



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

Main Ideas from an Open Agenda Ideas-Building Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 2nd – 3rd November 2006

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The purpose of this paper is to capture the main ideas that emerged from this 24 hour event held at St. George's House, Windsor Castle. It has not been written as a report for general reading, but as an aide memoir for those who participated in the event.

As such, it does not provide the 'story' of our discussions but the insights and ideas they sparked. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

Our starting point was to question whether "*partnerships would be worth the trouble*" without the strong drive from Government to create closer working arrangements (loosely labelled partnerships) between Government Departments, Agencies and those delivering publicly funded services. The answer was a strong affirmative – "*when it feels right*" for the organisations involved.

There is no single blueprint for when and how partnerships should develop. But there are a set of common factors that contribute to the success of a partnership. Whilst some felt that the complete set of factors do not need to be 'givens' or essential for partnerships to succeed, it was widely recognised that they can act as a valuable checklist for organisations exploring the possibilities of working in partnership. The factors are summarised on pages 6 – 7 in the form of a checklist and tool for tackling difficult issues when exploring partnership possibilities.

As the focus for this event was on how can we make partnerships work, our intent was to ensure that everyone involved left with something tangible: an idea or insight that will enable them to solve a difficult issue, find a cost effective solution, or drive up quality.

What participants wanted was to explore the idea of working in partnership for different reasons and how to move their organisations into "*the right mindset*" for working in partnership. Reflecting the range of priorities and reasons in which partnerships could provide solutions, our key insights and ideas are summarised under the following headings:

- Delivery (pages 1 – 2)
- Multi-agency working (pages 2 – 3)
- Policy, funding and regulatory bodies: how they can support the policy drive for collaborative working (pages 3 – 4)
- Organisational leadership: working from within (pages 4 – 5).

IDEAS & INSIGHTS

Delivery A key priority for participants was to improve aspects of their delivery of work-based learning. Issues included:

- "*the availability of staff able to deliver what we need at a price we can afford*"
- "*penetration of the market, particularly amongst small and medium-sized enterprises*"

- *"lack of infrastructure for working directly with employers"*

PROPOSED WAYS FORWARD

There is real scope for organisations (either on their own or in partnership with others) to provide *"a pick and mix range"* of services for providers to choose from to resolve the specific issues with which they're grappling.

Services should include consultancy and training for providers *"to grow their own"* staff, as well as the opportunity for out-sourcing areas of work. The type of services that we had in mind included:

- Providing *"high quality employer leads/introductions"* (maximising the scope for marrying up with other contracts, such as those with Jobcentre Plus, LSC);
- Designing a joined up or *"holistic approach to meeting employers' training needs"* with an element of full cost recovery;
- Providing *"the right image"* that is attractive to employers and dispels myths about the shortcomings of the further education sector;
- Looking ahead to the second tendering round for Train to Gain by providing *"a brokering service/dating agency for organisations wishing to find partners"*¹;
- Providing a pool of skilled trainers and assessors able to deliver at short notice;
- Providing training for work-based trainers and assessors (*"perhaps targeted on older workers"* in specific industries, such as construction, where there is an unmet demand for work-based trainers and assessors).
- Sharing premises *"modelled on the same basis as high quality successful Department stores"* that provide a market outlet for a wide range of products that meet the 'host' organisation's quality standards, including service standards.

This is by no means an exhaustive list – but an outline of the types of services that for participants at the event pushed the right buttons for potential partnership working.

Multi-agency working This is a key priority for both planners, funders and those delivering services, particularly with regard to policies and strategies aimed at helping those who are most excluded in society, and those which **mainstream bodies and providers** find hardest to reach.

The sort of groups we had in mind included:

- Offenders and ex-offenders

¹ The Quality Improvement Agency is developing a web-based forum which will enable providers to find the consultancy and/or services they are considering outsourcing. The idea is that this service will be self-regulated through customer feedback and ratings. The aim is to launch this service by April 2007.

- Young people not in employment, education or training

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that lies in the path of helping people overcome multiple barriers to move into work is that there is *"no single organisation staying with them throughout their journey."* The approach is one of *"pass the parcel."* The importance of sticking with an individual on their journey was widely recognised, with the understanding that this support *"should not encourage long-term dependency."*

The difficulty is that this type of support falls outside most organisations' remits (with the exception of many in the voluntary sector). Understandably, what an organisation wants to achieve are its targets. At best an organisation's success is **part** of what individuals' with multiple barriers need, but a long way off the complete package of support required.

