

# A practical guide to: working with partnerships

Practical step-by-step building blocks for  
establishing an effective partnership  
in the not-for-profit sector



N<sup>2</sup>(squared) Consulting with Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service



# Foreword

In the voluntary and community sectors we're often told how important partnership working is. Most organisations know this, what they also know is that effective partnership working can be time-consuming, resource-intensive and can involve difficult choices about the services they offer. What is often lacking is the ongoing guidance and support needed to establish and develop meaningful partnerships that add value to our existing work. How do we organise ourselves? Who makes the difficult decisions? How do we evidence the benefits of partnership working?

We hope this guide will go some way to answering some of those questions. We have tried to keep it as practical as possible and structured the guide to take you from beginning to end. Whilst we realise that it is not exhaustive and additional resources may be required, we hope that, at the very least, it stimulates thought and discussion within your own service and those of your potential partners.

The very best of luck in developing a successful and lasting partnership.

**Jon Stevens, Commissioning Manager, Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service**

**T: 0115 934 8400**

**E-mail: [jons@nottinghamcvs.co.uk](mailto:jons@nottinghamcvs.co.uk)**

N<sup>2</sup> (squared) Consulting has formed its own partnership with the Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service for a very simple reason: that there has never been a more important time than now for charities and not-for-profit organisations to learn the partnership lessons from the corporate and public sectors, and to join together to punch above their weight.

I have over fifteen years experience helping private and public sector organisations form powerful business alliances. All the lessons I have learned: how to find the perfect business partner, how to set up a mutually beneficial relationship, what to burn the midnight oil over, what not to – have gone into this guide.

I wish you luck and look forward to hearing about your achievements.

**Nicola Davis, Managing Director, N<sup>2</sup> (squared) Consulting**

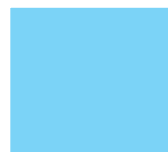
**T: 0845 3311314**

**E-mail: [nik@n2-consulting.com](mailto:nik@n2-consulting.com)**



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## 2. Scope of this guide

The concept of partnership working is becoming more and more popular in the not-for-profit sector. Commissioning bodies see partnership working as the way forward to get better value for their money and deliver more effective services. This guide has been developed in order to help not-for-profit organisations establish successful partnerships.

The guide focuses on a number of practical steps to help not-for-profit organisations create sustainable and effective partnerships.

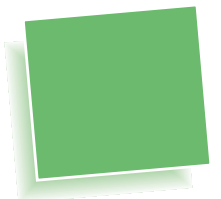
# Introduction

We define 'partnership' as a number of organisations working together to deliver more than each participating organisation could deliver alone. Where organisations have agreed that there is benefit in establishing a partnership, the structure of that partnership will largely depend upon:

- The purpose for which the partnership is established
- The benefits it wishes to deliver
- The organisations – large and small – involved in the partnership
- The requirements of the key stakeholders in the partnership
- The timeframe involved

There are a number of reasons why organisations may want to work together to address a specific issue or issues. Organisations working in partnership – sometimes referred to as 'collaborative working' - might want to achieve one or more of the following benefits for their own organisation and the partnership as a whole:

- Deliver increased benefit for end users and beneficiaries
- Attract additional public funding
- Strengthen lobbying and negotiating power
- Find better ways of doing things
- Build capacity to deliver
- Share costs of common functions to support more effective delivery of services
- Spread the risk of service delivery



Partnerships are about sharing resources, experience and skills to achieve outcomes that benefit partner organisations and the communities that they serve. It takes time and planning to ensure that the contribution of each organisation is both effective and realistic within the limits of available resources. Whatever the trigger for forming a short term or longer-term arrangement, it is essential to establish the right form of partnership for the right reasons.


