

Community, Cultural, and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee
Meeting to be held on Thursday, 18 April 2024

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Corporate Priorities:
Delivering better services;

**Partnership Working: Proposals to Review, Co-ordinate and Improve
Collaboration**

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Brief Summary

This paper proposes a programme of work to review, support, and enhance partnership working at the county council, overseen by the Community, Cultural and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee with appropriate and regular consultation with, and input from, our service Directorates and external partners.

Recommendation

The Community, Cultural and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee is asked to adopt the proposed work programme and, collaborating with officers, develop a workplan to take forward the proposals contained in the report as part of the Committee's scheduled actions for the coming year. Officers will report on progress to the Committee in 12 months, including on development of a registry of partnerships.

1. Introduction

This paper proposes a programme of work to review, support, and enhance partnership working at the county council, overseen by the Committee with appropriate and regular consultation with, and input from, our service Directorates and external partners. The proposed programme seeks to extend research and evidence-gathering previously conducted by the Committee and its Chair which acknowledged, as a basic premise, the benefits of partnership working. Some of this work is reflected in this paper. If accepted, the Committee may wish to commission further work from officers to take this programme forward.



Partnership approaches are built on the premise that no single agency can deal with, or be responsible for dealing with, complex public policy and service delivery issues. There are a range of ways of describing what constitutes a partnership approach. In simple terms, however, partnerships are a cooperative relationship between two or more organisations to achieve a common goal. Partnerships have been seen as effective platforms for public sector service delivery and reform since the Blair governments and have been taken forward by successive administrations since 2010.

It is acknowledged across local government that, while elements of partnership working have created better outcomes for communities, residents, and taxpayers, good practice is not evenly distributed across the sector. There may be a 'will' for partnership working to succeed but quite often this is not backed up with a 'way' for it to happen. However, research and other learning has demonstrated that excellence is achievable. Wider adoption of proven, replicable approaches to partnership working can improve democratic and managerial oversight and accountability, the quality of public service delivery, and value for money.

Subject to approval and further planning, the proposed body of work will identify:

- Principles of good practice developed by thought leaders across the public sector and specific frameworks and tools aimed at testing and improving partnership working in local government.
- The legislative frameworks governing the county council's partnership approach and a "map" of our current partnership landscape.
- How we currently manage partnerships, including ensuring accountability through appropriate governance arrangements.
- How we measure the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of our partnership working, including value for money, and knowing we have made a difference.
- Post-review, develop a corporate framework governing our overall, strategic, and cultural approach to partnership working, including common standards designed to: support officers engaged in partnership activity, streamline processes, avoid duplication of time and effort, and aid evaluation of impact.

If agreed, the Committee will be supported in this work by the Corporate Strategy and Policy Team, which will work with the Chair and Deputy Chair to establish a workplan, co-ordinate evidence-gathering from internal and external partners, and facilitate a set of final recommendations, aided by Corporate Services colleagues, especially in Law and Governance and including Democratic Services. Any recommendations from this piece of work will be prepared by and for the Committee and submitted within 12 months via the appropriate channels, all aimed at establishing a corporate approach to partnership working that can better assure efficacy and efficiency.

The following section briefly reflects on some of principles of partnership working which the Committee has acknowledged as foundational to its thinking.



2. Principles of partnership working

The proposed work will draw on sector studies and identify specific steps to embed this research, and thereby establish a better partnership culture across the county council. Much of this outside works comes with ready-made evaluation and development tools to assess the effectiveness of, and plan improvements in, our partnership working. For example, [research conducted by the Nuffield Institute for Health](#) commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister midway through the Blair governments identifies six principles to be used in evaluating partnerships:

Principle one: Acknowledgment of the need for partnership. Recognising that interdependent partnership working is a "good thing" but also respecting that some 'core' business does not require partnership working.

Principle two: Clarity and realism of purpose. Once partners agree that sufficient commonalities exist to sustain a long-term relationship. more specific aims and objectives need to be defined.

Principle three: Commitment and ownership. Partnership working is only sustainable if shared agreements are reinforced internally via strong leadership and embedded operational practice by staff.

Principle four: Development and maintenance of trust. Maintaining commitment means avoiding situations where one or two partners set the agenda and being sensitive to all agencies' requirements.

Principle five: Establishment of clear and robust partnership arrangements. Partnership working should be as clear and unambiguous as possible with each partner knowing what they are responsible for and how accountability works.

