



Building Better Partnerships

Guidelines for multi-agency groups working
with asylum seekers and refugees
in the East of England

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MENTER

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An on-line version of this report is available on the Refugee Council website at:
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Introduction

Asylum seekers who have just arrived or been granted leave to remain in the UK have a wide range of needs such as help with English, accommodation, access to health services and jobs if they are allowed to work. The arrival of asylum seekers dispersed to various areas of the UK and refugees settling in an area can raise concerns for the existing communities. However, refugees and asylum seekers can also bring new opportunities for the communities in which they live, filling labour shortages and bringing skills that are in short supply.

To meet these challenges successfully, the local authority and other agencies as well as communities themselves need be involved. Multi-agency partnerships bring together all those who work locally with asylum seekers and refugees so that they can

- develop services and policies to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees;
- share information and ideas from different agencies;
- co-ordinate their efforts more effectively.

Partnerships are difficult

There can be many problems in making partnerships work effectively. Partnerships are rarely created from scratch. There are existing relationships between partners and existing expectations about how things should be done. Existing multi-agency partnerships have identified the following issues:

“It’s difficult to **involve** refugees. If we involve everyone who wants to be involved we’ll never get anything done.”

“Our partnership seems to be nothing more than a **talking shop**. What can I do to get things moving?”

“Our meetings are **dominated** by two or three vocal people. What can we do?”

“No one around here agrees on anything, it’s just **politics** and **back-biting**. How can we ensure people are accountable?”

This booklet offers advice and guidance on developing effective multi-agency partnerships for refugees and asylum seekers to meet the needs of the whole community.

The anatomy of a successful partnership

This section 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. The remainder of the booklet explores these features, offers some simple questions to help you assess your partnership and tips on what you can do to improve.

The PiiSA Framework

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

- P** - Clarity of purpose and role
- ii** - The capacity to influence and to be influenced
- S** - Systems and structures that are fit for purpose
- A** - The capacity and resources to take action

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 they need a communication protocol - in other words, they need to strengthen the systems used by the partnership.

However, experience with partnerships suggests 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 in our experience, 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.

Clarity of purpose based on shared commitment to a specific goal transforms and galvanises an otherwise chaotic group. It is important to understand that a shared commitment is not the same as shared interest. We often assume that because we share interests, we must be committed to the same goal. A partnership based on shared interest alone will become a talking shop with little action. Use the checklist below to assess the capacity of your partnership for action.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Clarity of purpose			
	Always	Sometimes	Never
I am clear about what the partnership is trying to achieve.			
The key players have a commitment to respond to the views of the partnership.			
There is a common commitment between partners about what we are trying to achieve.			
The purpose of the partnership reflects the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and the local community.			
We have openly discussed what each partner brings to and wants to get out of the partnership.			
I know what the purpose of partnership meetings is.			
We have identified indicators or measures of success for the partnership.			

Similarly, it is helpful to be clear about the purpose and outcomes for each meeting of the partnership. The purpose of many meetings is anything but clear. Nobody is sure what the purpose of the meeting is and, as a result, the agenda is rambling and the wrong people are involved. Often, all that is needed is to simply ask the question: What are we trying to achieve? It is not uncommon to ask a group why they are meeting and to get a reply along the lines of “because it’s Tuesday!”

Roles for your partnership

Common roles for a multi-agency partnership dealing with the needs of refugees and asylum seekers include the following:

1. Sharing information on policy, resources, user needs, good practice, service standards and other relevant matters
2. Improving the local environment to aid integration
3. Mapping the needs of asylum seekers and refugees in your area
4. Mapping the resources and services available to asylum seekers and refugees
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 asylum and refugee issues and good relations among the asylum-seeking, refugee and other communities
8. Creating a better understanding of the needs of the local community with regard to new arrivals
9. Ensuring effective two-way flow of information between relevant regional and national bodies
10. Working with the regional consortium bodies to identify regional issues and specific actions by which the consortium can assist local multi-agency groups to address these issues
11. Involving refugees and asylum seekers in developing solutions to their problems

If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there." Lewis Carroll

ii - The Capacity to INFLUENCE and be INFLUENCED

Use this checklist below to assess how well your partnership creates an environment where people can influence each other. A partnership is 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.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Can partners influence each other?

	Always	Sometimes	Never
Meetings are well chaired and facilitated.			
I feel included in the decisions of the partnership.			
I feel I can challenge someone if I feel they are not being totally open or I don't agree with them.			
Everyone contributes to meetings including asylum seekers and refugees.			
I feel confident to say what I mean in partnership meetings.			
The meeting agendas talk about things that are really important to me.			
Asylum seekers, refugees and the local community can influence the partnership.			

Diversity, which can be a partnership's greatest strength, also presents the biggest barrier to a 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 to be reminded to listen.

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

Creating an environment where refugees and asylum seekers can influence the partnership

It is particularly important to be aware that there are many barriers to understanding the real needs of refugees and asylum seekers. One of the key tasks of the partnership is to work hard to ensure that these needs are properly articulated and understood by the partnership. Some of the barriers include:

- Problems of language can prevent some from expressing their needs or gaining access to basic services.
- Many refugees and asylum seekers may feel vulnerable and be reticent to articulate their real concerns.
- Lack of familiarity with the local culture and systems of government mean that it can be difficult to understand when and where to speak up.
- The needs of people from other cultures can be unfamiliar to us and easily overlooked or misinterpreted.

Working through influence

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.

What is cultural awareness?

- **The ability to recognise that your ideas, habits and attitudes have a built in bias**
- **The recognition that other ways of doing and thinking exist**
- **The understanding that actions, gestures and relationships mean different things to different people in different places**
- **The avoidance of value judgements about the way other people do things**
- **Avoiding stereotyping people because of their background or culture**
- **A willingness to adapt your behaviour to avoid giving offence**
- **An understanding that differences in levels of education, social class and outlook lead to different viewpoints**

◀ TRY THIS ▶ 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 which are relevant to the meeting?

