



Seminar Briefing – February 2009

Working in Partnership

Partnership working is an agenda for the third sector that has grown in importance over the past few years. One reason for the growth of voluntary and community sector (VCS) collaboration within and across sectors, is the government's belief that partnerships have a strong role to play in building strong and active communities and in the delivery of public services.

On 20th January 2009, KCSC held a seminar called *Working in Partnership* with the aim of exploring whether there is real value for voluntary and community organisations that work together in partnership and how it can be achieved. It explored the pitfalls of partnership working and lessons which can be learnt, and gave participants a chance to explore their own organisation's potential for partnership working.

A Success Story

The first speaker of the evening was **Helen Leech**, Director of Open Age. Helen presented on the partnership which got together to create the New Horizons centre in Chelsea. Helen gave an open and honest account of how the partnership between Open Age, Sixty Plus and the Guinness Trust developed and why it has worked.

Some of the key points of why the partnership works included a history of working together, having a clear vision about what the partnership wanted to achieve and clarified role and responsibilities written into a partnership agreement. Finally Helen ended her presentation by stating that strategies were put in place to ensure that there was effective communication and believes this to be a vital element for a successful partnership.

Partnership Drivers

The second speaker of the evening was **Gareth Coles** from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) who gave a presentation on partnership drivers i.e. who or what is behind the reasons for partnership working in the sector. Gareth highlighted the four main drivers:

1. The Government

Over the past few years, the government has delivered a strong message that the third sector be recognised as a key partner in public service delivery. The mechanism appropriate to ensuring that the VCS are able to bid for public sector contracts is the partnership or consortia model.

2. Public Opinion

Gareth noted that 58% of the general public think that there are too many charities. Public opinion may drive charities to consider working together to streamline or improve services and avoid duplication.

3. The Charity Commission

The Commission has also said that that charities should consider working together as a way to lessen competition for funding and strengthen the position for the sector generally.

4. Funders

Funder-led collaborations have become more frequent than in the past, but rather than being organic, this type of partnership can feel forced.

Support for Collaborations – The policy context

After the consultation on *Destination 2014; (2007)*, Capacity Builders National Support Programme included the building of collaboration and alliances across the sector. A dedicated workstream for collaborations was set up in 2008 to deliver on this agenda.

The Office of the Third Sector has recently published a guide for third sector organisations called *Working in a Consortium (2008)* as part of the third sector action plan for partnership in public services.

In 2006, the Charities Act made it easier for charities to merge and easier to receive gifts and legacies. The Finance Act also published in 2006 has enabled jointly owned charities to gift aid partners.

In closing Gareth stated that the **1 + 1 = 3 model** of a partnership should be applied when considering collaboration. This means that the partnership brings added value to the individual organisation, therefore helping to achieve its objectives better than it could alone.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned were presented by **Ian Baker**, Development Director from the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE). Ian addressed the many issues which can face organisations when partnerships go wrong. One such lesson was an overly ambitious competitive bid for a contract which led to hasty and unworkable situations particularly where partners are involved.

SSE's experience of competitive tendering and setting targets that were extremely challenging led them into difficulties when working with a partner organisation that was not as committed as SSE. Ian's advice to the sector when writing a competitive bid was:

- To ensure from the outset the agreed rationale for target setting so that all partners buy into the idea of meeting the targets.
- To know your capacity as an organisation, the money may be attractive but delivering the services must be prioritised.
- To always communicate with partners. Set up a structure which will ensure effective communication.

- To know your partners. It is important that the lead body has had some previous connection with the partner and so has an informed brief about their way of working and capacity to deliver.
- To carry out regular reviews, not just end of year reviews as this will enable the partnership to identify and deal with problems before they become unmanageable.

Ian concluded his presentation by saying that workers on the ground must be able to see the vision for a partnership as well as the senior management team or chief officer. It needs the buy in from all staff involved to make a partnership work.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

The question and answer session clarified many of the key points raised during the presentations;

- There must be shared accountability so that when partners are not pulling their weight they are accountable to the other partners.
- Partners must take control from the outset and not allow the funding to take control. Money, however important should not be the driver.
- Personalities can play a large part in the success or failure of a partnership.
- Small groups or organisations just starting out may find it difficult to work in partnership with well established groups as they lack reputation or experience.
- Working with small groups can allow for greater creativity as they are less restricted by structure.

The group exercise gave those that attended the opportunity to discuss in pairs what they believe their organisation has to offer in a partnership and what they might need support in. The exercise allowed participants to assess their organisations capacity and assets and revealed that local groups have much to offer in partnerships.

In closing **Mary Gardiner**, Chief Executive of KCSC stated that the sector has a great ability to work in partnership and has much to learn from each other. Partnerships should not be allowed to suffer because of personalities that cannot work together but should strive to overcome differences.

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