



What is partnership/partnership work?

Partnership is described as a joint venture between two or more people. It was traditionally associated with the business sector, but has become commonly used in the voluntary and community sectors. Partnership or partnership work, in this context, is when two or more organisations come together to undertake a project or programme of work collaboratively. Partnerships can become a legal entity in their own right, with formal structures for representation and management; or can be a less formal arrangement between the partners involved, with more flexible working structures. There are many types of partnership work in the voluntary and community sectors and it is important that any partnership chooses the structures that best suit its membership and purpose.

Why undertake partnership work?

Partnership work has many benefits to include:

- More effective service delivery
- Less confusion in relation to service provision
- Better information and clearer sign posting
- Increased co-operation at an interagency or community level, or both
- An integrated approach that can cut across narrow sectoral interests
- Increased resources and services attracted to the community/area
- A positive and enjoyable experience for all involved
- The ability to maximise skills and resources available
- The promotion of reconciliation and community cohesion

The above should not be viewed as an exhaustive list but as an indication of

some of the advantages that partnership working can bring to a community or area. Many community groups will already be engaged in partnership work but may not recognise that working together with other communities or community groups is 'partnership' because it is not packaged it in this way.

Who should undertake partnership work?

Partnerships can be formed at any level:

- between community groups
- between community groups and other agencies
- between organisations and agencies.

It is essential that the management bodies of each of the partners have signed up to, understand and are fully committed to the partnership, even if they are not directly involved in its work. It is also important that representatives attending partnership meetings can act on behalf of their own group/agency knowing that they will be supported.

Partnerships/partnership work requires many skills and a high level of confidence amongst all the partners. It can take a long time to establish and develop a partnership. Therefore it is unlikely that very new groups/organisations are going to feel comfortable with a role in a partnership.

When should partnership work be undertaken?

As with any community development work, partnership/partnership work is best undertaken in response to identified need or issues in a community or area. Partnership work is quite a sophisticated way of addressing issues and as such should be developed accordingly over an appropriate period of time. Most commonly, results will not be quickly apparent and it will often take between six and eighteen months before outcomes

can be seen. Partnership work is not a 'quick fix' but a long term solution to issues.

Where can partnership work be carried out?

Partnership work can be carried out in any location, although the benefits will obviously be visible in the targeted community/area. In order to develop the partnership, partners may choose to meet outside of their normal environment or away from buildings or offices that are directly associated with one particular partner.

How do we undertake partnership work?

As has previously been mentioned, developing partnerships/partnership work is a skilled, long term and challenging process. When a decision has been taken between two or more organisations to form a partnership or undertake partnership work, the development of that partnership is not an inevitable process but one that requires energy and effort.

Partnership Building – A Model Stages in Partnership Building

Common Purpose

There must be agreement as to the purpose of the partnership which is being proposed, for example, to address poor transport facilities. Partners also need to develop and agree the principles that will underpin their partnership.

Structures

Sufficient time must be given to agree appropriate structures that will allow for the effective management of the partnership, whether formal or informal. Partnerships need to be accountable to all the partners and also to the community in the area in which they work. Partnership structures need to facilitate feedback and participation by all the partners, in addition to two way communication with the community.



Equality

It is essential that all partners are treated equally and that none have undue influence because of their perceived or real power outside of the partnership. Each partner is likely to bring a different range of skills and experience to the partnership. This is undoubtedly one of the many strengths of a partnership but each partner's skills and experience need to be valued equally by the other members. The parties to any partnership, particularly when they come from different sectors or spheres of work, need to develop an understanding of the other organisations'/agencies' work and ethos.

To promote equality within partnerships, it is important that there is a common understanding of language with accessible and inclusive language should be used. In any partnership, it is important that the roles and responsibilities are fairly shared between partners, otherwise one 'powerful' partner can dominate. It is essential that all partners understand their roles and responsibilities fully and those of the other partners also.

Training

Training and facilitation in partnership working should be available at meetings of the partnership. Partnership working does not always come easily to groups and organisations and they should have the opportunity to work through any issues that may arise within the partnership.

Work Plan

A detailed and realistic programme of work should be agreed by the partnership. In addition, that programme of work must be appropriately resourced by the partners or from an external source of funding.

Checklist for Partnership Working

The following issues can be used as a checklist to gauge the development of any partnership.

Positive features

- Ownership
- Transparent mechanism
- Sufficient time to build the partnership
- Trust, confidence and understanding between sectors
- Equality between partners
- Structures to facilitate feedback and participation
- Training/facilitation in partnership working
- Effective leadership skills
- Commitment to the principles and practice of partnership working and training for partnership working
- The promotion of networking between different sectors
- Commitment to community development principles and practices
- Added value
- Co-operation and integrated working practices
- Equality
- Accountability
- Democracy¹

Barriers/challenges to partners/partnership work

- Inappropriate structures
- Unaccountable mechanisms
- Practical tensions between partners, for example, different timescales/budgets
- Value based tensions between partners, for example, interests or priorities
- Fragmentation of policy as opposed to integration
- Competition between partners rather than co-operation
- Lack of accountability
- Centralisation of services rather than a localised response²

¹ Based on material from Carroll, Christine (1998) *Partners for Progress. The voluntary and community sector's contribution to partnership building*, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, Belfast and Wilson, Andrew and Charlton, Kate (1997) *Making Partnerships Work. A Practical Guide for the Public, Private, Voluntary and Community Sectors*, Joseph Rowntree Trust, York.

² Based on material from McCabe Angus (1997) *Partnerships and Networks*, Joseph Rowntree Trust, York.