Partnership Working

What is partnership working?

Put simply, partnership working is when two or more groups come together to achieve a common purpose. This definition includes three important elements:

Firstly, partnerships are deliberate because they are established for a specific purpose.

Secondly, partnerships draw together resources from a number of different partners.

Lastly, the sharing of resources and information is necessary to achieve desired outcomes.

Why are partnerships formed?

Partnerships are often established in order to fulfil a goal which may otherwise be more difficult or even impossible to achieve through the isolated work of organisations working independently of each other. Partnership working is therefore based on the assumption that there are situations in which working alone is not a sufficient or effective way to achieve the desired goal(s).

What are the benefits of partnerships?

Successful partnership working can have huge potential benefits for organisations and individuals working together, including creating new opportunities to learn from each other and share knowledge and perspectives.

There is also an added value for organisations working in partnership to be able to improve their ability to provide goods or services, and to improve their access to funding streams.

The pooling of resources (people, information, funding) is a key strength of partnership working, and the sharing of fresh perspectives can results in the creation of new ideas and approaches which would not otherwise come about. This resource will examine both the benefits and challenges of partnership working for organisations and individuals, and give case study examples of partnership working from the rural context.

Case Study: Just Enterprise, Scotland

An example of partnership working from the rural context is Just Enterprise, a business support and advisory service for social enterprises and enterprising charities in remote and rural Scotland.

What is the aim of the partnership?

The partnership aims to provide business support and advice services to social enterprise organisations in remote and rural areas of Scotland, who have limited access to centrally-located services. The business support services recognise the unique challenges, needs and opportunities of organisations operating in rural and remote locations.

Who are the partners?

The funding partner is the Scottish Government, who provide the financial resources to allow the partnership to work. However, they are located in Scotland's urban centre and have limited capacity to provide extensive support to some of the country's more remote and rural locations. Therefore, to extend the reach of Just Enterprise services to social enterprise organisations in remote and rural areas, the partnership uses delivery partners located in rural areas across Scotland.

How do they work together to overcome obstacles?

The urban/rural partnership allows the program to benefit from the expertise of local delivery partners, who have a strong understanding of the indigenous conditions which allow social enterprise to flourish or decline. These local delivery partners are also commonly known as anchor organisations.

Using the partnership model of working, the program benefits from both a reliable income stream with the government partner as the funder, and also from the local knowledge of delivery partners in territorial areas.

Conclusion

The Just Enterprise partnership is a prime example of a group of partners collaborating to pool resources (financial, local knowledge, geographical proximity) to have an impact which would not otherwise have been possible from working independently or in silos.

Case Study: Estonian Rural Tourism Association

ERTO is an example of a number of small rural accommodation providers, nature, eco, culture, events, activity and tourism enterprises coming together to form a partnership to reach a broader market and collectively raise the profile of their area. The partnership was established as a membership organisation in 2000 and now has around 300 members.

The partnership allows greater visibility on the national and international context which is especially important for small scale rural tourism providers. This also assists to increase collective voice on behalf of the partners with officials at state, regional and local level.

Through the partnership there is increased capacity as well as improved social capital, with trust, networking, common rules, and ethics enabling partners to know, understand and support each other.

The link below provides case study which describes these elements in more detail:

- Member type and examples
- Overall aims and management structure
- Financing
- Challenges of Estonian rural tourism
- Most important activities
- Logos and branding

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/w26_rural-north_ee-rural-tourism_mengel.pdf

Case Study: Innovative Village Project Report

The Innovative Village is a cooperation project run by partners from Finland, Estonia and Northern Ireland. The project was established to compare the village development and community enterprise activities in three different countries, and looks for new perspectives and experiences of shared problems.

The partnership supported local communities to pilot and evaluate methods for stimulating locally produced services in rural areas, and searched for new solutions to organise services in rural communities.

The project also strengthened innovation skills, active citizenship, and networks both nationally and internationally. The project used study tours and digital networking to share ideas, achievements, and experiences.

The project ended in 2014, and the partners have written a book in all three languages: English, Finnish and Estonian. The full resource can be found at the link below:

https://issuu.com/innovative-village/docs/innovativevillage_book108p

Why do partnerships matter in the rural context?

