

Chapter 3: Technical approaches to partnerships

Key messages

The technical resources available to support collaboration and the development of partnerships are expanding in scope as the mandate for collaboration evolves across sectors. The literature describes a range of partnerships along a continuum of collaboration and the stages or life cycles of partnerships.

Barriers to collaboration include inadequate resources (time, people and funding), poor leadership, an absence of vision or collective outcome, poor partnership processes (for example, around use of agreements, communications, conflict resolution, backbone support, evaluation), limited opportunity or mandate to innovate or explore divergent thinking, and poor or limited existing relationships and trust with prospective partners.

There are a number of resources available to support organisations to form more formal partnerships. The resources emphasise a focus on:

- understanding the partnership context through scoping out the problem, building relationships and knowledge, and the use of feasibility assessments to assess collaboration opportunities and whether a more formal partnership is warranted
- using agreements to bind a collaborative relationship
- managing partnerships through identifying the resources needed, developing a shared vision and collective outcomes, developing ways of working, and understanding the phases of partnership processes
- using evaluative techniques to review progress and ensure the health of the partnership.

Introduction

The technical side of collaborative capability, particularly for organisations, is based around more formal partnership processes and mechanisms that provide structure and security around new organisational relationships. *Get Well Soon* (New Local Government Network & Collaborate, 2016) describes these mechanisms as “commitment devices”, which, broadly speaking, are structural arrangements that bind the relationship and guide collaboration process and organisational activity.

Being conscious and strategic in your decision-making processes ... is the best place to start your partnering journey (Waitakere City Council, 2009b)

The literature is dense with analysis of the technical components of partnerships, but there is some evidence that the more technical resources are not being utilised by the health and social services sector in New Zealand. Hazel and Hawkeswood’s (2016) review of collaboration in the New Zealand community services sector found that few of the collaborative case studies they reviewed focussed on the technical aspects, with evidence of considerable variability around process, and little utilisation of available resources. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The organisations interviewed in Hazel and Hawkeswood’s (2016) review emphasised relationship building as central to their collaborative approaches and this is entirely validated in the literature, with a checklist approach to collaboration generally unsupported, especially at the start of a collaborative process (Hazel & Hawkeswood,

2016; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2015; OECD, 2015; Partnership Brokers Association, 2016; Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, 2015).

However, it is important for organisations to be aware of when to engage with more structured approaches. Ham and Alderwick's (2015) research highlights the risk of getting stuck at the networking phase when more formal support would allow a partnership to progress. *Get Well Soon* (New Local Government Network & Collaborate, 2016, p. 60) states that if:

Commitment devices ... are deployed at the right time by partners based on good relationships and along a trajectory towards integration, they can serve to deepen and embed integration.

