



*From policy to practice: what does a successful partnership look like?*

## **Background Paper for an Open Agenda Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2006**

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### **Welcome**

I'm delighted to welcome you to this confidential ideas-building event. The purpose of this event is to work through ideas openly and in sufficient depth for us to feel that we can move on from a notion that partnerships are 'a good thing' in themselves to an understanding of when and how they can provide a real competitive edge.

Given the additional time and workload involved, there have to be real and significant tangible benefits to working in partnership. From the perspective of policy makers, planners and funders, benefits are perhaps relatively easy to identify. Partnerships enable diversity without the administrative burden of dealing with a large number of contracts. They can also provide cohesion in the range of provision available and pricing policies, best value and quality, and clear points of contact and routeways for learners, employers and communities.

However, from the perspective of organisations, especially larger ones, these benefits don't always present a compelling business case for working in partnership! Perhaps the most compelling argument is that this is increasingly what public policy, planning and funding bodies want – and they hold the purse strings! The White Papers over the last couple of years, and with the Framework for Excellence and Leitch Report in our sights are all prodding providers in the direction of partnerships.

Our goal is to identify how providers can use this policy and planning thrust in the direction of partnerships in ways that will **add value** to their organisations. We want to explore whether there is real competitive advantage to working in partnership, and these advantages are there for the taking whether or not there are policy pulls to move in this direction. Or is it more about survival – given that this is the direction the Government and its Departments and Agencies want to see providers move towards. We also want to sharpen up the policies, guidance and infrastructure planners and contractors need to have in place **to support rather than hinder the growth** of partnership working.

In our discussions there are bound to be some very strong opinions expressed, but I hope that this won't stop us at least considering others' viewpoints. We ask everyone joining the event to be prepared to be as open minded as possible, and to accept that we are engaging in areas of debate in which there is **no one solution** and that **no one can be certain of the best way ahead**.

An important aspect of this event will be to keep our goal in mind – while we're breaking ground in such rich terrain. It will be very easy to stray into discussions that are important in their own right and **do** relate to partnership working but don't help us to break new ground. I hope you feel that your investment in time in this event is about weighing up the possibilities of the business opportunities for

partnerships, what your organisation would want to gain from specific opportunities and the 'non-negotiables' that would need to be understood and agreed for a partnership to work effectively.

Those of you who have worked with Open Agenda before also know that we don't go for set speeches or pre-arranged working groups. However good, opening speeches they encourage the 'us and them' habit, with one or two people being expected to produce all the answers, and the rest of us lobbing in questions and indulging in the sport of picking holes in their arguments! We want to begin this event as we mean to continue – with a fast flowing informal discussion, in which we **all feel that we have a responsibility to put forward ideas** and, in doing so, **take risks** in breaking new ground.

This approach reflects the aim of St. George's House to create an atmosphere of trust in which well-informed people can bring fresh thinking to key issues that will have impact on our future. The House is **NOT** the sort of place where delegates with badges listen to speeches. It **IS** a place where free spirits can try out new ideas without fearing the consequences.

We will be welcoming a number of you to St. George's House for the first time, which is why we'd like to forewarn those booked into the House that when you arrive, you will find that you are not offered a key to your room.

This is quite intentional, and is because the Dean, Canons and Warden welcome you to the House, as their home.

We hope that you'll feel that you can enter into the spirit of the place as a safe and welcoming environment, and that the experience will be both creative and enjoyable. I very much look forward to welcoming you to St George's House on 2<sup>nd</sup> November.

## **Key Timings and Contact Numbers**

On pages 3 – 4 are outlined our key timings for the two days. If anyone needs to contact you urgently whilst you're attending the event, the 'phone number for St. George's House is **01753 848848** and the fax number is **01753 848849**. The report of the event will be circulated to you by 17<sup>th</sup> November.

When you arrive, you will find your name badge on a table in the Patricia Hotung Room, on the ground floor of St. George's House. We are just putting first names on badges to make it easier to see each other's names, and also to spare us what can be the 'creeping death' of introductions.

We are very keen to create an informal atmosphere during our time together, and we have found that making a point of using each other's names – instead of saying "*I agree or disagree with the person over there, who's name I can't remember!*" really does help people to relax and spark creative discussion. Please don't think we're being over familiar!