Both urban and rural communities are affected by overarching challenges associated with the economy, environment, health, employment, and housing. Rural communities also face additional challenges due to their remote or rural geography, which makes the provision of basic services more logistically challenging and expensive.

These additional challenges are largely due to geographic isolation and distance from central markets, which reduces access to markets and increases the cost of service delivery. This may also add to challenges of lack of capacity in terms of the skills or expertise required to deliver certain services, meaning that these must be sourced from out with the community.
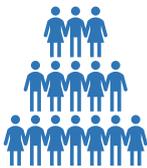
Rural population trends also show a growing number of elderly people and increasing rates of youth depopulation from rural areas, as young people move to urban centres to pursue education and work opportunities. This increases the pressure on local services to provide for the needs of the growing elderly population, without a sufficient workforce of young people.

This combination of remote geography, market failure and a changing rural population means that rural services and solutions often end up being very different in their design, application and cost when compared with urban counterparts.

Within the rural setting, partnerships can be a very effective way to deliver goods and services, as they recognise key rural characteristics such as strong community cohesion, locally based / focussed organisations and a greater prevalence of small micro-enterprises.

So how can partnerships address these challenges?

Partnerships enable small micro-businesses and organisations to collaborate to deliver services which they would be unable to provide independently, and win large public contracts.

The collective business model of partnership working challenges the more corporate model of service provision, where public contracts are often awarded to large external companies who can provide the whole service, often for a lower cost.

While a partnership of small, local business may provide the services at a slightly higher chargeable rate, the socio-economic value that they add to the local community and rural economy is much greater.

Partnerships for service provision?

Partnerships improve the chances of smaller organisations to collectively win contracts for service provision, as they add security and reliability for the buyer/purchaser. Partnership working also creates scope to pool resources to extend capacity and allows the sharing of operational costs and can reduce expenses. Knowledge and information sharing is another additional benefit of collaborative work, which can bring immense added value to a partnership.

Partnerships are used widely across many sectors, including healthcare, where this approach can provide a more holistic overall service for healthcare consumers. Having a partnership of individual service providers all working together means that service provision can be much more holistic, and address all needs, rather than focusing on more individual aspects of service provision.

Case Study: ReStyle Argyll, Scotland

An example of this is the ReStyle Argyll partnership, which operates across the remote rural area of Argyll and Bute in the west of Scotland.

What is the aim of the partnership?

The partnership has created a Reuse and Repair Hub, which will allow second-hand goods to be repaired and resold in communities across Argyll and Bute. This project seeks to provide environmental benefits by preventing waste and encouraging recycling. It also produces social and environmental benefits by providing employment and training opportunities for people who find it difficult to access mainstream employment.

Who are the partners?

The partners are four social enterprise organisations from Oban, Islay, Bute, and Kintyre, in Argyll and Bute – a region of Scotland. This geographic area includes many remote and isolated peninsulas, islands and hard-to-access villages and towns.

The social enterprise organisations therefore face challenges associated with accessing markets, operational costs and retaining skilled staff. The organisations all engage in reuse activity as individuals, but realised that by working as partners, they could increase their potential social, environmental, and economic value.

How do they work together to overcome obstacles?

This partnership recognises the challenges and limitations of operating within an area which includes very remote peninsulas and islands, spread out over a large geography.

Partnership between the four reuse organisations has allowed them to extend and widen their reuse activities and have a greater environmental impact throughout the area. The ability to share costs, pool resources and knowledge has significantly improved local reuse activities and access to refurbished furniture for local residents.

An example of this is that large furniture items which are not available from a local reuse organisation can be sourced from one of the other Reuse Hub partners. This benefits local residents, who have wider access to low-cost, refurbished furniture and other items. It also creates environmental impact by ensuring that more items stay out of landfill and go on to have a second life.

Benefits of partnership working

Working in partnership with others creates a number of opportunities, including access to the unique resources provided by other partners. Potential resources can include access to knowledge; technical expertise, people with experience and skills; access to large networks of people and organisations; financial support; reputation and credibility; and local knowledge or insight.

The resources provided by each partner differ, for example, a large organisation or local council might be more likely to be the provider of funding or technical expertise in a partnership, whereas a community group would be more likely to provide local knowledge. The involvement of people and organisations at a grassroots level is important to ensure that the goals of the partnership meet a need that is actually there, rather than just delivering services which are not required.

