

# Knowledge ...

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## Partnerships: where next?

- This briefing is designed for local, regional and national policy makers across the public sector who are involved in developing and promoting partnership working.
- Tackling the 'cross-cutting' social issues that are at the centre of this government's agenda requires multi-agency working. However, this should not be equated with an assumption that partnership working is always required.
- Where partnership is required there must be more clarity about the type of partnership needed to ensure that the most appropriate type of partnership working is established.
- Good governance is crucial and needs to be combined with the development of an environment that gets the most out of the individuals tasked with making the partnership work.
- Effective partnership requires clear aims and objectives that senior staff within partner organisations have signed up to and a performance management system that takes account of the complexities of partnership working and makes clear links between inputs to the partnership process and outcomes.
- Greater clarity about the need for and role of specific partnerships, coupled with better accountability and performance management systems, will result in more effective partnership working.

### Box 1: Commonly cited obstacles to effective partnership working

- lack of a shared vision of and for the community;
- lack of appreciation of short, medium and long term targets for the different partners;
- inability to set, agree and achieve local targets and to balance these with nationally driven targets;
- lack of agreement about risk-sharing;
- absent partners / poor level of engagement among partners;
- competing ideologies between partners;
- conflict and poor decision-making;
- inappropriate levels of representation;
- poor governance, including lack of clarity around accountability and responsibility;
- lack of trust and inability to manage the 'people issues' (eg team-working and leadership); and
- poor performance management.

## Introduction

Partnership working is seen as central to the delivery of the government programme, and the number of partnerships has grown over the last few years. But, for many of those involved, partnership working can often feel frustrating and ineffectual. Successful partnerships are too often based primarily on individual personalities and enthusiasm and are hard to sustain when people move on.

## Obstacles to partnership

We know a lot about the obstacles that face day-to-day partnership working from research and guidance published by a range of bodies including government departments, inspectorates and academics. Some of the commonly cited ones are set out in Box 1.

This briefing builds upon research and consultancy undertaken by Matrix to provide an overview of some of the factors crucial to effective partnership working:

- **Justification:** clear justification that a partnership is needed to realise the vision and that a partnership solution represents value for money.
- **Governance and teams:** a framework of responsibilities and accountabilities combined with the development of an environment that gets the most out of the individuals tasked with making the partnership work.
- **Performance:** how to ensure that the partnership is making a difference.

## Justification

The orthodoxy of partnership working has become so embedded that sometimes insufficient consideration is given to whether a partnership is actually required to achieve a specific goal. Two questions need to be asked:

- What type of partnership is required?
- What value is added through the development of a formal partnership?

## What type of partnership is required?

Building upon work by Griffith<sup>1</sup> we have developed a partnership typology that takes account of the level of collaboration within and the function of the partnership. We use this when developing new partnerships or reviewing existing ones to ask what type of partnership is required, whether the correct one has been developed and whether partners have a shared understanding of the type of partnership they have or are creating.

We identify three levels of collaboration:

- **Co-operation:** Members agree to co-operate with each other; their goals remain individual rather than collective, but they see their future as linked.
- **Co-ordination:** Members agree to carry out pieces of work, representing collective goals, together. Members allow their activities to be influenced by the contributions of other members.
- **Integration:** Activities undertaken are developed, implemented and 'owned' by the group. The partners are committed to co-designing something for a shared purpose.

and three functions:

- **Strategic:** The immediate product of partnership will be strategic documentation that shapes the strategies of individual partners.
- **Commissioning:** The product of partnership will be commissioning decisions and the performance management of services and projects that are commissioned.
- **Delivery:** The partnership will move from being a virtual organisation to a physical one in which individuals from different organisations come together to manage and deliver actual services.

This leads to the two-fold typology illustrated in Figure 1, which also provides some examples of where typical partnerships *might* fit within the typology. However, specific local partnerships might fall into different categories.

