



Collaborations and partnerships



What are collaborations and partnerships and why are they important?

Collaboration is simply about two or more organisations working together towards a common goal or on the same project. Most social enterprises will collaborate with other organisations at one point or another. Collaborations can arise between two social enterprises or between a social enterprise and a charity or voluntary organisation, but it also often takes place with organisations from the public or private sector.

Collaboration is a flexible option which can take many forms, such as shared resources and shared running of projects or services. It can last for the duration of an event or a project, or even lead to a long term partnership. A partnership is a more systematic and official approach to collaboration, usually tied by a contract or legal agreement. It involves sharing responsibilities, risks and rewards with your partners and is therefore a more formal way to collaborate.

An increasing number of social enterprises are looking into collaboration and partnership. This is because it can be difficult to access grants or funding for projects alone, and also because of the increased pressure to achieve value for money and efficiency which can be done by sharing resources. In some cases, the ability to work across a range of beneficiaries or locations will be a requirement to get a grant or a contract, and will require small organisations to work together to meet such criteria.

Collaborations and partnerships are not for everyone – it has to be an option that works for you. However, if the collaborative process is planned well, a social enterprise working alongside another organisation can often deliver more effective and comprehensive services, access more opportunities and reduce the cost of delivery.

How do collaborations and partnerships work?

Depending on the scale and scope of the collaboration you may need to spend quite some time effectively planning and managing the process. Collaborations and partnerships can take many forms and have different degrees of involvement and durations.

For example, you may link up with another group to organise a one-off event. This could involve carrying out joint fundraising to get money to run the event, and joint marketing to ensure you have a great turnout and generate beneficial Public Relations as a result. Or, you may share resources by allowing another organisation to access your building to run training sessions, which in turns enables you to meet your own outputs and attract new customers to your café.

Mutually beneficial collaborations also tend to share influence and campaigning by promoting each other's activities and initiatives through networks and contacts. More complex examples of collaboration can include sharing office space, resources and even staff members. Alternatively, you may work with another organisation on a joint bid for a fixed term contract, for which you would share the delivery if successful. This type of collaboration should include a service level agreement or some form of formal legal agreement. In these cases you would be presenting yourself to the funder as a partnership.

There are many ways to make a collaboration process work for you, but first there are a number of issues that should be addressed before you get involved.

1 - Why collaborate?

The first thing you should do is to think about **why** you would collaborate. Is it that you want to collaborate or that you need to? Thinking about what your objectives are will ensure that your enterprise can engage in purposeful, focused and useful collaboration. You should also be able to determine what a successful collaboration looks like for you.

Identify or define the reasons why you want to collaborate or why you would consider this option. What does your social enterprise want to achieve in the short, medium and long term through collaboration and partnership? Here are a few examples:

Collaboration will help us...

- survive financially or sustain the enterprise another way
- increase our capacity to deliver on existing or future projects
- augment our chances of getting a contract
- secure funding
- access new opportunities or new markets
- reach more potential beneficiaries (e.g. geographically)
- access new resources/contacts/information/expertise
- work with like-minded organisations
- improve our social/environmental impact

2 - How will your stakeholders be affected?

How will collaboration affect or impact on your customers, beneficiaries and other stakeholders? You need to think about how each of your relevant stakeholders will react and what's in it for them too. Here are some examples:

Collaboration will...

- improve the quality or standards of your products or services
- raise awareness about your social enterprise
- improve access to your products and services (e.g. geographically)
- improve access to finance, contacts and opportunities
- meet customer, funding or commissioning requirements
- reduce costs and increase value for money

Bear in mind that there are not just benefits to collaboration - think about whether there are potential negative impacts on some of your stakeholders too. Remember that collaborating can be quite political and by working alongside some organisations you may alienate others (because they are competitors or have different values, etc.). You will need to weigh those factors against your own strategic priorities when making a decision to collaborate. Here are a few examples of potential side effects:

Collaboration will...

- reduce the quality or standards of your products or services
- confuse people as to what you are about
- dilute your ethical values
- reduce your focus and make you move away from your goals
- increase your costs
- reduce your ability to make your own decisions

3 - What will it mean for your team?