Potential benefits of partnership include:

	Ability to adapt and be responsive	Access to a wider variety of perspectives and knowledge to inform partnership working so that service delivery is meeting current needs. Access to wider resources pool improves ability to innovate and adapt.
	Access (to knowledge)	Reducing potential mistakes and improving access to specialist knowledge and understanding within the operational context.
	Access (to people)	Drawing on a wider pool of technical expertise, experience, skills, labour, and networks.
	Added value	More can be achieved through partnership working than either party would have been able to achieve by working alone.
	Cooperation	A spirit of competition is replaced by a spirit of mutual cooperation.
	Developing networks and relationships	Professional networks and relationships are developed through collaborative work.
	Economies of scale	Particularly in the rural context, where individual partners may not have the resources to be able to deliver services on a large scale, working in partnership can provide the means to expand service provision and deepen impact.

	Efficient use of resources	Pooling and sharing resources improves overall knowledge, understanding and ability to achieve end goals.
	Exchange of information and ideas	Leading to improved decision making and the development of knowledge and skills of different partners.
	Holistic approach	Partners are able to provide a more holistic approach to services, rather than individual services addressing needs separately.
	Human resource development:	Enhancing the knowledge and skills of different partners.
	Innovation	Developing unexpected/new ideas and approaches to address old issues and complex challenges. Being exposed to new perspectives and being able to bounce ideas off of each other can spark and generate fresh ideas.
	Reputation and credibility	Achieve genuinely earned organisational reputation and greater credibility. Furthermore, partnering with a more well-known organisation can improve your own reputation by association, improving your access to contacts and widening your network.

Challenges of partnership working

Partnerships involve different organisations working together, which inevitably increases complexity and can create barriers to effective work. Challenges can arise when different organisations have different aims, values, or cultures, all of which create different management styles and ways of working.

It is therefore important to try and understand the motivations of potential partners, so that you can identify both potential barriers that may arise and also how best to engage with them. For more information on understanding stakeholder motivations, see the section on Understanding motivations and potential support or conflict that may arise, in Stakeholder Engagement in Module 1: Community Involvement.

It is also important for organisations working in partnership to try to align/share their values and aims in order to minimise their differences, reduce potential conflict and remove barriers to success. In this section, we describe eight of the challenges and risks of partnership working, and offer recommendations to mitigate risk.

1. **Different management styles:** Many community social enterprises operate with a focus on shared responsibility and collective leadership. Other organisations, such as local government or funding partners may prefer a more traditional top-down management style, which prioritises chain of command, creating a formal organisational culture. When working in partnership, different organisational styles could be cause for conflict but can also work advantageously in cases where each partner's individual style is complementary to the partnership.

> **Recommendation**: It is important to invest time and energy into establishing a balanced management in the partnership, even if your organisational styles are different. Striking a good balance may take time and effort, but will ultimately be beneficial to the success of your partnership. Understanding different partner motivations will help you to avoid conflict and collaborate successfully.

2. **Different values or goals**: Some of which will be openly stated, others which may be more subtle or hidden. It is fundamentally important to align your organisational values and goals to reduce the chances of organisational differences leading to conflict. Agreeing on intermediary and end goals is vital for the partnership to work well for everyone. Understanding stakeholder or partner motivations is essential for successful collaboration.

> **Recommendation**: Organisational values should be clearly communicated to prospective partners, so that you can each understand how your values align or differ from each other's.
>
> When considering partnership, you should engage in meaningful discussion to assess what your shared goals and vision would look like. This will help you to determine how compatible the partnership is, and if the proposed combination of partners would create successful conditions for collaboration.
>
> - **See resource:** Creating a Shared Vision. This resource is a tool to guide you in defining a shared vision for your collaboration. Follows 4 step by step activities to identify future aspirations and create a joint vision statement.

3. **Different funding streams:** Different partners will each have their own sets of income streams and therefore will have individual goals or outcomes to meet for funders, investors or customers. This will likely mean that some aspects of your partnership may have to accommodate the funding needs of partners.

Recommendation: Be open-minded, considerate, and flexible when it comes to the requirements of other partners. Meeting outcomes/goals to sustain income streams is essential for small businesses. In the interests of collaboration, it is worth considering how you can assist, or to what extent you can accommodate, the needs of your partners, especially if they are helping or accommodating your needs in some way.