## What is the value of partnership working?

The benefits that specific partnerships are intended to deliver vary, but generally focus on delivering holistic approaches to social and economic issues that cut across the spheres of influence of a number of different organisations. Sometimes these benefits can be achieved through multi-agency working *without* the creation of a formal partnership. As the partnership typology (in Figure 1) suggests, different types of partnership will be appropriate for achieving different goals. Before creating a partnership, it should be made clear how partnership working will make it easier to achieve the goal, and whether there are other, less formal or less permanent forms of collaboration that could be used.

As part of this assessment the real cost of the partnership should also be considered. Recently, the Audit Commission noted that<sup>2</sup>:

*"There are many examples of partnerships being set up, but whose progress and impact was hampered by a lack of access to the resources needed to 'make things happen'. Statutory partnerships in particular, which have failed to suitably resource themselves, have found it difficult to meet the timetables to produce strategies and action plans."*

## Governance and partnership working

Developing appropriate systems to ensure accountability is crucial for all partnerships and a strategy for involving stakeholders will strengthen accountability. Ultimately partnership working is about individuals from different organisations working together effectively. Good governance sets the framework within which this is possible, but it must be combined with the development of an environment that gets the most out of the individuals tasked with making the partnership work.

### Accountability

Partnership accountability requires agreed and documented structures and processes appropriate to the partnership's role. For instance, if the function of the partnership is primarily to commission services, careful consideration must be given to the position of potential service providers within the partnership structure, and the importance of undertaking robust needs analyses must be built into partnership processes. Key processes and structures are set out in Box 2.

Poor governance will not just damage the reputations of partnerships and their constituent organisations. It can also result in poor overall performance and the inefficient use of resources.

### Engaging service users and communities

The issue of why and how to involve service users and communities in partnerships is complex. As a result, this area of partnership working is often characterised by under-developed strategies and short-term, tokenistic solutions to complex problems. There are two key questions that partnerships need to ask when developing an involvement strategy.

**The first question is:** why should we engage service users and communities? Reasons for engagement include:

- improving the partnership's understanding of need, leading to better decision-making and service design;
- improving the accountability of the partnership in relation to local communities and service users; and
- developing individual and social capacity through the process of consultation with and participation in the partnership.

### Box 2: Processes and structures for assuring accountability

- clear roles and responsibilities for the accountable body and the partnership;
- clear roles and responsibilities for different elements of the partnership (eg partnership board, sub-groups, individual members);
- well-defined decision-making processes that ensure decisions are made at the appropriate level of the partnership (eg strategic decisions are made by the partnership board) and in a transparent manner (eg key decisions are made in an open forum, not between more powerful partners away from the partnership setting);
- a project management system that is common to all the work undertaken within the partnership; and
- risk management including regular risk assessments and appropriate preventative and contingency strategies for identified risks.

**The second question is:** how should we engage with service users and communities? Generally, sustained engagement and involvement is better than 'one-off' consultation exercises, but for this to be successful users and communities require appropriate support and training.

### Taking care of the partners

In its report on Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs), the Audit Commission<sup>4</sup> concluded that:

*"The biggest barrier to delivering better community safety is organisational values and culture in councils, policy and other local partnership agencies."*

Overcoming cultural barriers and developing a shared culture within a partnership is difficult. It requires a leader who has:

- an understanding of the key stages in the process of change, such as gaining agreement that there is a problem that needs to be addressed, analysing the problem, developing solutions, implementing them and monitoring their effectiveness;
- an ability to identify and engage with different organisational cultures; and
- experience of team-building.

### Performance

Performance management is a contentious issue throughout the public sector and more so in the context of partnerships. Our experience suggests that two key issues are:

- the development of clear aims and objectives; and
- a performance management system that reflects the complexity of partnership working, with a clear focus on outcomes.

