



Community **Change**



WORKING TOGETHER EFFECTIVELY

**A BASIC GUIDE TO PARTNERSHIP WORKING
OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Other Booklets in this series are: **Doing it Well, Getting it Done,**
Planning for the Future and **Making the Most of the Opportunities.**

Page 3	What we do?
Page 4	What do we mean by Partnership Working?
Page 5	What different Partnership Working Arrangements are available?
Page 6	What are the most important aspects to ensure that Partnership Working is successful?
Page 7	Why consider Partnership Working?
Page 8	What are some of the benefits and risks of Partnership Working?
Page 9	How can you identify a suitable partner?
Page 10	The key steps in preparation for Partnership Working
Page 12	Useful Contacts

For the purpose of this booklet the term 'group' applies to any community / voluntary group and / or organisation.

Relevant legal advice, which Community Change **does not** provide, must be taken into account before the establishment of any Partnership Working Arrangement.

WHAT WE DO?

Community Change provides facilitation, training and support to community groups and organisations on:



- Management Committee Skills and Development
- Good Governance
- Planning and Development including Action Planning and Strategic Planning
- Partnership Working
- Change Management
- Organisational Development
- Financial Management
- Community Involvement and Good Practice

We work with established community groups and those just starting out, at their own premises or in a neutral meeting place, across Northern Ireland. Using participative group work as our primary methodology, Community Change facilitators and trainers aim to develop the skills of participants by building on their experiences and expertise.

Our facilitation and training are designed in response to the unique interests and needs of the groups who contact us, within the time they have available, and at a pace suitable for their specific needs.

Community Change values equality and diversity and we are committed to delivering work through the core community development principles of:

- Self-Determination
- Social Justice
- Working and Learning Together
- Participation
- Sustainable Communities
- Reflective Practice

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PARTNERSHIP WORKING?

In the Community and Voluntary Sector the word 'Partnership' is often used inappropriately. It is too often used to describe all kinds of relationships between groups but 'Partnership' is in fact a legal term referring to specific types of working arrangement.

There are many different ways that groups can relate to and work with other groups including, but not only, Partnerships. The most appropriate term to refer to these is 'Partnership Working' and that is the focus of this booklet.

Partnership Working refers to a broad range of actions and can be easily defined as:

Two or more groups coming together to achieve a common purpose

This is a broad definition that incorporates formal and informal working arrangements and includes things such as Mergers, Networks, Joint Ventures, Memorandum of Understandings and Service Level Agreements.

Partnership Working is not necessarily a 50/50 division of power or financial responsibility but there is always some degree of spreading of power, control or influence. For example, some funders still require a single lead partner and this carries a greater degree of responsibility for that lead partner.

Partnership Working will be most successful if due time is given throughout the process to establish trust between potential partners, to discuss an agreed purpose and to clarify the most suitable working arrangement for your group's context.



WHAT DIFFERENT PARTNERSHIP WORKING ARRANGEMENTS ARE AVAILABLE?

Most groups operate on an autonomous basis, being responsible for all governance and the associated risks, but there are a wide variety of different Partnership Working Arrangements that can impact on this situation. Each Partnership Working Arrangement has different financial and legal implications and not all are appropriate for consideration by every group.

Some of the terms relating to Partnership Working and some of the different Partnership Working Arrangements that groups could investigate are:

Amalgamation

The joining of one or more groups into a single larger one, by a variety of different means.

Collaboration

Groups pool resources, assets and skills - formally or informally - to fulfil their purposes.

Consolidation

Two or more groups join together to create one new group.

Joint Venture/General Partnership

A contracted relationship with each group sharing the risk as well as the reward.

Limited Liability Partnership

A contracted relationship with risk being limited to the specific capital contribution of any group.

Limited Partnerships

A contracted relationship with risk and responsibility being held by one group and limited to the specific capital contribution of any other groups.

Memorandum of Understanding

A statement of commitment to work together on a particular issue and in a particular way.

Mergers

The assets of one or more groups are transferred to one other group and only this one group continues to exist.

Networking

Two or more groups linking together for the purpose of sharing information.

Service Level Agreements

An agreed contract to run a specific activity.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS TO ENSURE THAT PARTNERSHIP WORKING IS SUCCESSFUL?

S - Structure

Partnership Working will only be successful if due time is given to identify the most suitable management structure. This will include ascertaining a joint purpose and vision, and taking account of different working arrangements of the groups involved.

P - People

Staff and clients are very important to the success of any Partnership Working. It is important that they are made aware of any Partnership Working Arrangement and it is often beneficial to have them involved in the development of the working arrangements. As far as possible, any person or group that will be directly affected by any agreed Partnership Working should have their voice included in the decision process.

A - Awareness of Risk

Entering any working relationship with another group is not always a straightforward or easy task. There are potential risks - e.g. finance, competition between groups, termination, feelings of losing control - and while the benefits of entering a Partnership Working Arrangement will generally outweigh the risks, it is still important to be aware of them.

C - Communication

This is probably the most important aspect of entering any Partnership Working Arrangement with other groups but it also extends to clients, staff, and funders. Most of the potential risks can be overcome or avoided by open, honest communication and it is essential to ensure that whatever agreements are reached are fully understood. All participants in a Partnership Working Arrangement are not necessarily equal so it is essential that communication exists to ensure one participant doesn't manipulate or dominate.

E - Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation inform future development and it is important that all participating groups know not only how successful they have been, but also why they have been successful. It needs to be built into the process during and after reaching agreement on any Partnership Working Arrangement.

S - Strategic Thinking

Any planning needs to be strategic to ensure 'joint' vision, purpose and goals. It also needs to include a clear action plan, at least for the first year, to ensure that each participating group knows exactly what is required of them.

