

## About this briefing

This briefing provides a summary of an evidence review produced by What Works Scotland in response to key issues identified by What Works Scotland Community Planning Partnership partners.

The evidence review and briefing were produced by What Work's Scotland's Evidence Bank for public service reform. The Evidence Bank provides appraised, accessible and action-oriented evidence reviews and other resources for those involved in public service delivery including Community Planning Partnerships, policy-makers, local authorities and third sector organisations.

The Evidence Bank builds on methods developed by CRFR (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships) to address well-documented issues around using evidence including accessibility, relevance, and timeliness.

The full evidence review contains further findings, signposting, talking points, references, and details of how the research was carried out – see [www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk).



What Works Scotland Evidence Briefing

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# Partnership working across UK Public Services

## Introduction

Partnership working is central to the public services reform agenda across the UK and beyond. Partnerships exist between public agencies, the third and private sectors and local communities. Across the UK they are often formally mandated by policy. Partnership is seen as a means to address a wide range of complex issues, from health inequality and local regeneration, to increasing employability and decreasing pressure on hospital beds.

This briefing and the accompanying evidence review presents a range of evidence about partnership working aimed at people who wish to use this to inform both policy and practice. This briefing highlights findings and high-level messages on key issues to help thinking and prompt discussion about how to improve partnerships.

## Summary points

- Partnership working in UK public services is a complex process shaped by structural, cultural and social factors. Developing and sustaining effective partnership working is challenging in this context.
- There is very little evidence linking partnership working in the UK public services to improved outcomes. This is, in part, because of the methodological challenges associated with conducting robust evaluation work within such complex systems.
- The research evidence highlights a range of features of effective partnership working. How these features contribute to partnership effectiveness are shaped by a number of factors, including the motivation for any partnership and the agencies and sectors involved.
- By considering the relevant literature in terms of inputs, activities and different levels of outcomes, this report highlights the features that need to be in place at different points in the partnership journey for effective partnership working.
- There are no 'one size fits all' solutions to improve partnership working. Organisations and individuals need to engage with the complex context in which they work to address structural, cultural and social factors influencing effectiveness.

## Partnership working: definitions and concepts

Partnership working is a messy phenomenon that is not easily defined. None of the studies included in this review of evidence sought to develop their own definition of partnership working.

A range of terms are used to refer to collaborative work between different organisations. These include: partnership, collaborative, interagency working, joint working and integration. Differences in language use reflect use of terminology in policy and practice rather than any meaningful difference between concepts.

UK public service partnerships can be conceptualised in relation to their organisational forms, their features and the social processes within them. Understanding the ways in which these factors play out in any given partnership, and the relationship between them is essential to understanding partnership working in that context.

## Evaluating partnership effectiveness

The complex nature of partnerships and the contexts in which they operate makes evaluating partnerships very difficult. Researchers have adopted a wide range of approaches but to date there is very little evidence linking partnership working as an organisational form to improved outcomes.

## References

Full references can be found in the report at [www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk)

## Acknowledgements

**Research team:** Dr Ailsa Cook, Director, Outcome Focus (lead researcher and author); Tamara Mulherin (research assistant); Karen Seditas (Evidence Bank lead, review co-ordinator, editor).

**Peer reviewer:** Dr Adina Dudau, Lecturer in Management (Management), Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow;

**User reviewer:** Kate Bell, Change and Innovation Manager, NHS Lanarkshire

**Additional comments** were provided by Dr Oliver Escobar and Dr Sarah Morton (What Works Scotland co-directors); Dr James Henderson (What Works Scotland Research Associate)

Research has demonstrated links between partnership working and improved processes, such as engagement of the third sector and improved trust between partners. Research has also linked specific partnership processes to final outcomes, for example access to specialist multidisciplinary services reducing reoffending.

### Features of an effective partnership

There is strong agreement within the research evidence about the features of effective partnerships and these apply across UK public services.