Principle six: Monitoring, review, and organisational learning. These are vital in terms of performance assessment but also with respect to building trust. Success criteria needs to be made clear and agreed upon by the partnership itself.

Similarly, the [Local Government Association](#) – focusing specifically on partnerships between county and district councils – has identified seven "drivers" of collaboration across local government:

People and trust. High levels of trust between political and managerial leaders are vital and require continued time and attention.

Formal structures such as leaders' groups, joint committees or growth boards provide a framework for collaboration and decision-making.

Joint posts. More extensive joint officer arrangements deliver benefits for the councils directly involved and wider district/county relationships.

One size doesn't fit all. County-wide collaboration can leverage economies of scale across place, help avoid duplication, and support efficient service delivery. There may also be value in more granular, hyper-local partnerships to leverage unique



opportunities, such as where a particular business type has clustered or where there is acute need (e.g., housing).

A mobilising topic or initiative focusing on outcomes for people, places and communities is the most powerful driver of collaboration. The pursuit of a particular challenge, such as economic and housing growth, shared services, or the future of high streets has proved to be a powerful mobilising force.

A shared understanding between leaders of what is on the table for discussion is a prerequisite for sustained collaboration, giving clearly defined boundaries.

This is difficult. The historically hierarchical nature of government in England can create barriers to collaboration from the perspective of both types of council.

Lastly, [research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) looking specifically at the role of elected members in supporting efficient partnership working acknowledged the growing importance of partnership working to local government; bringing public, private and voluntary sectors together, boosting transparency, improving service delivery and reinvigorating community activity. Concerns remain, however, around the relative costs and efficacy of partnerships and their impact on lines of democratic accountability. Their report concluded that councils' role in ensuring both publicly accountable, equitable and quality service delivery and in providing a strategic overview of local provision must be maintained and strengthened.

3. Legislative framework

Partnership working between agencies, both statutory and non-statutory is an important way in which policy issues are tackled at both local, sub-regional, and regional level. Many of the key partnerships in which the county council is heavily involved have a statutory or regulatory basis. Partnerships can be incorporated, creating separate legal entities in their own right, for example, a company limited by guarantee, company limited by shares or a limited liability partnership. However, most of the partnership arrangements entered into by the county council will be unincorporated, such as agreements to work together in accordance with s75 Health Act 2006, collaboration agreements where the county council takes on the role of Accountable Body for the receipt of government funding to deliver a specific project, or even a simple forum to work better together and share good practise or learning.

As part of the "mapping" phase of the proposed work programme, officers will identify the legal basis for partnerships to prioritise evaluation. Officers will also look to revise a previous corporate partnership toolkit used by the authority to monitor and evaluate partnerships, including a database of key partnerships.

4. Undertaking the review

The actual work to be conducted under these proposals will seek to join theory to practice in a structured way, leading to a set of standard approaches governing our approach to and assessment of key partnerships, which will be identified as part of



this work. Subject to approval, it is intended to conduct the work across the following phases:

(a) Scoping and Mapping

This phase will: determine which partnerships will be in or out of scope (i.e., purely contractual relationships may not be considered) and identify partnerships which can serve as case studies for a "lessons learned" approach (e.g. Community Safety Partnership, City Deal/LEP), drawing on the work already submitted by officers to the Committee; working with Law and Governance, create a register of the main partners we work with and the attendant partnerships, using survey methodology and engagement with senior officers across the council; formulating a fact-finding "checklist" of questions to be asked of each in-scope partnership (e.g. their legislative basis, spend/cost and other inputs, an assessment of management and accountability mechanisms, risk sensitivity, SWOT analysis, evidence of impact etc.). Key to this phase will be the establishment of an officer "policy and partnerships" working group to inform and coordinate all further phases of the work programme (as well as aiding policy and strategy development more widely), which will also report into the Compliance and Assurance Board. This phase will seek, wherever possible, to identify and combine individual pieces of work (e.g., the partnership survey) that is either already in progress or in the planning stage. The council has previously created a partnership toolkit for use when evaluating or setting up any form of partnership working. The review will consider the extent to which existing partnerships have made use of the toolkit. It will also be reviewed, updated and adapted appropriately to reflect current good practise and may form part of a future partnership working framework as appropriate.

