Creating Stronger Partnerships:
A Guide for Local Authorities

Community Forest Trust

National Trust

WOODLAND TRUST

Contents

Introduction

Working in partnership with other individuals, groups or organisations with common goals can make us stronger. Together we can be more effective, more proactive and resilient than we are alone. And every partner benefits from the working relationship.

Partnership working can have slightly different connotations depending on the context. Here we're considering partnership working for local authorities, what that can look like and what benefits it can bring, specifically in terms of income, resources in kind and project delivery for departments within councils that are tasked with managing green spaces and parks.

Generating income in green spaces can be challenging for various reasons. Crucially outdoor spaces are usually accessible for free, and some may have conditions imposed that mean that possible income generating activities are simply not allowed. In addition, budget reductions over the years have meant that in some areas of the country outdoor spaces are potentially only being maintained to a very basic level, without the funding and resources needed to proactively manage and develop them.

Working together equips us with new tools that allow us to tackle these challenges in a new way. Focusing ambitions, strengthening income and resources, and achieving common goals by everyone bringing something unique and valuable to the table.

This guide, along with the Partnership Toolkit (Excel), provides a background to local authority partnerships. You'll find examples, best practice advice and a toolkit aiming to support practical partnership working by creating a framework to help achieve successful and effective partnerships.

Background

Many UK councils recognise the benefits of partnership working and have published policies and frameworks to manage working in this way. Generally, the policies are cross-directorate and apply to any and all directorates and departments within local authorities.

However, some councils have found partnership working difficult for a variety of different reasons. This can include bureaucracy levels creating a barrier for both internal and external stakeholders. This can be a particular challenge as many potential partners are based within the local community and don't have the resources or skills needed to set up and manage a partnership with a local authority.

A strategic approach is a key factor in areas where partnership working has been successful. This is where the style of working with external organisations is seen as integral to the delivery of the local authority's ambitions.

Background

Over the past 20 years Hull City Council have taken a strategic view of partnership working. They think long term with some high-level agreements designed to support them in delivering the vision for the city. They assert:

"The Council is committed to working to promote effective partnerships and sees this as the key to achieving the Council's mission:

'The Council will strive to secure a positive and sustainable future for the city. This will be achieved through decisive leadership, consultation, the development of inclusive and meaningful partnerships and the support of active and empowered communities.'

This commitment is demonstrated through our leadership and involvement in ONE HULL, our Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). Partnership is the key to Hull's future success, as well as to that of the wider region we support. We will build on our current partnerships and seek to develop new ones locally, nationally, and internationally, to bring greater benefits to our local community, as we work together to achieve our common aims to create and sustain a better quality of life for all our residents.

Examples from local authorities

Gateshead Council recently set out clear intentions in their 'Guide to Partnership Working' about how they will realise the benefits of partnerships and how local communities can benefit from the council working in this way, stating that:

"The Council will look to fulfil its role as a community leader in the development of partnerships in Gateshead and realise the benefits of partnership working. This includes greater coordination of service activities, the more efficient use of resources and the increasing involvement of the community in decision making."

Working in partnership can be particularly beneficial for local authority departments where budgets have been cut or limited. Also, where there is a need for community engagement or where the service directly impacts on the community. In the past, Oxfordshire County Council have created a strategy for partnership working. They are specific about their definition of a partnership and what benefits they feel it should be delivering. They describe a partnership as:

"An arrangement involving the Council and one or more other organisations, from any sector, who share the responsibility for agreeing and then delivering a set of actions and outcomes which improve the economic and/or social and/or environmental wellbeing of people living in, working in, or visiting Oxfordshire. Arrangements made by the Council with a third party to deliver one or more services on its behalf are contractual arrangements rather than partnerships."

What is partnership working?

There are various types of partnerships, and each local authority will have slightly different ways of assessing partnerships. However, the standard dictionary definition is:

"A process in which two or more organisations agree to work together to achieve a common goal, or a set of compatible goals, and do so in a way that they achieve more effective outcomes than by working separately."

The Government Audit Commission (now defunct) defined a local authority partnership as: "A joint working arrangement where partners are otherwise independent bodies, who agree to cooperate to achieve a common goal, through creating an organisational structure or process and agreed programme, and share information, risks and rewards."

What is partnership working?

Whilst in the various policies and guidance documents reviewed most councils agree on the need to **keep things as simple as possible** without too much bureaucracy, they also emphasise the **importance of clear governance and having a defined framework for partnership working**.