The partnership needs to:


- Be focused on achieving shared objectives
- Be aligned to individual partners' aims and objectives
- Add value to each of the organisations involved in the partnership
- Reflect the needs of all stakeholders who might have an interest in the partnership outcomes
- Have planned activity that is managed effectively
- Have sufficient financial and human resource to ensure that agreed deliverables and aims are achieved

This guide explores the types of partnership that might be appropriate for the not-for-profit sector and provides practical, step-by-step advice for establishing an effective partnership.



The guide consists of the following sections:

- Key attributes of partnerships
  - Establishing a successful partnership
  - 6 phases to creating a successful partnership
    1. Developing the partnership strategy
    2. Agreeing how the partnership will operate
    3. Ensuring stakeholder support
    4. Committing the resources
    5. Making it happen
    6. Reviewing the partnership development process
- 



Each section explores each of those considerations in more detail, identifying:

- What is required of each phase of partnership development
  - The involvement of senior managers from all organisations in the partnership
  - An approach that might be employed to support the creation and management of an effective partnership
- 

# Key attributes of partnerships

There are many different types of partnerships. Whilst no two partnerships are the same, we believe that they can be generally grouped together into three main types. The most appropriate type of partnership will vary according to particular circumstances; they may be short term and tactical in nature, or might lead to more permanent, strategic arrangements being put in place.

The key attributes of the three types of partnership are detailed in the table below. The table offers examples but is not an exhaustive list.

	Short-term/ temporary partnership	Strategic alliance partnership	Merger/full partnership
Format	Few partners, typically 2 but can be more Seeking short term advantage for mutual benefit	Usually a larger partnership Addressing issues of common strategic importance	Usually 2 organisations with a similar purpose or complementary aims and objectives
Typical drivers	Opportunity for joint funding bid Campaigning or lobbying on a specific issue locally, regionally, or nationally	Changes to local purchasing policies providing opportunities for larger scale delivery contracts Competition from other organisations within and outside the local area	Taking advantage of a significant business opportunity Preserving the activities of one or both organisations
Outcome or skill focused	Outcome focused for a specific tender or purpose	Focused around sharing key skills and competencies required for several purposes	A new organisation combining skills, competencies and required outcomes
Individual or shared identity	Individual identities preserved	Individual identities preserved	Shared identity with a new brand or name Consortium or new company
Time	Lasts for a defined period of time, not long-term	May be on-going over time but can be stopped whenever some or all of the participating parties decide to	Long term commitment combining activities of all parties

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## Establishing a successful partnership

Putting together the right partnership framework requires preparation and planning, no matter what size the partnership or the issue(s) being addressed. It is critical that agreement on key factors is reached by senior managers from all organisations involved. This early, senior level of involvement is essential for ensuring that the potential benefits of the partnership are realised. Therefore, the senior managers need to:

- Be clear that the partnership will complement their organisation's core activity
- Have the authority to commit the necessary resources so that the partnership aims and objectives are achieved to an agreed plan
- Understand how the partnership will be managed

If the potential benefits of a partnership are to be realised, it is essential that all parties have a clear understanding of how the partnership will affect day-to-day activity, and are clear about the level of commitment required from all partners. There are, therefore, a number of key questions that need to be addressed in the early stages by the senior managers representing all organisations in the proposed partnership.

Key amongst those questions are:

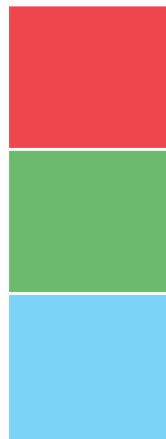
**Why should the partnership exist?** - an opportunity for each organisation to be clear that the partnership complements the strategic aims of each potential partner, and that the partnership will make a difference to the issues being addressed and/or the community being served

**Which organisations should be involved?** - it is worth investing the time to make sure that there is an appropriate mix of organisations who will all make a positive contribution to the aims and objectives of the partnership

**What will it achieve?** - a very clear understanding of the deliverables and outcomes for the partnership, agreed by all of the organisations involved

**How will agreed deliverables and outcomes be achieved?** - development of activity, workload and resource plans as a group will ensure a successful partnership that achieves the agreed deliverables and outcomes

**How will the partnership activity be managed?** - clear governance, reporting and decision-making structures are essential to the success of any partnership, ensuring that issues are addressed efficiently and risks are identified and managed effectively



## Establishing a successful partnership

The amount of time needed to discuss the style of partnership, how it will operate and what it will achieve will vary according to the nature of the partnership activity and the partners involved. However, it is important to allow sufficient time for the potential partners to have specific discussions, not only as a group, but also in their individual organisations.

