



Perspectives on Partnership



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Accountability and Compliance

The current climate for charities and voluntary sector organisations is a challenging one. The tentacles of austerity have been felt with less government funding for organisations; alongside a wave of scandals that have rocked the public confidence in the charitable sector. Accountability and compliance, thus, have become the key drivers for organisations delivering work in communities and with young people, and for their funders.

The role of YouthPact is to support the 11 delivery agents tasked with running projects with young people across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. Within the delivery agents are approximately 40 embedded partners (in addition to the 11 lead partners). This presents a complex network for compliance, governance and accountability issues. These are further complicated by the cross-border nature of these partnerships with variations in the governance arrangements across both jurisdictions. For YouthPact, our interest is in signposting to existing materials that support organisations in good governance and in developing resources to stimulate conversations on accountability, quality assurance and partnership.

Good governance is essential to any partnership. This forms the cornerstone of how the partnership will grow. It is essential that the governance arrangements are clearly defined and built into any agreement. There has to be a commitment to build an effective steering group.¹

This paper is written to support a process of self-evaluation for projects. This process of reflection and discussion can help identify operational or procedural areas for development within the partnership that need understanding and attention. In considering compliance and accountability, a plethora of local resources on governance already exists. At the end of this paper, we point to a few resources that might be useful to your organisation.

However, the focus on governance alone will not ensure the effective delivery of projects as part of the Peace4Youth programme. The partnership is the vehicle for delivery. This paper explores how the YouthPact partnership has developed and operates in practice; and uses this concrete example to identify key elements of effective partnership. The five-point plan for partnership is presented as a potential audit tool for each of the Peace4Youth consortia to consider and explore, in their own context.

Partnership

YouthPact uses partnership in both its principles and practices. The partnership has a distinct developmental function; to support the quality of delivery of projects for young people throughout Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. Partnership becomes particularly important for cross-border co-operation, where long-standing structural divisions need to be bridged. The support role provided allows the YouthPact staff to focus on strengthening the delivery partners'

¹ <http://collaborationni.nicva.org/article/8-simple-steps-effective-partnership-working> accessed: 10 April 2019

skillset to ensure the young people are receiving the highest quality and most modern techniques in peace-building theory and activities.

The cross-border YouthPact² team is comprised of a project manager, three development officers and an administrator. The team is employed by four organisations {Cooperation Ireland (Lead Partner, administration), Ulster University (Project Management, Development Officer), Pobal (Development Officer) and National Youth Council of Ireland (Development Officer)}, from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland which truly sets its framework and structure aside from others. The team is guided by a Joint Management Committee (JMC)³, comprised of executives from the four organisations, as well as an Expert Advisory Group (EAG)⁴.

The JMC is the backbone of YouthPact's commitment to good governance and productive programme implementation. YouthPact's lead partner, Co-operation Ireland's work is overseen by an independent, voluntary (unpaid) board comprising key influencers from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland or with an Irish background who have a genuine interest in helping communities to strengthen ties and move beyond the divisive legacy of the conflict. The board supports the delivery of effective Corporate Governance and takes an objective long-term view of the development of the organisation, leading on strategic planning and assisting the CEO in meeting his Corporate Governance responsibilities⁵. YouthPact fits within this framework.

YouthPact adheres to five principles of good partnership that has allowed for a positive and productive collaboration. The principles of this five-point plan for partnership are to have a **Collaborative and Collegiate Working** relationship, to develop **Confidence in Partners**, to maintain **Clarity**, to stay **Adaptive and Responsive**, and cultivate a **Balance of Power and Resources**.

² The fact that CI is the Lead Partner organisation but that the Project Manager is in UU emphasises the unique cross border partnership that has been designed taking full account of the experience and expertise available to the partnership. This structure ensures that staff resources are deployed to the project and organised into one comprehensive unit working for the agreed purposes of the Project Partnership

³ Joint Management Committee (JMC) – comprising nominated representative of each partner organisations, this group oversees project implementation, reviews its operation and authorises change if required. It meets quarterly and Co-operation Ireland acts as secretariat to the JMC.

