

## Sustainability Learning Guide: Successful partnerships

### Ten key elements of a successful partnership project

#### About this guide

This guide has been developed to assist council sustainability practitioners develop and manage successful partnership projects. The information collected in this guide has come from practitioners who have shared their success factors with LGSA, from the experiences of the Urban Sustainability Support Alliance (USSA) and also from some key references.

The two main things this guide focuses on outlining are:

- The stages of group development, and how knowing this can help your group.
- The ten elements of a successful partnership project, and tangible examples (from various contexts) of how to build these into your collaborations.

#### Why produce a guide?

Projects delivered through formal collaborative partnerships with a council and other agencies, councils or community groups ('partnership projects'), have the potential deliver improved sustainability outcomes across a number of organisations and communities. They can also increase project efficiencies by saving time and money. Successful partnerships increase knowledge sharing and improve working relationships.

#### Stages of Group Development

Managing a partnership project is not always easy and can pose many challenges. The USSA found Bruce Tuckman's "Stages of Group Development" helpful in acknowledging and managing these challenges in its own partnership. Talking about these stages in a new group and recognising that it will take time for the group to 'get into the swing' of things may be helpful in reducing anxiety if conflicts does arise. These can then be framed as an expected element of the process.

##### 1. Forming:

This is when a group comes together for the first time. The project manager can help by facilitating introductions, using ice-breaking tasks, and explaining the tasks and purpose of the group.

##### 2. Storming:

This stage is when the group is actively trying to carry out a task and there may be conflict between one or more group members as the group sorts itself out and becomes more functional. The project manager can help by clarifying and reflecting ideas, smoothing over and moderating conflicts and acting as a go-between between members.

### 3. Norming:

The group begins to share ideas, thoughts and beliefs, and to develop shared norms (group rules). The project manager can help by clarifying ideas and ground rules, encouraging more reticent people to participate and moving the group towards its purpose.

### 4. Performing:

This is when the group focuses on the activity and starts to work together as a team to perform the set tasks. The project manager's role is to keep the group focused and to encourage and facilitate as necessary.

Some ways to help the group through these stages are outlined below.

### 10 key elements of a successful partnership:

1. Recognition of the need for a partnership
2. Clear and agreed purpose and objectives
3. Commitment and ownership
4. Trust between partners
5. Create clear and robust partnership arrangements
6. Good communication with all partners
7. Mutual benefits for all partners
8. Conflict resolution and mediation
9. Systems to monitor, measure and learn
10. Outcomes that live on beyond the life of the partnership

(Note: The first five elements are derived from the [Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool](#))

#### What is the Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool?

In 2001 in the UK a Strategic Partnership Taskforce was set up to look at how local government could better achieve outcomes through partnerships. They commissioned the Nuffield Institute at the University of Leeds to provide a Tool that local authorities could use to assess partnership relationships and aid the achievement of successful partnership working. The tool they made is a practical self-assessment tool, which can be used to develop, take stock of the health or diagnose problem areas in partnerships.

**Table 1 – things you can do to embed the elements needed for successful partnerships into your projects**

Element:	Actions:	Guidance & Examples:
1. Recognition of the need for a partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify the factors associated with a successful working partnership.</li> <li>- Identify the potential barriers to partnership working.</li> <li>- Acknowledge whether the partnership is voluntary, coerced or mandatory partnership</li> <li>- Acknowledge the extent of partners' interdependence to achieve some of their goals.</li> <li>- Acknowledge areas in which you are not dependent upon others to achieve your goals</li> </ul>	<p><b>Example:</b> The USSA was formed as part of a coerced partnership (facilitated by others as part of a grant process) therefore it was particularly important to acknowledge different reasons for entering the partnership.</p> <p>The USSA asked the following key question: How do we best to build a collaborative team within a formal alliance of separate organisations, each with their own project aims and processes, and emphasis on different knowledge types?</p> <p>The USSA explored individual ideals by asking the group to write down their three greatest hopes and fears for the project.</p>
2. Clear and agreed purpose and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure that the partnership is built on shared vision, shared values and agreed service principles.</li> <li>- Define clear joint aims and objectives.</li> <li>- Ensure joint aims and objectives are realistic.</li> <li>- Ensure that the partnership has defined clear service outcomes.</li> <li>- Partners' reasons for engaging in the partnership are understood and accepted.</li> <li>- Focus partnership effort on areas of likely success.</li> </ul>	<p>Objectives that have been developed prior to the formation of the partnership should be revisited together.</p> <p>It is useful to apply the <a href="#">outcomes hierarchy</a> to each objective to ensure it is measurable and achievable.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> The <a href="#">Lower Georges River Sustainability Initiative</a> (LGRSI) took a “reality check” at the beginning of their project and reviewed the project objectives.</p>