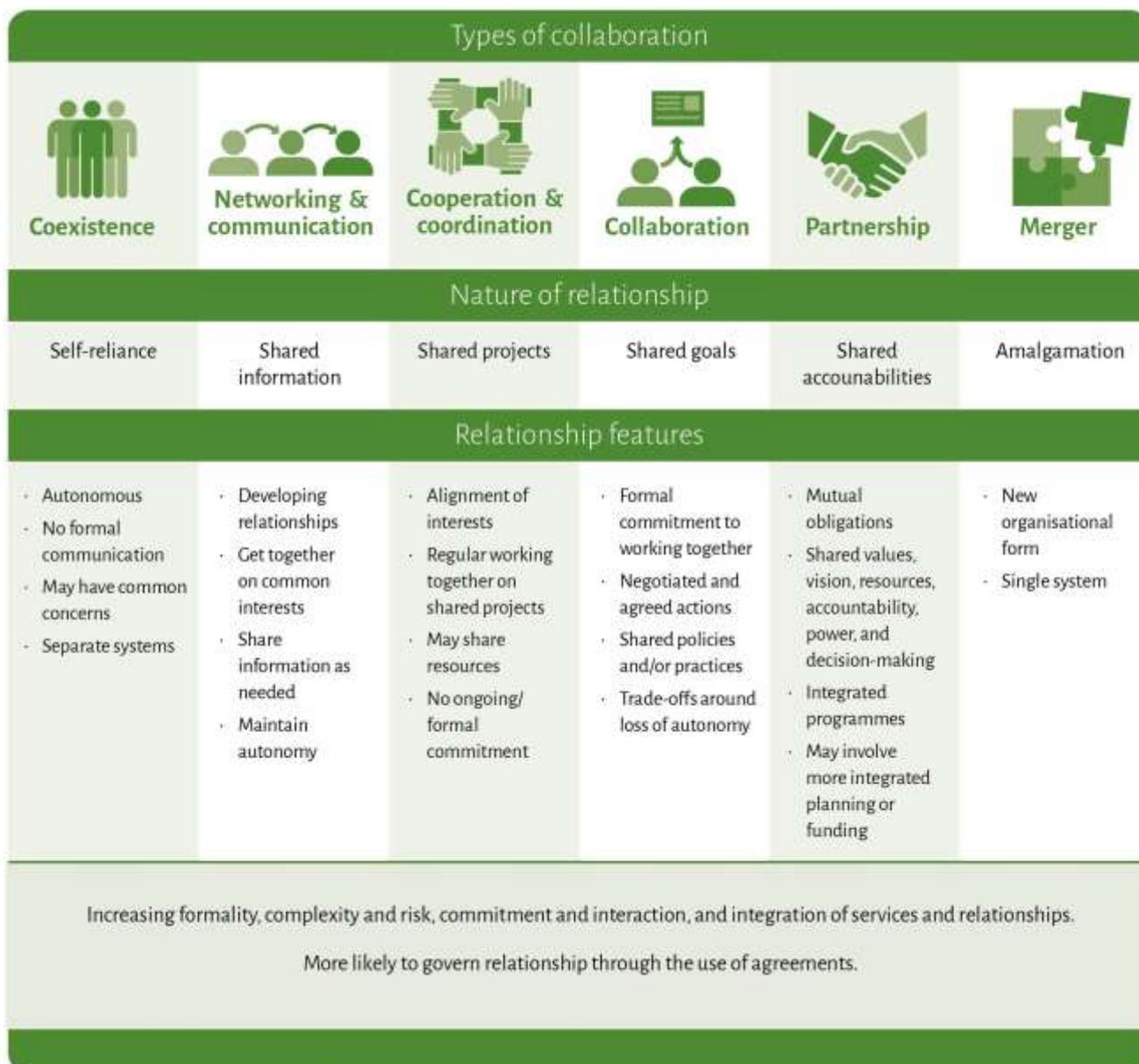
There is clearly a balance within organisational collaborative capability between a focus on relationships and outcomes, and the technical side of partnerships. The emphasis here is to support services and organisations to be purposeful and considered as they enter more formal partnerships. There are many resources available, so this section highlights the main points arising out of the literature and links to key resources that cover off types of partnerships, stages of partnerships, features and pitfalls, and use of agreements.

Collaboration partnership continuum

There are many visual descriptions of the collaboration or partnership continuum in the literature. The continuum below is an amalgamation of two sources.¹ It identifies commonly described collaborative relationships along a continuum and lists the characteristics of each type of relationship. These relationships range in formality and degree of relational integration from co-existence, to networking, to cooperation and coordinated activities, to formal collaboration and partnerships, and finally full mergers. The continuum below describes structural approaches, so it does not represent the citizen engagement processes outlined in the Citizen Engagement section of this review, but focuses instead on the ways that services or organisations typically work together across the continuum.

¹ The continuum above combines the *Better Connected Services for Kiwis* (Institute of Policy Studies, 2008) continuum of inter-governmental integration and the *Putting Pen to Paper* partnership continuum (Department of Internal Affairs, 2007).

Table 4: Relationships and structural characteristics along the collaboration continuum



Adapted from Institute of Policy Studies (2008) and Department of Internal Affairs (2007).

The key message about the collaboration continuum is that it works best as a guide for ways of working together, but should not be used as a definitive description of how partnerships will proceed. The nature of a partnership and where it sits on the continuum will depend on existing relationships and the outcomes sought, as well as capacity, willingness and mandate to collaborate. In fact, many collaborative endeavours can exist at different points along the continuum at one time (Courtney, 2007; Waitakere City Council, 2009a).

Different stages of partnerships

There are a number of different frameworks in the literature describing the stages that partnerships typically go through. One of the most comprehensive models is that developed by the Partnering Initiative (2016c), which provides a systematic framework based around four stages.

1. Scoping and building.
2. Managing and maintaining.
3. Reviewing and revising.
4. Sustaining outcomes.

Figure 3 shows the partnering cycle broken down into the four stages of partnerships.