As much as this is to provide a level of **due diligence and risk management** for the council, this is also to ensure that the setup provides the external partners with some **level of reassurance and support.**

For green space and parks departments within local authorities, partnership working could deliver tangible benefits by saving money, delivering services that councils cannot deliver (for various reasons) and potentially generating income for the council. This document explores many other benefits, although it is important to remember that this style of working also requires resources. You should also consider the implications of partnership working and develop a framework to manage any relationships. This guide, along with the Partnership Toolkit (Excel), aims to provide best practice guidance on the different factors you need to consider when starting partnership working and how a relevant framework can be constructed. **Local authorities generally agree that an arrangement with one or more of following structures, forums and setups would constitute partnership working. It's recognised that these vehicles and agreements can help the process.**

What is partnership working?

Not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises that exist for the benefit of the community. These include:
- Charities, trusts and foundations
- Companies limited by guarantee
- Companies where the council is a shareholder
- Another local authority
- Another statutory body

However, some local authorities have differing views on whether arrangements such as commercial and/or service contracts and grant awards constitute partnerships. The local authorities which take a more strategic approach tend to favour considering these types of arrangements as partnerships with the view that a more holistic method is true partnership working and will usually result in additional benefits.

What is partnership working?

Statutory partnerships (those required or covered by law). These include:
- Crime and Disorder Act 1998
- Health and Social Care Act 2012
- Partnerships where the council acts as the accountable body for European, regional or national funding

The majority of local authorities agree on the need to minimise bureaucracy where possible and to not add layers of complexity where not required, whilst still ensuring a level of risk management and clear governance. Obviously there is a need for a legal governance arrangement and this format can vary depending on the level of risk and responsibilities of the partners. Sometimes there may be various elements to consider in the agreement, as there could be more than one way that the local authority is involved with the partner.

What is partnership working?

Strategic alliances these include such as :
- Formal forums
- Joint committees and joint ventures
- Voluntary arrangements
- Management committees
- Local Strategic Partnerships
- Strategic service delivery arrangements
- Strategic arrangements for private sector procurement

There is also agreement that where the council has direct control over a budget and decision-making responsibilities that this would not constitute a partnership. Similarly, if the issue or development is primarily the responsibility of one organisation, with others only having a marginal interest, then a partnership may not be appropriate.

What is partnership working? – Examples from local authorities

Thame Town Council state in their Code of Practice for Partnership Working:

"It is important to understand that involvement in "partnerships", however small or seemingly insignificant, usually carries legal, procurement, financial, personnel, reputation and service delivery risks and implications for the Council, and for partners, some of whom as small organisations may rely heavily on the "partnership" to sustain its existence."

Some councils have created formal policies and frameworks. **Surrey County Council**'s policy on partnership working states:

"The term "partnership" is widely used to refer to a variety of working arrangements from informal collaboration to formal contracts. For the purposes of this framework a partnership is defined as a joint working arrangement involving officers and/or members of the council with colleagues from the public, private, community, voluntary, community or faith sectors, where organisations commit to combine capabilities and/or resources to achieve a common purpose. Partnerships vary in nature and scale, and they create different opportunities, risks and liabilities for the council. This policy seeks to ensure that the council's most significant non-contractual joint working arrangements are treated with an appropriate level of formality."

Benefits of partnership working

There are many benefits to partnership working which all interact and support each other. Here, benefits are split into four main categories:

Agility and flexibility

Diversity of thought

Access to funds

Support in kind and savings

Benefits: agility and flexibility

- External organisations are not usually subject to the same politically-led changes and restraints
- External organisations can often be more agile and fleet of foot in terms of decision making and progressing ideas
- An external partner could be more flexible with trialling ideas and agile enough to make changes if some trials do not deliver as intended
- An external partner may have higher negotiating power
- External organisations can often offer a level of innovation that a local authority might not be able to achieve
- Some issues and/or development may be across geographical boundaries and therefore partnership/s may be required

Benefits: diversity of thought

- An alliance of partners can ensure a more holistic approach as different viewpoints, skills, experience, services and industries are brought together
- Partnerships can help deliver on a diverse range of local authority objectives
- An external partner may be better suited to delivering on social and/or environmental outcomes
- Partnerships can offer varied opportunities to local businesses and communities and therefore meet specific local authority objectives
- Partnerships can increase access for diverse groups that the local authority may not have engaged with
- Partnerships could ensure that the needs of specific marginalised groups (for example refugees or care leavers) are met
- A partner may have formal or informal knowledge and data about communities
- Strategic partnerships can help to improve visibility of a cause/project
- Positive outcomes can reflect well on the local authority, potentially improving public perception, stakeholder engagement and project response