<p>3. Commitment and Ownership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure appropriate seniority of commitment.</li> <li>- Secure widespread ownership within and outside partner organisations.</li> <li>- Ensure sufficient consistency of commitment.</li> <li>- Recognise and encourage individuals with networking skills.</li> <li>- Ensure that partnership working is not dependent for success solely upon these individuals.</li> <li>- Reward partnership working and discourage and deal with those not working in partnership</li> </ul>	<p>Obtain senior management signoff and encourage continued involvement.</p> <p>Developing the business plan in collaboration can increase ownership.</p> <p>Make sure your advisory committee includes decision makers from all partners.</p> <p>MOU's could be developed to ensure commitment is documented.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> The <a href="#">Restoring Watercourses Wetlands and Coastal Lakes</a> project linked project objectives to the community strategic plans of partner organisations which formed the basis for the organisations commitment.</p>
<p>4. Trust between partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure fairness in the conduct of the partnership.</li> <li>- Ensure the partnership is able to sustain a sufficient level of trust to survive external problems which create mistrust elsewhere.</li> <li>- Trust built up within partnerships needs to be high enough to encourage significant risk taking.</li> <li>- Ensure that the right people are in the right place at the right time.</li> </ul>	<p>Trust takes time to develop. The USSA was able to dedicate a significant amount of time to building the partnership.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> The USSA retreat is an example of a trust building initiative.</p>
<p>5. Create clear and robust partnership arrangements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify and document roles and responsibilities</li> <li>- Ensure clear lines of accountability for partnership performance.</li> <li>- Distinguish single from collective responsibilities and ensure they are clear and understood.</li> <li>- Develop operational partnership arrangements which are simple, time-limited and task-oriented.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Example:</b> The USSA Terms of Reference are a detailed document which provides clarity around its roles, responsibilities and governance arrangements. Project managers preparing or updating governance structures for their projects have found this resource helpful as a sample terms of reference</p>

<p>6. Good communication with project partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have a regular way of communicating with partners</li> </ul>	<p>USSA Communications Strategy.          LGSA's Sustainability Snippets</p> <p><b>Example:</b> The <a href="#">Groundswell</a> project has a Steering Committee that includes the Palerang Agricultural Society along with the four participating councils and the DECC Sustainability Programs Division South East Office. Regular meetings and a project blog are vital to ensuring good communication.</p>
<p>7. Benefits for all partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure each partner's contribution is equally recognised and valued.</li> <li>- Ensure fairness in distribution of partnership benefits.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Example:</b> in the Blacktown City Council and Liverpool Plains Shire Council <a href="#">Regenesis program</a> both communities benefit and council benefits from shared resources and learning's associated with joint project.</p> <p>The USSA steering committee meetings involved a speed dating activity where project partners got a chance to exchange information and resources in an informal setting.</p>
<p>8. Agreed methods to resolve conflict</p>	<p>Outline how conflict will resolved during the early stages of the partnership.</p>	<p>USSA Terms of Reference</p> <p>The USSA used an external facilitator to help overcome conflict within the partnership.</p>
<p>9. Systems to monitor , measure and learn</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop arrangements for monitoring and reviewing how well the partnership's service aims and objectives are being met.</li> <li>- Develop arrangements for monitoring and reviewing how effectively the partnership itself is working.</li> <li>- Ensure widespread dissemination of monitoring and review findings amongst partners.</li> <li>- Celebrate and publicise partnership success and address</li> </ul>	<p>Use reporting as an opportunity to involve all partners in monitoring, measuring and reviewing.</p> <p>The USSA used the <a href="#">Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool</a> to evaluate the partnership mid-way through the project.</p>

continuing barriers.  
- Reconsider/revise partnership  
aims, objectives and  
arrangements.

10. Outcomes that  
live on beyond the  
partnership.

- Seek opportunities to embed the  
project into council core business.

**Example:** The Lower Georges River  
Sustainability Initiative has included criteria in  
their Community Partnership Program that  
asked the community groups applying to  
provide a legacy beyond the life of the project.

For a copy of any of the USSA resources, please contact [sustainability@lgsa.org.au](mailto:sustainability@lgsa.org.au)

#### Further reading:

[Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool](#) – web link and date published here February 2003 Available free online.

Bruce Tuckman's "[Stages of Group Development](#)"

#### Help on other topics:

Check out more sustainability resources at [www.lgsa.org.au](http://www.lgsa.org.au) under ESD

For further assistance with your council's sustainability journey contact LGSA  
[sustainability@lgsa.org.au](mailto:sustainability@lgsa.org.au) or phone 02 9242 4000

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