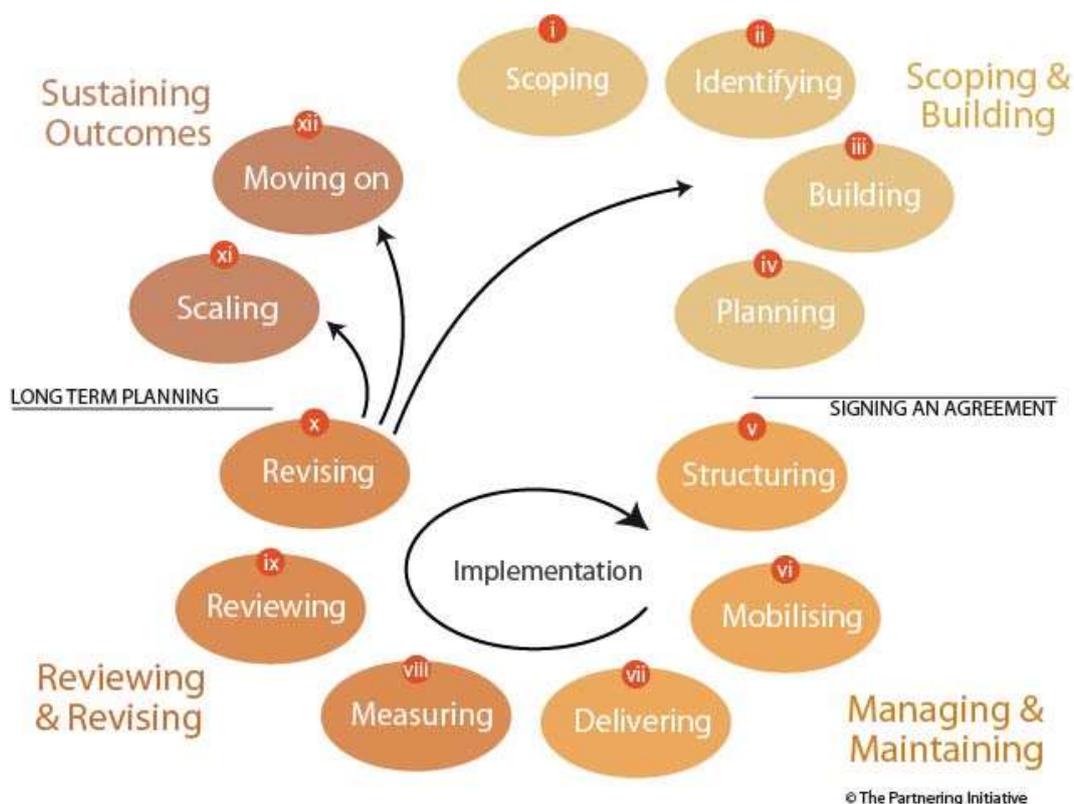


Figure 3: The partnering cycle

Source: The Partnering Initiative (2016c).

These stages are analysed further below, with supporting evidence from the wider literature.

Scoping and building

The scoping phase should include an assessment of whether more formal collaboration is going to improve a situation. Barriers to collaboration may be difficult to overcome, so it is important to understand barriers before you start. The *Partnering Practice Guide for Waitakere* (Waitakere City Council, 2009b) outlines five reasons why collaboration may be very difficult to undertake.

1. Historical conflict – based on prior experiences or interpersonal disputes, trust issues, or conflicting values – personal and organisational.
2. Competition and contracting arrangements – particularly in a constrained funding environment.

3. Ignorance – based around “the way we’ve always done things” or lack of insight into the benefits of working with others.
4. Resource constraints – most commonly time, but also lack of skill set and minimal financial resources to support collaboration.
5. Barriers – physical, cultural, ideological, or bureaucratic that make an organisation difficult to approach.

These context-related issues and challenges also include cultural differences and variance in leadership expectations (Partnership Brokers Association, 2016, p. 22). However, it can be the complexity of the context that often creates the most interesting opportunities for innovation and transformational change. Context should strongly influence the shaping up of vision and goals, identifying the type of partnership that will work best, personnel involved, other resourcing needed, and the process for developing a partnership.

