Effective partnership working
Partnership principles – summary

Partnerships should:

1. Agree joint aims and outcomes, and be clear about the responsibilities and contributions of all those involved

A key task for partnerships is to agree their joint aims and outcomes. This enables the partnership to be driven by active and meaningful collaboration, rather than externally imposed prescriptions and sanctions. Partnerships work well when there are shared aims and all those involved are clear about what they have to do to achieve them.

The aim of a partnership ultimately should be to improve outcomes for service users. Employers and universities should show how their jointly agreed activities in the delivery of social work education will lead to the achievement of this aim. They should also plan how the outcomes will be evaluated.

The aims of a partnership should be integrated across social work education and professional development, and include initial social work training, the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and CPD.

Agreeing genuinely joint aims can be difficult when universities and employers have different pressures and priorities. Partners should discuss and acknowledge these differences and identify ways of preventing their separate priorities affecting their ability to collaborate in the partnership. Time invested in these discussions at an early stage can help ensure partnerships remain sustainable and work towards long term benefits, rather than short term gains.

A key success factor, reported by the East Midlands test site, was the recognition that ‘employers and universities jointly share responsibility for the quality of social workers through the recruitment of students, curriculum content and delivery, practice learning, ASYE and CPD.’ It was enhanced employer engagement in the partnership that led to explicit shared goals. Partners from the same area working together on university-based CPD described the design of programmes as a ‘co-creation with agency partners’, whilst acknowledging that working together in a meaningful way takes work on all sides.

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1 The new continuing professional development (CPD) approach will provide structure and support for social workers to develop their capabilities throughout their careers; to update, extend and deepen knowledge, skills and analytical thinking to deal with increasingly complex and specialist work and to develop professional identity and confidence.
2. Record their agreement in a Memorandum of Cooperation and keep it under regular review

Partnerships can no longer rely on personal relationships alone to achieve their outcomes; written agreements should be used to support the interpersonal relationships that underpin effective collaboration.

Partnership agreements should be recorded in a Memorandum of Cooperation. This should be a simple document, which avoids being legalistic, long or complicated, as employers and universities may need to enter into more than one agreement in their local area or come together as groups of employers and universities, working under the same Memorandum. It should include the arrangements for keeping the Memorandum under review.

As a non-legal document, the prime purpose of a Memorandum of Cooperation is to set out the aims and outcomes of the partnership, the activities agreed and the responsibilities of all those involved. There may be a need for a key principles agreement which is overarching, and operational agreements which focus on delivery.

A Memorandum of Cooperation provides a mechanism to ensure the activities of a partnership are properly authorised. It is essential that the Memorandum is signed at senior manager level for employers and at faculty level for universities, to demonstrate accountability for decisions that affect the quality of service received by service users and carers, and the resources committed to this. A Memorandum of Cooperation also provides formal evidence of partnership arrangements to meet the Health Professions Council’s Standards of Education and Training (SET 5.1, 5.10).

Two of our test sites, Herefordshire and Tavistock/University of East London (UEL), reported using written agreements. Herefordshire has used written agreements with its partners for a number of years. They are not seen as legally binding but as an agreement to work towards goals. Drawing up the agreement is an opportunity for partners to discuss what works and what measurable outcomes can be used. The written agreement used by Herefordshire focuses on the expectations partners have of each other, while Tavistock/UEL’s Memorandum of Cooperation also includes quality assurance of courses and management of assessment.

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2 The Health Professionals Council (HPC) will become the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) in August 2012
3 Herefordshire, University of Worcester, Gloucestershire and North East Worcester College
3. Be strongly led at a strategic level, informed by workforce planning and key policy drivers

There is substantial evidence that the engagement of senior managers is critical to the effectiveness of partnerships. For employers, this means the involvement of a senior strategic manager at Assistant Director level, with strong lines of accountability to the senior workforce. For universities, this means the Head of Faculty, with strong lines of accountability to the Head of Programme.

Senior managers are responsible for setting the strategic direction of the partnership. In doing this, senior managers are likely to take into account:

- Local workforce needs and workforce planning data, across the statutory and non-statutory sectors
- Meeting the Social Work Reform Board agenda and other key agendas, e.g. Standards for Employers, CPD recommendations, Munro recommendations
- The priorities of ADASS\(^4\), ADCS\(^5\), the higher education sector and other key strategic bodies

This does not mean that senior managers should attend all partnership meetings, but they should demonstrate ownership of and accountability for the direction they have set through signing the Memorandum of Cooperation. Successful partnerships often have a ‘champion’ at senior management level, who monitors and supports the implementation of the strategy.

Senior manager engagement is even more significant in a climate of financial cuts and reduced resources. Successful partnerships acknowledge the amount of time that needs to be invested in effective collaboration. In setting a strategic direction, senior managers should allocate resources (staff time and money) to enable partnerships to carry out the agreed activities, whilst maximising the cost-effective benefits of partners pooling funds and sharing delivery.

The West London Alliance (West London Social Work Project) was a two-year Department of Education funded partnership (2009–11) of eight West London Boroughs and 12 universities. This test site reported that the involvement of senior and operational managers had been a key feature, both in developing placements and commissioning CPD programmes, because it ensured a shared vision could be driven forward to achieve buy-in from the organisations involved.

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\(^{4}\) Association of Directors of Adult Social Services  
\(^{5}\) Association of Directors of Children’s Services
4. Be based around local, flexible and diverse partnerships, build on existing arrangements and ensure the participation of voluntary and independent sector organisations, and service users and carers

Existing partnerships should continue to operate using a flexible and diverse range of models. The practical arrangements for partnerships can be influenced by local geography, availability of funding, long-standing collaborative arrangements, and distribution of universities in the local area. No single model should be prescribed but all partnerships should consider whether a number of key aspects have been incorporated in their arrangements:

- Partnerships should be inclusive and ensure all stakeholders can participate, including voluntary and independent sector organisations, service users and carers, as well as statutory agencies and universities.
- Partnerships are likely to have both an overarching strategic direction and local delivery arrangements, and their arrangements should facilitate this. The model and structure chosen for the partnership should reflect what works best locally.
- Partnerships should not become too large or complex to manage effective collaboration, but may have partners offering different levels of contribution.
- Partnerships should be able to respond to new initiatives across the spectrum of social work education and professional development.

All models of partnership will involve complexity. Several partnerships may need to be formed for different aspects of operational delivery, and these will require their own Memorandum of Cooperation. Partnership arrangements need to be kept under review to accommodate new developments. It is therefore essential that the time investment in partnerships is acknowledged and sanctioned at senior manager level, to enable partnerships to work positively with these demands.

Partnerships should also recognise the difficulties faced by voluntary and independent sector organisations, which lack the resources to invest fully in partnership activities, and work with them to develop innovative ways of inclusion.

The University of Bedfordshire’s Strategic Planning Group for Social Work meets four times a year to review and support the development and delivery of the programmes at qualifying and post-qualifying level. Partners represented are: local authorities, students, service users and carers, and employer partners from private, voluntary and independent sectors. This means a comprehensive review of social work education as a whole can take place, changes in practice and policy can be responded to and issues relating to the delivery of programmes quickly identified and addressed.