

Sharing your toys

Advice agencies working together

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“It’s big, isn’t it? It’s a huge thing that’s going on out there around commissioning – it’s not just about CLACs and CLANs; it’s all tied in with European procurement. It’s the whole shebang, really, isn’t it? So, actually, change, working together, being more joined up, being more strategic, sharing your toys – all of that matters.”

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Advice agencies are increasingly working together, for a number of reasons
 - To improve the services they provide to clients
 - To improve co-ordination between advice giving organisations
 - To pursue their common policy objectives
 - To respond to funders’ requirements
 - To take advantage of new funding opportunities
 - To boost their reputation and/or their position within an increasingly competitive market.
- 1.2 We interviewed 20 people in advice agencies about their experience of partnership working.¹ The interviewees were selected with a view to obtaining a range of views about different kinds of partnerships, and discussed with us their experiences in 16 different partnerships, of different kinds and with various partners.
- 1.3 The partnerships discussed included:
 - Partnerships delivering debt advice under the Financial Inclusion Fund (FIF)
 - Partnerships delivering advice funded by the Legal Services Commission (LSC)
 - Partnerships delivering advice by outreach
 - A partnership delivering housing advice for a local authority
 - Partnerships formed to bring advice agencies in an area together in order to improve their services collectively (referred to below as the “advice sector partnerships”)
 - A partnership between an advice agency, a local credit union and a debt advice agency
 - A partnership between advice agencies to carry out policy work
 - A merger of three agencies involved in giving advice
 - A group structure.
- 1.4 Further details of these partnerships are set out in Appendix 1.
- 1.5 Our interviews provided clear evidence that partnerships between advice agencies can and do work. The people we interviewed were generally enthusiastic about what their partnerships had achieved in improving services to clients and relationships between agencies.
- 1.6 However, interviewees also identified a number of issues to do with partnership working. Some of these issues seem to be particular to the advice sector. Others are more general, reflecting the experiences of partnerships in other sectors.² We discuss these in turn below.

¹ The interviews were based on the list of questions set out in Appendix 3.

² See the bibliography in Appendix 2 below.

2 Advice specific issues

2.1 A number of issues identified by our interviewees seem to be particular to the advice sector, reflecting:

- The nature of the sector
- The different kinds of advice being provided
- The wider activities carried out by advice agencies
- The funding rules under which advice agencies operate
- Specific issues to do with providing advice
- Specific delivery problems.

The nature of the advice sector

2.2 The advice sector is extremely wide-ranging and diverse.³ Large amounts of advice are provided by agencies that do not see advice giving as their primary function. Agencies that do specialise in advice giving come in all shapes and sizes. While this diversity can be seen as one of the strengths of the sector, it also creates significant challenges. There are considerable dangers of agencies operating in their individual “silos”. One of the advantages of partnership working identified in this study is the role it can play in breaking down the barriers between agencies - both between advice agencies themselves and between them and other agencies that are involved more as outreach “partners” – resulting in an improved and more integrated service to clients.

2.3 The diversity of the sector was also seen however as a potential obstacle to successful partnership working. Interviewees emphasised the importance of transparency, trust and mutual respect, and the need to find partner agencies that share the same values or ethos, suggesting perhaps that it is not always easy to find like-minded partners.

2.4 The extent to which one can straddle the borders of the advice sector is an issue however. The partnership involving an advice agency and a local credit union provides an interesting illustration of this. While the project could properly be described as aiming to provide a co-ordinated financial service to local people by linking access to affordable advice services with the provision of money advice, this proved difficult to achieve in practice, revealing considerable differences in approach and ideology.

The different kinds of advice being provided

2.5 Advice agencies differ significantly in the kinds of advice they provide. Some see themselves as providing “generalist” advice about a wide range of problem areas, while others see themselves as “specialists” in particular types of advice. This is reflected in the Quality Mark system originally devised by the LSC, which distinguishes between “general help”, “general help with casework” and “specialist” advice. The differences between these types of advice were seen as important by our interviewees, some of whom emphasised the advantages of having partners that provide advice at a similar level. This was felt most keenly in relation to the Specialist Quality Mark, which was seen as providing a guarantee of the nature and quality of advice being given. The General Help Quality Mark was however seen as less of a

³ See the report by Matrix Research and Consultancy “Estimating the size and nature of the civil legal advice sector in England and Wales”, DCA Research Series 4/06 (March 2006) available at http://www.dca.gov.uk/research/2006/04_2006.pdf

guarantee. This is linked to the specific issue of quality, which we discuss further below.

The wider activities carried out by advice agencies

- 2.6 The partnership engaged in policy work illustrates the wider activities carried out by advice agencies and the wider objectives espoused by much of the advice sector.