Benefits: access to funds

- External organisations could have access/the ability to apply for various funding streams which a local authority would not be eligible for
- An external partner may have the capital or access to the capital required to progress with a project that the local authority could not fund
- An external partner may be able to generate income that the local authority couldn't. This income may fund the delivery of services, projects and developments
- Partnership working can open access to private investment which may not otherwise be accessible, and this can help to generate income and/or save money, boost economies and deliver on a project and/or service
- Donations to partner organisations could achieve a higher level of giving due to high levels of trust

Benefits: Support in kind and savings

- Partnerships combine resources so that each partner has access to a wider pool of resources
- A partnership may mean that the partner/s can provide the local authority with resources or value in kind that may not be met by local authority budgets or resources
- Delivering an outcome or service through a partnership could mean significant cost savings to the local authority
- An external partner may be able to access lower prices and/or a better procurement deal
- Delegating to partners to some degree can save time and money for the local authority
- External organisations can often deliver services at a higher level of efficiency, meaning savings and/or better value for money for the local authority and/or end user

Of course, partnership working can also come with challenges.
These are discussed below, under four themes:

Skills and resourcing

Governance and finance

Cultural differences

Trust issues

- The relationship management element of partnership working requires specific skill sets and experience which the local authority needs to carefully consider, ensuring a suitable level of resource is allocated to maximise the return on investment
- There could be a risk to standards of delivery as the local authority may have less direct control over the outcome
- The risk management elements need careful consideration, and clear agreements must be created requiring internal local authority resources, but also potentially external resources
- The approach, setup and management of partnerships can be time consuming and require varied resources from within the local authority (including procurement and legal) meaning there is an internal cost
- The external partner may not have the resources and/or skill sets needed to meet the requirements of the local authority's partnership framework/administrative essentials

Challenges: governance and finance

- If a strong governance is not in place, tensions and conflict around roles and responsibilities could arise, potentially resulting in a termination of the partnership
- The long-term nature of some projects and partnerships may mean that the partnership needs to evolve, and an exit strategy is required to manage this
- Cost-saving requirements and cuts within local authorities can mean a change in priorities and/or a structural change, possibly impacting on a partnership agreement
- The income generated by various activities may go directly to the partners or other stakeholders rather than the local authority. This could mean the local authority has less control over how this income is spent
- Rectifying a problem caused by a partner or the potential resulting legal elements could be time consuming and costly

Challenges: cultural differences

- The cultural/organisation values of the partner/s need considering as there can potentially be reputational risks if these do not align with the local authority's values
- The administrative elements that are required by the local authority can sometimes be restrictive for both the local authority and the external partner (the whole structure needs careful consideration with clear governance, which could mean organisational changes for the local authority)
- Tension between partners or a difference in vision could cause relationship issues

- If the process is not seen to be fair and transparent, other organisations or individuals could raise objections to partnerships on grounds of partiality or discrimination
- There could be reputational risk to the local authority (and the partner) if a relationship is not managed or a project/services are not delivered as expected
- Public perception means that the different partners/entities may not be recognised and the local authority is seen as responsible, meaning any issues may be raised with them and reflect on them
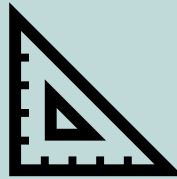
Best practice

There are a range of considerations to make sure you are following best practice.
We've grouped them into three categories:

Principles

Relationships

Effectiveness

The Government Guide on Partnerships for People and Place says:

"There are many incredible examples of local partnerships across the country coming together to deliver better outcomes for local places and communities. Local authorities and their partners have shown that, even in times of real challenge, people can come together in new ways to improve lives. It is important that government continues to play a role in strengthening these partnerships and looks internally to better understand how it can help empower local communities to develop and deliver innovative locally-led solutions, supported by coordinated policy at central government level.

Opportunities to improve poor social and economic outcomes can be improved by collaboration within and between local authorities and local partners. This is particularly the case where 'place-based' policies – where funding or attention is targeted at a certain place – are deployed to tackle specific issues or create desired policy outcomes."

The Standards Board for England (now defunct) published a 'Protocol for Local Authority Partnership Working' stating that:

"High standards must be at the heart of all local government decision making. Partnership working between local authorities and other agencies – public bodies, the private sector and the voluntary sector – is an increasingly important aspect of public service delivery. Good governance of partnership arrangements enables an authority to work more effectively and to manage risk."

