

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT POLICY INSIGHT BRIEF

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CAN GOVERNMENT, PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS WORK TOGETHER?

Lessons for partnership working

Partnership between government, philanthropy and civil society organisations offers the potential to address shared goals. However, differences between them in their approach, outlook, and governance norms can often affect their ability to work together.

A study by the Institute of Public Administration draws lessons from partnership working between The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic), government and civil society organisations in Ireland. Atlantic grant funding of activity in the areas of ageing and children and youth has been largely based on a partnership-based approach, with matching funding by government needed for the initiative to proceed.

A partnership-based approach can help to shift the traditionally negative views that stakeholders can hold of each other. But this doesn't happen overnight.

Interviews with policymakers suggest that the Atlantic approach to partnership with government was both positive and pragmatic. Atlantic was seen as understanding how

government works. Also, public officials clearly understood Atlantic's position that it will only engage if the government is willing to work in a context of genuine dialogue and partnership. There is no doubt that as well as the style of the approach adopted, the fact that Atlantic contributed substantial amounts of funding gave them influence to promote joint working.

Having clear, performance-oriented agreements between government and Atlantic is seen as a plus by policymakers, reflecting the more 'formal' side of partnership, and providing a clear sense of direction.

KEY POINTS

- Have a clear, outcome-focused agreement, like a memorandum of understanding
- Make use of partnership governance structures such as oversight groups, steering groups, and consortia
- Develop strong informal partnership arrangements to complement the formal governance measures
- Be prepared to be in it for the long haul – changing public services takes a long time
- Personnel change quite frequently in the public sector. Build awareness of this into planning
- Managing expectations presents challenges

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Partnership governance structures vary from grant to grant, but a common arrangement is (a) a memorandum of understanding; (b) an oversight or advisory group, responsible for strategic decisions on the programme such as funding; and (c) a steering or project group, charged with oversight of implementation. Several grants also depend on the creation of consortia at a local level.

The oversight group is particularly important for sending out the message about the seriousness of the project across the system. The steering group oversees the implementation of the strategy on the ground, and is concerned with embedding the desired practices and holding deliverers to account. Consortia are partnership groupings at local level and enable participants to learn about each other and the boundaries within which each works.

While the formal governance arrangements were seen as important in developing partnership, interviewees also stressed the importance of the informal side of the partnership. Senior government officials welcomed the fact that, if needed, they could pick up the phone and make contact with Atlantic staff. These informal engagements were seen as necessary in the context where, in a changing environment, new priorities may emerge, or issues or problems with scheduled activities arise.

This is not to say that the partnership approach always runs smoothly. Within both the NGO and statutory sector there are reservations about partnership and views that one side does not really understand the other. A significant challenge is that of the constantly changing personnel involved from the public service organisations. People are regularly moved for career development, on promotion, to solve problems elsewhere etc. and this means relationships have to be built with new people.

Partnership is not a panacea. But the evidence indicates that on balance it makes a positive contribution. Many of those interviewed for this study said that more attention is given as a result of the partnership arrangements to developing a shared perspective on desired outcomes, and working towards those outcomes.

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Further details on this and other aspects of government, philanthropy and civil society organisations working together can be found in R. Boyle and L. Shannon (2018), *Better Together? Philanthropy and Government: Lessons from The Atlantic Philanthropies and Irish Government Partnership-based Co-Investments*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. Available to download from <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/research-reports/better-together-philanthropy-and-government> or <https://www.ipa.ie/fileupload/ResearchPapers/Better Together Report.pdf>