

Finding and working with campaign partners

If you haven't done much campaigning, you may be able to learn a lot from working with a more experienced partner. Joint campaigns can also be more credible and much harder to ignore than one group acting alone. Bear in mind, though, that they are generally more complex than campaigning on your own, so you may want to start with a relatively straightforward issue.

Pros and cons of campaigning in partnership

Campaigning in partnership with other organisations can be a good way to increase your impact on policy and practice. There are potential disadvantages as well, however, so before you get involved in a joint campaign, you need to weigh up the pros and cons.

Pros might include:

- maximising impact
- pooling knowledge and expertise
- pooling resources or sharing work
- combining different strengths (e.g. evidence from service users, knowledge of law, contacts, staff skills)
- more contacts/ routes to influence
- increased credibility/ higher profile
- partnership working impresses funders/ policy makers.

Cons might include:

- loss of control – a partner may take the campaign in another direction or do/ say something that brings you into disrepute
- incompatible objectives
- culture clashes (e.g. value based versus evidence based approach)
- major inequality of resources
- time/ resource/ transaction/ opportunity costs
- possible dilution of message
- coordination breaking down
- one party pulling out
- hidden agendas
- partner gets all the credit (or none of it!).

In August 2008, a North of England advice agency worked with the local centre for full employment to publicise Employment and Support Allowance. They used social landlords to promote briefing sessions to tenants and other residents who might not otherwise get advice. Other organisations including credit unions also participated in the briefings.

Laying the foundations: identifying partners

Local networking is a good starting point for identifying potential partners. Getting to know other organisations that share some of your aims is getting to know potential allies. Here are some practical suggestions for 'ways in'.

- 1) Set up regular liaison meetings with local agencies whose policies and practices affect your service users, or join those already established.
- 2) Make links with other voluntary organisations working on issues affecting your service users, e.g. local community care forums or consumer support networks.
- 3) Try to have regular meetings with neighbouring advice agencies to discuss policy issues. If there isn't one already, consider setting up a local policy forum where advice agencies can raise issues of common concern.

An advice agency in London held a social policy conference with several objectives including; better coordination of policy work between advice and information agencies, promoting key issues to policy makers within the London borough, and providing local MPs with the opportunity to listen to their concerns. Delegates included the council leader, the police, the Race Equality council, other voluntary organisations including black and minority ethnic groups and older people's organisations, and MPs. The conference resulted in a proposed action plan to be taken forward.

As well as local networking, there are other ways to identify potential partners for campaigns:

- 1) Your paid staff, volunteers and trustees may all have useful contacts.
- 2) Joint service delivery projects could give you access to various committees, steering groups and so on.
- 3) Academic links might be important if you plan to base your campaign on research.

Do remember, if you set up a joint campaign with groups that have no track record in campaigning, you may spend all the time explaining the concept and convincing them of the value, rather than actually working on the issue. Sometimes there may not be a suitable partner for a particular campaign.

Developing relationships with partners

It is essential to get to know the structures, personnel, organisational cultures, jargon and attitudes to campaigning of potential partners. Below is a list of some of the most important things to be aware of:

- Ensure you share key values to avoid serious disagreement over the big issues, for example equality and diversity.
- Some organisations may be very service delivery oriented; they could get nervous about a 'campaigning' role, but respond better if you talked about 'learning lessons from experience'.
- Other organisations may be deeply committed to a cause and less concerned with evidence-based arguments, in which case it can be hard work to ensure that a campaign maintains an objective approach.
- Dealing with different terminologies, or jargon, can be a problem. You may find

that the same terms mean something different to another organisation, and this is where concrete examples are needed.

- Partners' agendas can change (e.g. as a result of new funding or cuts), making them less, or maybe more, suitable partners. Relationships need maintenance; keep partners informed of what your status and ask that they do the same.
- Joining an existing campaign can be challenging – you are likely to have more influence and control if you are involved in a campaign from the outset.

How formal should collaboration be?

Informal arrangements

Usually you will find that you can work well with other organisations and achieve good outcomes without setting up a very formal structure. Examples of informal collaboration include:

- Using another organisation's case studies in a report. You could then jointly brand, launch and publicise the report, so increasing its credibility and impact.
- Getting other groups to sign a letter to a local paper.
- Setting up a joint seminar, for example for Jobcentre Plus and local authority staff about the impact of benefit changes.
- Giving publicity to another group's campaign, possibly by informing your service users about it.
- Sharing expertise, such as getting a university social studies department to help design and analyse a survey in return for 'sharp end' experience for their students.
- Supporting one another's arguments for a particular policy change. You could do this at forums and liaison groups, or through a joint approach to a service provider.

After seeing many people with problems accessing local homeless services, a Midlands Citizens Advice Bureau partnered with Shelter to meet with the local authority homeless service. After discussing their concerns, the homeless service agreed to clarify its procedures, change parts of its practices, arrange for bureaux staff to shadow housing officers and invite the partners to a local homeless forum.

Formal arrangements

Informal collaboration has the advantage that it can be established quite quickly and should be relatively simple to bring to an end. It works well where each organisation can focus on what it does best. However, a large scale campaign will probably need more formal structures in place from the outset. Also, if an informal arrangement works well initially, and then a campaign really takes off, you might need to make the move to more formal partnership structures along the way.

More formal structures include a 'lead partner' arrangement where one organisation handles finances and employs staff on behalf of others. This can be relatively simple to set up if done through an established organisation, and day to day responsibilities should be clear. The most obvious disadvantage is that it may lead to real or perceived inequalities between the campaign partners.

Alternatively, you could consider setting up a completely new organisation to run a campaign. This would require substantial time and resources, but it would also mean that the organisation running the campaign was entirely dedicated to ensuring its success.

Formal arrangements are essential if the campaign is to involve employment of staff or handling a budget. If you are considering this, it is highly advisable to get professional (including legal) advice before you start.

Planning joint campaigns

If you do decide on a joint campaign, it will need planning (see 'Planning a local campaign' in this series). Joint campaigns, because they are inherently more complex, generally need to be planned and managed more carefully. Written project plans are vital to avoid misunderstandings, and should address the following:

- clear, agreed overall aims and objectives
- a realistic timescale
- details of a campaign committee or project board who give overall direction
- clear individual roles and lines of accountability (this is important whether you are using existing staff and volunteers, or creating new posts to take a campaign forward)
- clarity about how much staff time each organisation can devote to the campaign
- systems for communication, internal and external
- a budget and clear financial procedures if money is involved
- a contingency plan for the possibility that a partner will have to pull out
- monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Some key aspects of joint work are more to do with relationships than with formal structures and documents. Joint projects will fail if there is no trust between partners and you will therefore need to:

- 1) Ensure that prospective partners have the necessary autonomy and resources to join the partnership and deliver their part.
- 2) Be open about problems when they arise.
- 3) Think about possible problems and how you would address them (possible roles for a project board/ steering group and national staff).

Further resources

- NCVO runs a project on campaigning in collaboration www.ncvo-vol.org.uk > what we do > campaigning effectiveness > projects > campaigning in collaboration
- NCVO has published a useful introductory book, *Campaigning in collaboration*.
- NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit is a useful source of advice and examples if you are considering a more formal partnership.



LOTTERY FUNDED