Perhaps some of the most important stakeholders are your team members, colleagues and board of directors. You need to carefully consider what the implications of working in partnership are on each of these groups. Also ensure that you get the relevant people engaged in discussions around planning and managing the collaboration process. Try to answer key questions such as:

- who in your team will be involved
- who will lead on the collaboration process
- whether your team members/colleagues are prepared to collaborate (i.e. has there been buy-in or engagement around the decision)
- whether your team understands the implications on their time and their roles
- whether the benefits for the organisation / customers / beneficiaries are clearly communicated
- whether you have the capacity to address any issues that may arise from this collaboration within your team

4 - How will you work together?

This is a crucial stage during which you should critically consider the collaboration opportunity in order to minimise risks and increase chances of success. You should ask questions to yourself, your team and perhaps involve other stakeholders in order to know more about the potential partner organisation. Questions can include:

- Are your ethical values and objectives compatible?
- Have you agreed what you want to achieve (i.e. are your objectives aligned)?
- Who is doing what? (i.e. is it clear what each party is providing and getting back from the collaboration process?)
- What resources will be required and how much will it cost (financial, management time, other)?
- What are the risks involved in terms of confidentiality, intellectual property, conflicts etc.?
- What are the timescales involved?

5 – How will you ensure that the process is working?

Successful collaborations are not always a smooth process – they need to be planned, managed and reviewed in order to remain effective. This doesn't have to be complex and lengthy, especially if you have clarified the previous questions. The key is to communicate regularly and be prepared to address issues critically as they arise. If one of the parties is not pulling its weight, this must be addressed transparently and monitored to ensure that problems or misunderstandings don't affect your ability to work together.

Planning regular review meetings and talking to each other are probably the best ways of keeping things under control. If some objectives or targets change along the way, make sure that these are clearly communicated and agreed in writing. You must also ensure that you update your plans so that you and your team are using the correct and updated information when it comes to reviewing and evaluating the project/process.

Finding organisations to collaborate with

If you have identified the need to work in collaboration or partnership but haven't yet identified organisations you could work with there are a number of options:

- Look around you – some potential partners can be found within your customers, your suppliers and even your competitors.
- Communicate your needs – if others don't know what you are looking for they will not be able to help! Advertise your needs on your website or through your newsletter or other social networking sites. The website www.fundingcentral.org.uk also provides a facility to advertise for collaborators or partners.
- Take advantage of social enterprise networks, local CVS and other membership or umbrella organisations – use their newsletters, events and contacts to find a suitable partner.
- Do your research and approach potential candidates with your collaborative idea.
- Speak to funders, commissioners and public sector organisations that you are interested in approaching – they often have processes in place to enable and facilitate collaborative working.

Things to look out for with collaborations and partnerships

- Not every organisation is good at collaboration – some enterprises have very specific cultures or work ethics that make it difficult to work in partnership. Try to work with organisations that share your values and your standards otherwise you will end up compensating for their weaknesses.
- Be prepared to end a collaborative process if it is not meeting your objectives or is straining your staff and resources. This may mean setting clear exit options in a contract or in a formal agreement.
- If you cannot create a win-win situation and you cannot terminate your agreement it is likely that the partnership will spoil your working relationships and demoralise your team.

- Keep in mind the potential intellectual property and confidentiality issues around some aspects of your work – be very clear about what resources you will share for the duration of the project and what will remain your enterprise's property during and after the project's lifespan.

Further information

Visit the Bassac website, a membership body for key community organisations, for resources on collaboration and partnerships:

www.bassac.org.uk

(Bassac have also developed a range of self-help and capacity building guides to enable organisations to tender for and deliver public services.)

Visit the National Council for Voluntary Services website:

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Read about Third Sector Foresight:

www.3s4.org.uk/drivers/collaborative-working

Information on Capacitybuilders and Improving Support:

www.improvingsupport.org.uk/resources_by_topic/collaboration.aspx

Visit the Funding Central website:

www.fundingcentral.org.uk