***The early and ongoing involvement of senior managers from all organisations is crucial to a successful partnership.***

We believe the most effective format for these discussions is to involve the senior managers from all organisations in a series of structured, facilitated workshops with the intent of enabling them to reach consensus on a range of issues. This approach should provide sufficient time for discussion of particular topics, and allow for reflection outside of the workshops. It is also important that outcomes from each workshop are documented so that each partner can, between work shop sessions, discuss the outcomes within their own organisation.

Whilst there may be facilitation skills within the partnership organisations, it is worth considering the use of an experienced facilitator from outside the partnership. Independent facilitation will ensure that each partner is seen to be treated equally, and that all attendees at the workshop are able to contribute fully and effectively. The format for these workshops will vary depending on the nature and purpose of the partnership, but planned and well-managed workshops will provide an effective way of agreeing the principles.



# 6 phases to creating a successful partnership

The table below summarises the 6 key phases in establishing an effective, successful partnership:

Phase	Title	Activities	Tools*
1	Developing the partnership strategy	Agreeing the vision, values, objectives, deliverables and outcomes	Partnership strategy
2	Agreeing how the partnership will operate	Identifying partner contribution to making the partnership work Agreeing how partners will work together Developing a project plan for establishing the partnership	Project tools for setting up the partnership: Planning: partnership roadmap and detailed project plan People: roles and responsibilities chart, governance arrangements Risk and issue management: risk and issue logs and review process Progress reporting: progress report and review process Financial plan Change management: process to manage subsequent changes to the partnership Exit strategy for the partnership
3	Ensuring stakeholder support	Understanding stakeholders needs and ensuring their support for the partnership	Analysis of stakeholder priorities and needs Communications plan for regular and appropriate communication with stakeholders
4	Committing the resources	Confirming the commitment of all partners	Legal agreements/memorandum of understanding Service level agreements Funding agreements Staffing agreement
5	Making it happen	Undertaking the actions required to establish the partnership	Progress reports
6	Reviewing the partnership development process	Formal review of the process and assessment of the partnership strategy	Review reports

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\* More information on tools can be found in Appendix 1.

Example tools can also be downloaded from our website - [www.n2-consulting.com/partnerships](http://www.n2-consulting.com/partnerships)

# Phase 1: Developing the partnership strategy

Developing a consistent and shared strategy for the partnership is essential to its future success. There are a number of discussions that need to be had in order to answer some key questions and others that will arise as the partnership strategy develops. In the early stages of the partnership development, the structured workshop series will enable senior managers to agree:

- The key drivers for the partnership - why the partnership will exist and what it will achieve
- A vision for the partnership - a future view of what will be different as a result of partnership activity
- Core values and principles - what a partnership believes in, how partners will work with each other and the community
- Strategic objectives - the key deliverables and outcomes for the partnership
- Critical success factors - the key elements of partnership activity that will ensure success
- Key barriers and risks - the factors that might impact on a successful partnership
- The contribution that each organisation will make to the partnership objectives

The partnership strategy document produced will form the basis of any subsequent memorandum of understanding and/or service level agreement, and will inform the subsequent phases of partnership development as discussed in the following sections.



## Approach

We suggest that the partnership strategy is developed through a series of structured workshops, preferably facilitated by an independent party. It is also important to have reflection time outside of these workshops to review the output of the workshop and to allow each partner organisation time to talk to their staff.

