

Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations

Your local county voluntary council

3. Working with others

3.3 Partnership



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Partnerships are about sharing creativity, risk and responsibility and streamlining tasks to those best suited to do them. If partnerships are established well, the productivity of a partnership is higher than if each partner worked separately, as a result of each partner doing what they do best.

Should you get involved in a partnership?

The advantages to partnership working are many. Avoiding duplication, using the strengths of the partner where you are weaker and vice versa.

However partnership working might not always be the solution so it's worth considering the possible benefits, costs and risks to your organisation.

Possible benefits

- Getting additional resources for your organisation.
- Improving your ability to identify needs and plan for the future.
- Increase your organisation's skills and capacity.
- Help you build coalitions and relationships.
- Improving the quality of services by making them more joined up and by getting new ideas. Increase reach of services.
- Improving long term sustainability of services.
- It may provide added appeal to funders.
- Possible savings in time and money.
- Avoid possible duplication of administration.
- Possible increased strategy development.
- More extensive consultation processes.

Possible risks

- The level of commitment to the partnership may not be clear at the outset. The disruption and effort may outweigh the return.
- Lack of investment into research and strategy development.
- You may lose autonomy.
- Your new alliance may mean that you are viewed differently by some organisations, including your prospective partner. A dilution of your brand.
- It may pull your organisation in new policy directions or hinder current work. A mission drift.

- Are the partnerships aims clear? Is there consensus between the partners over how and by whom, it will be run? Are the service user benefits measurable?
- Problems with staff feeling an allegiance to their particular organisation, rather than the partnership. Partnerships often come together to work on a specific project.

As an individual

If you are asked as an individual or on behalf of your organisation to get involved you may need to ask yourself:

- Do you have the time?
- Do you have the commitment to attend meetings? If not remember your place could be taken by someone who does.
- Do you have the necessary skills and the confidence? Are you willing to be trained?
- What are the partnership structures

Models of partnership by structure

Given the different size, scope and area of work of partnerships there is no one model for making them successful.

The Audit Commission paper *A fruitful Partnership, effective partnership working* identifies four main partnership structure models:

1. Separate organisation

A longer term lifespan or large area of activity and the need to employ people might require a separate organisation to be formed.

Advantages of this are:

- A clear identity.
- Freedom from restrictions (such as remit) of the individual partners groups.
- A staff dedicated to that purpose.
- Reduced risk of one partner dominating.
- Setting up the new entity helps define roles and responsibilities.

Disadvantages might be:

- Formal commitments may be required and off-putting.
- There is a risk of the partnership losing touch with the original organisations.

2. 'Virtual' organisation

A separate identity but without a formal legal identity. A separate logo, premises and staff who are accountable to the partnership. However one of the partner organisations actually employs them.

This model has the advantages of a distinct identity but without the potentially fraught legal issues.

However just as the separate organisation model may help clarify responsibilities as part of the set up process, these can remain blurred in the virtual model.

3. Co-locating staff from partner organisations

A less formal arrangement where staff remain in their original organisations but work together under a common agenda - perhaps as a steering group.

If there is trust between partners then this can work well.

This differs from the virtual model in that you work for organisation A and happen to be working on partnership C as opposed to C workers.

4. Steering group without dedicated staff resources

The outputs are implemented through the partner organisations' mainstream staff and resources.

This co-ordinates service delivery across organisational boundaries. A key is that the steering group has sufficient authority to change the ways of working within the partner organisations.

It is less useful for partnerships which have a long lifespan or need a separate identity for resources and credibility.

Essential elements for all partnerships

Board or Steering group with recognised authority. Delivery of objectives and accountability require this.

Composition is key here. How to properly involve the right people is another subject entirely.

A smaller executive committee might address key issues but not play a day to day role i.e. discuss strategy rather than organisational matters.

Varying relationships

Partnership is a key concept in many Welsh Government policies. However the word is used to describe a variety of relationships and is frequently ill defined.

Organisations are often asked to join partnerships but need to be clear about what is the exact nature of the request and respond accordingly. It may be preferable to replace the all-purpose term partnership with more precise language that reflects more accurately the nature of the relationship that is being sought. The following are examples of the different levels of partnership that can exist.

1 Supporter. In this case, the organisation is asked to be a partner, but what is really meant is will you support this initiative / project / application with your name or a letter, and come along to occasional meetings.

2 Agent. In this case, the organisation is asked to be a partner in delivery, but what is really required is an agent. Here the task is pre-determined, with or without discussion, and payment is made to deliver the task. The power remains with the commissioner.

3 Adviser. Many organisations are asked to sit on advisory committees. These are often *second tier* non-executive structures to involve a wider range of players. Advisory committees rarely have much influence, and may serve the interests of the main players (in demonstrating inclusiveness) rather than the participants. The power remains with the main committee.

4 Junior members. In this case, the organisation is on the main decision making structure, but has inferior status either in numbers or influence. It may be over dependent on other members for its existence or funds or policy.

Power remains with other actors, and is used to keep the organisation in its secondary place.

5 Joint ownership. In this case, the organisation is an equal partner, and is seen and treated as such. It is there as of right and from inception. It has an equal say over terms of reference, criteria, policy and distribution of resources. It has access to its own constituency, research, information, and its resources are not determined by other members.

6 Community ownership. As above, except that the community representatives must have at least 50% of the members.

Setting up the partnership - a checklist

- Establishing clear roles. Are the roles and responsibilities of all partners clearly defined and agreed?
- Is there a lead partner? Is their role clearly defined?
- Establishing an appropriate structure.
- Does the partnership constitution and structure define:
 - Who employs any staff
 - Who administers the day to day activity
 - Who contracts with delivery bodies
 - Which body makes the final decisions

- Who is responsible for financial control and auditing
- Are the members of the committees, groups, etc all defined?
- Are the meetings for the first six months scheduled?
- Is there a clear strategy to involve the wider community in the partnership?
- Are there clear written procedures to prevent conflicts of interest?
- Establishing common goals
- Has the partnership agreed a vision and aims?
- Is the vision supported by the local community?
- Do the community know what the partnership exists for? Building capacity of partners.
- Do any partners require training in technical skills to participate fully in decision-making?
- Do the partners know each other?
- Do partners share a good understanding of the issues being tackled? Is any briefing required?
- Is there a budget/time set aside for training/capacity building for partners?

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations

Tŷ Derwen, Church Road, Newport, NP19 7EJ

Registered Charity 1113558

Tel: 01633 241550

info@gavowales.org.uk

Fax: 01633 241583

www.gavowales.org.uk



Tel: 0800 2888 329

www.wcva.org.uk

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