coastal strip between Worthing and Shoreham in West Sussex with a total population of around 98,000 (Census 2011). Although the area is smaller in terms of population, the LSP is concerned with issues of wide social variance across the	Covers the same area as Chichester District Council, ranging from Selsey Bill in the south to Plaistow and Wisborough Green near Billingshurst in the middle of the county. The population size for the district is 113,794 (Census 2011). This is a	Horsham District in West Sussex is a local authority, which although without its LSP, continues to support multi-agency partnership working in the locality, with a population of 132,900 (Census 2011).

| population of 273,000 (Census 2011), this makes Brighton and Hove Connected the partnership which covers the largest and most varied population in terms of age and demography in the study | locality, with some areas of extreme deprivation among the more affluent (DCLG, 2015). | varied, mostly rural area, containing the county town of Chichester, which is usually regarded as a fairly affluent area (Retail summary, n.d) although the area has pockets of deprivation (Observer, 2011). | |

Provisional findings

A draft outline for semi-structured interviews was shared with five LSP managers and members prior to the commencement of the full, year-long study. From these preliminary discussions, some information was volunteered by managers about the partnerships, from which initial indications about structure and operation can be explored in this paper. All five respondents to the draft outline for semi-structured interviews hold management or member positions within the LSPs and offered comments on the nature of their partnerships and details about their own involvement. The most significant element to emerge from the responses was the consistent reference in all three partnerships to the strength of the relationships among key local actors and how important these were in the operational and functional aspects of the LSP, which constitutes the performance of localism. One of the partnership managers who responded to the pilot questionnaire said "Without these local relationships, nothing would be done", exemplifying both the local functioning of Propinquity (John, 2009) and the enactment of localism.

In terms of structure, each LSP shares similar features with others. There are core groups in each, representing a "board" with executive powers, and smaller themed groups focusing on major priorities in the community or area strategy. There are leaders for each of these themed groups, most of whom have long, reciprocal relationships within and outside the partnerships of some years' standing. These leaders often live and work in the localities that they represent, having mature connections within the local communities in each area. There are also Memoranda of Agreement or Understanding in partnerships which are occasionally refreshed, but largely the partnerships are all run by managers situated within, if not wholly funded by, the local councils in each locality in line with the Community or corporate plans set out by the partnership. None of the LSP members have specific job roles for the leaders of the thematic groups. The only members of the LSPs with anything representing a job description are the council managers who run the partnerships. One of the respondents from Adur and Worthing Waves Ahead Partnership recently (May 2016) had her title changed from Community Planning Manager to LSP Manager, focusing attention on the fact that this is a long standing LSP, still functioning as such.

In Horsham in West Sussex where the District Council has disbanded its LSP, there are partnership arrangements which work in a similar fashion, based on very similar long term, local relationships among leaders. The former LSP manager for Horsham District Council said in 2015 "It is still the same people doing the same things, just not as an LSP". The principles of Localism, Propinquity and Corporatist Governance are operating in Horsham as in the other partnerships in the research area. This is significant because the practice of working together in partnership across agencies has

continued in Horsham: just without the LSP. As this research progresses over the next year, more will emerge about the nature of these arrangements and whether the LSP remit was a vital part of each partnership's operational power or not. It may be possible to draw conclusions about the role and importance of a legal or written framework in the life of a partnership, which could have implications for others planning similar groups outside the LSPs, but at this stage, all conclusions are provisional.

All five respondents mentioned their reputation among local communities, (the inside-out view) which appears to vary from partnership to partnership, though it is too early in the study to draw any firm conclusions. Where partnerships are involved in direct contact with communities in initiatives for helping residents to enter employment, home care for elderly people, reducing incidents of domestic abuse, healthcare or youth services, reputations are reported to be positive. However, respondents agree that much of the work of the partnerships remains strategic, with decisions taken at organisational level, supported by the LSP. Decisions are taken between key local actors to address social issues such as fuel poverty, youth unemployment, traffic congestion, road safety, local crime, child poverty and similar issues of immediate local concern, and in the case of child poverty and domestic abuse, national concern. Non-participant observation at LSP meetings in the study area confirm this approach. Each LSP seems to be known and respected by local authorities, (the outside-in view) and partnership member agencies such as the NHS and the Police in the area, are often called upon to support or inform when there are emergencies or issues of importance within the locality. This represents localism as it is defined in the context of the partnerships.

Conclusion

At this preliminary stage, conclusions are bound to be of a provisional nature. Yet across all three partnerships functioning as LSPs, there appear to be indications of a wider pattern of localism, propinquity and the use of corporatist governance. Perhaps of greater significance in terms of propinquity is the power and saliency of individual local actors, and the strength and efficacy of their long term relationships upon the partnerships' objectives. This will constitute an area for further study over the course of the following year to establish exactly how much authority within the partnerships these individuals have, and the extent to which this may influence the local outcomes for each partnership.

In terms of the wider issue of establishing localism: each partnership seems to exemplify localism as it is intended in the policy documents of both Labour and Conservative political parties. For New Labour in the early 2000s, localism was a policy choice (Painter et. al., 2011) and has been sustained by the Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010 through the Localism Act 2011 and the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. Where the government-owned, organisation, "Local Partnerships", became involved in the establishment of the so-called Northern Powerhouse, or devolved Greater Manchester Authority, Simon Bandy, the Programme Director for Local Partnerships said "The only way forward is going to be through local integration" signalling the importance of localism through co-operative action to address those issues which jointly affect communities.

The catalyst for an LSP-type response to community issues appears to survive in the study area and beyond, and seems to be manifested in the durability of the LSPs themselves, perhaps through the strength of their relationships inside and outside the partnerships. As the wider study progresses it may be possible to establish whether this is the case in other areas of the country, not

only among surviving LSPs. Just good friends may be a more significant term in this context than was originally envisaged.

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