The funding rules under which advice agencies operate

- 2.7 At least three of the partnerships discussed in this paper reflect the specific funding arrangements of the Legal Services Commission:
- In one partnership a specialist agency funded by the LSC saw clients at the office of a generalist agency, which was not entitled to LSC funding as it only provided advice at the General Help level.
 - One partnership between advice agencies to deliver social welfare law advice reflected the specific requirements imposed by the LSC in the relevant “bid round” as to who was able to bid for additional funding and the fact that joint bids were not permitted.
 - The policy work partnership was specifically funded by the LSC under its Partnership Innovation/Initiative Budget, and might not have been possible otherwise.
- 2.8 Other partnerships reflect the rules imposed by other funders
- The Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, in the case of the FIF partnerships
 - A local authority, in the case of the housing advice partnership
 - The Big Lottery Fund, in the case of the funding for project staff provided to one of the advice sector partnerships.

Specific issues to do with providing advice

- 2.9 Three issues raised in this study seem to be particular to advice, at least in the form in which they arise.
- 2.10 The first is referrals. Despite the considerable emphasis placed on the need to recognise your limits and refer clients when appropriate (in the quality marks and elsewhere), the issue of referrals remains a large one for advice agencies. Our interviewees identified cultural obstacles, capacity problems, conflicts of interest, eligibility problems and disagreements between agencies as to when referrals should take place. Specific referral problems are discussed further below.⁴
- 2.11 The second is confidentiality. This obviously arises in other sectors, such as the medical sector, but it affects advice in some specific ways. Problems were experienced in some partnerships, where advisers employed by different organisations were working closely together, causing confidentiality problems. The issue also arises in the context of referrals and outreach, both in terms of available facilities and more generally where information is being passed from one agency to another.
- 2.12 The third is quality. This must also arise in other sectors, but the concept is particularly difficult in the context of advice, where the quality of the service being delivered is much harder to assess, in the absence of a proper peer review system. Some interviewees expressed concern about the quality of the advisers employed by

⁴ See paras 2.14-2.15 below

their partners, and the fact that the General Help Quality Mark does not guarantee the quality of advice. Two partnerships had however allowed peer reviewing of each other's work.

Specific delivery problems

- 2.13 A number of specific delivery problems were identified.
- 2.14 Partnerships that depend on referrals being made can face specific problems:
- If there are cultural obstacles inhibiting partners from making referrals
 - If there are capacity problems in terms of space in which to interview clients
 - If caseworkers have to spend disproportionate amounts of time travelling to outreach venues
 - If there are conflicts of interest as to which funding stream or contract should be used in order to meet clients' needs
 - If there are legal aid eligibility problems (for example in relation to employment advice)
 - If there are disagreements (for example between generalist and specialist agencies) as to when referrals should happen.
- 2.15 The use of triage systems or gateway assessments appeared to be an issue. One interviewee emphasised the important role of such systems in identifying suitable cases for referral at an early stage. Another complained that such systems were a hindrance leading to the referral of complex cases only. Both views may of course be correct.
- 2.16 The problems associated with outreach work were highlighted by one interviewee who stated that outreach at a particular venue was not working well due to a lack of groundwork being carried out before the project started.
- 2.17 One interviewee, whose agency provided an outreach venue for a specialist agency, identified some problems for clients, who remained unsure about who they had received a service from, and unsure about who to contact, following a meeting with the specialist adviser. Some clients would come back to the agency for further advice, or to ask them to contact the specialist adviser on their behalf. Another interviewee commented that this is a particular issue when the specialist service is provided by another "branch" of the same branded service.
- 2.18 A problem arose in some partnerships where advice was being given by advice workers from different agencies at the same outreach venue at the same time. In some cases workers giving advice in different categories of law were actually working in the same room at the same time. One interviewee suggested that a conflict could arise between confidentiality and the possibility of providing a more "holistic" service for the client when resources are limited. However, it is arguable that this is not an issue unique to partnerships as much as a structural problem associated with providing advice in small, poorly-resourced organisations or inappropriate outreach venues.

3 Making partnerships work

- 3.1 The interviews highlighted a number of themes about making partnerships work. These were mostly generic partnership issues, and familiar ones at that, but they were clearly important to the interviewees.

Getting things right at the beginning

- 3.2 Several of our interviewees emphasised the importance of getting things right at the beginning of a partnership. This was expressed in various ways, including:
- The importance of thrashing things out, in open and frank conversations
 - The need to explore partners' organisational cultures, ethics and expectations
 - The importance of getting partners' agendas out into the open
 - The need to build up trust through honesty and openness
 - The need to understand each other, and work out how you can fit and work with each other
 - The importance of having one vision or an agreed strategy
 - The importance of being honest about what you can and cannot commit to
 - The importance of being clear about what you are agreeing to, and who is going to do what
 - The need to spend time getting things right
 - The need to do your homework
 - The desirability of training for members of the partnership
 - The need to explain what you are proposing to your own staff, and not making assumptions about what they think.
- 3.3 The importance of writing things down, so that everyone knows what has been agreed, was also emphasised.
- 3.4 One interviewee emphasised the need to “avoid a short-termist approach of seeing the money and thinking we’ll worry about the other stuff later.” A similar warning seemed to be given by other interviewees who described one partnership as having been started on “a wing and a prayer”.