## Agenda

<b>Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> November from 11.30 am onwards</b>	Arrival at St. George's House
<b>12.15 pm</b>	Light lunch, soup and sandwiches
<b>1.30 pm prompt</b>	<p><b>Opening Session</b> We'll begin by confirming our goals for this event and agreeing our ground rules for discussions. We'll then spend a few minutes sharpening up what we mean (and don't mean) by working in partnership – so we're confident that we're all sharing a common language and understanding!</p> <p>We then want to move on to ask the big question 'why'? When are there real advantages for organisations to work in partnership rather than go it alone?</p> <p>At this stage, we want to look at the advantages of partnership working from the perspective of providers, learners and employers. In particular, we want to test out whether there would be a strong business case for partnership working without any policy push to do so</p> <p>Once we've got a feel for how partnership working can add value and give providers a competitive edge, we want to move on to identify what we feel are the non-negotiable, essential elements that need to be in place for any partnership to be successful</p>
<b>3.15 pm</b>	Short break
<b>3.30 – 4.50 pm</b>	<b>Second session</b> Drawing on our earlier discussions, we will begin to identify key areas of work where partnerships can add value in specific and tangible ways
<b>5.15 – 6.00 pm</b>	Sung Evensong in St. George's Chapel for those who would like to attend.
<b>6.00 pm sharp</b>	<p><b>Third session</b> In this session we will have the opportunity in 'ideas-building' groups to consider, in some depth, areas of activity where working in partnership could give real advantage to organisations. We will configure the groups around specific areas of activity and ask them to consider three key questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the advantages for an organisation of working in partnership rather than going it alone with regard to a specific activity?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What might be the internal obstacles that need to be overcome, and how could this be done?</li> <li>• What policies, guidance and structures do planning and funding bodies need to have in place to support this type of partnership working?</li> </ul>
7.45 pm	Pre-dinner drinks
8.10 pm	Dinner in St George's House Dining Room
9.45 pm	Private Tour of the Chapel led by Andrew Carter, Warden of St. George's
<b>Friday, 3<sup>rd</sup> November</b> 9.15 am	<p><b>Fourth session</b> Drawing on the models developed the previous evening, we'll identify <b>common</b> internal and external barriers that can act as show stoppers in making these opportunities happen</p> <p>We then want to sharpen up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the actions we can take ourselves to remove barriers, and</li> <li>• ways of influencing others to remove barriers or stop behaving in ways that undermine or damage partnership working</li> </ul>
10.45	Short break
11.00am	<p><b>Final session</b> Before ending we want to explore how we can maximise impact in moving policy into practice. In particular, we want to share:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• any actions our discussions have prompted you to consider taking to improve your organisation's competitive edge (for example, working in partnerships, re-configuring arrangements, changing behaviours and preconceptions);</li> <li>• how we can influence policy makers, planners and funders to support partnership working, and</li> <li>• what for you personally has been the most important thing that you've gained from participating in this event.</li> </ul>
No later than 12.20 pm	End of the event and lunch

## **We determine the agenda**

One of the key principles of Open Agenda events is that we determine the agenda as we go, in order to get the most from our time together. This means that, at any stage of our discussions, we can change the structure of a session, if we feel that it will help us achieve stronger outputs from the event. I say this, with one important proviso.

We find that groups go away far more satisfied with what we have accomplished by the end of an event, if we start off with a commitment to achieving **as much clarity as possible** in our discussions, and really push ourselves in **breaking new ground** and **moving ideas forward**.

During the sessions on Thursday afternoon we want to consider the question 'why partnerships'? I must say that this not an academic nor navel-gazing question! It's one that that I feel (and I hope you do too) that needs to be asked up front so that we share the same starting place for our discussions: a shared understanding of the case for partnerships and the strength of this case for different providers.

During our evening session we'll have an opportunity to work up in some depth partnership activities that you are interested in exploring. The event has been designed to try and maximise the return on your investment in participating. With this in mind, our intent for this evening session is to provide you with a confidential and informal space to work through ideas high on your list of priorities with like-minded people.

Once we've had an opportunity to sharpen up what we want from working in partnership (as distinct from working within a network or sub-contracting), we will turn our attention to what we need to do tackle internal barriers and the policies and behaviours of policy makers, planners and funders likely to undermine or hinder the progress of partnership working.

By the end of the event our goal is to have given every participant at least one idea or insight that will result in them doing something new, doing something differently or stopping doing something as a result of discussions.

## **Working in idea-generating groups**

As an important part of the ideas-building process, we will break into '**idea-generating**' groups during the event to tackle key questions raised through our discussions.

The purpose of these groups is to focus on sharpening up the issues and developing ideas that we want to pick up and run with. Please use your time in groups to sound out your ideas and do **not** be tempted into trying to develop a group view.

We use these groups because it gives everyone an opportunity to think through different points of view and have their say, when this would be impossible as one large group because of time constraints. As a result, a number of different – even opposing – ideas can emerge from small group discussions.

This is what we're after: ideas and not a group view. For those who haven't been in on a Windsor event before, it's worth saying that it really helps us to leave the groups behind, if you make a point of **not** sitting with members of your group afterwards, and agree to outlaw the phrases "we think" or "my group thought that".

"We think" makes it difficult for group members to change their minds without feeling disloyal to their group. Also, "we think" has more authority than "I think" and, completely unintentionally, can make it less easy for others to challenge or discard ideas.