The ways in which different features of partnership contribute to outcomes is shaped by the ways in which they are operationalised in any specific partnership. This in turn is

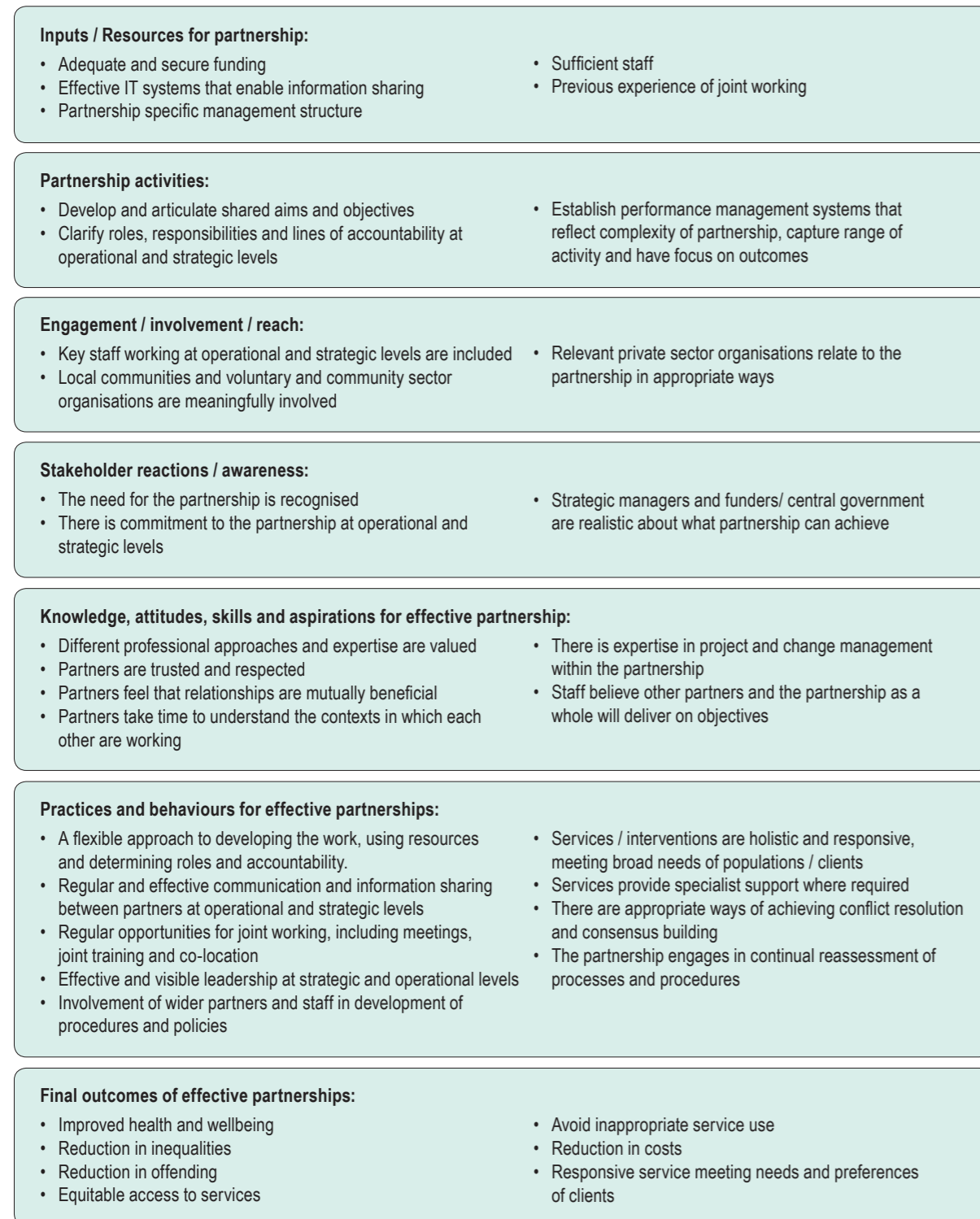
shaped by the contextual, structural and cultural factors of the partnership.