The need for transparency, trust and mutual respect

- 3.5 This was emphasised by several interviewees, who clearly saw these as essential requirements of a successful partnership, and not just a matter of stating the obvious.
- 3.6 “You have to get on with your partners” was one clear message.
- 3.7 Interviewees emphasised that:
- It takes time to build up trust.
 - You have to overcome your past history and deal with each other's agendas.
 - You have to make sure that there is no “whispering in corners” and that no one feels excluded.
 - You need to recognise and acknowledge issues of competition between the partners (even if they cannot be resolved).
- 3.8 In one partnership the members made a point of telling each other about other bids they were involved in, and inviting the others to join in such bids.
- 3.9 One partnership faced the prospect of making cuts, due to a reduction in funding imposed upon it. The partnership tried to make the cuts in a proportional manner, so that they would not have a disproportionate impact on the smaller agencies involved. The lead agency took a cut and was seen to do so. This was felt to be an important test for the partnership and one that it was important for it to survive.

- 3.10 In two partnerships, the partners had developed sufficient trust in each other to allow voluntary peer reviewing of each other's work. In one partnership this had taken place between the "lead" members, who were wondering whether there was enough trust to enable this to be rolled out to the wider partnership.

Communication

- 3.11 The importance of communication was emphasised by several interviewees.
- 3.12 Communication between partners was one issue. Regular meetings between the key people involved (usually the managers) were seen as important, as was personal contact between agencies, the opportunity to see how your partner operates in practice, the importance of communication between the staff involved (and not just the managers) and the value of socialising. One partnership experienced a problem when new staff members were appointed in one agency and were felt to be less responsive than their predecessors to the staff in another agency. The managers and the staff from both agencies went out for a meal together and good relations were restored.
- 3.13 Communication with one's own staff was also seen as important, in order to keep them in the loop, explain what you are doing and why, and deal with internal conflicts of views.
- In one partnership, there were conflicting views within one of the partner organisations about the extent to which the agency was perceived as working too closely with the local authority, rather than acting as the independent voice of clients.
 - In the partnership involving an advice agency and the local credit union there were considerable reservations amongst the advice agency staff about the fact that they were engaging with a creditor.

Commitment and capacity

- 3.14 Issues of commitment and capacity arose in some of the partnerships.
- 3.15 One interviewee emphasised that "you've got to genuinely believe that there's merit in the partnership".
- 3.16 One agency had engaged in a short-term project of providing file supervision to another agency. When they realised that they had no authority to get the other agency to make the changes they thought were necessary they pulled out.
- 3.17 The importance of having a core of committed people was emphasised.
- 3.18 One interviewee emphasised the importance of getting commitment from an organisation's trustees.
- 3.19 Problems of lack of commitment and/or capacity were evident in at least two of the partnerships. One partnership that involved advice being given at the venues of different partners experienced problems in relation to two partners – one that did not seem to be committed to what the partnership was trying to achieve, and another which had recently moved premises and was lacking interview rooms that could be used. In another partnership, which involved advice being given at a number of community venues, a review was being carried out of the "host" venues. Some of the host organisations involved were reported to be happy with the service being provided. Others apparently felt that they were involved in a lot of administration that was unconnected with their core service.

Flexibility

3.20 The need for flexibility was mentioned in several ways. Interviewees commented that:

- “Things change, and you have to be able to adapt.”
- “You need a mechanism to be able to review things.”
- “You need to be flexible.”
- “You need to compromise and not think that you can get your own way on everything.”
- “Partnerships often involve ‘giving something up’, which is not easy.”
- “You need to be prepared to extend yourself on behalf of the partnership.”

Having the right structures in place

3.21 A number of themes were emphasised by the interviewees:

- The need for clear leadership
- The importance of having continuity of leadership
- The importance of having clear lines of responsibility and oversight
- The need for proper co-ordination
- The need to sort out management and supervision arrangements
- The advantages of having a lead organisation rather than more diffuse arrangements.

3.22 The importance of decision-making was expressed in various ways including

- The need to start at the same level and be inclusive
- The need to be clear about the decisions that you make.

3.23 One partnership took an important decision in a way that was felt to be rushed and unfair. They re-visited the issue and came to the same decision in a way that was acceptable to all concerned, once they felt that all opinions had been debated and all alternative options had been investigated.