I don't know if you've heard this about collaborating, but everyone thinks it's a wonderful idea. They don't account for how much time it takes to have organizations trying to do projects together, and when two organizational cultures deal with turf issues, all that takes a lot of time (Gray & Stites, 2013, p. 38).

Whatever the reasons for collaborating, a key message from the literature is to be very clear how much time and energy collaboration can take, especially at the start of the process

when partners are getting to know each other (Department of Internal Affairs, 2007). The Auditor General’s review of Whānau Ora noted the “extra work involved in delivering services in a whānau-centred way”, with mixed messages from government funders about recompensing providers for the extra workload arising out of more collaborative behaviour and the provision of a more integrated model (Office of the Auditor General, 2015, p. 53).

Even when an organisation is well resourced, collaboration may not be the best approach. A number of authors emphasise the importance of undertaking a feasibility assessment before collaborating. Such an assessment might ask questions such as:

- What is our goal and do we need to collaborate to succeed?
- Is there capacity within the organisation to collaborate?
- Does the problem need to be resolved quickly (collaboration takes time)?
- Is there a willingness to share power and decision-making and are there any differentials in power that will need to be managed?
- Do we have enough information about the context and potential partners?
- Is there capacity for flexibility, innovation and risk?
- And overall, do the benefits outweigh the risks?

(Aldridge, 2012; Allen and Clarke Policy and Regulatory Specialist Ltd, 2010; Gray & Stites, 2013; Huang & Seldon, 2014; Partnership Brokers Association, 2016; State Services Commission, 2004, 2008; Waitakere City Council, 2009b).

Reasons for not collaborating include the need to act quickly, target groups that are too diverse, “significant differentials in power”, and either a top-down push for collaboration that lacks grassroots support, or the converse, grassroots support with little leadership commitment (Allen and Clarke Policy and Regulatory Specialist Ltd, 2010, p. 22). Organisational risks around the decision to partner include damage to “reputation, loss of autonomy, conflicts of interest, drain on resources, implementation challenges” and difficulty managing the partnership (Waitakere City Council, 2009b, p. 9).

Tools to help with the feasibility process

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation website includes a Partnerships Analysis Tool (VicHealth, 2011) to assist organisations entering into or working in a partnerships and to assess, monitor and maximise partnership effectiveness. The tool has particular relevance for cross-sector partnerships. See

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/the-partnerships-analysis-tool>

The Working Together More fund (The Working Together More Fund) has New Zealand-specific checklists “How Well Prepared Are We To Collaborate” and “Tips When Collaborating”. The fund also has a funding stream to support collaborative projects get up and running. See <http://www.workingtogether.org.nz/new-checklists-learn-from-others-about-preparing-and-implementing-strong-collaborations/>

The U.S.-based Fund for Our Economic Future (Thompson, 2016) has developed a collaboration handbook to support civic partnerships between philanthropic organisations. The handbook includes a series of evaluative tools that include partnership feasibility and evaluation of the outcomes of collaboration. See

http://www.thefundneo.org/sites/default/files/CollaborationHandbook_FINAL.pdf

When to use agreements

Many partnership relationships work well without an agreement in place. But entering into a formal agreement demonstrates a concrete commitment to a partnership and a collaborative way of relating, so to a greater or lesser extent, it formalises accountability. Even if that accountability is just a commitment to keep each other informed or meet regularly.

The *Partnering Toolbook* makes a distinction between agreements and contracts. Agreements are generally not legally binding, they are voluntary, easily re-negotiable, often open-ended, and are mutually developed between parties. The complexity of the partnership may necessitate more formal contractual agreements (Tennyson, 2011).

The point at which commitment devices are deployed across the healthcare system is critical. Use them too soon and you create friction if solid relationships are not yet in place and partners do not yet trust each other's motives ... Yet without any commitment devices at all, partnerships tend to get beached at the bottom end of the scale, having meetings that lead nowhere and maintaining separate ways of working despite the appearance of good relationships (New Local Government Network & Collaborate, 2016, p. 61).

A joint initiative between The Partnering Initiative and The Partnerships Resource Centre has developed the *Partnering Agreement Scorecard*, a resource to help create new partnership agreements or review existing ones (Pfisterer, Payandeh, & Reid, 2014). The resource is based around the presumption that an agreement should “reflect and enable the objectives of the partnership” and supports both transactional exchanges and the transformational aspects of collaborative partnerships (Reid & Pfisterer, 2014, p. 65). The scorecard states that a good agreement will:

- define the problem
- specify roles and responsibilities
- articulate commitments
- formalise relationships
- support the partnering process and guide decision-making
- reduce misunderstanding and conflict
- maintain focus
- support review and evaluation (Pfisterer et al., 2014, p. 8).