Effective partnerships need to be both clear about their aims, objectives, roles and responsibilities and flexible and responsive in the way that they operate.

The features of effective partnership is summarised below showing what needs to be in place for a partnership to achieve the intended outcomes.

The relationship between partnership features in Diagram 1 and outcomes is not just linear. A change in practice, such as improving communication and information sharing can have an effect on activities, engagement, reactions and knowledge, as well as final outcomes.

**Diagram 1: Effective Partnership Processes: Evidence Overview**



**Table 1. Conditions for effective partnership working: assumptions and risks**

Assumptions	Risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This is a partnership</li> <li>Partnership is the appropriate form of organisation to address this issue</li> <li>There is a clear need and rationale for the partnership</li> <li>There are shared understandings of final outcomes</li> <li>The partnership has sufficient autonomy and authority to make decisions</li> <li>All partners are involved in clarifying direction and decision making</li> <li>There is effective power sharing across the partnership</li> <li>There are sufficient resources to deliver on objectives</li> <li>Timeframes are realistic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Term 'partnership' used cynically to mask hierarchical arrangements</li> <li>Partnership formed naively as it seems the right thing to do</li> <li>No clear sense of purpose and outcomes</li> <li>Programme of work complex and unwieldy</li> <li>Not all partners involved in decision making and agreeing direction of partnership</li> <li>Voluntary and community sector excluded and marginalised</li> <li>Operational staff excluded from strategic decision making</li> <li>Work of the partnership dominated by performance management reporting requirements</li> <li>Lack of ownership amongst partners</li> </ul>

### Factors influencing partnership effectiveness

A number of high level factors influence partnership effectiveness. These include: the motivation for establishing the partnership; the involvement of central government; the balance between hierarchical and collaborative ways of working; the links between strategic and operational levels and the engagement of the third sector.

Running through all of these factors is power. The transparent and equitable distribution of power within partnerships is arguably the most important factor shaping partnership effectiveness.

A key challenge in establishing effective partnerships is creating systems that are robust and meaningful, whilst still allowing for flexibility and the unique and timely contribution of different partners.

Key conditions for effective partnership working can be identified from the evidence and are summarised as risks and assumptions in Table 1.

### Improving partnership working

Empirical evidence around partnership improvement is very limited and further research is required. Research has looked at the efficacy of inter-professional development programmes and action-orientated evaluation as tools for improvement.

Successful approaches to improving partnerships engage with complexity, support staff to reflect critically on policies and practice and develop enhanced understanding.

Opportunities for different partner organisations to learn together supports staff to develop understanding of the cultures and contributions of different partners and increases their confidence in working across agencies.

### Conclusion

Despite the methodological challenges of conducting research in this area, the findings of this review are clear. There are a range of features of partnerships that have been shown through multiple studies to contribute to partnership effectiveness. Effective partnerships are transparent, inclusive, flexible and responsive to the needs of partners and people who use services. Unequal distribution of power

and ongoing tensions between hierarchical and collaborative forms of governance make partnership working difficult in this context.

'One size fits all' approaches will not deliver partnership improvement in UK public services. Effective partnerships require public service leaders who understand and engage with the different pressures on partnership and staff who are supported to work in these complex environments. The overview of partnership and assumptions and risks presented in this briefing should be an aid to achieve this.

### Policy and practice implications: improving partnership effectiveness

- Be sure that partnership is the right approach to address the issue.
- Be clear about aims, objectives, roles and responsibilities and ensure understanding is shared by all partners.
- Establish a dedicated management structure for the work of the partnership and ensure strong, reflective and responsive leadership.
- Ensure performance management systems are meaningful and tailored to the work of the partnership and information is shared with and of value to all partners.
- Support staff to develop skills, confidence, trust and relationships required for effective partnership working.
- Involve all partners in decision making and maintain strong links between the operational and strategic functions of the partnership.
- Be mindful of the impact that power relations have on partnership working, work to maintain equal and transparent relationships between partners.
- Engage with the complexity of partnership work – developing in-depth understandings to find tailored solutions to local partnership issues.