

Partnership strategy

Introduction

Over recent years the importance of partnership working in local government has grown significantly. There have been a number of drivers including a move to increased sharing of resources and regional initiatives that look at a broader perspective for delivery.

This is underpinned by a recognition that organisations, particularly in the public and third sectors, can deliver better value for money by working together.

A “Governing Partnerships” report by the Audit Commission identified a number of issues:

- They bring risks as well as opportunities, and governance can be problematic
- They may not deliver good value for public money, so local public bodies should ask searching questions about those they are engaged in
- Clear accountability is needed between partners to produce better accountability to the public, including redress when things go wrong.

It is these, and similar, issues that this strategy sets out to insure against.

As an authority we commit significant resources to partnership working both in terms of officer and councillor time and, in some instances, financial support. We need to be confident that our partnerships are fit for purpose and that we are using our resources appropriately to support the relevant partnerships. We also need to ensure that they support our strategic objectives, deliver value for money and that we have the mechanisms in place to make these judgements.

Why work in partnership?

We are clear that partnerships can add value. The aim of this strategy is to set out how we ensure that this is delivered. Partnerships provide a number of opportunities:

1. We can deliver more in partnership than we would working in isolation
2. We can ensure that we are not duplicating work of other organisations
3. We can improve value for money to the customer by making sure work is both joined-up and complimentary to that of our partners
4. By aligning strategic agendas we can make sure that all partners are working to the same goals
5. It is likely that additional sources of funding will be available by working in partnership
6. Support to deliver our priorities and a better service to our customers.

What do we mean by partnership?

“A relationship between two or more independent legal bodies, organisations or individuals working together to secure some shared objective”

Defining the different types of partnerships, on a number of different spectrums:

- Strategic / operational
- Statutory / voluntary
- Single organisation / Multi organisation
- National/ regional/ local.

And what is not partnership?

We need to be clear about what we mean when we use the term partnership working.

This strategy is not applicable to:

- Groups where the Council has direct control over budgets or decision making
- Informal groups set up to discuss and consider specific topics for example consultation groups
- Appointments and/or financial commitments to outside bodies where the Council has no strategic or policy function
- Commercial agreements
- Contracts for delivery of service.

While we will work with a partnership ethos in many of these circumstances there is a different relationship and these situations will be managed through different processes.

How do we get the best out of partnerships?

Clarity of purpose

We need to absolutely clear at the outset what we are trying to achieve in each partnership. There also needs to be confidence that the aims and agendas of all participating organisations are in line.

Performance management

There will be a range of methods to suit different levels of partnership and the suitable performance management methodology for each partnership is identified in the partnership register. Performance management needs to be proportionate to the type and complexity of the partnership.

We have established frameworks in place for many of our partnerships. The suitability and effectiveness of these arrangements need to be monitored both by the Council and the individual partnerships.

What risks are involved in working in partnership?

There are a complex set of risks in working in partnership:

- Performance management arrangements are ineffective and do not identify issues in time
- The agendas of participating organisations are out of line and cannot be reconciled
- Personalities change and previously effective partnerships become more difficult
- Trust breaks down
- Resources are not committed
- Priorities change
- They fail to deliver their objectives
- Agreement cannot be reached by partners on any range of issues
- It cannot be demonstrated that the partnership is adding value

The aim of implementing a more formal partnership strategy is to try and mitigate the range of risks.

Tools for improvement

Attached to the Strategy are two tools to assist in managing partnerships. They are intended for guidance only and should provide useful checklists:

1. Partnership checklist – this is intended as a tool when a new partnership is about to be established. It asks a series of questions that will help in making sure that, for example, appropriate governance arrangements have been put in place. This checklist is based on Audit Commission guidance.
2. Partnership Improvement Tool – this is intended as a tool to assist in a review of a partnership. Again, it asks a set of questions that provide a framework for assessing how effective aspects of the partnership are. This is based on a good practise tool used by a number of organisations for assessing partnerships.

Partnership checklist

1. Rationale for the partnership
 - a. Why does the partnership exist?
 - b. What are its agreed aims?
 - c. Where have these been published?
 - d. Can we identify a better way of serving the public
2. Added value from the partnership
 - a. How does the partnership add value
 - b. How do we demonstrate this added value to the public
 - c. How do we know whether funds are being well spent
 - d. How does the public know that partnership funds are being well spent
3. Governance arrangements
 - a. How do our partnership's corporate governance arrangements link to those of individual partners
 - b. How are decisions made
 - c. How are they recorded
 - d. Who makes sure they are acted on
 - e. Who scrutinises them
 - f. Who are they reported to
4. Performance management
 - a. How do we know which partnership targets we are meeting and which we are failing to meet
 - b. Who manages and reports progress
5. Financial management
 - a. Who provides the money
 - b. Who decides how to spend it
 - c. Can the money be reallocated
 - d. What are the financial reporting arrangements
6. Risk management
 - a. How do we know when things are going wrong
 - b. Who can take action when things go wrong
 - c. How do we resolve conflicts of interest
7. Termination arrangements
 - a. What are the arrangements if this partnership comes to an end
 - b. Or if we decide not to be involved any longer
 - c. How will resources be reallocated back to partners
8. Serving the public
 - a. How effectively does this partnership communicate with the public
 - b. How can the public and service users obtain redress when things go wrong
 - c. Is there a complaints and suggestions process the public can use

Partnership Improvement Template

Area of Practice	Yes	No	Action
Whether there is a 'Lead Officer' or 'Project Sponsor' who has responsibility for the Council's involvement in the partnership, but who will not necessarily be the Council's representative within the partnership.			
The clarity of the purpose of the partnership. There should be a rationale for why a partnership exists (eg to deliver co-ordinated packages of services, to tackle 'wicked' or complex issues or to reduce the impact of organisational fragmentation).			
The legal status of the partnership and whether it is appropriate for the objectives to be achieved through partnership working.			
Whether the Council has defined its 'bottom line' in terms of what it wants to obtain from the partnership for itself and for local people.			
Clarity on council involvement in the partnership (eg leading or supporting).			
Whether there is a plan for how the Council's involvement is supported and managed (eg reporting arrangements and lines of accountability).			
'Rules of engagement' (eg whether the Council is simply funding a partnership and has minimal involvement, or whether it is a full and active partner and is carrying out practical activities on behalf of the partnership).			
Whether the rights and responsibilities of members of the partnership have been defined and are understood.			
Are decision making arrangements effective?			
Whether the partnership is appropriately resourced and whether consideration has been given to resources that might be made available from sources other than the Council.			

Area of Practice	Yes	No	Action
The effectiveness of performance management arrangements including scrutiny and evaluation.			
<p>How the partnership is held to account including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability between members of the partnership • Accountability back to the organisations involved, including to the Council (Overview and Scrutiny, Cabinet, Area Forums, Senior Management Team) • Accountability to local people and other stakeholders. 			
Whether there is a plan for the development of the partnership.			
The effectiveness of governance arrangements.			

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