The tool can be accessed on <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/tpi-tools/the-partnering-agreements-scorecard/>.

The best New Zealand resource around agreements to support partnerships is the Department of Internal Affairs (2007) *Putting Pen to Paper*. The guideline advises that there is no one size fits all agreement, instead the agreement should be specific to the partnership, the history between partners, the type of collaborative relationship sought and any accountability mechanisms included. *Putting Pen to Paper* includes a good description of agreement types, the likely trigger for considering that agreement and some general requirements around the use of each type of agreement. The guideline can be found on the Inspiring Communities website <http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/working-together-2/>.

Managing and maintaining

At the start of a partnership, the emphasis should be on identifying leaders and initiators, making sense of the problem, learning to share information between partnership members, and being clear around the resources required if a partnership proceeds (Hazel & Hawkeswood, 2016; Institute of Policy Studies, 2008).

Identification of the right people in the right roles is also critical. Hazel and Hawkeswood (2016) split personnel into:

- decision-makers and managers
- service delivery personnel
- facilitators
- external stakeholders, including people accessing services and community.

In terms of team composition, people work together better if they see themselves as alike, and if there are some (but not too many) prior relationships between group members. The more experts there are in a group, the more likely it is that conflict will occur (Gratton & Erickson, 2007).

Decisions need to be made about the skill set required, representation of stakeholders, and clarity around roles and responsibilities (Institute of Policy Studies, 2008). Collaboration improves when roles are clearly defined and well understood (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). In the absence of role clarity, team members are more likely to focus on negotiating roles or patch protection than getting on with tasks. Gratton and Erickson note that the balance between role clarity and task ambiguity is critical to developing a creative approach. Role clarity supports people to work independently and with autonomy. Task ambiguity encourages innovation, because individuals have to develop their own solutions to achieve the collective goal.

The early stages of a partnership should also include the development of a **governance structure with “strong and credible champions”** (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 3). Governance can be based around self-governing structures, a lead organisation, or a network administrative organisation (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 49).

In terms of making sense of the problem or challenge, it is important to collaborate around a clear vision or set of goals and shared measures of success. Gray and Stites (2013) emphasise that having a shared vision is not the same as having the same goals. In fact, often organisations can have different goals that coalesce under a shared vision. The process of developing a vision should be built on an open-minded exploration of similarities and **differences, and the capacity to hold your own organisation’s goals, alongside the goals of other stakeholders**, which might be quite different, in the context of broader objectives.

Identification of need and challenges should include a rich understanding of the contextual factors: the more complex the context, the clearer the vision needs to be (Partnership Brokers Association, 2016). Fundamental to this is a commitment to working with and on behalf of citizens and the affected community and shaping the

problem or need based on an individual and community perspective (Waitakere City Council, 2009b). This part of the partnership process can be very time consuming but it is important not to rush or force an outcome. Often most learning and development happens through the process of understanding the issues, relationship building, and exploration of the challenge (Institute of Policy Studies, 2008).

Ways of working is about practical process and should be based on shared values and expectations around engagement and participation. All parties need to have a voice and feel safe to speak, there need to be ground rules for interactions and how to manage conflict (Gray & Stites, 2013; Hanleybrown et al., 2012). *The Partnering Toolkit* outlines good partnering practice based around partnership language, working from an evidence base, good partnership conversations, management of meetings, keeping records, creating a learning culture, and setting ground rules (Tennyson, 2011, pp. 23-26).

Trust is central to productive ways of working. It is a key component of good interpersonal relationships and organisational competence, it is a bond between partners, and it generates good will towards the process. Trust is developed through sharing of information and knowledge, commitment to the process and outcome, and honesty and good will between stakeholders (Bryson et al., 2006). The development of trust and ensuring participation should also be based on a commitment to cultural capability and making sure that whānau-centred approaches are an integral part of identifying need, establishing commonality and developing solutions (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2015).²

Managing conflict is central to successful partnerships. Bryson et al's (2006) review of cross-sector collaboration identified that conflict is common (and should be expected) and most often emerges from differing aims and expectations of partners or power differential between partners. Partnerships are most likely to succeed when "partners use resources and tactics to equalize power and manage conflict effectively" (p. 48). Conflict resolution demands "people be willing to open themselves, recognize their blind spots and rigid preconceptions ... to challenge respective biases and assumptions" (Gray & Stites, 2013, pp. 44; quoting Senge et al., 2006: p. 2429).

