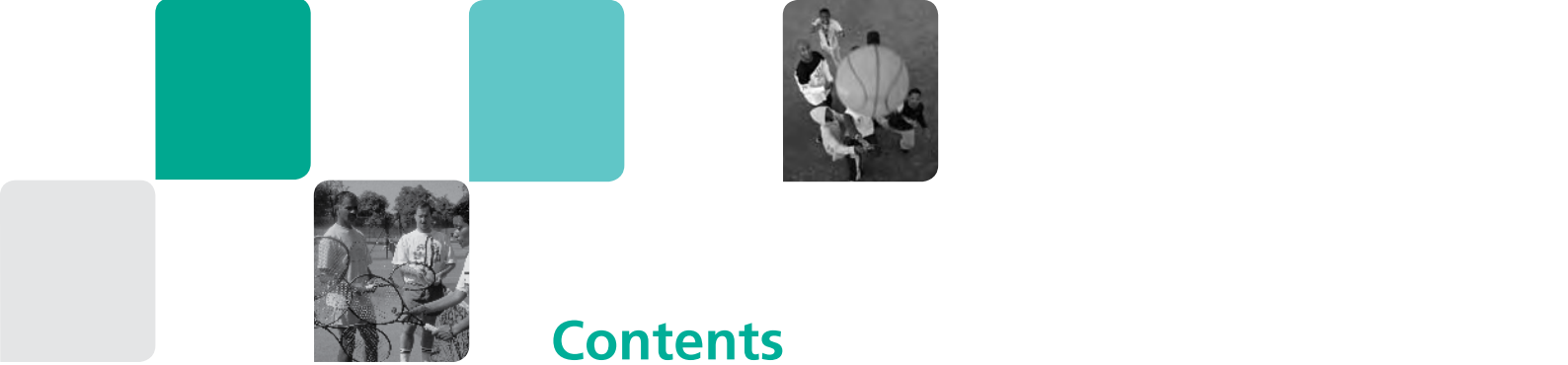# Making partnership work better
in the Culture & Sport Sector

Successful partnership working – a simple guide to improving how your partnership works.

Contents

Making partnership work better
in the Culture & Sport Sector

This series of two short booklets is aimed at operational staff working in the culture and sport sector offer some simple advice and guidance on getting the most out of multi-agency partnerships and how you can make them work better for the culture and sport sector.

This booklet has been produced with the help of Greengage a consultancy company who have helped many partnerships work better. Despite the work now going on in partnerships there are many examples of partnerships not working successfully and causing frustration for those attending and trying to work together. Partnership working is not easy and success often apears to depend on personality and the behaviour of those that attend and take part. This guidance is deliberately simple but experience shows us that we are not always good at doing the simple things well.

Although partnership working is now very much becoming the norm for some operational staff working in the culture and sport sector there remains a lack of information and understanding about the more strategic partnerships operating in councils and this is hindering the sectors ability to contribute effectively.

The second booklet gives you a simple breakdown of the key strategic partnerships operating in and arround local government where culture and sport should be playing its part to improve places and outcomes for communities and individuals. The booklet also provides a range of examples and short case studies describing some of the successful partnership working going on across a range of different strategic and operational partnerships. Given the numerous partnerships now forming and the constant pressure to commit more time and resources

to partnership working the booklet also promotes the idea of reviewing partnerships to ensure you are using time and energy to the most effect.

We hope you find these documents helpful and useful.

The anatomy of a successful partnership

Sometimes partnership working can be very frustrating. The same people do not turn up, no decisions get made, if decisions are made they do not get implemented, nobody is clear about what they are trying to achieve or if they are achieving anything and as a result they quickly get dismissed as a waste of time "a talk shop".

This booklet describes some of the features of successful partnerships and introduces a diagnostic framework to help you identify where the strengths and weaknesses of your partnership lie. It explores these features, offers some simple questions to help you assess your partnership and tips on what you can do to improve.

The material has been developed by Greengage consulting who have been helping partnership improve for many years. The ideas are deliberately simple but experience suggests that it is these simple things that we do not do and that can make a difference to how we work together.

