
Executive Summary

Interagency partnering between local and central government has been gaining traction over the last 10 years. The Community Outcomes process under Local Government Act (2002) has brought a focus to the relationship and will be a catalyst for further collaboration between local and central government.

Partnering covers a broad spectrum of joint working arrangements, with relationships between people the essential factor.

Partnering is key to addressing complex social problems which are generally beyond the realm of any one agency working alone. There are many other practical gains from central and local government working more closely together.

New kinds of agreement frameworks are needed to better support partnering objectives and approaches. Traditional top down contracting models do not easily fit with partnering.

Written documentation is essential for successful interagency partnering and helps to mitigate against two common risks to partnering – personnel and environmental changes. It is also useful to have a clear documented vision for working together in case things go wrong.

Developing agreements

The process of developing an agreement is as important as the end product itself. This can take considerable time so the anticipated benefits from putting pen to paper need to outweigh the likely risks and costs.

The agreement development process is a key opportunity for people to get to know each other, find out how each agency works and explore the common ground between them. Meeting face to face is the key for relationship building.

It is often useful to balance the agreement development process alongside efforts to start concrete projects collaboratively. This both gives a sense of progress, and contributes to understanding of what is needed in written documents. Agreements alone do not make things happen. Developing shared work programmes and review processes helps put agreements into practice.

Each agreement is unique, reflecting the partners, their history and their purpose for coming together. (Cutting and pasting, or simply re-hashing agreements developed for other partnering purposes might be tempting, but is not advisable!) There are no hard and fast rules about what an agreement should look like, and terminology about agreements is often used interchangeably.

Agreements can be developed with the assistance of an external facilitator, or by the parties themselves, with one acting as a “lead agency”.

Critical issues

There are a range of emerging critical issues for partnering and implementation of partnering agreements including:

Time and resourcing: Partnering is time consuming and generally resource hungry, and should be used selectively. “Meaningful” relationships are the key, and time needs to be taken to develop and monitor these. The agreements must be managed as agreements between organisations, rather than between individuals, so that appropriate processes and timeframes must be invested in.

Differing approaches and resourcing capabilities: There are not consistent approaches to partnering within or between government agencies or local government agencies. Workforce development will be required around developing and maintaining effective partnering agreements. Currently most emphasis has been on contracting relationships which tend to be “top down”.

Risk management: Government and local government agencies are publicly responsible and have to manage for risk. Partnering, particularly new partnering relationships formed to address difficult issues, will require elements of risk-taking, and will not be enhanced by over-emphasis on risk management, or by centralised rigid compliance systems. A balance will need to be developed which encourages and supports innovation.

Tensions between collaborative and competitive tendering processes: The Local Government Act (2002) points to the need for a culture of collaboration around Community Outcomes. However many current funding mechanisms are competitive. The tension which this creates is not conducive to partnering. Thought will need to be given to appropriate funding mechanisms which do not undermine, or reduce the potential for, effective partnering.

Learnings from the Funding for Outcomes integrated contract work led by the Ministry of Social Development around good practice for integrated service delivery are an example of constructive work underway by Government agencies to address these tensions.