3.24 In terms of implementing partnership decisions, one interviewee emphasised the importance of making decisions that were realistic, by reference to clear work plans setting out who was going to do what and when, taking account of their other commitments.

Having the right people and skills

3.25 Interviewees emphasised

- The importance of agencies having stable and experienced staff involved in the work
- The importance of having workers who are part of a team, well-supported and supervised
- The need to have people who are good negotiators and/or are able to act as mediators or peacemakers.

3.26 Having designated partnership co-ordinators was seen as very important in at least two partnerships. One employed a project manager and project assistant whose role was to co-ordinate and develop the partnership. Another had a project manager who was responsible for co-ordinating the partnership and reporting on its behalf to the funders.

Managing performance

- 3.27 The importance of performance management was emphasised in two partnerships – one that was very large (and clearly needed it) and one that was small but felt that the partnership had been hindered by the lack of good project management.
- 3.28 Lack of proper targets was seen as a problem in one partnership.
- 3.29 Organisations not providing their returns was identified as a “key problem” by one interviewee.

Reciprocity

- 3.30 Although not identified as such, some of the partnerships highlighted problems that arose out of a lack of reciprocity or mutual benefits for the partners.
- 3.31 In the partnership involving an advice agency and a credit union, it was not clear that the partners were benefiting equally. One interviewee suggested that there was no problem with the credit union referring clients to the advice agency, but that it was harder for the agency to be able to refer clients back.
- 3.32 Where one agency was providing advice via outreach at another agency, some of the arrangements involved a payment in respect of accommodation costs. This was not universally popular amongst the payers however.
- 3.33 One interviewee expressed concern that the situation in which they acted as an outreach venue for a specialist agency, while beneficial to their clients while it lasted, could be problematic in the longer term as it could also lead to the de-skilling of their current staff. This would be particularly problematic if the specialist agency were to lose the contract, as the “host” agency would then be unable to pick up the pieces.

The use of consultants

- 3.34 Several of the interviewees reported the use of consultants to help with various aspects of partnership working.
- 3.35 Most of those concerned were positive about the value of consultants in
- Drafting terms of reference and other partnership documents
 - Reviewing the structure of the partnership
 - Helping with merger negotiations.
- 3.36 Some interviewees felt that consultants had not been helpful, or had been more trouble than they were worth.
- 3.37 Others suggested that:
- Consultants are difficult to manage.
 - Working with them is time-consuming.
 - Their value varies depending on the consultant and the task in question.
 - You need to be clear about what you expect from them and reflect this in the brief you give them.
 - You should not expect them to make decisions for you.

4 Specific problem areas

- 4.1 Some specific problem areas were identified.

Monitoring

- 4.2 Interviewees said that
- There are problems if agencies have different computer systems that are not easily compatible.
 - Monitoring systems are difficult to reconcile. For each agency there are different things that are easy and cheap to deliver and different things that are costly.
 - Different partners will want different information.
 - You need to discuss and agree what you are going to monitor, rather than impose it.
 - Monitoring can add costs, which need to be covered.
- 4.3 One of the FIF partnerships required all the partner agencies to use the same system so that they would have comparable data and remote monitoring would be possible. This had caused problems for the partner agencies but it was generally seen as essential to the successful monitoring of the partnership's work.
- 4.4 In at least three partnerships, failure by one partner to provide statistical information to other partners was identified as an issue. In one partnership this was specifically attributed to the system being used and lack of resources.

Staffing

- 4.5 The interviewees identified a number of staffing problems that had affected their partnerships:
- The problem of underperforming staff
 - The problem of having staff from two different organisations working together without proper line management
 - The difficulties of supervising staff from another organisation
 - The problems that arise when staff employed by one organisation are actually based at another organisation⁵
 - The problems that arise when a member of staff is employed by one organisation on behalf of the partnership⁶
 - The problems of having staff spread out at several different sites, making supervision and support more difficult, and causing problems of recruitment and retention.

Quality concerns

- 4.6 Quality control was identified as an issue by some interviewees.
- 4.7 One interviewee commented that a lack of continuity of staff working on a project makes it difficult to build up trust and confidence in the people you are working with or to agree benchmarks.
- 4.8 Within one of the partnerships there was some concern about quality issues, and the level of service provided by some members. One interviewee commented that the

⁵ One advice agency manager referred to the difficulties of having a member of staff working full time in her agency, while being employed by another agency. She dealt happily with the worker on a daily basis, but the worker was responsible to the manager of the agency that employed him. She felt that both she and the worker would have been happier if the worker could report to her.

⁶ One advice centre manager felt that she had a conflict of interest when her organisation employed staff who were employed purely to work for the partnership and not just for her organisation. As an employer she was basically wearing two hats.

quality mark does not guarantee the quality of advice, and that the General Help Quality Mark does not monitor the quality of advice.