However, if you find that accommodating the needs of another partner is going to negatively impact your enterprise, then the best course of action is to have an honest discussion. Make clear that these conditions are not suitable for you, and aim to resolve the problem.

4. **Everyone has their own agenda:** All partners have their own agenda, which like values and goals, may be openly stated or more subtle or hidden. A partner with an open agenda will be honest and open about the reasons for their plans and actions, whereas a partner with a hidden agenda will act without revealing their motives for doing so.

Recommendation: By recognising that everyone will have an agenda, you can be aware that there may be ulterior motives driving partners decisions or plans and try to understand different stakeholder motivations. It is far better practice to act with an open agenda and be honest about your motives, especially in a business partnership, where trusting relationships are essential for successful partnership work.

5. **Bureaucracy:** Some organisations and agencies are tied by many restraints that it impacts on their ability to be effective within that partnerships. Academic institutions and governmental agencies are notably bound by bureaucratic procedures and regulations, often limiting their ability to be enterprising, seize new opportunities or take risks.

Recommendation: Be aware of the considerable limitations placed upon bureaucratic agencies before entering into partnerships. Recognise the strengths of combining innovative social enterprise approaches with public sector approaches to local service design and application, which can often be risk averse and bureaucratic. The social enterprise approach can help to identify new opportunities and counter the risk-averse approach of civil servants, and provides scope for innovative and nimble community partnerships.

6. **Different legislative frameworks:** Some organisations or agencies may be working within different legislative frameworks which define their powers, their duties to provide specific services and the targets and outcome that they are expected to meet.

Recommendation: Ensure that discussions are held prior to entering into partnership so that all partners understand the requirements and frameworks inside which other partners are expected to work. This will limit the chances of confusion or conflict in later stages.

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7. **Lack of autonomy:** Individuals from partner organisations who are directly involved in collaborative activities need a fair degree of autonomy in order to make decisions and progress. Where organisations do not fully empower their staff to make decisions, progress is hampered by staff continually needing to consult with superiors before action can occur. This can result in much lapsed time, during the course of which momentum and energy levels for the proposed action can decline.

Recommendation: Appoint a representative partner who has a sufficient level of autonomy and authority to be able to make decisions without having to first seek affirmation from superiors. If this is not possible, have a system of communications between your representative and decision maker(s) which is fast and efficient, resulting in very little time lag between proposed action and decision-making.

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8. **Financial constraints:** There can be issues when financial constraints result in savings having to be made. This can often be the case in public sector contracts, where the wider socio-economic benefits are not taken into account and a contract is awarded based on the cheapest option. This can make it difficult for rural community-led organisations to compete or sustain vital services.

Recommendation: Financial constraints can make partnership work infinitely more challenging, especially when projects or services have to be restructured mid-project or mid-delivery. Being able to articulate and demonstrate your organisation or partnership's social value in relation to contract procurement is a vital skill to be able to enhance your bid.

ReStyle Argyll Reuse and Recycling Project partners

Identifying potential partners

When first considering potential project partners, you may already have a shortlist of candidates, or have had some initial discussion. However, there may also be other potential partners that you have not yet considered.

One way to identify potential partners is to carry out an 'Other Player Analysis'. This can help you define the market you are operating in, who the other players are, and what they do. This tool will enable you to determine who is potentially a complementor, competitor or collaborator.

> You can find the 'Other Player Analysis' instruction sheet here.

Another way to identify potential partners is to carry out a 'Network Mapping Exercise'. This is a brainstorm-style activity which will produce an overview of all of the stakeholders who support or are involved with your work.

You can use this activity solely to map potential partners who could be engaged in collaboration. Partners can be categorised by themes such as Influence, Passion, Cash, Time, Contacts and Expertise, to identify what skills or attributes they can bring to your partnership.

> You can find the instruction sheet for network mapping here.

Once you have identified all potential partners, it is important to give meaningful consideration to key questions which will help you to assess compatibility for collaboration.

- ➤ What is the aim of the partnership?
- ➤ What skills/resources will you and your partner each to bring to the partnership?
- ➤ Is there sufficient compatibility between your organisations? Do you have shared aims?
- ➤ Have you considered the other organisations' charitable objectives, culture, governance, organisational structure, policies, financial resources and funding base?
- ➤ Are there any areas of potential conflict? Could these areas be overcome?
- ➤ Have you considered the strengths and weaknesses of each potential partner individually?
- ➤ Can all partners make a meaningful and useful contribution?