Below is a guide as to how the workshops may be structured:

### Workshop 1

Discuss and agree the key drivers, vision, values and objectives.

### Workshop 2

Review and confirm the output from workshop 1 and discuss the critical success factors, key risks and contribution from each partner.

### Workshop 3

Review and confirm the output from workshop 1 and 2.

There may be further workshops needed, if further time is required or to resolve key issues or disagreements.

## Phase 2: Agreeing how the partnership will operate

The workshop activity in Phase 1 resulted in a partnership strategy detailing amongst other aspects, the vision, values, objectives, deliverables and outcomes, as well as the contribution of each organisation. The next step to be agreed is how the partnership will operate, its shape and how it will be managed.

The information gathered at this stage will add more substance to the partnership strategy, and the continued involvement of senior managers from all partner organisations remains crucial. The key questions that need to be addressed in this phase, include:

- What is the governance structure and decision-making process?
- What is the process for managing risks and issues?
- What is the process for managing changes to the partnership strategy?
- What are the main areas of work that need to be undertaken to establish the partnership?
- Who will be responsible for each area of work?
- How will performance be measured and communicated?
- How will the partnership be funded?



## Approach

The use of structured, facilitated workshops will provide the most effective way of answering these questions. The purpose of the workshops will be to design and create a number of project management tools (see Appendix I for further detail), to enable the actual creation of the partnership. This phase is vitally important as it is when the senior managers and key staff of each partner organisation will identify in detail what actually needs to happen to set up the working partnership.

The content that will be created in these workshops is crucial to the partnership's future success, and therefore it is likely there will be further work necessary outside of these sessions to test the newly created management tools.

Below is a guide as to how the workshops may be structured:

### Workshop 1

Discuss and agree the overall governance and decision-making process for the partnership.

### Workshop 2

Discuss and agree the content for the project tools and allocate responsibilities to individuals/smaller working group to develop the project tools outside of the workshop.

### Workshop 3

Review and agree the governance and decision-making process and review the project tools.

Again, further workshops may be required depending on the size and scope of the partnership.

## Phase 3: Ensuring stakeholder support

An aspect that is key to the success of any partnership is the support and engagement of key stakeholders. Some stakeholders may already be involved in the partnership, but having a full understanding of all stakeholder needs and a clear strategy for communicating with them is vital to successful delivery of partnership activity. Continued involvement from the senior managers of all organisations will be critical in this exercise and discussion amongst all partners will add further value to the overall understanding of partnership activity.

The key questions that need to be addressed in this phase include:

- Who are the key stakeholders that might have an interest in the partnership activity?
- What are the stakeholder's priorities and needs?
- How will those priorities affect partnership activity?
- What does the partnership need from the stakeholders?
- How will the partnership engage and communicate with the stakeholders?





## Approach

The use of structured, facilitated workshops will provide the most effective way of answering these questions. The purpose of the workshops will be to create a stakeholder analysis and communications plan. Information and knowledge from individual partners will be essential to developing a complete picture of the stakeholder's priorities and needs. The workshops will enable partners to undertake the stakeholder analysis, and identify the needs of stakeholders. Examples of stakeholder groups are:

- The customers and suppliers that each partner contracts with or supplies services to
- The community and voluntary groups that might promote the partnership
- The recipients of existing services
- Other organisations involved in delivery of partner's core services
- Staff in individual organisations that might be affected by partnership activity
- The key funders of core and/or project activity
- Agencies and mainstream service providers that might have an interest in partnership activity
- The press, radio and TV organisations that might support the partnership
- Any other organisation that might have an interest in partnership activity

Below is a guide as to how the stakeholder workshop may be structured:

### Workshop

Identify all stakeholders; agree their needs and importance to the partnership, agree the method, frequency and content of communications, and agree the person who will manage the communications for each individual stakeholder or group of stakeholders.