WHY CONSIDER PARTNERSHIP WORKING?

There are many reasons that groups are motivated to begin to consider Partnership Working, both positive and negative. There are also many benefits and risks to Partnership Working and, if it is to be successful, is not a simple or easy option.

Some of the main factors that motivate groups to begin Partnership Working are:

Circumstances

Groups recognise the mutual benefit of working more closely together or of amalgamating because this will enable them to more easily meet a common need or purpose.

Skills Gap

After identifying a need in a community or within the group, it is recognised that other skills are required to meet the need. Rather than retraining or taking on new employees, a group may be able to access the skills by entering a Partnership Working Arrangement with another group.

Financial Pressure

Many funders express more openness to supporting groups who either agree to work together or submit joint applications for funds. This can occur because groups recognise the advantage of working more closely together but it is often driven by the funders themselves.

Improved Reputation

Particularly in more informal Partnership Working Arrangements, groups can recognise the benefit of entering the arrangement. It may bring new, useful contacts or enable greater exposure and publicity of work that is already being undertaken by the group.



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING?

The wide varieties of Partnership Working Arrangements available to groups also carry different benefits and risks.

Some of these benefits can be generally summarised as:

- Bringing together new skills, ideas and resources
- Sharing resources, including financial, capital and human resources
- Open up additional funding sources
- Improvement of service delivery
- Increase in opportunities to deliver services
- Potential risks are shared among groups, rather than one group being entirely responsible
- Sharing of knowledge between experienced individuals and groups

The risks of working in partnership can be summarised as:

- Difficult to maintain motivation
- It can be difficult to manage programmes that are operated with other groups
- Accountability between partners may not always be clear
- There may be differences in group purpose or in ways of working and if these are not clarified then confusion and resentment may arise
- Decision making can sometimes be slow
- If one group is affected by bad publicity, this can affect all participants of the Partnership Working Arrangement

HOW CAN YOU IDENTIFY A SUITABLE PARTNER?

Many groups often consider Partnership Working to be something that sounds good, but is too difficult to implement in practice. In particular, it can often be difficult to know which other group or groups would be beneficial partners. However there is a relatively straightforward process for enabling this course of action:

1. Clarify priorities and needs

Identify the priorities and needs in your group's locality. It may be the case that your group is not charged with meeting all the identified priorities and needs but this will be helpful in identifying any gaps in provision as well as those with whom your group could enter a Partnership Working Arrangement.

2. Map relevant groups

What groups actually operate in your area in an effort to meet the priorities and needs? Include statutory and voluntary organisations.

3. Identify 'useful' groups

'Useful' in this context refers to any group that may help or support your group in meeting priorities and needs, but it also refers to any group that your own group may be able to help or support. This is a two way process and your group may have the experience and skills to help and support others in meeting the local priorities and needs.

4. Informal reflection on greater engagement with 'useful' groups

Once 'useful' groups are identified, arrange to meet with these groups to discuss a way forward. These discussions are informal and are not binding but will enable groups to reflect on some of the benefits and risks of entering a Partnership Working Arrangement.

5. Enter discussions to establish a Partnership Working Arrangement

If the informal discussions lead to groups being open to the possibility of entering a Partnership Working Arrangement then further and more detailed exploration will be required. This is a more formal, facilitated process and is explained in the next section.

THE KEY STEPS IN PREPARATION FOR PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Following the informal discussions suggested above, the step-by-step process detailed below will help clarify many of the potential issues of entering a Partnership Working Arrangement. This process requires external facilitation, principally because tackling some of the areas - e.g. staff and finances - can be quite difficult and emotive.

This process will enable groups to identify suitable formal and informal Partnership Working Arrangements and there may also be some elements of the process that require legal clarification. Relevant legal advice, which Community Change **does not** provide, must be taken into account before the establishment of any Partnership Working Arrangement.



Common Purpose
Groups identify reasons for working together and if there is a common purpose

Philosophical decision
Following the above reflections, each group's individual management committee/board needs to take a decision on whether or not to continue involvement in the process.

Proposed structure
This begins the very practical implications of any proposed Partnership Working e.g. Will it be a formal or informal arrangement? What is the best management structure to ensure that the Partnership Working is a success? What tasks will be carried out and what staff, premises, assets etc. will be required to fulfil these tasks?

Implications
Reflect on the implications for constitution, current staff, premises, assets, etc, if a group enters the proposed Partnership Working Arrangement. The legality of the proposed structure and the implications need to be clarified.

Practical decision
Now that the most suitable Partnership Working Arrangement and the implication of this have been identified, each group's individual management committee/board needs to take a decision on whether they wish to actually enter this arrangement. Relevant legal advice, which cannot be provided by Community Change, must be taken into account in any decision making.

ESTABLISH THE PARTNERSHIP



Community **Change**



USEFUL CONTACTS

Community Change

Tel: 028 9023 2587

www.communitychange-ni.org

NICVA

Tel: 028 9087 7777

www.nicva.org

Community Evaluation NI

Tel: 028 9024 8005

www.ceni.org

Rural Community Network

Tel: 028 8676 6670

www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org

Equality Commission NI

Tel: 028 90 500 600

www.equalityni.org

Supporting Communities NI

Tel: 028 2564 5676

www.supportingcommunitiesni.org

Labour Relations Agency

Tel: 028 9032 1442

www.lra.org.uk

Volunteer Development Agency

Tel: 028 9023 6100

www.volunteering-ni.org

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Tel: 020 7713 6161

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Workers Educational Association

Tel: 028 9032 9718

www.wea-ni.com

Other Useful Websites:

www.communityni.org

www.diycommitteeguide.org

www.managementhelp.org

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