⁴ The role of the Expert Advisory Group is strategic and high level. It will support YouthPact by seeking insights and deep understanding on the particular issues and opportunities facing Priority 2.1 delivery organisations, add new insights and perspectives, and offer independent advice. The EAG will use members' networks and positions to inform practice and policy on a range of issues including (but not limited to) youth development approaches, opportunities for citizenship and building social activism, good practice in good relations and peace-building, engagement with hard to reach groups, effective practice in impact measurement, training and development opportunities and progression routes for young people, and training and development opportunities for youth workers.

⁵ Also see guidance followed by the partners:

https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2018/11/managing_better_01_governance_28-11-18.pdf

http://www.governancecode.ie/uploads/1/4/0/6/14069721/governance_code_composite_-_27_october_2016_2_.pdf

<http://www.diycommitteeguide.org/sites/default/files/2016-03/code-of-good-governance-2016.pdf> accessed: 10 April 2019



Collaborative and Collegiate Working

Partnerships exemplify the old adage — it takes two hands to clap. Asymmetric partnerships, where one partner does all (or most) of the giving and the other does all (or most) of the taking are usually short-lived. For a partnership to be sustainable, the giving and the taking must remain commensurate, or at least perceived to be so by both partners. The terms and conditions (tacit or spelled out) that form the basis for a partnership define the nature, scope and quantum of the give and take between partners, and as such may be taken to represent a kind of social contract (if not a legal one).⁶

The core directive of the YouthPact project is to support approximately 50 youth organisations and their delivery to young people throughout Northern Ireland and the Border Counties in the Republic of Ireland. Every individual on the team has their own responsibilities to assure the project is delivering as expected. However, the team works together on other training events, reports or support work; to achieve a combined final product. As each member of the team has specific expertise in areas of youth work, governance and programme implementation, often team members will assist with projects to ensure the delivery is at the highest quality and that groups are given sufficient space to have both a productive *and* a rewarding experience. YouthPact has all the

⁶ <https://hemantputhli.com/2011/10/04/partnership-fundas/> accessed: 10 April 2019

hallmarks of a quintessential support programme - The collaborative nature of the team, with give and take at its heart; and a respectful regard for each other is characteristic of both the YouthPact staff team and the JMC partners.

In the spirit of collegiality, holding a listening position is the key to having a flexible responsive approach to the projects delivering on the ground. YouthPact has evolved its training and support activities to accommodate the needs and pressure points of Peace4Youth project staff. YouthPact considers recommendations for future trainings and collaborative efforts with delivery organisations to adapt to changing learning needs. Furthermore, YouthPact produces an Ezine three times a year to promote the successes not only of the YouthPact work, but champion the achievements of the delivery agents throughout the projects.⁷

Confidence in Partners

“In working with a wide variety of organizations that are seeking to implement person centred plans it has become clear that good plans are not enough. Real implementation requires that the people being supported are respected, that there is trust between them and those who do the support, and that there is partnership. Further, respect, trust, and partnership must be present for those who provide the support as well as for those who receive the support. As efforts in having self-determination move from being the exception to being the norm it is even more critical that efforts be made to help organizations build respect, trust, and partnership as core values.”⁸

The cross-border work of YouthPact is built on trust and confidence in the expertise of its partners. Confidence is most tangible when based on the track record of an organisation and their staff; but to assume trust based on an organisation’s reputation alone may be foolhardy; a trusted relationship offers a great deal more strength. The foundations of this trusted relationship are laid on equality and respect. In general,

“partnerships are based on engagement terms that represent a fair exchange of value, partnerships are intrinsically relationships of equals, and neither side can honestly claim to have an ‘upper hand’ over the other.”⁹

The JMC have some existing bi-lateral strong working relationships and trust at the beginning of the YouthPact process can be borrowed from these. Trust and confidence are played out in JMC meetings through robust questioning of the processes, the finances, the operational issues and the impact of the work. Mutual respect grows from a sense of having a robust principled approach to the work. Questions are asked of the staff team, regarding what the JMC might do to support and develop their work. Trust and confidence are grown through such activities.