These concerns and expectations are listed - usually on a flipchart - so that 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 up.

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.

One very effective way to make partnership meetings more effective is to create a common agenda through the above simple exercise entitled *Concerns and expectations*.

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.

We have seen this exercise 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 not used 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, or imbalances between participants all impact on people's ability to contribute.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Small groups

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

In meetings attended by people whose first language is not English and who are not used to contributing to large gatherings, the design of the meeting is paramount. Refugees and asylum seekers who do not understand the local culture or the systems and structures of local government and health care, will need specific support to help them participate effectively.

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 discussion, it is equivalent to paying attention to one part of the picture without any awareness of the bigger picture.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ 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.

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.

One simple technique we have found to be 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 what the dominant members of the group expected.

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 all have 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.

◀ **TRY THIS** ▶ 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.

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.

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.

It is particularly important to be aware that many refugees and asylum seekers may feel vulnerable or lack confidence in our language and culture, and therefore will have difficulty raising concerns. In some cultures, it is impolite to raise concerns directly and so it is important to be sensitive to unvoiced concerns.

It may be necessary to provide a safe, one to one environment where the concerns and frustrations among refugees and asylum seekers can be explored before being openly discussed in the partnership.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Systems and structures

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

S - SYSTEMS and STRUCTURES fit for purpose

Effective partnerships are characterised by systems and structures that are fit for purpose. Multi-agency forums for refugees and asylum seekers may need systems and structures, which balance the need for a wide range of participants to be involved in the workings of the partnership, while retaining the ability to take strategic views. Many of the problems observed are 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, refugees and asylum seekers 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, which is the key to tackling some of the challenges that the partnership has been set up to deal with in the first place.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Clarity of purpose

	Always	Sometimes	Never
I am clear about what the partnership is trying to achieve.			
The key players have a commitment to respond to the views of the partnership.			
There is a common commitment between partners about what we are trying to achieve.			
The purpose of the partnership reflects the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and the local community.			
We have openly discussed what each partner brings to and wants to get out of the partnership.			
I know what the purpose of partnership meetings is.			
We have identified indicators or measures of success for the partnership.			

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 which allows all interests to influence the views of the executive.

Involving asylum seekers and refugees

No one has a better understanding of the needs of refugees and asylum seekers than refugees and asylum seekers themselves. Think creatively about how to involve them in the partnership.

- Think about holding meetings in places familiar to the people you are trying to involve.
- Approach refugee community organisations and network representatives.
- Plan focus groups to run in the languages of the groups you are trying to reach.
- Ask refugees and asylum seekers themselves how they can best be involved.
- Think about what support structures can be made available such as briefings, one-to-one meetings and language support.

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

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Getting into 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 are recorded and followed up.			
The partnership finds the resources it needs to carry out its plans.			
The partnerships' actions address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.			
All partners get involved in implementing actions.			

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.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Inclusive action plans

Before the end of a meeting, ask each individual present to list three actions that they would like to see from the discussion that has taken place.

It is important that each person works alone to prevent the more senior or vocal characters in the group dominating the action planning process.

Each action is presented on a separate post-it note. The post-its are then gathered and clustered so that similar or supporting actions are grouped together. It is often possible to arrange the post-its in a sort of time line so that the actions form a coherent action plan. Responsibilities and deadlines are then agreed.

The partnership needs to consider its context in considerable detail. This involves asking questions such as the following: 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 the ability to focus on the areas where the partnership can have an impact and provides insights into possible future pitfalls.

◀ TRY THIS ▶ Accountability

Sadly, this is another basic discipline which is common sense but not always common practice. The atmosphere changes when people know that they will be asked the simple question: "Did you do what you said you would do?"

What might have been a woolly talking shop, will be transformed into a focused, energised and effective group.

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. 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. This sounds like common sense, but, sadly, it is not common practice. 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. It can also avoid 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.

...And finally, a personal note

If we do not understand asylum seekers' and refugees' needs and concerns, it will be difficult to address them. But understanding people who are different from ourselves can be very difficult - and not just because for most refugees and asylum seekers, English will not be their first language. Even when we speak the same language, it is not safe to assume that the words we use share a common meaning with others. We must therefore enquire carefully about the meaning behind the words being spoken.

The biggest barrier of all is that it is very difficult simply to listen. As soon as someone begins to speak, our minds start working. We try to categorise what we hear, we formulate our reply, or we find ourselves judging what is being said: is it right or wrong, useful or irrelevant. All kinds of judgements get in the way of us just listening, such as our feelings about the person speaking, whether we like or dislike them, whether we respect their views. These are normal and healthy instincts that help us to navigate a complex world. But 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 or 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's not about agreeing with the other person's view 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 our actions on real information rather than our own assumptions about what is needed. The final word in this document is therefore, above all, listen!

◀ **TRY THIS** ▶ 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. 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!

Contact list

The organisations below can help with partnership-working on refugee work.

Partnership Development Project

Tel: 01603 617076

Website: www.partnershipdevelopment.org.uk

Refugee Council - Eastern Region

Tel: 01473 297900; Fax: 01473 217334

Regional Development Adviser: 01473 297905

Website: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Menter

Tel: 01223 355 034; Fax: 01223 359047

Website: www.menter.org.uk

East of England Regional Assembly - Consortium for Asylum and Refugee Integration

Tel: 01284 729413; Fax: 01284 729429

Website: www.eera.gov.uk

Voluntary Sector Refugee Network - East of England

Tel: 01473 406432; Fax: 01473 406431



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