

Partnership: developing collaborative working

Introduction

This guidance is about the process of planning and negotiating leading to the establishment of a joint project or consortium. The guidance is designed for use in conjunction with the related documents: Partnership: introduction to collaborative working; Networking: foundations for partnership; What type of partnership?; Partnerships: checklist, and Managing joint projects.

Deciding to explore a partnership

The process of exploring a potential partnership should enable you to decide in principle whether your bureau should get involved. During this stage the different parties discuss ideas, explore concerns, investigate constraints and establish whether they can in principle work together on the particular initiative and whether a joint project is the best way to do it.

Once that decision is made, you can move on to the process of negotiating and planning in more detail.

Clarify purpose

At the outset, define what you want to do in general terms: its aims and objectives, timescale, who will be involved, what is within the scope of the proposed project and what is not.

Be clear about why you want to work collaboratively. Feeling that any “partnership” must be worthwhile in itself is not a good enough reason to get involved in one.

Establish responsibility

It is essential to be clear where responsibility lies in exploring (and later negotiating) partnerships. Collaboration can have major legal, financial and other implications for an organisation. Although all or most of the work involved will usually fall to paid staff, trustee boards should be kept informed from the start. If work on exploring and/or negotiating a partnership is to be delegated by the overall manager or chief executive, s/he must be informed of progress throughout.

Identify and assess partners

You may already have partners in mind, perhaps because they approached you or because of previous contacts (see Networking: foundations of partnership). However, take care not to exclude others who might be valuable partners.

- What other stakeholders are there? Could they have a role?
- How will users be involved? Could you bring in service user organisations?

Ensure that you start with a good understanding of any potential partner. You may feel that you know them well, but be sure that you can answer some basic questions about them.

- What are their aims and objectives?
- Who are their clients/users?
- What do they actually do (support, advocacy, social policy, education and training, research etc.)?

You also need to be sure that an organisation will be a suitable partner. You need to be satisfied on these key issues:

- Are they happy for joint working to reflect CAB principles (and are you content with theirs)?
- Do they have the powers/autonomy necessary to enter into an agreement?
- What is their geographical area of operation? If it is different from that of the bureau, could that cause problems?
- Are their current staffing and financial circumstances healthy and likely to remain so?
- Will they give a high enough priority to ensuring the success of the joint project?
- Is there a track record of previous joint working or good relations between your organisations?

The process of identifying and choosing partners is explored in more detail in [Making Partnerships Work](#) published by the Prince's Trust on their website. See also the paper [A fruitful partnership](#) p20, on the Audit Commission website.

Costs, benefits and risks

All collaborative working has costs as well as benefits. Costs in terms of staff time can be high; you may need a lot of time for planning and communication.

A simple cost-benefit analysis can be carried out at the point when a partnership is being contemplated. Where you can, quantify costs and benefits. The table below indicates some possible headings. These are not exhaustive.

Collaborative working: example of cost-benefit analysis

Costs	Benefits
• Time costs/transaction costs/administrative complexity etc. • Financial costs • Skewing of aims and objectives • Loss of direct control • Less clear accountability • Opportunity costs (not being able to do other things) • Negative impact on other relationships • Blurring of public image	• Better access for clients • Better understanding of client needs • More “joined-up” services for clients • More informed social policy work • More effective promotion of social policy objectives • Sharing of skills and expertise • More efficient use of resources • Increased resources • Enhanced public profile

Some benefits may be identified from the guidance on [Partnership: introduction to collaborative working](#); [Why work collaboratively?](#) and [Areas of activity for collaboration](#). It is important to be specific. For example, how will services be more joined-up? How will independence be affected?

Any cost-benefit analysis involves making estimates or assumptions about what could happen. To ensure that potential costs are fully weighed, it is vital to assess the risks involved.

If the initial cost-benefit analysis is satisfactory, you may need to repeat it in more detail before entering into a firm commitment.

Accessing funding should not be the only benefit. Be sure that there is a real basis for joint working, or the project may distort the bureau’s development priorities and damage relationships with partners (see also Collaborative working and contracts in the BMIS item [What type of partnership?](#))

Another useful tool is the checklist on the Collaborative Working Unit website: [Should you collaborate? Key questions](#).

Decide on feasibility

Initial discussions should determine whether the partners are broadly agreed on what they want to do and whether a joint project is the best way to do it. Once a decision in principle is made, you can move on to more detailed planning and negotiation.

Identify key procedures

It is important to identify any key organisational and legal procedures, for example:

- trustee board approval
- agreement from Citizens Advice
- taking legal advice
- Charity Commission approval
- incorporation
- amendment to constitution/memorandum and articles
- Citizens Advice membership procedures.

Failure to plan for these may cause serious delay and could put the whole collaboration at risk.

Responding to initiatives

Initiatives for joint working may come from other voluntary and community bodies, local authorities, other statutory bodies (such as NHS bodies), or from Citizens Advice at national or regional level.

Assess the approach thoroughly as you would any other proposed joint project. If you are not sure and there is scope for negotiation, it may be worth entering preliminary discussions, but be prepared to withdraw if the proposal is not appropriate for the bureau. Similarly, care should be taken in responding to an invitation to join an established joint project.

Where a funding bid is involved, you may need to negotiate with partners under pressure of time. Relationships already established through networking will repay the effort invested; see the Networking: foundations for partnership.

Joining an established project

Joining a joint project that is already underway is never ideal. Arrangements that are already in place may not take the working practices of the CAB service into account, and there is likely to be much less scope for negotiating with other partners.

You will need to consider carefully whether you can work with the existing partners. You may need to take professional advice before signing any documentation. Use the Partnerships checklist to assess the partnership agreement, plan and any monitoring information available, with particular regard to:

- service delivery expectations
- social policy
- past performance
- costings
- reporting and monitoring requirements
- funding
- employment obligations.

