

Working in Partnership – Some Tips to consider

Working in Partnership with other organisations to deliver projects and services is an option being increasingly considered in the Public Sector. This approach can save money and improve consistency and quality of provision of services and other benefits to citizens; it can also present challenges as organisations with different cultures, processes, expectations and political drivers need to compromise to accommodate each other's priorities. The tips below are provided to help you to address some specific challenges of working in partnership with other organisations:

1. Agree and document Clear Objectives

Clear objectives are essential to ensure that all stakeholders agree what you are collectively trying to achieve. Clear objectives and measurable outcomes/ benefits are the foundation for measuring success.

Different organisations will have different organisational aims, priorities and cultures, these differences make the agreement of clear and unambiguous objectives absolutely essential, and potentially difficult to achieve. For example; a fire and rescue service, a local authority, a health trust, a regional partnership or a third sector organisation will see the world in very different ways and have very different drivers. Even organisations of the same type will have differences. It is very important to understand these differences and to agree which priorities can be realised and which cannot.

Tips to get this right:

People tend to overestimate the extent to which they agree, don't assume that after a positive initial meeting you are all on the same page. You should have a well prepared, facilitated and structured face to face discussion with all parties to generate a shared project vision and a set of clear objectives.

Don't avoid any difficult discussions that may be required to resolve differences and arrive at clear agreed objectives; it is better to disagree with one another up front in order to reach a consensus that you can all support as the project progresses and challenges arise.

2. Agree and document and Roles, Responsibilities and Accountability of each organisation and/ or individual in the partnership

It is essential to be clear about who is responsible for what in a partnership. A lack of clarity may lead to essential activities being overlooked, and potentially cause the project to fail.

You will also need to ensure that the partners agree who is accountable for the project (or parts of the project) and who will carry the risk in the event of a problem or project failure. Different organisations will have different approaches and appetite for taking and managing risk, these differences will need to be discussed and overcome.

Depending on the nature of the partnership you should consider the need for Service Level Agreements/ Legal Contracts/ Memorandum of Understanding or other similar agreements. The Authority's legal department will be able to advise you on this.

3. Agree Governance arrangements for the project

See A Guide to Effective Governance for information on some key principles of good governance. In addition to the principles contained within that guidance document you should give consideration to the following in a partnership arrangement:

a. Membership & Terms of Reference for the Project Board

In a typical project the Project Board membership would include the Senior Responsible Owner, the Project Delivery Representative (to represent those who will be delivering the project) and the User Representative (to represent the end beneficiary of the project). In a partnership this arrangement may need to be expanded to include representatives of the partner organisations. To avoid meetings becoming too large and unmanageable membership should be kept to the minimum number who are needed, and the purpose of the group must be clearly documented in a Terms of Reference document.

b. Management Processes, reporting and communication

It is important to think carefully about what reporting approach will be used in a partnership arrangement. Will the approach of one partner be adopted? If so, it is important to be sure that the system is really understood by those completing reports and those receiving them. It may be better to co-design a new approach that meets the requirements of the Project Board, all partners and funding bodies. It is also essential to understand that different organisations have different approaches to decision making and authority to make those decisions. For example, meeting cycles and decision making speeds may differ, particularly if politicians as well as officers must take decisions.

Communication becomes more important and challenging in a partnership project. There will be many important stakeholders who are not included in the Project Board meetings so it is vital to ensure that they are kept up to date. For example, a single IT or HR lead may be on the Board and if part of their role is to keep their counterparts in other organisations engaged then this role must be made clear.

You may consider using a cloud based or shared electronic workspace which is accessible to all parties, this can reduce the risk that information is "hidden" within one organisation.

4. Managing Relationships

Developing and managing positive working relationships will be important to the success of a partnership. Discussing and setting clear objectives, roles and responsibilities (as above)

will provide a foundation for strong working relationships. Positive, accurate and appropriate communication will also be vital to the success of the partnership.

It is not unheard of for disagreements to occur and relations to break down through the course of a project. Disagreements need to be confronted constructively and resolved thoroughly when they arise, and should not be avoided or ignored. Partners need to respect the differences between them and work together to resolve any issues that arise.