Confidence and trust are then cascaded from the JMC through to the team ethos and practice. The team is comprised of experienced youth workers who bring different skills to the projects and

⁷ <https://www.cooperationireland.org/youth-pact> accessed: 10 April 2019

⁸ <http://www.allenshea.com/teambuilding.html> Building respect, trust, and partnership: Michael W. Smull accessed: 10 April 2019

⁹ <https://hemantputhli.com/2011/10/04/partnership-fundas/> 3. Peer-to-peer, not master-slave. accessed: 10 April 2019

through this it is essential to maintain full confidence in each other's positions and plans to implement trainings and other duties. As the team is dispersed throughout the region, the trust built and maintained amongst staff is the key to a sustainable and productive partnership. Each team member has their own projects and partners that they are responsible to ensure all support is available when required. Through this, the team works in an autonomous manner much of the time, as a more efficient use of human resources. Micro-management, for this skilled team, would be undermining to this autonomy and detrimental to project outcomes.

The guidance from the JMC and the project manager reflects the practice of autonomous teamwork. The quarterly meetings held by the JMC keeps the lines of communication between the partners both active and participatory, however the day-to-day activities are entrusted to the development officers. The Project management is conducted in a similar manner to the JMC, yet more hands on and supportive. The team meets via video in the beginning and end of each week allowing the manager to understand what the team is working on and if or where support is needed.

Clarity

"We don't need more standards-based guidelines or accounting-based rules to cover every possible situation. Instead, we need leaders of character and integrity. We need leaders who don't put their own egos and greed ahead of the welfare of the company and its employees. We need principled leaders who make ethically-based decisions while considering how both other people and the environment will be affected by their actions."¹⁰

The clear vision of the YouthPact team is cultivated and refined through the value-based leadership of the JMC. The heads of the four, cross-border, organisations come from diverse disciplines which allows for a healthy and robust conversation to occur when presented with new or recurring issues. The discussions held during the JMC meetings result in clear guidance for the team to continue and there is full trust within the YouthPact team, which relieve the overarching stresses of big-picture decision making and allows for the team to focus on what is most important, the support of organisations delivering quality youth work to the young people.

The guidance from the JMC closely resembles the concept of *Principle-Centered Leadership* proposed by Stephen Covey. This approach to leadership acknowledges there are no quick fixes or short-term approaches to both solving problems and sustainable leadership. Covey explains "Centering life on correct principles is the key to developing this rich internal power in our lives, and with this power we can realize many of our dreams. A center secures, guides, empowers. Like the hub of a wheel, it unifies and integrates. It's the core of personal and organizational missions. It's the foundation of culture. It aligns shared values, structures and systems"¹¹. The JMC is the 'hub' of the YouthPact project. Through its vision and guidance, the team is able to continue progressing and training in a progressive and compassionate manner, ultimately benefiting the young people with reflective and robust youth work.

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<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://scholar.google.co.uk/&httpsredir=1&article=1050&context=jee> accessed: 10 April 2019

¹¹ "Principle-Centered Leadership" Stephen R. Covey. Rosetta Books, 2 December 2009. P. 20

Adaptive and Responsive

"The first and most important determining element of quality and effective leadership is the employee's perception of the leader-member relationship as positive, meaningful, and supportive. The second key variable that determines quality and effective leadership is a leader's capacity to learn about, understand, and respond to the unique needs, values, goals, and strengths of individual team members."¹²

The YouthPact partnership is a new configuration for this quartet of cross-border organisations. As such, the shape of the YouthPact leadership has grown and evolved, initially through the application stage and into the implementation. This evolution has essentially taken an iterative approach to all tasks – with individuals assuming roles and actions, then checking out progress with others in order to re-direct or continue forwards. Navigation and negotiation have been central tenets of the relationship from the early stages. Project plans have been developed, considered, re-designed or adapted, in response to the commentary from other partners and the guidance of YouthPact staff. To be adaptive and responsive to changing needs, circumstances or resourcing is a confident leadership style. The guiding principles for adaptive responsive work lie in having a clear shared vision which acts as the roadmap to keep us on track. Moving towards our final destination with single-minded intention means that we can meander along the way to meet the changing needs of the projects delivering youth work.

The JMC is a place where partners are interested in listening with action in mind, to understand how they can intervene to best support the work and workers. The terms of reference for the partnership present as a set of rules for governance; but the mood of the YouthPact JMC goes beyond this. Partners notice and act on collaborative opportunities; they offer resources to their partners; work on tasks to profit one of the other partners; these examples illustrate the generosity of spirit that is the essence for being adaptive. Being adaptive is about making a decision to stand your ground, or move to accommodate another, the latter being evident in the YouthPact model.