Development of a collective outcome will arise out of the process of identifying need and establishing ways of working. The outcome will depend on many factors and may be a more superficial change such as improvement in reputation, or a deep transformational change such as a complete system redesign. Outcomes can be process-focussed, such as integration of function or increased participation, or technical, like defining models of governance. Outcomes can be broad and difficult to measure, for example, improvements to quality of life, or implementation of culturally responsive practices, or very specific, such as the implementation of training opportunities (Gray & Stites, 2013).

The Partnering Toolkit (Tennyson, 2011) is a comprehensive resource that provides guidance around building partnerships, use of agreements, management of the partnership process, and partnership longevity and sustainability. It contains a number of templates, checklists and questionnaires and can be accessed at <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Partnering-Toolkit-en-20113.pdf>

² See Te Puni Kōkiri's *Understanding Whānau-Centred Approaches* for a detailed description of whānau-centred approaches and cultural capability, both for individual workforces and organisations (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2015).

Reviewing and revising

Evaluation of the success of a partnership should be built into the process from the beginning. *The Partnering Toolkit* outlines the following areas of review:

- monitor progress
- audit results or impacts
- review the partnership (including the partnership agreement)
- clarify revision procedures
- develop moving on and exit strategies (Tennyson, 2011, p. 26).

Evaluation is dependent on the development of useful and measurable outcomes that can be process or ends-based. Measuring progress early on in the partnership demonstrates achievements during more challenging stages of the partnership and allows opportunities to celebrate success to help maintain motivation (Bryson et al., 2006; State Services Commission, 2008, pp. 15-16). Evaluation also contributes to a culture of accountability within the partnership (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). The development of a strong evidence base, based on outcomes is critical for the scaling up of projects, replication at other sites, and influencing outside decision-making and policy (Whitehead, 2015).

The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation has developed a tool to assess how collaboration is progressing relative to 20 success factors and based on a five-point scale for each factor (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey). See <http://www.wilder.org/Wilder-Research/Research-Services/Pages/Wilder-Collaboration-Factors-Inventory.aspx>

Sustaining outcomes

Partnerships may end because they lose resources; they achieve certain goals; because new partnering opportunities are available; priorities or context changes; or because the need or challenge no longer exists. A number of authors recommend building in exit planning or a moving on strategy so that partners can leave with minimal friction (Halper, 2009; Huang & Seldon, 2014; Tennyson, 2011). Partnerships may disband through handover of responsibility from one partner to another, or based on a decision that the work or programme is better managed independently. Or a third independent organisation may take over the partnership (Tennyson, 2011, p. 29).

The greatest risk to partnering is staff turn-over resulting in loss of organisational knowledge and damage to key relationships, particularly if the person leaving has been a broker or key facilitator (Waitakere City Council, 2009b, p. 21). The Waitakere partnering practice guide (Waitakere City Council, 2009b) includes a 'Relationship Hand-over Template' to support succession planning. See <http://www.waitakere.govt.nz/abtcnl/pp/pdf/Partnering-Practice-Guide.pdf>

Some of the literature also describes the end of partnerships as part of a cyclical nature of relationships. Inspiring Communities compares partnership evolution to an ecological cycle, noting that the failure or completion of a partnership is an opportunity for learning, new thinking, and developing of new opportunities (Inspiring Communities, 2016).

The *Moving On* handbook (Halper, 2009) is a specific resource that supports partnerships through exits, transitions, and the end of partnerships. It includes advice around hand-overs, communication guidelines, and links to further resources. See <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/toolbook-series/moving-on/>

The life cycle of partnerships

The *Better-Connected Services for Kiwis* (Institute of Policy Studies, 2008) report describes the life cycle of partnerships, including typical characteristics of each stage and opportunities or strategies that can be used to compensate or advance the partnership. The tool assumes there will be high points and low points throughout the life of a partnership. The authors note that some partnerships will never get past stage 2, as illustrated in Figure 4, which is why conflict resolution strategies are so important.