PROPOSED WAYS FORWARD

- Agencies and those delivering specific interventions to help those with multiple barriers to become healthy, working, housed and valued members of communities should share knowledge of their respective remits and targets (and accountability systems) so they *"understand each other's agendas and priorities."* It was **not** recommended that partnerships attempt to share ownership of targets, merely understanding.
- Seedcorn funding (through European Social Funding or other discretionary pots) should be used to testbed an approach in which **personal** mentors/support workers are given caseloads of clients who need support throughout 'their journey'. Care needs to be taken to ensure that caseloads are not so large that they prevent mentors from providing the personal support needed, nor too small to be prohibitively expensive to sustain.

This approach should be monitored so that Agencies and providers can *"evaluate its impact in boosting the achievement of targets and value for money"*, compared with the mainstream working practice. If evaluation proves this approach to be more effective than organisations working without mentors, organisations should explore the business case of jointly funding this approach through mainstream budgets.

Policy, funding and regulatory bodies: how they can support the policy drive for collaborative working While there is no doubt that Government Departments and Agencies want to increase collaborative working amongst themselves and their providers, they often are not geared up sufficiently to offer the practical support that will encourage this to happen.

For example, guidance, contracting and audit requirements for providers are often exactly the same as for single organisations. At worst, this can send out a message to providers that *"they not really serious about preferring to work with partnerships: its just PR!"* At best, contracts and systems are not fit for purpose for partnerships.

PROPOSED WAYS FORWARD

- When something is not fit for purpose *"offer a solution"*, rather than pointing out why a contract, audit requirement or whatever is not appropriate when applied to a partnership or other type of collaborative arrangement.

The solution should be as - or more - robust than the original approach. After all, systems are set up to ensure accountability and those responsible for them are paid to do just that, and not take risks in doing things differently. The way forward, therefore, must be to suggest an alternative approach that is fit for purpose and, at the same time, ensures the same or an even higher level of accountability than was in place before.

Of course, this approach must be managed with tact! Those who are accountable do need to be persuaded that they can take ownership of the solutions put forward, and that they will suffer no loss of authority in doing so.

- One practical example of helping Agencies to support partnerships more effectively is in the redesign of contracts so that they apply specifically to partnerships. Following this event, a group of participants² were committed to working together to do this – ahead of the second tendering round for Train to Gain. The idea is not to start with a blank sheet but to build upon and adapt a partnership contract that has been drawn up and successfully applied already in a region. Following this, the next task will be to review audit requirements and quality processes so that they ensure the accountability of and quality of partnerships in ways that recognises the difference of approach that is needed to that applied to single organisations.

Organisational leadership: working from within For partnerships to work effectively on an operational level, there needs to be 'buy in' from those working within organisations. This requires *"strong and visible leadership"*. Also, staff need to understand what this means for them as individuals: how the content, the way that they work and working behaviours may need to change.

It is about changing *"mind sets"*, and encouraging organisations to demonstrate the high value they place on collaborative working, both internally and externally.

PROPOSED WAYS FORWARD

- An exercise to raise people's awareness about how we and others can feel working together was demonstrated to great effect.

Taking around 15 minutes or so, the object of the exercise is to increase understanding of how the way in which we communicate and act can have an adverse effect on collaborative or team working.

² The names and contact details of this group are included at the end of this Paper. If you wish to join the group, please contact Steve Glasscock by email for further details.

We were asked to consider an occasion when we had felt let down by a colleague. We were then asked to explain to the person next to us why we felt let down, who we should approach to resolve the situation, and work through how we would broach the difficult things that need to be said, and how it could be said without anyone feeling that they were under attack or that we were 'snitching' behind their backs.

Really tricky stuff – and it has to be said a little bit too 'touchy feely' for a few. However, we all recognised the massive impact this short simple exercise can have. It provides people with fresh insights on:

- how our behaviour (the way we do or don't do things) can affect people in ways we don't realise
- how peoples' behaviour is unlikely to change unless their attention is drawn to it
- how this needs to be done in a way that helps them understand the damage that they're doing without feeling under attack.

The relevance and importance of these insights to working in partnerships was plain to all.

- An organisational staff development plan should be developed and carried out over, say, a six month period to change mindsets about what working in partnerships is all about, and identify those within the staff group who are keen to lead the organisation in developing partnership working. An outline of the challenges to be faced (where the mind set of staff might be now), and the triggers for change that should included in a development programme, are outlined below.