### Developing clear aims and objectives

Developing clear aims and objectives in partnership working is difficult because of inherent tension within the process. Effective organisations need to develop and focus on a small number of *deliverable* aims and objectives on which the whole organisation agrees. Any partnership that aspires to be effective will seek to achieve the same. However, in doing so, it is likely to require its

		FUNCTION		
		Strategic	Commissioning	Service delivery
COLLABORATION	Co-operative	Community Legal Service Partnership		Health Collaborative
	Co-ordinating	Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership	Drug Action Team	
	Integrative		Local regeneration partnership such as New Deal for Communities	Youth Offending Team

Figure 1: A partnership typology

## References

- 1 Griffith, A. (2002) *Partnerships and the Community Legal Service*. London: Advice Services Alliance
- 2 Audit Commission (2002) *Developing Productive Partnerships: A Bulletin*. London: Audit Commission
- 3 Audit Commission (2004) *Youth Justice 2004: A Review of the Youth Justice System*. London: Audit Commission
- 4 Audit Commission (2002) *Community Safety Partnerships*. London: Audit Commission

individual partners to sign up to aims and objectives that are additional to those of their own organisation's strategy, thus potentially diluting the effectiveness of that strategy. As the Audit Commission<sup>2</sup> put it:

*"It is widely understood that organisations that attempt simultaneously to pursue a number of unconnected strategies are unlikely to succeed with any one of them. But in the real world of multiple objectives and competing public sector priorities, defining and sticking to a limited set of core goals is a major challenge."*

This statement is especially true of partnership working. For example, how should a Primary Care Trust attempting to meet tough access targets upon which future funding is dependent, approach its requirement to participate in the work of a Crime and Disorder Partnership, knowing that minimal input will carry no sanction?

The solution to this problem is at least partly in the level of organisational representation on the partnership's strategic decision-making group. Generally, if individual organisations are not represented by their first- or second-tier leaders, the aims and objectives set by the partnership are unlikely to have the level of organisational sign-up required to be achieved.

## Developing performance management systems

Measuring and managing performance in a partnership context is often complex. The complexity and multitude of targets, performance management and assessment regimes often diffuse the focus of partnership working making it difficult for the organisations, staff and communities who have a stake in the partnership to identify what exactly the partnership is trying to achieve and whether it has succeeded.

The first stage in developing a solution to this issue is to develop a performance management system specific to the needs of the partnership. According to the Audit Commission<sup>2</sup>:

*"Partners are likely to already collect a range of indicators, without clearly identifying why and what they are attempting to measure. Strategic partnerships in particular, due to the wide remit of their activities, are more likely to become*

## Conclusions

Many of the issues raised in this briefing are illustrated in the parallel development of CDRPs and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). Both were created by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. CDRPs bring together key local players to develop a strategic approach to crime and disorder reduction. YOTs, which involve many of the same agencies, are responsible for providing local youth justice services for children and young people aged 10 to 17 and co-locating professionals from a number of agencies to achieve this.

Many YOTs, which are predominantly service delivery bodies, have been able to demonstrate success by having initial targets that were clear, achievable and part of the system they were established to deliver. A recent Audit Commission report<sup>3</sup> found that:

*"The new structures work well . . . The 155 Yots are critically placed between criminal justice, health and local government services to coordinate and deliver services to young offenders and the courts."*

In contrast many CDRPs have struggled to define strategic goals, engage key partners from the health and criminal justice sectors and demonstrate their impact on local crime rates. An Audit Commission report<sup>4</sup> on CDRPs concluded that:

*"Local partnerships have not made an obvious impact on community safety between 1999 and 2002."*

One conclusion to take from the areas of partnership working discussed in this briefing, is that partnership working in and of itself cannot be expected to increase the effectiveness of public services. Instead greater clarity about the need for and role of specific partnerships, coupled with better accountability and performance management systems, will result in more effective partnership working and hence in more effective public services

*frustrated as they attempt to reconcile the different standards, criteria and information that members will already collect against those that the partnership actually needs. . . . [P]artners need to develop specific indicators relevant to the partnership and its remit . . . "*

This need for bespoke performance management systems must be balanced with the need to minimise bureaucracy and collect new data.

The second stage is to develop a performance management system that captures the range of partnership activity and that is able to link this to the achievement of outcomes. The use of a Balanced Scorecard (BSC) can be helpful tool for doing this.

Matrix specialises in providing independent, evidence-based solutions that form the cutting edge of the policy-making agenda.

**Information is useless until you turn it into knowledge**

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