Good Practice Guide: Assessing partnership working

This guide has been prepared to assist local partnerships delivering projects as part of Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs initiative. Many of the projects have identified the need to build and develop their partnerships. This guide signposts some of the available learning and support resources for assessing partnerships; it suggests how resources may be used and tailored by projects and includes some tips on effective partnership building as part of organisational learning. The guide outlines good practice and the latest thinking on partnership working; it is not a review of local partnerships' performance.

Background

Big Lottery Fund's (BigLF) initiative *Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs* aims to improve the stability, confidence and capability of people with multiple and complex needs to lead better lives as a result of timely, supportive and coordinated services so that they spend less time in prison, reduce their substance misuse, are in stable accommodation and have better mental health.

BigLF have funded one partnership in each of 12 selected areas in England and expect local partnerships to ensure that the investment complements other interventions in the area.

Partnerships are voluntary sector led and bring together representatives of other voluntary and community sector organisations, public sector service providers and local commissioners. Partnerships should work to make services more joined up with better systems for sharing information and assessing needs. They have an important role to play in leading and influencing local systems change. In addition, partnerships are expected to analyse gaps in local provision, share and communicate widely on learning and genuinely involve people with multiple and complex needs in the design, development and delivery of the project.

Why effective partnerships are important in supporting people with multiple and complex needs

Complex needs involve complex solutions. To achieve their aims the projects all have groups of individuals and organisations working together at a number of levels: typically a core group and a wider partnership. Much therefore depends on the quality of partnership working. These partnerships are in their own right complex and evolving systems.

Funded projects work through partnerships in the following ways to achieve their aims:

Governance – a partnership is a leadership group who have a shared vision of the systemic change they wish the project to attain. They work together to define this vision in such a way that all the members of the partnership can own it. They continually refine the vision and communicate it to members and stakeholders. They have overriding responsibility for why the project exists and what beneficial outcomes result. They work through a business strategy or plan and an executive arm that implement their intentions.

Engagement – active members are the life-blood of any partnership. Members must be clear about why they are engaged and what their role involves. Partnerships are rarely the coming together of equals, but all members should comfortably identify with the project purpose. All projects are seeking to cultivate the active engagement of their members and wider stakeholders. This is particularly the case with user and peer-led approaches integral to the projects' visions. Successful engagement is vital to project outcomes, sustainability and ultimately enduring system change.

Resources – it is through the partnership that the lead partner (a single organisation often called the accountable body) is held to account by the members for how finances are spent. The partnership body will concern itself with systems of resource allocation. It ensures that decisions are purposeful, transparent, fair and equitable. Resource allocation involves financial control, questions of probity, of value for money and asset management. The latter includes effective leadership and management of the partnership's workforce.

Expertise – one of the great strengths of partnership working, for this initiative in particular, is that it enables the pooling of experience, skills, knowledge, and influence. By ensuring mutual access to both individual and organisational expertise partnerships can secure added value

from all the ideas and suggestions of its members. Learning and training together is an indicator of an effective partnership.

Management – it is unlikely that partnerships will undertake project delivery directly but members are very likely to be agents of implementation. This can be a sensitive area for partnerships where they must wrestle with conflicts of interest, with personal and organisational challenge and tendencies to 'micro-manage'. It is a partnership responsibility to determine the form of oversight of organisations, groups and people (managers) undertaking delivery. Most commonly they do this through regular business planning and risk assessment processes

Review and evaluation – fundamental to funded projects is the support provided to people with multiple and complex needs. The ultimate gauge of an effective partnership is that it achieves the beneficial outcomes signed-up to on its behalf by the lead partner. To do this it must understand, agree and provide evidence of the measures of success. In turn this demands that partnership members are fully engaged with the mechanisms of review and evaluation. An effective partnership will have its finger on the pulse of outcomes – both qualitatively and quantitatively. It will be concerned with data and information, with evidence of positive impact and with sharing learning. It will actively seek opportunities to demonstrate the progress of the project.

Characteristics of an effective partnership

An effective partnership will be characterised by:

— *A simple and clear vision that expresses the purpose of the project in everyday language;*

— *Active members who know their role and that of each other;*

— *The leadership of respected people;*

— *Evidence of user and peer-led participation and involvement;*

— *Collaborative decision-making that values consensus;*

— *An easily accessible business plan;*

— *Financial transparency;*

— *An approach that shares knowledge and develops people's skills;*

— *Clarity of responsibility for the specifics of implementation; and*

— *Aims and goals that are SMART – specific, measureable, achievable, relevant and time-bound.*

Individual partnership members will demonstrate behaviours that champion the project, show openness to challenge, share information, reveal understanding of fellow partners and

essentially exhibit mutual trust in each other. They will make evident both the successes and short-comings of the project.