One or more workshops may be required depending on the size and scope of the partnership.

# Phase 4:

## Committing the resources

By this phase, the partnership will have reached a crucial decision point and now needs to make the final commitment of the financial and human resources that will be needed to establish the partnership. The workshops that have taken place prior to this phase should have facilitated a process of open discussion at a senior level. These discussions are critical in order to build trust between all of the partners – an essential element of any successful partnership.

### Approach

We suggest a three-stage approach for this critical stage of the partnership development, which comprises of the individual partner review, the collective partnership review and the formal partnership sign off:

#### Individual partner review

Representatives in each organisation need to have communicated the partnership strategy and requirements within their own organisation, to ensure that they have the appropriate level of support and approval. The information gathered thus far will enable representatives from each organisation to demonstrate the value of the partnership to their own organisation by:

- Presenting the final partnership strategy document
- Demonstrating how the partnership activity will align with their organisation's strategy
- Demonstrating the commitment and investment that their organisation will need to make
- Reviewing the risks that might affect the partnership and how they will be managed



## Collective partnership review

The development approach in the first three phases has been designed to ensure that the partner organisations understand the requirements, key risks and issues associated with developing the partnership. It is therefore unlikely that key issues relating to the key principles, strategic objectives and outcomes will be raised at this stage (although not impossible – there may be external influences that could change an individual partner's perspective). However, it is more likely that other risks and issues to the partnership as a whole might be raised as a consequence of the individual partner review. It is essential that those risks and issues are discussed fully by all partners before the final decision is made to go ahead. A single, facilitated workshop of approximately 3-4 hours duration should enable all partner views to be taken into account and a strategy agreed to manage any outstanding risks and issues.

## Formal sign off

The final partnership strategy document and appendices will reflect the consensus that has been reached in all of the areas considered. The partnership as a whole will understand:

- What it is trying to achieve
- How the partnership will be managed
- Who will be responsible for delivering the workstream activity
- How the agreed deliverables and outcomes will be achieved

In order to clarify and further formalise partner commitment to the strategy, the final partnership strategy document should be formally agreed by each partner. Depending on the size and nature of the partnership, further, formal documents might be appropriate and include:

- Legal agreements – for example, arrangements for a joint venture or to protect intellectual property
- Memorandum of understanding – outlining the framework for partners to undertake joint activities
- Service level agreements – to manage specific activity undertaken by an individual partner on behalf of the partnership
- Funding agreements – where additional funding has been sought or given by a stakeholder not formally part of the partnership
- Staffing agreements – detailing the resources that will be committed or seconded to deliver partnership activity

# Phase 5: Making it happen

So far the partnership phases have focused on designing and planning the partnership - so that all of the partners and their respective organisations know exactly what they are involved in and the commitment they are making. The following has been achieved:

- Strategic objectives have been agreed and documented
- The way in which the partnership will operate and be managed has been established
- The workload required to establish the partnership has been determined
- Responsibility for the various workstreams has been allocated
- The resource plans are in place
- Adequate financial resource has been set aside

The partnership is now ready to be created. The creation of the partnership should be viewed as a 'project' in its own right. As with any project, there are a number of questions that need to be addressed and managed, including:

- Are outcomes and key milestones being achieved?
- Are key risks and issues being appropriately mitigated/managed?
- Is the partnership project progressing to budget and on time?
- Is additional budget required?
- Are there sufficient resources?
- Are stakeholders being managed and are communications working effectively?