The YouthPact team takes direction from the JMC, but also works to the ethos of the JMC; and applies this ethos to the daily functioning of the project. The YouthPact team work together and share responsibilities according to each member's expertise and abilities. The development officers have projects and groups that they are specifically responsible for, however the entire team participates in and helps organise, facilitate and deliver training events.

As the team works on different areas of the region, communication is implemented through bi-weekly conference calls using Zoom.¹³ The bi-weekly meetings outline what the team are working on each week and where any team members can help, providing a structure to the working week and a harmonious relationship amongst the team without physically seeing each other often.

This adaptive, responsive ethos is to be rolled out in how YouthPact interact with projects, to be seen in the quarterly coordinator's meetings. These meetings gather the coordinators of all eleven

¹² https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/70274_De_Groot_Chapter_2.pdf accessed: 10 April 2019

¹³ Zoom Video Communications is a company headquartered in San Jose, California that provides remote conferencing services using cloud computing. Zoom offers communications software that combines video conferencing, online meetings, chat, and mobile collaboration.

lead delivery agents. The meetings offer a space and time for those responsible for all project delivery to discuss success and challenges in a safe space that is not often available for the people in charge of large-scale projects involving multiple partners. The session allows the YouthPact team to develop new support strategies in response to emerging themes, issues or opportunities. This strong ethos can be seen at each stage of the process; and offers a robust approach, even in a rapidly changing landscape.

Balance of Power and Resources

“For a team to be a comfortable and safe place for all members, each person must respect everyone else. Members should respect every aspect of other members, though they may not agree with it: ideas, communication abilities, background, religion, work style and cultural traditions. Because a great team requires open communication, respect can create the trust that will allow members to be vulnerable.”¹⁴

The foundation to the success of the YouthPact project is maintaining a balanced power dynamic and equality within the team. Leadership is important in equalising power dynamics and simple actions such as rolling chair act to support this principle. For YouthPact, the development of a partnership agreement was slow and considered with earnest discussions on the status of lead partner in relation to the embedded partners. These discussions feed into the respectful and trusting ethos of the JMC.

The YouthPact team work together for many of the training and support events implemented. The success of the project depends on the sharing of resources, be it skills or supplies. The team’s dependence on each other strengthens the working relationship between the members and ultimately allows for a more productive and sustainable delivery all round.

“We use teams at nearly every point in our life...the work place, our social organizations, community affiliations...it’s all about interacting with others, and in many ways you can centre on the importance of teams. Every team is different of course and the dynamics of teams determine if goals will be met in an efficient manner. In the workplace, identifying team dynamics and understanding positive and negative outcomes that can occur is a stepping stone to knowing how to predict and build team performance.”¹⁵

A Final Thought.... The Road is Long

All cross-border Peace4Youth partnerships will have considered and nurtured many of the elements outlined here, either in the initial stages of the partnership and perhaps since then. But the pathway of a project can be long and winding, and along the way, either by accident or by design, some partners can branch off, alone, in their own direction.

As recognised by NICVA, “embarking on partnership working or remaining committed when the going gets tough can be very difficult. Even when partnership working can improve the services for beneficiaries, it is not uncommon for the process to cause unease with some board members, staff

¹⁴ <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/characteristics-good-teamwork-habits-20848.html> accessed: 10 April 2019

¹⁵ <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/characteristics-good-teamwork-habits-20848.html> accessed: 10 April 2019

and key stakeholders. Strong leadership is required to support people and bring them through the unease associated with change.”¹⁶

This paper is presented as a reminder to return to where the cross-border partnership began. In talking and thinking about each element in this five-point plan, remedial actions can be revealed (particularly for places where no problem was detected at all). Pathways can be reconciled, and clarity of combined purpose can be restored towards the long-term peace-building vision for children and young people.

RESOURCES ON GOVERNANCE:

Partnerships and networks in work with young people. Accessed at www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=19983&printable=1

¹⁶ <http://collaborationni.nicva.org/article/8-simple-steps-effective-partnership-working> accessed: 10 April 2019