The PiiSA Framework

Experience suggests that there are four key factors for success in any partnership.

These four factors form the basis of a 'balanced score card' approach to evaluating the quality and likely effectiveness of partnerships. Most people tend to focus on the last two parts of this framework when examining their partnerships. For example, when problems arise people might suggest that "we need a communication protocol" in other words we need to strengthen the systems used by the partnership. However, experience with partnerships suggest that most of the real problems lie in the first two parts of the framework. There are far more problems caused by lack of clarity of purpose and by poor relationships between members than by a lack of robust systems.

P - Clarity of PURPOSE and roles

Effective partnerships have clarity of purpose. This means that everyone in the partnership is clear about what the partnership is trying to achieve. This might seem like common sense but experience suggests it is rarely common practice. It is such lack of clarity about the precise purpose of the partnership which often causes confusion and undermines shared commitment.

Identifying common purpose
When working with others, it is not enough to ask, "What is my purpose for this meeting or conversation?" This question is a good place to start, but it is important to look behind this question, and to also ask, "What do other people want from this meeting?"

The most influential conversations and meetings are those which help others to achieve what they are committed to, as well as what you are committed to. In order for people to want to work together, it is important that everyone gets something out of the relationship. It is also important to realise that what you are committed to, may not be what everyone else is committed to.

When working with a group of people, it is useful to have clarity of the common purpose of the group. This means that everyone in the group is clear about what the group is trying to achieve. This might seem like common sense, but it is rarely common practice.

Clarity of purpose
use the checklist below to assess the capacity
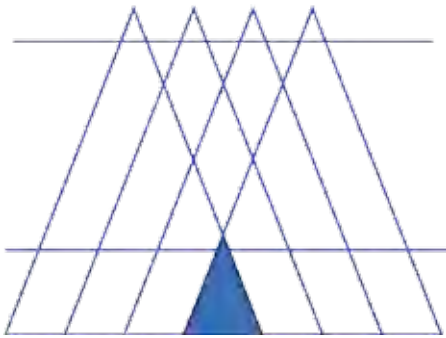of your partnership for action

	Always	Sometimes	Never
I am clear about what I want to achieve through working in partnership			
I am clear about which partnerships I need to work with			
I am clear about what each of these partnerships is trying to achieve			
There is a common commitment between partners about what we are trying to achieve			
The purpose of the partnership reflects the needs of the local community			
We have openly discussed what each partner brings to and wants to get out of the partnership			
We have identified indicators or measures of success for the partnership			

The diagram above illustrates the commitments of a group of people. The commitments of each member of the group overlap, but are not the same. This is why it is so important, when working with other people, to identify the common purpose. This is the area where the group will have energy to work together.

Figure 1. Common purpose

Whilst we might have similar interests to other people we work with, what we are committed to may not be exactly the same.

Lack of clarity about the common purpose of a group of people working together, often causes confusion and undermines progress. On the other hand, shared commitment to a specific goal transforms and galvanises an otherwise chaotic group. Therefore an effective partnership or team will identify the shared commitment, and agree its goals, before moving into action. It is easy to underestimate the effort that is required to do this. Time spent coming up with a clear declaration of the intent of the group might seem tedious, but can save many frustrating hours and days in meetings which seem to go nowhere, later in the project. In essence a clear common purpose defines the destination of the group.

Partnerships are particularly challenging when it comes to clarity of purpose. In many partnerships where there is a real lack of clarity about the purpose of the partnership, often, each individual partner will claim that they are clear about the purpose, but each individual partner will have a different view about what that purpose is. For any partnership or group or team, that works together regularly, it is essential to clarify the purpose of their work together.

It is useful at regular intervals to get each individual to write down two or three outcomes they would like to see, as a result of working together. These can then be grouped, to give a general picture of what purpose will draw and keep the group together.

A story of shared purpose

A sport partnership felt that they were all committed to the same thing. They were all committed to improving the sporting facilities of the town where the partnership was located. Somehow however, the partnership always failed to get into action. None of the projects put forward ever met with the approval of all the partners. Despite being well funded and having committed partners, the partnership had achieved little. An external facilitator was asked to help the partnership investigate how it could get into action.