## Approach

The partnership team will need to put in place sound project management processes to ensure that agreed deliverables and outcomes are delivered. The team should appoint a project manager and appropriate project resources to support the project manager. The project management team will be responsible for:

- **Planning:** reviewing progress against the partnership roadmap and detailed project plan
- **People:** ensuring roles and responsibilities are operational and the appropriate governance arrangements are in place (such as weekly/monthly progress meetings, appropriate escalation of key issues and decisions)
- **Risk and issue management:** maintaining risk and issue logs and ensuring they are being proactively managed
- **Progress reporting:** providing progress reports
- **Financial plan:** managing the budget
- **Change management:** managing the change process (where key partnerships documents such as the strategy may require a change which needs to be reviewed and agreed by all partners)
- **Communications:** ensuring all stakeholders are communicated with in an appropriate manner

In addition to the project management resources, there will need to be a number of working groups that will be co-ordinated by the project management team. These working groups will focus on doing the work required to make the partnership 'real'. Examples of this may include:

- Designing the organisational structure and business processes for the partnership (an existing process may be taken from one or more partners and applied consistently across all organisations or an entirely new structure or process may be designed)
- Developing a strategy for linking IT systems across the partners
- Developing a funding strategy for the partnership



# Phase 6:

## Reviewing the partnership development process

This final phase offers the opportunity to review the development process and how effective the overall method of setting up the partnership has been. Those responsible will need to address questions such as:

- Were the right people involved?
- Were they involved at the right stage?
- Were the workshops an effective use of time?
- What could have been done more effectively?
- Were the tools used appropriate and useful?
- Could additional or better tools have been used?
- Were the outputs from the workshops documented effectively?
- Was the frequency of organisation review appropriate?
- Did stakeholders feel informed at appropriate stages?
- Do stakeholders think the partnership will achieve the vision?



## Approach

Below is a guide as to how the review may be structured:

- Analysis of the project tools and management processes
- Analysis of the feedback from individual workshop sessions in the previous stages
- Structured, sample interviews with partnership team, partners and stakeholders
- Structured surveys to supplement and/or inform the interview programme

It is important to plan the reviews at an early stage in the process so that the data required can be identified and captured along the way rather than created retrospectively. It may be worth considering the use of an independent party to ensure that the review is carried out in an objective way.

**Finally**, the review reports are an opportunity to learn, provide feedback, identify improvements and inform future partnership activity.

We hope you find our guide to building practical working partnerships between not-for-profit organisations useful. Establishing an alliance is rarely easy, and there may be some tricky times on the road ahead. However, our approach should help you find a way forward and remember this: when partnerships work well they have the power to improve your service delivery and make your working lives easier and more productive.

Good luck!

See back page for Appendix 1: Key project management tools



# Appendix 1: Key project management tools

Area	Title	Description	Benefits
Planning	Partnership roadmap	Describes the different stages that the partnership will go through before becoming a reality	Ensures that all parties have a good understanding about what stages they will need to go through in setting up the partnership
	Partnership plan	Plans the various activities needed for the successful completion of each stage of the partnership roadmap	Illustrates all necessary actions and ensures all parties are aware of who is responsible for them
	Partnership strategy document	Underpins the creation of a partnership by defining the key characteristics including the vision, objectives, critical success factors and key risks.	Ensures that all parties contribute to, and have a full understanding of what the partnership is trying to achieve and how it will be created.
Risks and issues	Risk log	Identifies potential risks to the partnership and mitigating actions	The early identification of risks and appropriate mitigating actions reduces the likelihood of the risk becoming a reality
	Issue log	Records issues that have occurred that may effect the partnership and the actions taken to resolve them	Ensures that all parties are aware of any issues affecting the partnership, reducing the likelihood of them happening again
Resources	Role and responsibility matrix	Illustrates the different roles and their various responsibilities within the partnership	Reduces confusion regarding who is responsible for what within the partnership and illustrates the potential accountability for each role
Stakeholders and communications	Stakeholder analysis and communications plan	Identifies all of the potential stakeholders and their potential influence on the partnership, as well as planning and recording all communications to those stakeholders	Ensures that all stakeholders are kept up to date and that all parties are aware of any previous communications

For examples of these tools please visit our website at [www.n2-consulting.com/partnerships](http://www.n2-consulting.com/partnerships) or contact us on 0845 3311314

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