- 4.9 One interviewee involved in an outreach service, where workers came out from a central “hub” to a number of local agencies, commented that other agencies had raised concerns about the quality of the person sent to them, although this had not been a problem for her agency.

Conflicts of interest

- 4.10 Conflicts of interest can obviously be highly damaging to partnerships.
- 4.11 Some interviewees were firmly committed to their existing partnership while also conscious that they were or could be pulled in other directions in future bidding situations.
- 4.12 Some interviewees expressed concern at their partners’ wider plans or other alliances, which were seen as potentially threatening to the future of the interviewee’s organisation.
- 4.13 A specific problem occurs if a partner experiences a conflict between its own interest and those of the wider partnership. This was particularly the case in one partnership where agencies delivering social welfare law advice had their own LSC contracts to fulfil as well as those that were the subject of the wider partnership.
- 4.14 The advice agency that was involved in a partnership with a local credit union was also involved in another partnership that was seeking to reduce the number of tenants being evicted for rent arrears in their local area. This caused a particular conflict to arise since the credit union were offering loans to people specifically to assist with the clearing of rent arrears, whereas the other partnership, and its constituent individual members, aimed to direct such clients to receive debt advice on how to negotiate interest-free repayment arrangements rather than take out interest-bearing loans.

Other issues

- 4.15 One interviewee identified a VAT issue arising out of the drafting of partnership agreements. Care had to be taken to prevent such an agreement attracting VAT.

5 Attitudes to Partnership Working

- 5.1 Our interviewees made a number of comments about the advantages and disadvantages of partnership working.

The advantages of partnership working

- 5.2 Apart from the obvious advantage to their organisations of being able to access funds that might not otherwise have been available to them, our interviewees identified a number of advantages of partnership working:
- It improves relationships between agencies – both between advice agencies themselves and between them and other agencies that are involved more as outreach “partners” – resulting in an improved and more integrated service to clients.
 - It helps to protect and preserve agencies’ position in an increasingly competitive market, in relation to future commissioning processes and/or bidding rounds.

- It helps to create a culture that favours collaborative working rather than competition. This was seen as particularly important in the current climate, with its competing emphases on both partnership and competition.
- It enables agencies to speak with a united voice, towards funders in particular.
- It offers challenges to your own working practices, by exposing you to practices in other organisations.
- It improves people's expertise, by exposing them to different approaches and allowing a greater cross fertilisation of ideas.
- It can enable agencies to gain a working knowledge of other areas of advice that are outside their current provision.
- It provides benefits in terms of sustainability when you have staff changes.

The drawbacks of partnership working

5.3 Our interviewees also identified a number of drawbacks that are generic to partnership working:

- Partnership working is very resource intensive. It takes a lot of time and work. Partnerships can be at real risk if you cannot devote enough time to them.
- Partnerships can make slow progress as a result.
- You can be vulnerable to a change in approach by your partner. You can find yourself locked into a formal relationship with an agency with an agenda or approach that comes to diverge significantly from yours.
- Partnerships can be particularly problematic if partners have different cultures, expectations, knowledge and viewpoints.
- In terms of the membership of partnerships, there may be a conflict between being inclusive and being productive and efficient.

6 Choosing your partners

6.1 One interesting finding from the study was the number of partnerships that did not involve a choice of partners. This could be because of the nature of the partnership itself. Some partnerships may have to include all the key local agencies, in order to be representative and to achieve their objectives. This applied for example to the two advice sector partnerships.

6.2 The lack of choice may however be due to external factors, to a greater or lesser extent:

- Partnerships may need to include as many partners as possible in order to meet their conditions of funding and to deliver the service contracted for. This was apparent in one of the partnerships providing LSC funded social welfare advice.
- Agreement may have been reached at a national or regional level as to who should be involved in delivering services under a particular funding stream. This seemed to be the case in at least one of the FIF partnerships.
- The funders may have asked an agency to deliver a service by partnership with another specific agency.
- The funders may have specified that the winners in a bid round will have to work together. This was clearly the case in the partnership providing housing advice.

6.3 Where agencies are able to choose their partners, our study suggests that relevant factors might include:

- Whether the other organisation shares your values or ethos

- How compatible the other organisation is with yours, for example in terms of quality assurance
- How well the relevant people in each organisation get on with each other
- How financially sound the other organisation is, which may involve carrying out due diligence or a risk assessment
- The extent to which the other organisation is, or is likely to be, a competitor of yours in other circumstances.

6.4 One interviewee put it this way:

“I think, trust your instincts, if you’ve got that luxury. You have to look to the longer term, silly analogy, but it’s like a relationship or a marriage – you have to think, am I still going to be comfortable in this situation perhaps in two or three years’ time, when external challenges might put pressures on us as well, like reductions in funding for example. You know, ultimately, do I trust this organisation? Am I prepared to go the distance?”