The first thing they did was to ask each of the partners what they were committed to - what would represent success to them? The initial response from each one was, "I'm committed to improving the sporting opportunities in this town." They dug a little deeper.

- One partner was committed to improving the sporting facilities of the town – as long as that involved working on community recreation projects for disaffected young people.

- A second partner was committed to improving the sports facilities of the town – as long as that involved working on improving facilities for the local swimming club.

- A third partner was committed to improving the sports facilities of the town – as long as that involved working on improving sports facilities in schools.

- A fourth partner was committed to improving the sporting facilities of the town – as long as that involved working on providing more football coaching and places for children to play football.
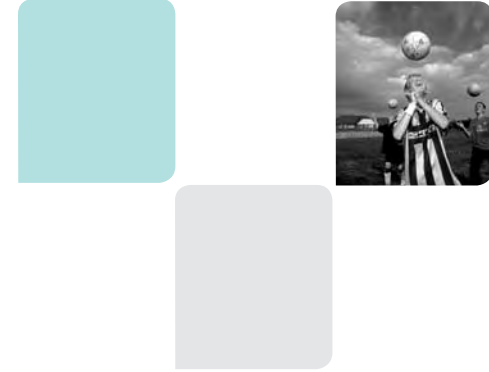
Each partner was committed to a specific course of action, none of which overlapped, and therefore there was no basis for a partnership in these individual areas of activity.

However, the partners did have two big areas of commitment in common, two specific things they wanted to see happen. They all wanted to see sport taken more seriously by the local authority, and they all wanted to see the impact of sport on people's lives have a higher profile in the local media. Having identified this common purpose, the partnership successfully lobbied for the local authority to create a stronger sports development team, and won much greater coverage for sport in the local media. This in turn benefitted each of their individual projects through greater public support, and eventually increased funding.

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If you don't know where you are going any road will get you there

Lewis Carroll

Identify common purpose

- Think of any of the partnerships you are involved in.
- What do each of the other partners want from working with you?
- What do you want from working with the other partners?
- What are some of the things that you are committed to that other partners are not committed to?
- What are some of the things that other partners are committed to that you are not committed to?
- What is the common commitment or purpose that you share?

Possible roles for the partnerships you work in

Common roles for a multi sector partnership dealing with the issues in or opportunities for the culture & sport sector include:

1. Sharing information on policy, resources, user needs, good practice, service standards and other relevant matters

2. Improving the sector's contribution to the local community

3. Mapping the needs, wants and interests of local communities

4. Mapping the resources and services available to local communties and other local partners

5. Identifying barriers to access and gaps in services

6. Agreeing actions to address gaps and barriers in accordance with priorities agreed by the group

7. Promoting better public awareness of the culture & sport sector

8. Creating a better understanding of the needs of the local community with regard to culture and sport

9. Ensuring effective two-way flow of information between relevant regional, national and local bodies

10. Working with regional agencies to identify regional issues and specific actions that partnerships can engage with

ii - The Capacity to INFLUENCE and be INFLUENCED

Partnership is something you do not just something that exists on a piece of paper. The way you "do" partnership is through your ability to influence and be influenced. Partnership is about your relationships with the other partners. If these are weak then the partnership will be weak. If these are strong then the partnership will be strong.

A strong partnership will have conflicting interests and disagreements will arise on how best to get things done.

Diversity, which can be a partnership's greatest strength, also presents the biggest barrier to the partnership working well. Partnership work, like life, is inherently difficult.