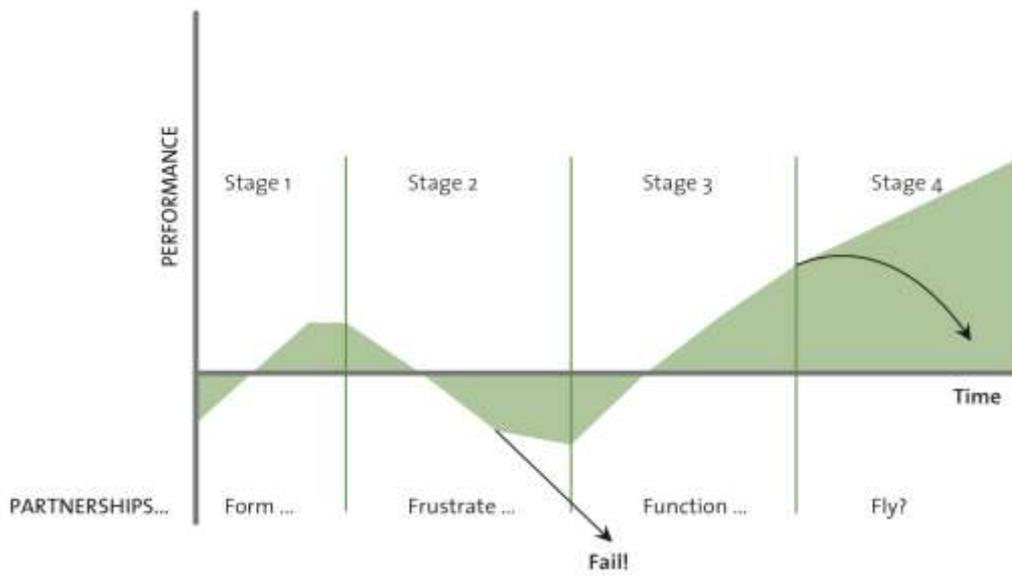


Figure 4: The partnership life cycle

Source: Institute of Policy Studies (2008).

Table 5 below outlines the characteristics of each stage of the partnership process and approaches to move partnerships forward. The emphasis is on explicitly describing the behaviours of partnership stakeholders and how those behaviours can support or hinder the success of partnerships

Table 5: Characteristics of the partnership life cycle

Stage	Characteristics	Focus should be
Stage 1 Forming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiasm for common cause • Exploration of challenges and relationships • Unclear commitments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to build relationships • Focus on common vision • Define tasks and outcomes • Use evidence
Stage 2 Frustration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disputes and questions about partnership priorities and methods • Doubts and suspicion about hidden agenda and partner contributions • Competition for control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit common ground • Celebrate little wins • Facilitate opportunities for constructive disagreement
Stage 3 Functioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed vision and focus • Progress through joint project teams • Clarity around roles and responsibilities • Development of mutual accountabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree objectives, responsibilities, success measures, and principles for collaboration • Encourage shared leadership and accountability • Develop common methods and quality standards • Develop learning opportunities through cross-partner project teams, joint training and review
Stage 4 Flying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement of partnership goals • Shared leadership • Transformational change in behaviour or service provision • Trust and respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate future challenges and develop capacity to respond • Develop a succession plan • Review group performance • Enhance communications • Review partnership effectiveness • Continue to celebrate success
Stage 5 Failing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disengagement • Tension • Lack of commitment • Relationship breakdown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review stage 2 actions • Wind up the partnership

Source: Institute of Policy Studies (2008).

Conclusion

The technical resources to support partnerships are expanding in scope, although the emphasis in the literature is still predominantly on collaboration between organisations rather than partnerships with citizens. This is a gap in the literature around more specific support for collaboration with service users, and this presents a sizeable challenge for the MH&A sector as it moves to develop partnerships with a broad range of stakeholders.

The literature signals the need for clarity around when to shift into a more technical and structured approach to collaboration. The timing around this shift is important because of the risks of partnership failure due to poorly organised and unsupported collaborative processes. There is a balance also between maintaining opportunities for organic, fluid relationship building and more structured and time-consuming partnerships. It is important for the MH&A sector to be cognisant of the types of partnerships, stages of partnerships, features and pitfalls of collaborative processes, and when and how to use agreements and other commitment devices.