7 What leads to success?

7.1 A number of factors seem to be directly relevant to the nature and/or success (or otherwise) of partnerships.

7.2 Size is clearly a factor. A large partnership is likely to need a clear structure, with an emphasis on performance management, but with the risk of being seen by some partners as bureaucratic, undemocratic and remote. Partnerships involving several partners may also be more exposed to the risk of under commitment or under performance by individual partners. The comparative size of the individual partners may also be an issue. Problems can be created if one partner is bigger and seen to be more powerful than others.

7.3 A small partnership, especially one with a small budget, may however raise the question of whether the time and effort involved is worth it.

7.4 As far as success is concerned, funding is clearly the most important factor. Issues highlighted by our interviewees include:

- How flexible or inflexible the funders are – some commented favourably on the advantages of having funders with a flexible approach
- How realistic the funders’ expectations are, in terms of what the partnership can achieve
- How supportive the funders are
- The importance of having targets that are achievable
- Whether the funding is sufficient
 - To cover the cost of running the partnership, with a realistic allocation of on-costs or overheads
 - To enable the agency to employ the additional staff to carry out the work involved without getting into financial difficulties
 - To enable the partnership to achieve all its objectives.

7.5 One organisation had experienced a situation in which its partner decided that it was no longer benefiting from the partnership arrangement. The latter organisation then withdrew, leaving the former to take over the whole project, even though it was operating at only marginal cost from their point of view.

- 7.6 One interesting distinction between some of the partnerships concerns how the funding actually works – whether the money goes to a lead agency (and on to other agencies under a subcontracting arrangement) or whether funding goes directly from the funders to the individual partners. The interviews did not suggest any significant conclusions however. Where a lead agency is responsible for the delivery of the service, it is obviously in their interest to ensure that payments to their delivery partners reflect performance. Where partners provide separate but complementary services, partners were obviously happy to report to and receive payment directly from the funders. A good example of this was the housing advice partnership, where two of the partners provided generalist advice in separate geographical areas, but were able to refer cases to the third partner who provided specialist advice.
- 7.7 It may be that funding arrangements are more likely to become an issue when a partnership is struggling to meet its targets, or there is a disagreement between the partners, but neither problem was reported to us in this context.
- 7.8 A related issue is the extent of “fit” between partner organisations. One interviewee commented that “the more developed a service is, the more effective the partnership can be.” Another commented that supervision was not an issue when both partner agencies had the Specialist Quality Mark.
- 7.9 A separate factor affecting the success of partnerships concerns their autonomy or freedom of movement. Partnerships that are dependent on the actions of others (especially their funders) can be seen as reactive rather than proactive. This was the case with one of the advice sector partnerships, where concerns were expressed as to whether the partnership had become too reactive and dependent on the local authority.

8 Conclusion

- 8.1 None of the problems mentioned in this paper seem to be insuperable however. Most of them were mentioned by only a few of our interviewees. Many of the partnerships we discussed seemed to be relatively trouble-free. There is no reason why advice agencies should not continue to expand the nature and extent of their partnership working.

1 Appendix 1 - The partnerships discussed in this paper

- 1.1 The partnerships discussed in this paper can be most easily described in terms of their purposes. These can be roughly divided into those that exist primarily in order to deliver advice services and those that exist primarily for other purposes, but the distinction is not always clear-cut.

Partnerships that exist in order to deliver advice services

1. Under the Financial Inclusion Fund (FIF)

- 1.2 Eight of our interviewees were or had been involved in partnerships that deliver debt advice under the FIF programme, in three different regions.
- 1.3 These partnerships all use sub-contracting but seem to use at least two forms of partnership working:
- The main contractor provides services itself but also subcontracts to advice agencies who deliver the service directly to clients
 - The main and/or the subcontractor delivers the service via outreach at other advice agencies and/or other outreach venues.
- 1.4 All of the interviewees stated that their FIF partnership worked well in terms of delivery
- The targets were achievable and were being achieved
 - The demand was clearly there
 - The requirement to target resources on people who are financially excluded was less onerous than the eligibility test required for legal aid work.