The Civil Society Toolbox website has a range of resources including the Partnership Assessment Tool, which enables you to assess a partnership and identify strengths and weaknesses either before, during or after a collaboration. This tool can be used individually or in a group setting, and uses a variety of categories to assess performance at all stages of collaboration.

You can find the instruction sheet here.

You can find the partnership assessment table here.

Partnerships for project and contract delivery

Partnerships can improve the chances of smaller organisations to collectively win contracts for service provision, as they add security and reliability for the buyer and allow the sharing of operational costs between partners to reduce expenses.

Due to the greater prevalence of smaller micro-business in rural areas, partnership working can be used as a collective business model for many smaller businesses to collaborate and bid for public contracts.

Partnerships are used widely across many sectors, including the healthcare sector, where partnership work is used as a way to provide a more holistic overall service for healthcare consumers.

Having a partnership of individual service providers all working together means that service provision can be much more holistic, and address all needs, rather than focusing on more individual aspects of service provision.

P4P (Partnership for Procurement) is an initiative which supports social enterprises and third sector organisations to be able to better access public procurement. P4P gives guidance on forming partnerships and consortia.

Their free online resources and toolkits give guidance on all aspects of partnership and collaboration. We describe below the P4P Collaboration Toolkit, and the P4P 10 Stage Guide to Procurement and how you can use them.

The P4P Collaboration Toolkit (accessible below as a downloadable PDF) has been developed as a guidebook for organisations entering into collaborations or partnerships. The 30-page guidebook informs on all stages of the collaboration process, and gives recommendations, tips and questions to ask yourself at each stage.

You can download the toolkit here.

The P4P 10 Stage Guide to Procurement Toolkit is aimed at third sector organisations who are either considering tendering for public contracts for the first time, or have some experience in tendering but would like to improve their skills. This toolkit offers practical guidance on 10 different stages of procurement, as shown in the table below.

These are split into stages so that readers can easily dip in and out of the resource as their learning needs require. We have detailed what topics are contained within each stage to make the guide even easier to use.

The P4P 10 Stage Guide to Procurement can be accessed here as a downloadable PDF.

Stage	Name	What topics it contains
Stage 1	Understanding Your Market	Identifying collaborators/competitors and potential contracts
Stage 2	Knowing Your Organisation	SWOT analysis, template for tenders/bids
Stage 3	Finding Opportunities	Public contracts portal UK, events, networking and relationship building
Stage 4	Collaborative Working	Benefits of, written agreements, resources, and further reading
Stage 5	Selection Process and ESPD	European single procurement document, template
Stage 6	Tender Processes	Types of procedure, timescales, framework agreements
Stage 7	The Bid Process	Timeline, bid submissions, first formal meeting
Stage 8	Writing Your Bid	Structure, planning, pricing
Stage 9	Pricing	Balance between quality and price, methodology, strategy, further reading
Stage 10	Evaluation and Continuous Improvement	Feedback, challenging an award

Case Studies

- ➢ **[Argyll and Bute Local Services Initiative Report (2013): Learning from public sector/social enterprise collaboration in Argyll and Bute]** (*in written English*)

  - This public sector report examines the partnerships between the public sector (state) with the third sector (social enterprise and community enterprises). It discusses the importance of social enterprise and partnerships to deliver services sustainably in the remote and rural context of Argyll and Bute, in the west of Scotland.
  - The report recognises the role of social enterprise in local service delivery, from environmental solutions to health and wellbeing.
  - This can be used as an evidence base to influence key policy makers and decision makers.
  - The report also gives a set of key success factors for social enterprise delivery of public services, and a set of recommendations and related actions to empower collaboration between social enterprises and the public sector.

- ➢ **[Finland Community Guide]** (*written in English*)

  - A short guide of good practice to assist rural communities and village associations to take forward social enterprise activity. This guide helps you to understand the rural context, explaining how to get started and identify your motivation and mission.
  - It explains how to map out the needs and hopes of local people, touches on market analysis, and the business planning process for community-based social enterprise.
  - Also gives a useful insight into collective leadership and how to distribute responsibilities equally among your group.