The key to developing successful working relationships is to recognise the difference between 'control' and 'influence.' In a genuine partnership no one has full control. Some partners may have more power than others, but as soon as they try to use that power without support of the partnership then trust disappears and relationships are weakened. Influencing outcomes is different to controlling outcomes, and it requires different sensitivities and skills.
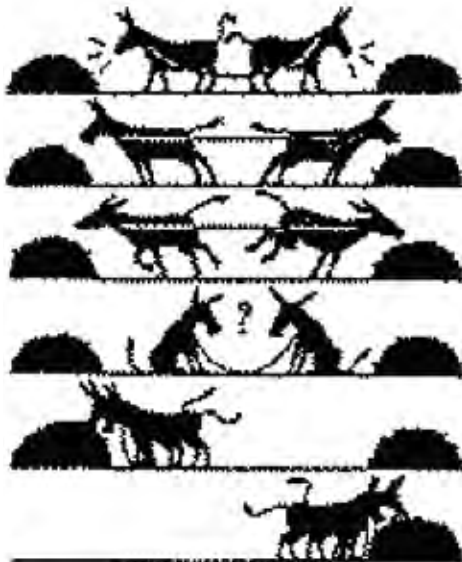
Whilst most people are aware of the need to influence others we often need reminding of the need to remain open to be influenced by others. In other words whilst we rarely need to be reminded to talk we often need reminding to listen.

Creating an atmosphere of trust between partners, where people are listened to and where they listen to others requires considerable skill and attention to detail. The following pages give some of the most practical ways of creating this environment

Can partners influence each other?
Use the checklist below to assess how well your partnership creates an environment where people can influence each other:

	Always	Sometimes	Never
I am clear about what decisions or projects I need to influence to achieve what i am committed to			
My views and actions are influenced as a results of my involvement in the partnerships I work in			
The partnership meeting agendas cover the things that are really important to me			
Partners understand what I am committed to and listen to and ideas and concerns that I have			
I feel included in the decisions of the partnership			
I feel confident to say what I mean in partnership meetings			
The local community can influence the partnership			

strong relationships, it is important to think in terms of "we" rather than "me." Thinking in terms of "we," we recognise that there is no winner and no loser, that we are both on the same side. The behaviour of looking out for the interests of all parties is a key to high people skills. We are not suggesting that this kind of approach is suitable for all situations. If you really are in competition, then win/win thinking will not be appropriate.
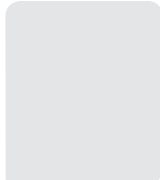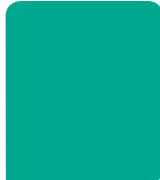
Win/win thinking

It might seem almost too obvious to state, but if we want to work well with other people, we need to look out for the interests of those we are working with, not just our own interests. If we look after only our own interests, we may have some success in the short term, but in the longer term, we will lose the confidence and trust of those we are working with. They will learn that we are not really working in their interests, and may decide that they no longer want to work in our interests. Many partnerships, boards and cross-functional teams fail to work effectively, for the lack of understanding of this simple truth.

Figure 2.
Competitive vs collaboration
When we get into competition with others we create opposition. When we seek the success of another, we create success for ourselves.

One of the things that those with excellent people skills are good at, is looking out for the interests of others. When we take an interest in the needs and concerns of other people, we make a deposit in our emotional trust account with them. If we operate solely out of self-interest, or we end up in competition, it will be difficult to work together, and we should not delude ourselves that we are working collaboratively. To build

Win/Win	Win/Lose
Lose/Win	Lose/Lose

Figure 3. Win/Win Thinking

The diagram above shows the four possible outcomes, when we interact with another person. Of the four, only win/win can lead to a relationship characterised by trust, over the longer term. There is always the option to walk away.

Influential partnership meetings

Create an inclusive agenda

How many partnership meetings have you attended where you looked at the agenda and sighed with dissatisfaction? The agenda is littered with items that are of no interest to you and the issues you really want to discuss aren't on the agenda at all! You plough through the agenda and find that by the time you reach "any other business" everyone is too tired to discuss the pressing matter you want to raise. This kind of agenda is not suitable if we want to work collaboratively. We need a technique for inclusive agenda planning that

reflects the real priorities of all those involved rather than the priorities of a minority.

The issue of how meetings are run has the ability to undermine a partnership if not addressed. Many ineffective partnerships can be characterised by poorly attended meetings (usually by substitutes rather than decision makers) where the root cause of the dysfunction can be traced to agendas which do not address the real interests and commitments of the partners.