2. Delivering an LSC contract

- 1.5 Two of the partnerships existed in order to deliver advice (and representation as appropriate) funded by a legal aid contract with the Legal Services Commission.
- 1.6 In one area, a number of agencies wished to take advantage of additional funding being provided by the LSC in social welfare law.¹ They were unable to put in a joint bid, as this was not permitted under the bidding rules, and only one of them was qualified to bid on its own. This agency (the “lead” agency) bid successfully to obtain additional funding to enable it to provide services from the offices of the other agencies.
- 1.7 In this partnership, the lead agency employs the staff
- Some of whom are based at the lead agency but go to the other agencies (and other outreach venues) at fixed times to see new clients
 - Some of whom are actually based in one of the other agencies and provide a service from there.
- 1.8 Where workers are based at the lead agency, the other agencies have designated appointment slots, which they are expected to fill with eligible clients to be seen by the workers who come out from the lead agency. This causes certain problems, especially since some of the other agencies have their own LSC and other contracts (such as FIF), which they also have to meet, and which can therefore present them

¹ The LSC was offering additional “new matter starts” (i.e. funded cases) via a “bid round” – an open competitive process that was advertised and open to suppliers who met certain conditions.

with a conflict of interest, regarding which service should be prioritised when allocating new appointments or cases.

- 1.9 In the second partnership, in a different area, a generalist advice agency has a link with a not for profit solicitor agency, who send a trainee solicitor once a week to see up to seven new clients who have been assessed as eligible by the generalist agency. If the solicitor agency accepts the referral, they take on the case as a legal aid case in the normal way, and the client becomes theirs. They conduct the case from their own office, which is some distance away, communicating with the client by letter and telephone. Any follow-up appointments however take place at the generalist agency.

3. Delivering non-LSC funded advice by outreach

- 1.10 Four of the partnerships involved relatively small projects,² funded by a charity or local authority, to deliver advice by outreach at community venues, local schools, or the office of a local arms length housing management organisation. The service could be provided by advice agencies working together (providing advice in different subjects) and/or with varying degrees of “partnership” with the host local (“non-advice”) agencies.
- 1.11 On the whole our interviewees were more enthusiastic about their agency’s partnership with the host local agencies than they were about partnerships between advice agencies themselves. One such partnership had ended when a partner agency withdrew. Another was felt to be resource intensive, and somewhat difficult to manage, although relations between the partners remained good.

4. Delivering housing advice for a local authority

- 1.12 One partnership of three organisations – two not for profit organisations and a solicitors firm – exists solely to deliver housing advice funded by a local authority. The partnership came about as a result of a tendering exercise by the authority. Bids were invited for different parts of the contract – general advice in three geographical areas, home visiting, and specialist advice. Two of the not for profit organisations provide the general advice. One also does the home visiting. The solicitors firm provides the specialist advice. It should be noted however that all three organisations had the Specialist Quality Mark in housing.
- 1.13 The housing advice service is provided under a common name. Each partner has a direct relationship with the funder. They have various agreements between themselves about referrals and other matters but there is no formal arrangement.
- 1.14 We interviewed the leading members of the three organisations involved. They all felt that the partnership had been very successful.

Other partnerships

5. Advice sector partnerships

- 1.15 Two of the partnerships were formed in order to bring advice agencies in an area together in order to improve their services collectively, and to be in a better position to deal with funders, and any future commissioning processes.
- 1.16 Like similar advice sector partnerships elsewhere, the members took their responsibilities very seriously, and the partnerships were clearly considerably more than talking shops.

² Typically paying for the cost of one to two full time equivalent workers

- 1.17 One partnership had obtained funding³ to employ a project manager and project assistant, who were employed by one of the member organisations. At the time of the interviews the partnership was engaged on a number of work streams. It had also previously reached an agreement to merge three smaller advice organisations into three larger ones, which was a considerable achievement in itself, but which then had to be put on hold pending decisions by the local authority, which funded the organisations in question.⁴
- 1.18 The second partnership⁵ had an agreement that its members would take turns as to who took the lead in any particular project or bid. At the time of the interviews, the partnership had recently won two contracts. One basically replaced the core grant previously paid to some of the agencies. The other was to provide advice services to children's centres. Both contracts only involved some of the members of the partnership however.

6. Partnership with a local credit union and debt advice agency

- 1.19 One advice agency had formed a partnership with their local credit union and with a debt advice agency that provided telephone advice. The project aimed to provide a co-ordinated financial service to local people by linking access to affordable financial services with the provision of money advice, aimed primarily at income maximisation and debt advice. Although the project achieved some success it also experienced some problems, which were attributable both to differences in approach between the partners and to specific aspects of the partnership itself.

7. Policy Work

- 1.20 One of the partnerships discussed had carried out policy work, funded under the LSC's Partnership Innovation/Initiative budget, which had come to an end. The project mostly involved policy work with the local authority (led by one agency) and training of local agencies (led by another agency), while also linking to the possession scheme at the local county court.
- 1.21 The project was felt to have achieved a number of notable successes, but it had also experienced some interesting problems.

8. Merger

- 1.22 One interviewee reported that their agency was planning to merge with two other advice agencies that were based in the same building.
- 1.23 We only discussed this with a representative of one of the organisations involved, which appeared to be largest of the three organisations. She told us that
- The proposed merger came about because of funding cuts that were about to hit one of the other organisations, which had then approached her organisation.
 - The third organisation then asked if they could join in.