Negotiating and planning partnerships

Once you have decided in principle to go ahead with a collaborative project, you need to work with partners to make it happen.

At this stage a preliminary project team should be formed. It may take the form of a steering group (see What type of partnership?, involving staff and/or trustees. This team is responsible for planning the project and negotiating with funders and other third parties. The team will need to agree how decisions are made and how its members will communicate. Team members' responsibilities should be clear – you may need a project manager to ensure effective co-ordination at this stage.

It is very important that the trustee board is appropriately involved. In a major partnership, trustees (especially chair and/or treasurer) will often form part of the negotiating team; in all partnership negotiations the trustee board should be kept fully informed of developments.

Part of the project team's task will be to plan the establishment of a partnership board to oversee the joint project or provide governance for a consortium.

Confirm aims and objectives

Establish the overall aims and objectives of the proposal in writing and ensure that all the partners will sign up to them. For more information, see the BMIS guidance on Managing joint projects.

Build the relationship

A good relationship between partners is essential. Without mutual understanding and trust, no amount of formal documentation can prevent problems from developing. Check out these questions:

- Do the participating organisations have professional respect for each other?
- Does each understand what others expect from the project?
- Are they aware of each other's goals, structures and organisational cultures?
- Do they have a common understanding of terminology (e.g. terms like 'advice', 'advocacy' and 'outcome')?

Do not expect spontaneous harmony - even if all partners are Citizens Advice Bureaux. If you already work closely with the proposed partner(s), then you may already have mechanisms for mutual learning and staff development. But for more ambitious partnerships they may need strengthening. Consider reciprocal training sessions or seminars. Is it worth organising a joint 'awayday' for staff and trustees?

Success is more likely if there is a sense of shared ownership of the project among all the people who will be involved (including trustees, volunteers and service users).

Ensure that there are mechanisms for informing and consulting people, both at the planning stage and during the life of the project.

Be realistic about inequality. Partner organisations will often differ greatly in size, resources and expertise. Inevitably this carries some risks for the relationship, but collaboration can work well so long as there is honest and open communication, mutual respect and scope for negotiation.

Partnership boards

All joint projects and consortia need a body responsible for direction or co-ordination. This may range from a steering group to a trustee board, depending on the type of partnership adopted (see What type of partnership?).

Partnership boards should comprise members who:

- represent all the organisations that share responsibility for delivering a project
- are in a position to convey the views of their respective organisations and report back to them
- are committed to the success of the joint project
- have a mix of knowledge and skills that will enable the board to carry out its functions effectively.

Note that if a separate charitable or incorporated organisation is set up, members of its trustee board will have to act in the interests of that body, not as delegates of other organisations. Be clear about any potential conflicts of interest that this may raise (see the BMIS guidance on separate organisations in What type of partnership?).

Where there are a lot of organisations involved, it may make sense to establish a smaller executive committee to deal with more day-to-day business. If there are a lot of other stakeholders or groups not directly involved in delivery, consider establishing an advisory group to feed views to the board.

Agree a project plan

Partners will need to agree a project plan. This (or at least an outline plan) will often be needed in order to secure funding. Once you are in a position to implement the project, the plan will need to address all aspects of it. For more detail of what the plan should contain, see Managing joint projects.

The plan is not the same as the formal agreement, although they may be linked – e.g. the plan may be included in the agreement as an appendix.

Secure resources

Unless a project can be delivered with existing staff, funds, premises etc., you will need to secure additional resources.

Ensure that estimated costs are agreed by all partners and are based on shared assumptions. Different organisations can have very different approaches to staff grading, salary levels, pension provision, travel expenses etc. In particular, try to ensure that the costs of social policy work and any evaluation are included, as it will be difficult to obtain extra resources for these later.

Be clear who is responsible for putting together funding bids, meeting funders' deadlines, negotiating with funders etc. Be clear, too, what the limits of their authority are.

Written agreements

In anything more than the simplest collaboration or networking, joint working should be underpinned by written agreements, to be signed by all parties. Written agreements are essential when any of the following apply:

- there is a regular commitment of resources by partners
- a substantial volume of activity is involved
- there are shared management responsibilities
- there is dedicated funding or staff
- joint work has a high public profile
- one organisation could incur a significant liability or costs as a result of the actions of another
- there is any risk that responsibilities may not be clear.
- services provided go beyond the usual remit of the partners.

The nature of the written agreement will depend on the type of partnership (see What type of partnership?). It does not always mean that everything will be covered by a single document. Documentation can include terms of reference, referral protocols, plans, job descriptions, code of practice or statement of intent, the memorandum and articles of a separate organisation.

However, documentation should always address:

- core principles
- aims and objectives of the project
- composition, powers and functioning of the partnership board
- responsibility for staff, finance, service delivery etc.
- responsibility for relations with funders and other third parties
- the procedure for amending the agreement

- the process for resolving any disputes between partners (including failure by any partner to deliver)
- 'break clauses' and the procedure for terminating the agreement.

N.B. The agreement will be legally binding if it can be shown that it is the intention of all parties that it forms a formal contract and that a contract exists. Further information about the creation and status of contracts can be found in the information system.

Useful links and resources etc.

NCVO Collaborative Working – voluntary sector good practice <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborativeworking/?id=2038>

Charity Commission - <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/> (go to publications > quick link list > RS4 Collaborative Working and Mergers)

Princes Trust <http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/> (go to Common Cause)

Wales Council for Voluntary Action <http://www.wcva.org.uk/> - see especially [Information sheets](#)

Voluntary Sector Legal Handbook, Sandy Adirondack and James Sinclair Taylor, 2nd edition, 2001, published by Directory of Social Change <http://www.dsc.org.uk/>