

Working in Partnership – an overview

‘Collaborative working’ is a catch all reference for the variety of ways in which two or more organisations can work together - from joint delivery of projects to sharing services and, at the other end of the spectrum, full merger.

Collaboration is not a new idea and many of us have been participating in some form of collaborative venture for years, often sharing information with similar organisations, signposting to other organisations and perhaps even joint project delivery. Recently, however, there has been a renewed push towards working together and working together more strategically.



Often collaboration in the voluntary sector is driven by response to crises, either loss of funding, or management changes. However, if groups can take some time to think about collaboration strategically before those pinch-points it can lead to a more successful collaborative venture in which organisations have more control and are better prepared.

This briefing provides a quick introduction to collaboration and some top tips to help you take control of your collaborative working.

The Collaboration Spectrum

Some people have difficulty with the term collaboration – it can seem too vague or tired. It is useful to think about it as an umbrella term that encompasses lots of different ways in which groups can work together. It is important to have an overview of all of the different things that ‘collaboration’ can mean so that when you are planning collaborative projects for your organisation you can be clear about what you want, what it means for the independence of your group and what will be best for your beneficiaries.

‘Collaborative working describes joint working by two or more organisations in order to better fulfil their purposes, while remaining as separate organisations.’

Charity Commission

Here are just a few forms of collaboration that lie on the spectrum:

Ad Hoc collaboration – groups get together and share information and resources informally.

Joint working – is a formal level of agreed communication, steering groups, shared practices.

Partnerships – formal arrangements which are normally around some type of joint working; might be a collaborative contractual relationship between larger and smaller organisation or between organisations with some form of similarity e.g. size or mission coming together for a shared purpose; can be a newly constituted organisation.

Merger –two organisations join fully together. This can take the form of merging organisations to create a new organisation, or it could be that one organisation becomes a part of another.

Opportunities and Risks in collaboration

In the current difficult economic climate, collaborative working is being hailed as a way of increasing the value of services and reducing costs. When considering collaborative working for your organisation take time to outline the risks and benefits for your organisation in order to make informed decisions.

Working with others can offer opportunities to:

- Deliver new, improved or more integrated services;
- Make efficiency savings through sharing costs;
- Develop a stronger, more united voice;
- Share knowledge and information;
- Offer a more holistic service.



Potential risks in collaboration are:

- Time and resources it takes to develop collaborative projects;
- The risk of mission drift if collaboration takes you away from your key purpose as an organisation;
- Loss of autonomy;
- Being forced to form partnerships for funding in unrealistic timescales.

Top Tips for collaboration

Many of the risks above can be mitigated through planning before the collaboration begins and in the early stages of partnership working. Use our 'Top Tips' below to help you be strategic about collaboration and ensure any partnership work is as successful as possible!

- ❖ **Keep beneficiaries at the heart of what you do:** The number one tip for successful collaboration. The primary purpose of any collaboration should be to better meet the needs of the beneficiaries and make the best use of charitable funds and property.
- ❖ **Involve trustees and have buy-in from the whole organisation:** Have discussions with staff and trustees about potential collaborations. Strong leadership is important in creating good collaborative partnerships and you will want to ensure that staff members understand the benefits of the collaboration and what it means for them.
- ❖ **Know what you can offer in collaboration:** As well as thinking about what your organisation would like to gain from collaboration also think about what you have to offer to potential partners. What is distinctive about your organisation? What are you really good at? What assets (physical as well as stakeholders, funders etc.) do you have?
- ❖ **Do a competitor and collaborator analysis:** Which organisations offer similar services to you or work with the same beneficiaries in your area? How successful are they? Is there any way you could work together to improve services for beneficiaries?
- ❖ **Think about your red lines:** Discuss 'red lines' with staff and trustees before collaboration to identify the things that you will not compromise on.
- ❖ **Take time for planning:** investing time in thinking about collaboration strategically before you need to, can save time fixing problems later! Take time to plan for your organisation and when beginning a collaborative project really invest time in the early stages to outline

what partners want to get from the collaboration and what the roles and responsibilities are of each party.

Case Studies

a) Learning from others African Prisons Project (APP) was founded five years ago to improve the lives of prisoners in Africa by providing education, healthcare and access to justice. As a small charity, it collaborates with other similar-size organisations all the time. For example, APP invited volunteers from a charity that was raising tuition fees for Ugandan refugees in the UK to cook Ugandan food at a music night organised to raise funds. APP also relies on more experienced charities for advice. By collaborating with African Initiatives, a social justice organisation working with communities in Africa, APP volunteers have recently learnt a great deal about how international NGOs like theirs should go about applying for government money. Adam Smith, trustee from APP, said: 'Partnering with another small charity in this way is incredibly useful: staff at African Initiatives faced the same challenges and, as the charity is still relatively small, they are approachable and always willing to help.' For further information: www.africanprisons.org or www.african-initiatives.org.uk

b) Supporting development Armley Common Right Trust, a small charity which maintains local commons and parks in Leeds, was struggling to recruit younger volunteers and trustees to help them to continue their work. Health Living Network-Leeds (HLN) worked together with the Trust to attract new volunteers and engendering greater community involvement by improving the constitution of the Trust, sharing contacts and resources such as photocopying, providing training courses and jointly running community events. For further information: Healthy Living Network Leeds and ACRT case study (Bassac)

c) Widening opportunities and reducing duplication Partnership working in Leeds has led to a more joined-up training offer and helps small charities to access bursaries. The project to develop a single shared training directory, listing courses delivered by a range of providers, is helping groups to identify quickly opportunities for building capacity. It is also proving a useful planning tool for providers, highlighting gaps and overlap.

For further information: Leeds training directory case study (Bassac)

From: [Choosing to Collaborate: Helping you succeed](#)

Support

Community Southwark can help on many aspects of collaboration. We can offer support and advice in thinking about collaboration, help you to identify partners or facilitate meetings between organisations and provide consultancy to support you through the process. Contact development@communitysouthwark.org / 020 7358 7020 for more information.

Resources

See <http://communitysouthwark.org/sites/default/files/images/Collaboration%20Resources.pdf>