

# Community Learning Reform

## Support and Resources for Providers

### Partnerships – Top Tips

#### Introduction

Partnership working has become a condition for receiving Community Learning funding from the Skills Funding Agency (Skills Funding Statement 2012 p.13). Partnerships are seen as a mechanism for making efficient use of Community Learning allocations to ensure that the £210 million Community Learning budget has maximum impact, avoids duplication and unnecessary competition and involves communities in planning and evaluation.

Working in partnership is already an important element of the work of most, if not all, community learning providers who usually have a number of different partnering arrangements in place that serve different purposes. The Community Learning Trust pilots demonstrate the value of reviewing your partnering arrangements to make sure they meet the demands of current community learning contexts, policy, and funding.

Reviewing your partners and the nature and purpose of your partnerships will enable you to respond more creatively and effectively to the complex demands of the current times, including to:

- establish collaborative strategic planning to ensure a comprehensive community learning offer across a locality;
- respond to the wider responsibilities of Local Authorities and other statutory bodies; for example wellbeing, public health, social care, services for older people, crime reduction etc.;
- ensure there are synergies between community learning plans and other local strategies and plans;
- link with LEPs, employers and social planning partnerships;
- support employability and pathways into employment;
- secure community involvement in planning, designing, monitoring and evaluating community learning;
- widen and increase participation in community learning;
- support localism through enhancing the capacity of local people and groups;
- support grass roots activism, democratic participation and increased volunteering.

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## Top tips

1. Allocate sufficient time and resources. Negotiating partnership agreements, often with several partners, takes a good deal of time and operating and monitoring partnerships can require considerable resource input.
2. Review and update your partnering arrangements to ensure that they enable you to respond to the social and economic needs of the communities you work with as well as funding and policy requirements. Decide which partners are relevant and limit partnerships to those who have something of value to contribute. Plan how best to secure the involvement of new organisations.
3. Be clear about the nature of your partnering relationships and what success will look like. Decide whether they are strategic or operational and where they fall on the spectrum from informal links to formal partnerships. This will help determine what role you will negotiate with partners such as network members, allies, associates, advisors, critical friends, steering group members, strategic planning and/or delivery partners. Recognise what they do best and play to their strengths when arranging their involvement.
4. Identify the mutual benefits for each partner and build common agreement around shared objectives, outcomes, timescales and level of commitment. These shared expectations should be realistic and explicit. Recognise that 'collaborative gain' from partnerships rarely happens by chance but needs to be planned and monitored. Make sure that partners understand and are committed to their respective roles.
5. Put strategies in place to build trust between partners and confidence that each will deliver. This needs to be actively developed through, for example, open and transparent working practices and collaborative activity such as joint planning, consultation, funding applications and/or service delivery.
6. Establish effective and inclusive communication processes. Agree how and when to communicate and who will do it. Plan meetings well so that they are purposeful and efficient and make sure they are attended by people with appropriate knowledge and decision making powers. Watch out for the 'dead hand' of bureaucracy stifling involvement and creativity.
7. Consider how you will recognise and respond to the challenges of partners' different cultures, viewpoints, ways of working or competing priorities. The different assumptions, perspectives, skills and knowledge that partners bring can challenge your practice so it is important to find ways of harnessing these to enhance your work and to be open to change.

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8. Put strategies in place to resolve conflict, especially for addressing difficult and intractable issues, such as aggressive competition arising from institutional self interest. Tackle any difficulties quickly and sensitively and aim to negotiate 'win win' solutions.

9. Make sure that your working arrangements and communications are appropriate and accessible to local people and grass roots organisations. Be alert to issues of power, equity and inclusion. Make dialogue, negotiation and participatory practice intrinsic to your culture to build trust, enable local voices to be heard and support creativity. Offer training where appropriate, for example to support membership of a Board.

10. Review partnering arrangements regularly and plan contingency. Circumstances can change over time and external forces, such as budget cuts, sometimes prevent partners from continuing their commitment.

**This documents has been produced by NIACE as part of the Community Learning Reform, Support and Resources for Providers work, November 2013**

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