Partnership: introduction to collaborative working

Purpose of this guidance

Working collaboratively can bring enormous benefits to service users and to the organisations involved. However, it can also mean increased costs and complexity in governance, management and administration.

This item covers reasons for working with other organisations and likely areas for collaboration. It is designed for use in conjunction with the related items:

- Networking: foundations for partnership
- Partnership: developing collaborative working
- What type of partnership?
- Partnerships: checklist and Managing projects.

What is partnership?

Bureaux have many links with other organisations: public service providers, funders, other advice agencies, umbrella groups, user groups, other bureaux, Citizens Advice etc. These relationships are essential in order to keep operating and provide a service. However, not all relationships can be described as partnerships.

The term "partnership" is used very widely and means different things to different people - from clearly defined projects run jointly by two or more organisations to vague statements of shared purpose. Note that the term is also used for a range of multi-agency arrangements (see, for example, the BMIS guidance on local strategic partnerships).

Partnership can include working with other bureaux and/or Citizens advice, with other voluntary and community organisations, (including user organisations), or with public or private sector organisations.

In this guidance the following working definitions are adopted.

Partnership or collaborative working: an arrangement whereby two or more organisations work together, usually over a period of time, with the deliberate purpose of achieving shared aims. Partnership and collaborative working are not the same as contractual relationships (see What type of partnership?).

Network: a group of organisations with the primary purpose of mutual communication between its members and, often, to external audiences. Note, however, that many groups calling themselves networks also undertake collaborative working, lobbying, running publicity campaigns etc.

Joint project: a project undertaken by two or more organisations working together to achieve a specific (usually service delivery) objective, without setting up a formal separate organisation.

Consortium: a group of organisations working together. In this guidance the term is generally used for formal consortia where a separate organisation is set up to perform functions on behalf of all the members, but without the participating organisations merging.

Be as clear as possible what you mean when using these terms. Note that the terms "partner" and "partnership" can have important legal and financial implications and should generally not be used in written agreements without taking specific legal advice (see also Voluntary Sector Legal Handbook, 9.5).

Why work collaboratively?

Better services for clients

This is the most important reason for working with other organisations. Working collaboratively, rather than in isolation or competition, can mean more holistic, effective and informed advice, social policy and promotional work.

Partnership can enable you to:

- learn from the perspectives of other organisations
- increase sensitivity to experiences of particular client groups
- identify particular advice needs
- reach client groups that might not otherwise access advice.

For example, working with a charity that specialises in housing problems can help provide a better service to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Better access: promoting equality and diversity

Working with equalities organisations helps to deliver and develop services to groups likely to suffer discrimination. For example, working with disabled people's groups can help to ensure that access improvements work well in practice as well as meeting legal requirements.

It is important to work with informal community and user groups as well as more formal and high profile organisations. For example, you can enhance services to people with

mental health problems or black and minority ethnic (BME) groups by engaging with local user groups as well as statutory services and national charities.

A wide range of partners can be really valuable here. For example, working with the police is important in combating racial harassment and violence against women and lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Increased resources

A collaborative approach can make better use of existing resources and attract new money.

Resources can be used more efficiently and effectively where they are used collaboratively. Different organisations can often deliver services more effectively or efficiently by combining their particular strengths. For example, a group of bureaux within a county could enhance their overall impact by combining publicity work or website development.

Economies of scale can enable organisations to do things jointly that would not be viable otherwise – such as employ a recruitment officer, or access funds where funding is restricted to larger projects.

Additional resources may be gained for existing and new services. Partnerships can be particularly attractive to funders where they can result in a more holistic service to clients.

Better planning

Partnership and networking, like other activities, should be part of the bureau's business and development plan. This should be a two-way process.

Networking and collaborative working should help bureaux to decide their development priorities. Greater awareness of and contact with other organisations in the community should result in greater awareness of advice needs.

Collaboration can also help to implement development plans. Identify objectives that lend themselves to joint working and look for partners to help you achieve them.

Government and public expectations

There is a widespread view that voluntary organisations should work together (or merge) where their activities overlap. Concern about duplication and inefficiency among charities is shared by the Charity Commission. For more information see "The wider picture" on the NCVO website.

Government policy favours closer working across all sectors in the delivery of public services. This is reflected in numerous programmes and units (see for example the websites of the Office of the Third Sector and the Futurebuilders fund) and increasing numbers of formal partnership structures, such as local strategic partnerships, Consumer Support Networks, local area agreements and crime and disorder reduction partnerships.

Areas of activity for collaboration

There are many areas of activity where collaboration can bring benefits. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations has identified three broad areas for collaboration. These are "charitable activities" (which for the Citizens Advice service means advice services and social policy), "support activities" and "strategic activities".

Advice services

Close co-operation can mean a better, more "joined-up" service for clients with complex and multiple problems, improving both quality of advice and accessibility and reducing the risk of "referral fatigue" caused by people being passed from one organisation to another without having their needs met.

Consider strengthening links with non-CAB organisations that you refer to or receive referrals from. Establish referral protocols and procedures. There may be scope for developing outreach services based in the premises of partner organisations

Partnership can be used to develop not only one-to-one advice but also information for groups, take-up campaigns, financial literacy work etc.

Social policy

You can have a greater impact on local social policy issues by working with other organisations, by gaining a fuller insight into issues and by identifying new areas for action. The case for policy or practice change is likely to have more impact when it is being put forward by two or more organisations.

Ensure that you include adequate resources for social policy work when making joint funding bids. Be aware that other organisations may not readily recognise the term "social policy" as it is used in the Citizens Advice service. Terms like "campaigning for change" or "learning from experience" may be useful in building a shared understanding.

Partnerships with academic institutions can create opportunities for research, bringing in valuable expertise such as knowledge of existing research, research design and ethical approval procedures. Academic institutions may also have staff or student resources that can be tapped for interviewing, data analysis etc.

Ensure that you establish “clearance” procedures - agree on which person in each organisation will be responsible for policy statements made on behalf of the partnership. Be aware that agreeing a joint policy line can sometimes be contentious and take some time.

Support activities

These are activities where partnership mainly benefits the partners themselves (though there should always be some ultimate benefit for service users and/or the wider community). Sharing payroll administration to reduce costs is an example.

Bureaux may work together to enhance support services – an example would be creating a county recruitment and training post. Sometimes the way forward is to merge. However, that may not always be appropriate (e.g. where bureaux want to deal jointly with a county council but retain their local identity to maximise district council funding), so some kind of collaborative mechanism may be required.

With other organisations, likely areas for collaboration might include sharing premises, and aspects of staff training.

Strategic activities

Strategic activities include working together to influence the context in which bureaux and/or other voluntary organisations operate, e.g. government funding regimes or consultation procedures - agreeing protocols, compacts etc.

This may be done at national level through various organisations (for example NCVO and Advice Services Alliance). More locally, you can work through networks such as rural community councils, most of which belong to Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) and local voluntary and community infrastructure bodies (see National Association for Voluntary and Community Action).

In Wales, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (see WCVA) works with the Welsh Assembly Government through the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council (see VSPC).

Evolving collaboration

Often, different aspects of collaboration will overlap (e.g. social policy and strategic activities). Groups may also evolve. For example, a relatively informal network such as a county CAB forum, set up perhaps to exchange information and examples of good practice, may give way to a formal consortium to negotiate funding and manage a joint service delivery project (see Partnership: developing collaborative working).

Useful links, 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, Directory of Social Change http://www.dsc.org.uk/

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