Concerns and Expectations

Given the purpose of the meeting, ask each participant to state:

- What he or she would like to get out of the meeting

- What concerns he or she has relevant to the meeting

These "concerns and expectations" are listed, usually on a flipchart so everyone can see them. In our experience a few common themes will be shared by many of the participants. Most importantly, a common agenda for the meeting can be drawn out.

One very effective way to make partnership meetings more effective is to create a common agenda through a simple "concerns and expectations" exercise (see box.) This exercise takes around five minutes to learn and has the capacity to improve dramatically the focus of any meeting.

There is often a great sense of relief when the common expectations of the group are shared or when a concern that has been buried away in the back of people's minds finally makes it onto the agenda. This in itself starts to build a capacity for dialogue in the group as they realise that their agendas aren't so different after all. This exercise can transform an otherwise unruly, argumentative "mob" into an ordered and committed meeting just through the realisation that they all want to talk about the same things - often not what is on the prepared agenda. This is a particularly important technique when trying to include people who are unused to contributing.

Design the meeting

Partnership meetings need to be designed so that everyone can participate effectively. For example, large meetings may need specific techniques so that everyone's views are captured. The venue, style and timing of meetings, the use of jargon, real or perceived power imbalances between participants all impact on the ability of people to contribute. In meetings which involve people whose first language is not English and are not used to contributing to large meetings the design of the meeting is paramount. Communities who do not understand the systems and structures of local government and other public sector partners and will need specific support to help them participate effectively.

Small groups

For larger meetings split into smaller groups for discussion then feed back. The questions posed to the small groups need to be very clearly stated for this technique to work well.

Making sure everyone can and does participate

Imagine each participant in a meeting holding one piece of a jigsaw puzzle, part of a bigger picture held by the group as a whole. If a few people dominate the conversation it is equivalent to paying attention to one part of the picture without any awareness of the bigger picture. Only when all participants contribute can we be clear which parts of the picture really deserve our attention. It is important to have some simple techniques to make sure that everyone contributes before a judgement is made about where the conversation should gravitate.
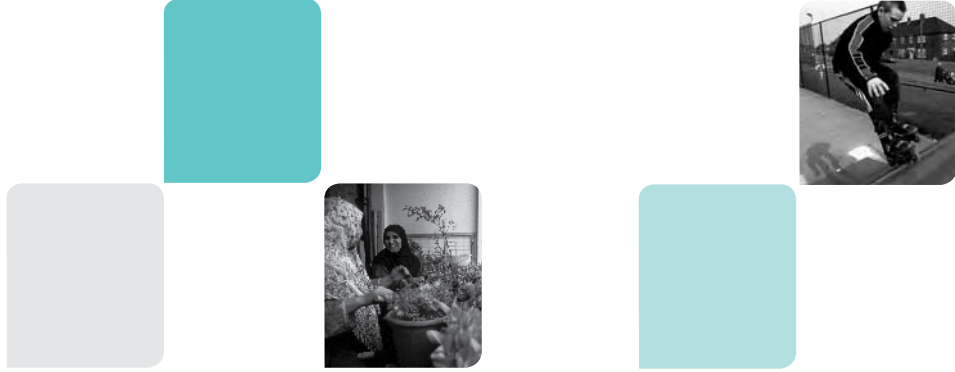
Go around the table

If a few members of the group tend to dominate or some members are not fully contributing this technique can be of great value. The group is presented with a specific question and all present are encouraged to express their view each in turn.

Say what you mean but don't wag the finger of blame

When you start to feel angry, frustrated, tense or concerned in a conversation or meeting look deeply at what your real concern is. State this concern clearly in terms of what you feel or think but without attributing blame for the situation. For example you might say "I feel frustrated that we haven't made much progress" but not " I feel frustrated that you are stopping us from making progress"

One simple technique of great value is simply going around the table to get each person's view in turn. Experience suggests that this collaborative process of understanding each other can lead the conversation in an entirely different and more fruitful direction than that expected by the dominant members of the group.

