
Building Effective Partnerships Lessons from the Adult & Community Learning Fund



Adult & Community Learning Fund

The Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF) is a £20 million fund set up by the DfEE. It aims to support more people into learning, especially those who may have been wary of education in the past. The Fund wants to support activities that take learning into sectors of the community not reached by traditional educational organisations, providing opportunities that are relevant to the people involved and delivering them in ways that will interest and attract those who are hardest to reach. It aims to support community based organisations developing new learning opportunities for adults. The fund will end in March 2002.

Building effective partnerships

Effective local partnerships are essential to achieving the objectives of the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF). Successful projects work closely with other relevant agencies to ensure that local resources are used in the most effective way. Partnerships also serve to help learners progress to further learning, employment opportunities and other activities that match and fit their needs.

Partnership working has become important to the development of ACLF funded projects in addressing a wide range of local community needs. However, those involved in the ACLF have found that establishing and maintaining effective partnerships is not easy. They would also tell you that the rewards of partnership working are not automatic.

The lessons learned from the partnership work in the ACLF reveal many critical success factors and points to consider when establishing, maintaining and developing partnerships with others. It is clear that a lot of thought needs to go into setting up a partnership.

This is the fourteenth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues.

Also available:

1. A history of the development of NIACE
2. What motivates people to learn
3. Student non-completion (drop out)
4. Who learns - key facts
5. Family learning
6. Lifelong learning - opportunities and initiatives
7. New Deal
8. Learning centres
9. Young adult learners, disaffection and social exclusion
10. Social exclusion
11. Emancipatory learning
12. Fees charged to part-time adult students
13. Learning and Skills Councils and older people

Suggestions for future issues to be covered are welcome.

Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE.
Tel. No. 0116 2044 261
E-mail: information@niace.org.uk

They are also available on the website at www.niace.org.uk

If you require a different format - e.g. a large print version - please let us know.

Some points to be consider when setting up partnerships:

1. Benefits of partnership working
2. What makes an effective partner?
3. Responsibilities within the partnership
4. Roles/opportunities of partnerships

An Effective Partner

- Has a real role within the partnership
- Has shared goals/interests/aims (these are agreed at the outset and all partners have signed up to them)
- Maintains their own autonomy (although all partners work well together individual autonomy is not lost and is encouraged as well as joint working and learning)
- Is not afraid to ask ‘what’s in it for me?’ and aim to achieve a win/win scenario
- Has expertise/experience or resources to offer and is clear about the contributions
- Is committed to working as part of a team of organisations
- Has the ability and commitment to build solid relationships and trust (over time)
- Is capable of delivering what is agreed and promised

Benefit of partnership working

- Enables learning from each other
- Builds supportive networks
- Cements relationships and builds trust amongst all those involved
- Adds to/enhances organisational capacity and resources and learners benefit as a result
- Can throw up opportunities for future joint working
- Helps with building progression pathways

Additional benefits

Although the partnership process can at times be difficult the end results in a wide variety of projects have proved to be positive. Partnership working has supported organisations by:

- Changing practice of staff within organisations

- Equipped people within the partnership with new and improved skills that enable them to make a valuable contribution to developing the projects and meeting the needs of learners
- Created opportunities for creativity, collaboration and understanding of different organisational strengths and cultures
- Enabled new learners to be reached and given relevance to the learning on offer

Risks/opportunities of partnerships

- There needs to be a clear commitment to sharing knowledge and expertise – possible focus group process?
- Trust and partnership should be built on good practice: know the ground rules and what you are getting into. Say no if it isn’t right – saying yes could be more costly
- Partnership process and developments should include all players
- Information sharing is essential for full contribution and consultation to take place
- It is essential that feedback is circulated to all contributors – particularly as stakeholders have vested interest in establishing links and clear understanding
- Building the infrastructure must include celebrating differences whilst working together to develop knowledge, skills, expertise of how to move forward

Roles/responsibilities of partners in the Partnership Process

- Providing advice and offer support
- Sharing collective vision
- Ensuring inclusion in decision making
- Acting as brokers – both small/larger organisations need to work together to achieve their goals
- Maintaining independence – don’t have to agree with everything that is said, negotiate terms and conditions
- Introducing creative consultation (based on time to consult) – say no (if appropriate) – but keep the door open for future working
- Delivering their specific contribution to the whole

Critical success factors - Effective partnerships are those that

- Involve the right organisations and players at the right level within those organisations
- Are focused on the target group and their needs
- Are committed to an agreed strategy
- Have clear objectives
- Have shared visions/interests
- Are mutually beneficial to all concerned
- Have a common aim
- Have strategies for achieving those aims
- Offer time and commitment to actively get involved and therefore are sufficiently motivated to stay the course
- Use partners strengths, skill, experience and knowledge to work more effectively
- Have clear decision making processes
- Understand their specific role and responsibility within the partnership
- Perceive value/get enjoyment from working together

Key Points

Good partnerships take time to develop. Most voluntary organisations are not structured to respond quickly to requests (decisions are commonly made through steering group structures). Some voluntary organisations always seem to get the money, quite often because they are geared up to make a quick response – this can further compound the problem for the voluntary and small organisation sectors. Voluntary/small organisations need to recognise the influence they have and can make within the process. There is a need for confidence and courage to participate but also to learn from the process

How to Move Forward?

Consider current practices – how can they be improved? Consider how to stop bad practice e.g. unrealistic time scales, partnership in name only, consultation through ‘lip service’ approach. Know and build on your strengths.

Finally

- Partnership working is a learning curve for all participants
- Terms of reference for the partnership may help
- We must not always work solely with those that are know to us- it's important to work with those that can help and support our cause/vision
- It may be necessary to thrash out the terms and conditions of the partnership in order to be successful- partnerships don't have to be ‘cosy’ - it is OK to argue!

Further Information

If you are interested in identifying and discussing some of the issues surrounding collaborative arrangements and partnership, or you would like to write an article about good practice in partnership working or share a partnership experience, we would like to hear from you. Contact Alyson Malach at alyson@niace.org.uk

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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