Best practice: principles

Structure is required for partnership working, even at low levels. A basic outline of how partnerships are going to be approached within the local authority or specific department can help to ensure consistency and a more positive outcome to the ambitions. Basic documentation should be agreed by both parties. Best practice is to develop a clear structure and set of procedures, and document any decisions taken. This could include:

- A strategy and/or policy for partnership working, setting out the reasons why the local authority wants to work in this way and what they hope to achieve

- A framework for partnership working that outlines a clear procedure and ways of working

- A Partnership Assessment that identifies the issue and/or development opportunity and sets out or assesses why a partnership may be the optimum way to achieve the ambitions (documenting all decisions clearly)

- A Partnership Database which provides an overview of all the partnerships, who is responsible for each and any key information (such as review dates)

- The addition of the partnership to any relevant risk register

- A Partnership Agreement that sets out governance and terms of reference relevant to the partnership scale and functions (a legal document relevant to the type of partnership and roles and responsibilities)

- A partnership Performance Management Review system

- An agreed process for recording lessons learnt. Agreement between the partners of who might capture this and how it can be accessed and used is useful from the start.

Best practice: principles

Ideally the question of 'why create a partnership?' will be addressed generally in the strategy and specifically in a partnership assessment, so the Partnership Agreement should, in basic terms, address the 'who, what, how, when & where'. The agreement doesn't have to be lengthy, but should consist of simple answers to the following:

• Who the partners are

• Aims and objectives and the outcomes expected

• Key milestones, timelines and an exit strategy

• The legal status of the partnership

• Risk management arrangements

• Governance and decision-making arrangements

• Any specific roles for key members/stakeholders and/or staff (including duties expected) of all organisations involved

• Any due diligence in terms of procurement, health and safety, GDPR, insurance and regulations

• Details of any financial accountability arrangements and reporting

• A system for monitoring and reporting on progress, including timelines and regularity of reporting

• A community engagement strategy and details of any internal and external communication arrangements

• Anything else relevant to the specifics of the partnership and/or partners

Best practice: relationships

In places and circumstances where partnerships have been really successful, there is consensus about the requirements to ensure that processes and outcomes are positive. A key factor noted is the relationship building and the proactive participation needed from any relevant local authority staff or stakeholders. Allowing time to make initial contacts and then time to build the relationships is essential and shouldn't be underestimated. Making time available throughout the duration of the partnership - and not just at the start - is vital for genuine engagement and for measuring and monitoring performance as the partnership develops.

Best practice: relationships

Leadership

Representatives from effective partnerships cite the importance of leadership in many different forms. First of all, leadership within the local authority in terms of advocating partnership working and the benefits it can deliver.

Local authorities, where the leadership team are true believers in the benefits partnerships can bring, ensure that partnership working is central to their core strategy. They often create a distinct partnership strategy, led with a top-down approach to encourage engagement across the authority.

Leadership within the partnership is vital to ensuring the opportunities it offers can be explored with a shared ambition and drive.

Trust

Effective partnerships also depend on the development of a high level of trust between all partners. This is something that comes up time and time again as a critical factor for success in all levels of partnership.

Most people involved in local authority partnerships agree how important it is to allocate a realistic and reasonable amount of time. Partnership managers should also have the right skills required to develop and manage relationships.

These factors will help develop trust between partners. Another crucial factor to increasing trust levels is that each partner needs to deliver what they say they will – a Partnership Agreement can help with setting out these expectations from the start and a good Performance Management Review system will help to monitor and recognise successes.

Best practice: effectiveness

Other key lessons from successful local authority partnerships include highlighting the importance of ensuring that a system is in place for performance management from the start of the partnership. Relevant levels of resources and capacity should be allocated to maintain this in a structured and regular way.

In addition, the learning opportunity should not be underestimated and is another area where resources need to be focused to ensure that real value can be maximised, both during the partnership and for any future partnerships.

Best practice: effectiveness

Performance Management

It is obviously important to manage the partnership relationship, but the performance of the partnership also needs managing. To do that, it first needs to be monitored and measured against some clear objectives and criteria, ideally set at the start of the partnership and documented in a Partnership Agreement.

Resources should be in place to ensure:

- Shared objectives and targets are set and agreed
- Any targets are 'SMART'
- There is a clear method for measurement of performance
- There is an agreed system for regular reports on performance
- Success can be celebrated
- Clear exit strategies are in place and there is a documented and shared understanding of when the end of the partnership may be reached

Learning

Partnership working provides countless opportunities for learning for all parties. Ideally this learning will be captured during the process with a final evaluation to allow for best practice sharing for the future.

Some areas of learning could include:

- How external (partner) organisations work
- Building organisational and individual relationships
- General learning about the partnership approach
- Governance and organisational structure
- Opportunities in working together to increase impact
- Capturing and sharing general best practice
- Considering at the start of the partnership how these lessons are captured, presented and shared