Dealing with concerns, frustrations and confrontations

Breakthroughs do not come without a few breakdowns along the way. Sometimes it is uncomfortable to deal with the most important and delicate issues. We have all experienced meetings where there are feelings of frustration, anger and even fear. You may have felt these yourself or observed them in others. You spot a concern but do not feel that you can express it openly. These buried concerns erode trust and undermine the capacity for collaborative working. Individuals may withdraw their commitment or become cynical about the effectiveness of the group. Confrontations can emerge fuelled by tensions that were created by earlier unresolved concerns. Without dealing with the most uncomfortable issues it is often impossible to make a real breakthrough in the group's thinking.

Your concerns are my concerns

When you find yourself in a difficult situation – perhaps being criticised or blamed by someone else make the request: Let me understand what your concerns are and any suggestions you have for how I might address them. By making the other's concerns your own you will find that they often start to make your concerns their own also.

Consequently, bringing concerns out into the open is fundamental to building an environment of trust. By voicing a concern as it arises and getting to the bottom of it, the group can introduce a new perspective in its thinking. Trust is generated and the capacity for the group to work together openly is enhanced. When the concern is seen as a source of creative friction it becomes an opportunity to change, rather than a barrier to progress.

S - SYSTEMS and STRUCTURES that are fit for purpose

Effective partnerships are characterised by structures and systems that are fit for purpose. Many of the problems observed in partnershipsare caused by inappropriate structures that do not reflect the purpose of the partnership (often the purpose itself is not at all clear.)

Careful consideration needs to be given to the membership of the partnership. The members must represent the full range of interests across the subject of the partnership or the legitimacy of the partnership could be undermined.

Furthermore, some sections of the community may be under-represented and may have very little experience of formal meetings. Yet it might be these same people that have the experience and knowledge that is the key to tackling some of the challenges that the partnership has been set up to tackle in the first place.

Systems and structures
Use the checklist below to assess how effective your systems and structures are:

	Always	Sometimes	Never
We involve local communities and relevant agencies and groups in the partnership			
The partnership has appropriate secretarial and admin support			
I receive agendas, papers and minutes in good time			
The minutes I receive from partnership meetings reflect the meetings well			
It is practical to take decisions in partnership meetings			
The right people are involved in the partnership meetings			
Does the structure allow all partners to contribute effectively?			

There are practical solutions to these very real problems. Some partnerships have set up structures with a small executive capable of taking a strategic view and taking difficult decisions but supported by a network of interest groups or forums that allow all interests to influence the views of the executive.

Getting the right people involved

Discuss the following questions:

- Who needs to be involved to ensure this partnership can achieve its purpose at this time?

- How can we structure the partnership in a way that everyone can usefully contribute without undermining the ability of the partnership to operate?

This exercise presumes that the purpose of the partnership is clear. If this is not the partnership will need to work on clarifying what it is committed to before this exercise can successfully be completed.

A - The capacity and resources to take ACTION

The effectiveness of a partnership is usually judged by its actions and achievements. The capacity to clarify, complete and monitor specific actions and to resource their implementation is essential to any effective partnership.

Actions should be agreed in an inclusive way and must be specific, detailing deadlines and responsibilities. The process of clarifying actions requires careful appraisal of possibilities for action, prioritisation of actions and clarification of other individuals who need to be involved for effective completion.

The partnership needs to consider its context in considerable detail. This involves asking questions such as; what resources are available now and in the future? What are the areas where the partnership has control and where it has influence?

What are the barriers? Are there historical matters to consider? What political reactions is the partnership likely to solicit? Exploring the context results in focus on the areas where the partnership can have an impact and provides insights into likely future pitfalls.

Failure to get down to action is often a sign that there are some unspoken concerns within the partnership or that the objectives of the partnership do not really reflect the interests of the members.
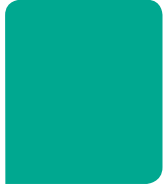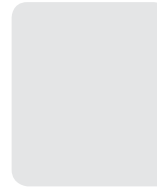
Meetings often end with little clarity on actions, responsibilities and deadlines resulting in a lack of progress between meetings. Even where actions are identified they often come from one or two dominant individuals. Ensuring that meetings end 'in action' and that these actions represent the diverse views of the group is an essential ritual for partnership working. Whilst this sounds like common sense, sadly it is not common practice.