(b) Evidence gathering and benchmarking

This phase will: invite key partners and sector experts, at the Committee's discretion, to share insights with the Committee at its regularly scheduled meetings; gather expertise from other councils and sector leaders such as the Local Government Association and County Councils Network or drawing on partnership-specific work in the sector (e.g. the recent Local Government Association-National Association of Local Council ["One Community"](#) research or using work completed by the Local Government Association/Association of Directors of Adult Social Services collaboration, Partners in Care and Health); focus on identifying structures, approaches and tools used by other large councils (e.g. Cambridgeshire) to manage and monitor partnerships; work with existing processes, such as Audit, to leverage data and analysis that already exists in terms of evaluating and benchmarking our partnership landscape; develop and use a "value for money" partnership assessment tool as well as other existing metrics such as ISO 44001 (formerly British Standard 11000), the first-ever international standard on collaborative business relationships.

Officers leading existing partnerships may be asked to complete template reports and conduct a review of their partnerships arrangements for submission to the Committee with support from the Corporate Strategy and Policy Team or wider Resources Directorate.



(c) Draft corporate partnership framework

This phase will: build on the evidence and analysis developed above to produce a standard set of flexible approaches to govern our partnership working, including an overarching "partnerships protocol" and checklists of criteria for establishing, evaluating, and reporting on partnerships and a revised partnership agreement template.

(d) Recommendations of how partnership working could be improved

This phase will submit draft recommendations for consideration by the Committee by Spring 2025.

5. Issues for consideration

The selection of partners invited to submit information to the Committee will be at the discretion of the Committee and coordinated with any relevant lead officer. Again, this work should, where necessary and appropriate, involve suitable internal consultation so that the Committee acknowledges all relevant current work. Several suggestions have been made which may potentially lead to information gathering and recommendations on:

- How we engage with the new Integrated Care Board and the Community Safety Partnership, building on work already submitted to the Committee.
- The range of partnerships involved in the work of Education and Children's Services.
- How we partner with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector, taking forward work already planned by colleagues in Adult Social Care and Public Health with a view to refreshing the current VCSE Partnership Agreement
- The role of Parish Councils in local service delivery.
- Our strategic partnership working with, for example, the Environment Agency, and National Highways.
- The Lancashire Armed Forces Covenant Hub, delivered in partnership with the NHS, Army, and University of Central Lancashire.
- Our engagement with public utility companies and other public realm agencies.
- Emerging ideas around county-district relationships as referenced by the Local Government Association report above, including the potential to explore shared service agreements where there is mutual interest among partners (building on existing public realm collaborations).
- How we continue a strong relationship with the private sector.
- Identifying current efforts to review and refresh existing partnership agreements.



6. Conclusion

Working in partnership has become increasingly important within public policy and is viewed as a key tool to tackle complex challenges, involving co-operation between actors working towards common goals. Nonetheless, working in partnership can also be problematic, especially when lines of accountability or the demonstration of impact are unclear.

A revised partnership framework will give practical guidance and support to staff involved in partnership activity. A "one-council" approach to partnership working can support delivery of our corporate priorities, provide clearer lines of accountability to the council and therefore the public, and promote excellence and value for money across the council. The challenge now facing the county council is to assure our partnership arrangements and the proposed work programme is intended to start a conversation and lay a foundation for accountable and effective partnership working, now and in the future.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Legal

There are a number of legal forms which a partnership may take. Incorporated bodies are legal entities in their own right and must be established and operate in accordance with statutory requirements. Unincorporated partnerships do not need to adhere to any prescribed legal framework. It is essential that both incorporated and unincorporated partnerships have in place, from the outset, robust governance arrangements, where each partner's objectives, roles and responsibilities, financial and in-kind contributions are clearly defined. Decision making, monitoring and audit arrangements must be set out along with other mechanisms designed to manage risk. The legal team will provide support in respect of the proposed review and the creation of legal documentation to support partnership working. The legal team has previously produced a partnership working questionnaire which formed part of a previous partnership working toolkit. This can be refreshed and integration as appropriate within the revised partnership framework. The questionnaire provides a useful starting point to evaluate an existing partnership or to focus minds on the material considerations to take into account in the formation of new partnership arrangements.

Finance

The financial obligations undertaken by the county council for each of the partnerships identified as in scope will be reviewed as part of this proposed piece of work.



Risk management

A risk analysis will form an essential element of the review of each of the partnerships identified under the proposed work programme and any findings will be submitted to the Committee as the work programme progresses.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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N/A

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A

