

Section 1 – Partnerships – A Beginners Guide

This section seeks to provide a brief introduction to partnerships by providing definitions, examining why they are important and the advantages and disadvantages of working in partnership. Most topics will be covered in more detail in Section 2, 3 and 4.

1.1 Definition

Working in partnership is essential if we are to provide high quality services. There are many definitions of partnership but a generally accepted definition is:

“two or more agencies coming together to achieve a common goal” (Audit Commission [‘A Fruitful Partnership’](#) (published in November 1998).

In summary, the Audit Commission describe partnerships as a joint working arrangement where the partners:

- Are otherwise independent bodies
- Agree to co-operate to achieve a common goal
- Create a new organisational structure or process to achieve this goal, separate from their own organisations
- Plan and implement a jointly agreed programme, often with joint staff or resources
- Share relevant information
- Pool risks and rewards.

1.2 Why do partnerships matter?

There has been a very significant increase in partnership service delivery in recent years. The Audit Commission estimated that in excess of 5,500 partnerships existed in the UK which accounted for over £4billion of public expenditure. Partnerships are important from three perspectives (more information can be found on <http://www.makingendsmeet.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=5148860>)

1.2.1 For the Government:

Partnership working is central to Government policies on the delivery of effective public services and they are an increasingly significant feature of public service delivery. They see the main objectives as being:

- Improving the user experience of services
- Ensuring easy and timely access to services

- Dealing with difficult 'wicked issues' in the delivery of services
- Promoting citizen involvement in shaping services
- Making best use of all the available resources

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1.2.2 For local authorities:

Partnerships can support the development of services delivered for the benefit of local communities. The use of financial and human resources available to partner agencies can be maximised to achieve common objectives. Partnerships can also support innovation as they bring together different views and risk is shared among a number of organisations.

1.2.3 For service users:

The needs of many people cannot fully be met by one agency alone. For example, many health inequalities are caused by a number of factors which could not be tackled if left to healthcare providers only. Many services are already dependent on joined-up working with others.

1.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Partnerships

1.3.1 In general the benefits of partnership working can be summarised as:

- Sharing risks of project delivery
- Sharing financial resources, including capital and human resources.
- Improved economies through joint procurement.
- Sharing information and knowledge between experts in different fields
- Widen ownership
- Gain formal commitment of other agencies
- Open up additional funding sources
- Improve range and co-ordination of services available
- Gain tax advantages or break free of investment constraints
- New market/business opportunities can be opened up.

1.3.2 However, there are risks or working in partnership:

- Governance of partnerships can be problematic.
- Accountability between partners is not always clear, including redress when things go wrong.
- Too much competition between partner organisations. While competition can be healthy, too much will lead to blame, resentment and lack of co-operation.
- Loss of control
- Slow, top heavy decision making
- Added confusion (eg all working to different organisational rules)

- Responsibilities of other partners taken on
- Higher administrative costs
- Opportunity costs (what could we have done with those resources)
- Bad publicity caused by actions of partnership or a partner
- Staff transfer issues
- Potential for poor partnership management
- Extra risks (involving the service, finance and legal issues)
- Termination (or reducing commitment) difficulties
- Possible uncapped liability of partners

1.4 Issues to consider at the beginning

When establishing a partnership there are many considerations to account for. Below is a list of issues all partnerships should consider when getting started. More detail on these issues can be found elsewhere in the guidance:

1.4.1 General Issues

- Is the purpose of the proposed partnership clearly identified and evidence of need explicit?
- Are customers likely to benefit from an improved service because of the proposed partnership?
- Can service improvements be achieved in a different way?
- Are there any other partnerships that already deal with the issue or could do?
- Have all services that could be affected been consulted and is there general agreement at officer level that the proposed partnership would be beneficial?
- Have the key decision makers been consulted?
- Do the other potential partners understand and agree with the objectives for the partnership?
- Have customers been consulted?
- Has the organisation's representation been considered and agreed internally?
- Do the organisation's representatives have enough authority to bring about the service improvements required?
- Do the representatives have the right skills - is training required?
- Are the County Council's key objectives and interests sufficiently protected in the partnership agreement?

1.4.2 Legal Issues

There are many legal issues associated with partnership working. Below is an introductory list of such concerns. More information can be found in Section 3.4, however, partnerships are advised to seek professional legal advice before any legal undertaking occurs.

- Establish the legal basis for the proposed partnership. Are there any statutory/regulatory duties and constraints? If it is a voluntary initiative, what powers will the Council be exercising?
- Consider whether approval/endorsement is required before negotiations commence with prospective partners, or bids for funding are submitted.
- When considering the timescale, establish any legal time constraints – e.g. periods of consultation (statutory or contractual) with staff or service users; minimum procurement timescales.
- Be mindful of the potential for inadvertently creating a contractual relationship with potential partners, particularly where they are spending money on preparatory work. Be clear as to responsibilities and liabilities from the outset, and keep written records.
- Assess the degree of innovation and ground-breaking that is required – novel or complex legal issues may take additional time to resolve.
- For larger strategic and contractual partnerships it may be necessary for a pre-partnership agreement to be drawn up (sometimes called a ‘memorandum of understanding’ or ‘heads of terms’ agreement) which incorporates a detailed project plan.

1.5 Top Tips for Partnership working

(Taken from Partnerships for better health

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_075758)

1.5.1 Involved all partners as early as possible and treat them equally. – Partnerships rely on partners working effectively together. This will only happen if all partners feel engaged in its development.

1.5.2 Set clear objectives and markers of success, and focus on results. – Define the purpose of the partnership and the difference it seeks to make. Critical success factors must be clear and the main drivers for every action.

1.5.3 Be open to innovation. – Partnerships provide opportunity for creativity with sharing of ideas and the sharing of risk of any failure.

1.5.4 Allow an honest exchange of information between partners. -Clear and open communication between partners helps build trust and a non-competitive environment.

1.5.5 Be clear about every partner’s role. – A written agreement will help identify what each partner will contribute to the partnership.

1.5.6 Allow partners to do what they are good at. – Utilise partners skills and expertise and let them lead in areas where they excel.

1.5.7 Be prepared to be challenged. – Partnerships will drive forward where a culture of negotiation and debate is encouraged.

1.5.8 Share risk across the partnership – As resources should be shared, so should risk. A simple risk management framework can be used to analyse risks factors and how this can be shared across partners.

1.5.9 Develop systems to ensure sustainability. – It is important to examine the likely challenges, such as staff turnover , and develop systems to minimise the impact of such events.

1.5.10 Monitor and evaluate. – All partnerships need to know not only how successful they have been, but also why they have been successful. Evaluation informs future development.