Getting into action
Use the checklist below to assess the
capacity of your partnership for action:

	Always	Sometimes	Never
The partnership is making a difference			
Partnership discussions are ended by asking what actions need to be taken			
I feel able to get involved in implementing the partnerships plans			
Important actions at partnership meetings get recorded and followed up			
It is practical to take decisions in partnership meetings			
The right people are involved in the partnership meetings			
Does the structure allow all partners to contribute effectively?			

One very effective exercise that allows any group to create a common action plan from a diverse and complex discussion is described in the inclusive action plans box.

As with the concerns and expectations exercise earlier there is tremendous value in allowing people to see that their ideas for action are similar or different from other people's. What had seemed like an incoherent rambling discussion often leads to a clear action plan through this technique as different individuals recognise the various elements of

what needs to be done. This technique also avoids over-dominance by a few vocal individuals or an unhelpful deference to the more senior people at the meeting.

Furthermore, it is clearly important to follow up on actions. Following up actions creates a climate of authenticity in the group. If people aren't held accountable for following through actions to which they have agreed this can create an environment where it is easier to say "yes" rather than deal with some uncomfortable concerns. This undermines the ability of the group to face up to those difficult situations when it is necessary to say no.

Proper accountability and performance management is difficult without good quality data with which we can measure progress. In order to measure our contribution to outcomes, such as levels of participation and use of cultural and sports facilities, we will need data provided by many different organisations. Some of these organisations will be formally involved in the partnership and some will be outside it. Without the collaboration of these organisations in collecting and sharing data consistently and regularly it will be difficult to monitor progress or manage performance.

This is often one of the biggest contributions to the failure of partnerships to make progress.Even if we have good quality data we need to accept shared responsibility and accountability for performance

and particularly underperformance. A good example is a partnership in sport and health to address inactivity and obesity. A range of partners will be involved, council facilities, local sport clubs, schools and others. Without agreement on how progress is measured the partnership cannot be held accountable and it will be difficult to identify and rectify areas of under performance. The related paper "Making Performance mangement Work for culture and sport" deals with this in more detail and is available on IDeA Knowledge.

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Just because you think you understand what I said doesn't mean I actually said what I really mean.

Comment overheard in a restaurant

And finally

It should be self-evident that it is difficult to address the needs and concerns of local communities and organisations if we do not understand their needs and concerns.

The biggest barrier of all is that it is very difficult simply to listen. All kinds of judgements get in the way of us just listening Our feelings about the person speaking, Do we like/dislike them? Do we respect their views? These are normal and healthy instincts that help us to navigate a complex world. However, to listen to someone properly, we need to suspend the instinct to judge. Only by doing this can we really hear what is being said. The real danger is that we think we understand someone when in fact we are simply hearing our own assumptions. We may feel that we have heard it all before, but as soon as we think we know what the other person is going to say, we have stopped listening.

The people we need to listen to most carefully are the very people we least want to empathise with. When we come across someone whose behaviour or values are alien to us, we may not really want to understand them. We might even feel antagonistic of fearful. These are quite natural human feelings – but not helpful.

Understanding someone is about empathising with them but empathy is not the same as sympathy. It is not about agreeing with the other person's view or values regardless of what they say. It is about making sure we have drawn out the other person's concerns and needs before we make a judgement. We can then make choices and base or actions on real information rather than our own assumptions about what is needed. The final word in this document is therefore, above all Listen!

Are you an elephant or a crocodile?

Ask yourself: "am I more like an elephant or a crocodile?" Remember an elephant has large ears and a small mouth whilst a crocodile can be described as all mouth and no ears – not a recipe for empathic listening! When you are listening to someone, remember the golden rule - SHUT UP!

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Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice
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The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner
organisations which work together to support, promote
and improve local government.

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