We may also break into groups for longer periods of time to '**build ideas**'. In this instance, it is more likely (but not certain!) that there will be agreement amongst members of the group.

What we ask is that when you come to share your thinking with the rest of us, you **just give us the idea**. Please don't feel you need to share the journey your group has travelled in developing this idea! If we are not clear about its rationale, we can always ask questions.

## Going with the flow

We need to manage our time together carefully as one large group, if we're going to develop the momentum we need to move our discussions forward.

Developing ideas needs careful listening. Let's try and stick to the rule that when someone comes in on the discussion, they **follow on** from what the person before them has said, before moving on and starting a fresh train of thought. Please also resist the temptation of making more than one point! As soon as someone says "*I'd just like to make two or three points at this stage in our discussions*" the ideas stop flowing, as we are drawn to recap on what's gone before.

Of course, when we're together as one large group we want **as many people as possible to participate**: brainstorming is not a spectator event! So I'll try and ensure that the more confident, natural talkers amongst us don't squeeze others out.

## Meeting everyone's expectations

I promise we will be arriving at Windsor with very different views about what should be our key priorities for discussion at this event. The whole agenda around partnerships is up there at there at the top where passions and frustrations run high! There are also enormous pressures on some of us to move from policy to practice in a short space of time. This is why we should give ourselves some time early on to work through **as a group** what we mean by partnership working and the essential elements for its success, before moving on to our personal priority areas for partnership development.

Developing ideas is always a messy process, especially during the opening stages! It can be frustrating for those who like to focus quickly on what they feel is **the** key issue that needs to be tackled, and want

to get on with sorting it out. The difficulty with this approach is that one person's key issue is another's back burner!

So, I would like to ask that we all try to be as relaxed as possible in the opening session, and let as many as possible have their say, so that we can build up a head of steam **as a group** in identifying the issues we want to explore in greater depth.

### **Confidential and informal**

Finally, I would like to stress that this event is not a conference. It is an opportunity for confidential discussion about difficult and often sensitive issues. We want you to feel that you can speak openly without any fear that what you say will be repeated outside of the Vicars' Hall in St. George's House.

Both Open Agenda and St. George's House feel that there are too few opportunities for people to work in this way. As a consequence, misunderstanding and mistrust can easily fester.

So our intent is to design events that encourage informality and open speaking. You may not always agree with what someone is saying, but you should always be confident that you are hearing what they believe to be true.

For this to work we need to foster informality. This is why we've ditched 'round robins' of introductions, and have first name badges instead.

We also avoid opening presentations outlining the context of our discussions and the key issues we want to tackle. However good opening presentations, they set up a 'them and us' dynamic, with the people giving the presentations having to adopt a position and then feeling they have to defend it throughout the event.

From the very outset, we want to feel that we are all responsible for developing the ideas that emerge from the event, and 'free spirits' in our discussions. This means that we shouldn't feel that we have any duty to represent a particular policy or organisational line – just our own beliefs, and that we are **ready to shift those** if the discussions persuade us to do so.

Overleaf are the Conventions of St. George's House for consultations and brainstorming events held here at Windsor Castle. At the beginning of the event, I will ask you if you are happy to adopt them as ground rules for our discussions.

I very much hope that you'll be open to giving them a go, as experience has shown that their application strengthens a culture of confidentiality, trust and informality, and can make an enormous difference to both the quality of debate and the ideas that emerge.

## St. George's House Conventions

### 1. *Please be open to changing your mind*

We hope that during your time at the House you will see yourself as a “free spirit”, open to the possibility that the opinions you hold most dearly, on the topic under discussion, might actually be wrong. Once we each take that step, we find that it is much easier to persuade others to question their own assumptions, as well.

### 2. *Please do not attribute remarks to individuals after the event*

At all House events, we ask groups to agree at the outset that comments made in plenary or small group sessions will not be attributed to individuals afterwards. We have a firm convention that people should not be quoted without their permission, and commend this to you most strongly.

### 3. *Please take risks with ideas*

The most successful Consultations at the House have been those where individuals feel sufficiently relaxed, and supported by others, to be able to take risks with ideas. This requires a high degree of trust among a group, and we hope that from the outset you will seek to build that trust.

### 4. *Please try and avoid any false consensus*

We hope that if you find a consensus emerging in your discussions, you will check to ensure that it is soundly based. It can sometimes be very difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to agree with their peers, and we hope that healthy debate will not be stifled by a false consensus.

### 5. *Please use “plain English”*

At just about every event, one of the biggest struggles is with the weight of technical language that some speakers tend to use, and others leave unchallenged for fear of displaying ignorance. We ask **everyone** joining a Consultation at the House to avoid using acronyms, and to be ready to intervene in debate to ask colleagues to use “plain English”.

*Andrew Carter*

Warden of St. George's House