Creating, developing and sustaining effective partnerships

Effective partnerships don't just happen because a group of people or organisations have a common purpose, albeit this is the foundation stone. A partnership is an ever evolving system, a way of working, which requires investment of time and money. Critical to success are the skills and behaviours of leaders in a model of working where everyone has a leadership role.

Because the partnerships have been set up for the purpose of delivering the Fulfilling lives initiative, they will have already documented their intentions. To do this they will have passed through the early stages of partnership creation and design. However it warrants stating that there are steps which all partnerships take as they incrementally develop:

Step One	establishing amongst potential partners that there is purpose in collaboration. Once done this requires regular review, restating and communicating
Step Two	deciding the approach to collaboration and how decisions are to be made. This might include balancing wider inclusion with stream-lined delivery
Step Three	making sure the right partners are round the table to achieve the purpose. Some partners will be 'mission critical' and others will be valued supporters. A partnership may need new partners, for example from the business sector.
Step Four	scoping the collaboration and roles of stakeholders. Knowing who does what is important information in deciding the nature of the partnership and the roles to be played.
Step Five	formalising and documenting the way of working. Understanding the legal standing of each other and of the partnership is essential. There may be intentions to develop the status or standing of the partnership in the future. There are various ways of doing this but there is no substitute for a document that is formalised by signatures.
Step Six	sustaining the partnership. It may seem self-evident that a partnership is sustained by success in achieving its purpose. However members may have separate and divergent needs in addition to their joint enterprise. Catering for these provides sustenance to commitment. Most partnerships will have to plan for changes in individuals even if organisational participation remains stable. The idea of partnership induction is a useful one.

Step Seven   having a way of exiting or bring the partnership to an end. Possible scenarios are the partnership has achieved its immediate purpose and is no longer required, requires renewal to better achieve its purpose or becomes unnecessary because the way of working is the organisational norm. Whichever, a partnership should always have an exit strategy. Big Lottery funded projects in particular are not only about providing more effective support to people with complex and multiple needs but also, vitally, about enduring systemic change.

The Tuckman theory (1965) – forming, storming, norming and performing – offers as helpful an explanation of partnership development, growth and behaviours as it does of teams.

Checking that your partnership is working effectively

An activity that partnerships will want to build into their programmes is to regularly assess their own performance. Carving out the time and space to check how things are going with the complex dynamics of organisational, personal and system relationships that make up the partnerships necessary for Fulfilling lives projects is well worthwhile.

Familiar ways of doing this are partnership away days, engagement of an external facilitator, use of 360º type assessment and feedback methodologies, surveys, checklists and the like.

The BigLF funded projects can choose to use some of their support and development time from Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) to undertake partnership review. The MEAM Approach website also provides some useful resources. .

The MEAM support contract is formed around four two year cycles of support and each area has an allocated local lead. Every two year cycle includes:

— *A diagnostic process and business plan review: looking at each partnership's progress to date, assessing the support received so far, and clarifying ambitions and priorities for the next two years;*

— *The development of a Support Action Plan (SAP) agreeing the support required to meet each partnerships' ambitions over the coming two years; and*

— *The implementation of the support as agreed in the SAP.*

Whilst partnership is a process and not a product of itself, project outcomes hinge on how well that process works. The diverse contributions of people and organisations only become greater than the parts in well-led partnerships that know both their starting point and where they want to head. Below are a series of supportive materials that can help leaders and members of partnerships.

Useful learning and support materials

The MEAM Approach

http://www.themeamapproach.org.uk/the-meam-approach/partnership-and-audit/

(Accessed 27-12-14)

The MEAM (Making Every Adult Matter) Approach is a website dedicated to helping areas design and deliver coordinated services. The non-prescriptive approach has seven core elements the first of which is all about partnerships and audit. The website includes a range of useful resources

Assessing Strategic Partnership: The Partnership Assessment Tool (ODPM/Nuffield 2003)

Assessing Strategic Partnerships The Partnership Assessment Tool.pdf, 202 KB

 (accessed 08-01-15)

Whilst dated this comprehensive tool is still widely used and available. In its entirety it can be received as quite complicated and is best delivered by a skilled facilitator. Nonetheless it is adaptable and easy to customise into more digestible chunks. As a diagnostic, audit and 'health check' framework:

— *It does provide material to conduct an assessment of the current effectiveness of your partnership working.*

— *It does, with repeated use, allow you to chart changes in partnership working overtime.*

— *It does, when used at different organisational levels, highlight a range, and possible diversity, of perspectives.*

— *It will not on its own tell you how all the problems associated with partnership working should be addressed.*

— *It does, however, provide a common framework (and vocabulary) for partners to develop a jointly owned approach to tackling some of the barriers to effective partnership working.*