³ From the Big Lottery Fund under its Advice Plus programme (round 1)

⁴ Although the three agencies were to merge into larger ones, it was agreed that the smaller agencies would continue to provide a service in their own locality and retain their identity. It was the management of staff and budgets that was to change.

⁵ This partnership had received some start up funding and support from one of the advice networks and also from the Charities Aid Foundation.

- The proposed merger was being mediated by a consultant, who was seen as being independent by all three organisations, and whose help was generally felt to be critical to the success of the proposed merger.⁶

9. Group structure

- 1.24 One of the organisations involved in the housing advice service mentioned above⁷ had joined up with a local housing association within a group structure. The person we interviewed felt that the organisation had derived a number of advantages from doing this, specifically in relation to the support services available to it and the enhanced reputation it gained by the association with the (considerably larger) housing association.

⁶ The interviewee has since told us that the merger has been very successful, and that the new organisation has been able to secure additional funding, due to the fact that they can now offer a “package” of services to their clients.

⁷ See paras 1.12-1.14 above.

Appendix 2 – Further Reading

I. On partnership working generally

ADP Consultancy: *Making Successful Partnerships*
Available free via info@adpconsultancy.co.uk

Advice ^{UK} Sustainable Advice Services Briefing No.6: *Effective solutions to working in partnership Part 1 – Taking practical steps to partnership*

Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research: *Collaborative working between large and small voluntary organisations*
http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/What_we_do/Collaborative_Working_Unit/Resource/s/NCVO%20Collaborative%20working%20large%20small%20report.pdf

Charity Commission: *Collaborative Working and Mergers: An introduction*
<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc34.asp>

Hact/collaborate resource kit worksheets

1. A strategy for change
2. Large/small partnerships
3. Consortia
4. Developing positive relationships
5. Influencing the process
6. Legal issues
7. Writing the bid
8. Implementation

<http://www.hact.org.uk/downloads.asp?Pagelid=175>

Law Centres Federation *Partnership Toolkit* (forthcoming)

N² (squared) Consulting with Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service: *A practical guide to working with partnerships*
<http://www.n2-consulting.com/partnerships.html>

NCVO Collaborative Working Unit

- Collaborative Working: Partnership between voluntary organisations
- Joint working agreements
- Joint working for public service delivery
- Merger – A model of collaborative working
- Should you collaborate?
- Working together to achieve your mission

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborativeworking/index.asp?id=2041>

NCVO Public Service Delivery Network: Case Study: Lancashire County Council – Supporting People
<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=10020>

NCVO Sustainable Funding Project: Case Study: DISC – Developing Initiatives Supporting Communities
<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=10020>

Sitra: *A Providers Guide to Procurement*

[http://www.sitra.org.uk/fileadmin/sitra_user/TEMP/A Provider s Guide to Procurement for website.pdf](http://www.sitra.org.uk/fileadmin/sitra_user/TEMP/A_Provider_s_Guide_to_Procurement_for_website.pdf)

II. On partnership working in advice

Conway, Russell: "A meeting of minds", *Solicitors Journal* 153/5 10 February 2009

HASKC: *Going forward with Housing Solutions (2000 – 2004)*

Available from The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Housing and Social Services, The Town Hall, Hornton Street, London W8 7NX

Jones, Paul A: *Linking credit unions and money advice* (2008) Liverpool John Moores University

http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/HEA/HEA_Docs/Blackfriars_Report.pdf

Michael Bell Associates: *Partners in Advice: Advice Partnerships between the Voluntary Sector and Local Authorities*

Available from Michael Bell Associates Research & Consultancy, 307 The Foundry, 156 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8EN

Possession Prevention Project: *Report on the work of the Possession Prevention Project April 2004-April 2007*

http://www.lawcentres.org.uk/uploads/Possession_Prevention_Project_2007.pdf

Appendix 3 – Interview Questions

1. Please describe the partnership(s) you have been recently or are currently involved in?
2. How did the partnership(s) come about?
3. How well is it working?
4. What works well and why?
5. What problems have you encountered?
6. What solutions (whole or partial) have you found?
7. Have you had any particular problems in relation to
 - Monitoring
 - Supervision
 - Quality control
 - Reporting
 - Outcomes
8. Have you had any problems between the partners in relation to
 - Different cultures
 - Different ways of doing things
 - Different expectations
9. Based on your experience, what factors do you think are likely to be significant in
 - Helping partnerships to work
 - Making partnership working difficult
10. If you were starting again, what would you do differently?
11. If you were writing a guide to partnership working, what would you emphasise in terms of DOs and DON'Ts?