Challenges (possible mind set of staff)	Triggers for change (benefits of partnership working)
<i>Disillusioned</i>	<i>Avoid offering another initiative</i>
<i>Initiative overload</i>	<i>Acknowledge the causes of disillusionment</i>
<i>What's in it for us?</i>	<i>Focus on making the job easier</i>
<i>Why bother to change?</i>	<i>Start with internal partnership working</i>
<i>No time for this</i>	<i>Hold interactive sessions</i>
<i>Where's the real commitment?</i>	<i>Spot partnership talent</i>
	<i>Involve partnership talent</i>
	<i>Give time for meetings and give visible support and commitment to partnerships</i>
	<i>Listen to and work through new ideas and solutions</i>
	<i>Revise policies [in the light of partnership working]</i>
	<i>Publish solutions</i>
	<i>Publicise successes</i>

Checklist for Partnership Working

This checklist can be used in a number of ways. It could be a useful tool during initial discussions about a partnership to help put on the table issues that are sometimes difficult to raise and discuss, especially if the potential partner is 'new' to your organisation. It could also be used to help prompt areas of discussion that you want to cover, or as a checklist to help pinpoint why you may feel uneasy about a prospective partner or, alternatively, why they press all the right buttons.

- 1. The extra value** *"Every partnership needs to gain something that would not be possible for an organisation working on it own."* What's the point of this partnership? What do we want to gain from it: improved quality, economies of scale, expertise, enhanced reputation, new markets? The extra value that is sought and how it will be measured needs to be identified and agreed.
- 2. Common language** This may seem obvious but interpretations of partnership, collaborative working, equity, outsourcing, commissioning vary widely. You need to feel that you share a common meaning about the key words that describe the working relationship that you're looking for.
- 3. Chemistry** Is it there? There are tangible ways that this can be assessed. Do your organisations *"share the same ethics and values?"* Is there a sense of common purpose and 'like minds'? Do you enjoy the idea of working together? Is there a creative spark, and *"a sense of excitement and shared investment (risk and reward)"* about the proposed joint venture?
- 4. Reputation** What do you know or may have heard about this organisation? Is there any hearsay or skeletons in the cupboard that you feel should be discussed? What about referees, testimonials from organisations that they have worked with before, financial standing, quality standard and inspection achievements and reports? If it is a new organisation, what **don't** you want it do to damage your organisation's reputation?
- 5. Roles and responsibilities** There needs to be clearly defined roles, responsibilities and areas and lines of accountability. As they say: 'the devil is in the detail'. The details need to be worked through to ensure that there is a fully shared understanding by all those who are going to be involved in the operation of the partnership. The objective is to agree *"an open, transparent and robust working relationship"*, in which everyone involved feels comfortable about their respective roles and responsibilities, and the shared risks and rewards.

6. **Long or short term?** Partnerships often occur because of a business opportunity, for example an invitation to tender. The expectations of partners need to be clear from the outset: is this a quick 'marriage of convenience' or are there expectations that this is likely to grow into a longer-term business relationship? Of course there are no guarantees about what the future might hold, but some sense of the scope of the partnership is important in "*determining how much energy should be placed in making it work effectively.*"

7. **Dependability** It is important that partners discuss what their expectations are of each other and the parameters of their relationship to minimise the risk of "*shocks or the feeling of being stitched up.*" This is more than sharing common values and purpose. It is about how partners expect each other to behave. This will include their approach to identifying and securing new business opportunities, especially those which partners might find themselves in competition with each other, as well as the governance and operation of the partnership. A great deal of upset can be avoided by discussing these difficult issues up front, rather than reacting to the behaviour of a partner if they act in a way that creates tensions.

Endnote

Drawing on participants' feedback, all felt that they had gained tangible benefits from joining the event. As well ideas that people felt that they could take away, develop and make happen, a lot of value was also placed on the relationships that had been nurtured through discussing openly the difficulties of sometimes seeing the value of partnerships, let alone making them work!

On behalf of all that attended, I'd like to propose a vote of thanks to A4e for sponsoring this event, and providing us with a much needed opportunity to discuss informally and confidentially why and when partnerships can be of value.

Krycia Hudek, 13th November 2007

Participants

In alphabetical order of first names

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Steve will be in contact with members of this group to take forward this piece of work.