The Practitioner Hub for Inclusive Business

http://businessinnovationfacility.org/forum/topics/tools-for-assessing (Accessed 28-12-14)

Two assessment tools can be accessed from this site of the Business Partnership Forum. First the ODPM/Nuffield product mentioned above, and a second a tool from the former Local Government Training Organisation (LGNTO) for analysing the depth of partnerships and reviewing how they might be improved

Digging deeper finding answers.pdf, 109 KB

Health Development Agency: The Working Partnership (3 Books, 2003)

http://www.gserve.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/documents/working_partnership_1.pdf   (Accessed 28-12-14)

Book 1 is an introduction

http://www.gserve.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/documents/working_partnership_2.pdf   (Accessed 28-12-14)

Book 2 offers a short-assessment tool

http://www.gserve.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/documents/working_partnership_3.pdf   (Accessed 28-12-14)

Book 3 is a more in-depth assessment and continuous improvement programme

There are lots of materials, worksheets and references that can be copied.

Evaluating Public Partnerships: A Review of Current Practices, Approaches and Toolkits (2005)

http://www.m-e-l.co.uk/casestudies/05.02_Evaluating_Partnerships.pdf (Accessed 28-12-14)

This is a descriptive and comparative review of three partnership assessment tools: the OPDM/Nuffield, LGNTO products and the Health Development Agency products. It includes a useful references section.

Partnership Assessment Tool: East Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (2010)

http://www.leicestershiretogether.org/partnership_assessment_toolkit_mar10.pdf   (Accessed 27-12-14)

This tool says its purpose is to provide a quick and cost effective way for partnerships to assess their effectiveness. It is intended as a starting point for partnership development work, as opposed to a means of assessing partnership performance. It provides a framework for established partnerships to reflect on their activity, whilst also providing a useful checklist for new partnerships. The tool does not tell you how to address problems that are being experienced by a partnership. It draws on the 2003 ODPM/Nuffield work (there is a list of references) and is valuable generically.

Excellence Gateway: Toolkit 2 - Partnership working and planning

http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/2942   (Accessed 27-12-14)

This website (last reviewed in 2013) aims to help establish or enhance the effectiveness of approaches to collaboration on strategy and delivery. The guidance, frameworks, tools and

examples can be used by partnerships to reflect on, develop and improve collaborative working and planning. The Partnership working and planning toolkit has four sections:

1. What does effective partnership working look like? – develop partnership working
2. Where are we now? – review current working practices and refine them to meet partnership needs
3. Where do we want to be? – develop a collaborative vision and direction
4. How are we going to get there? – establish the effectiveness of your approach to collaboration on strategy and delivery

There are downloadable tools and advisory documents in each section

Working better together? Self-assessment questions - improving partnership working (Audit Commission, 2009)

http://archive.audit-commission.gov.uk/auditcommission/subwebs/publications/studies/studyPDF/3517.pdf
(Accessed 27-12-14)

This is an Audit Commission support product from 2009 aimed at Local Strategic Partnerships and delivering the then Sustainable Communities Strategy. The approach of self-assessment questioning around a number of domains is adaptable to the BigLF funded projects. Agreeing the domains and identifying the questions for self-assessment would be a valuable exercise in partnership development.

The Development of an Evaluation Framework for Partnership Working (Maurice Atkinson, Southern Health and Social Services Board, Northern Ireland, 2005)

http://www.ejbrm.com/volume3/issue1 (Accessed 28-12-14)

This is an item in the Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods Volume 3 Issue 1 2005 (pages 1-10) which considers, from an academic perspective, the dimensions involved in the development of a partnerships evaluation framework. It is based on action research undertaken in children's services planning.

ELRHA: Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships (2011)

http://www.elrha.org/work/partnerships/effective-partnerships-guide

(Accessed 27-12-14)

A downloadable report from the humanitarian aid sector that has useful sections on how to go about developing effective collaboration, with tools, tips, case studies and learning reflections.

Partnerships Online

http://www.partnerships.org.uk/ (Accessed 27-12-14)

This generic website about partnerships and participation confesses to being 'old' in parts. It has sections on creating partnerships, on effective participation and on Trusts. Its archive contains durable materials about online communities. In this respect the work of FeverBee http://www.feverbee.com/ (Accessed 27-12-14) offers a wealth of current material on creating thriving online communities. As most partnerships look to sustain their extended membership participation through social media the free resources section of this website is invaluable.

HM Treasury, Office of Government Commerce: A guide for those working together to deliver better public services (2003)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/191515/Managing_risks_with_delivery_partners.pdf (Accessed 27-12-14)

This downloadable guide includes a section about managing risks in partnerships. It should be noted that risk generally is a useful topic for partnerships development exercises.