

The background of the entire page is a light blue-grey color. Overlaid on this are several dark blue puzzle pieces. One large piece is in the center, with others partially visible around it. The pieces are arranged in a way that suggests they are being put together.

WESSEX GROUP OF 6TH FORM COLLEGES

WORKING IN HAMPSHIRE
PORTSMOUTH
SOUTHAMPTON

SETTING UP A PARTNERSHIP

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There are various models of partnership in existence within the further education sector. Many colleges have established co-operative groupings for a number of different purposes and differ in the degree to which they collaborate. This booklet examines some of the considerations in establishing or developing existing partnerships. It considers whether groupings of colleges need to be similar and offers advice about some of the organisational aspects of partnership working, as well as some factors important in making a start.

MODELS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Some of the more common models of partnership across the further education sector include:

Joint initiatives

Agreement between two or more organisations to set up and operate shared services

Lead departments

An organisation consolidating and centralising a business service that will be shared by other organisations

Federations

Where colleges are members of a co-owned organisation delivering shared services on their behalf. Evidence suggests that current popular modes of collaboration include joint committees and limited companies, whether by shares or guarantee or charities

Source: Steve Frampton, FE Efficiency Innovation Fund, Solent Colleges Innovation Partnership

The Wessex Group¹ is an **informal partnership**. Member colleges have agreed to jointly fund the salaries and costs of its part-time staff who are seconded from colleges in the partnership. Further details about how we operate can be found in booklet 2, The Wessex Group. There is no formal association, no joint governance, and

the decisions taken about the strategy and direction of the Group are taken by the group of Principals.

There may be advantages to establishing a **more formal association** and the Group has investigated options.

OPTION	CONSIDERATIONS
Charitable status	<p>Aims must benefit those other than its members</p> <p>Need to demonstrate that the wider public would benefit</p>
Partnership with a partnership agreement	<p>Need to:</p> <p>Appoint directors/partners</p> <p>Establish rules of membership and operation</p> <p>Clarify options for getting in and out</p> <p>Clarify mission and aims – without restricting future activity too much</p>
Ordinary Trust	<p>Need to demonstrate benefit beyond members</p>
Establish a company limited by guarantee	<p>Need to:</p> <p>Appoint directors/partners</p> <p>Establish rules of membership and operation</p> <p>Clarify options for getting in and out</p> <p>Clarify mission and aims – without restricting future activity too much</p>

Whichever of these more formal models is adopted there would need to be agreement within the partnership about how prescriptive the organisation's rules would need to be; the degree to which membership can be terminated or got out of; the impact of joint/several liability; the role of governors and

governance; protocols for dealing with dissent/disagreement; and options for ensuring the continuing flexibility for the partnership's sphere of operation. It would also be advisable to engage the services of a **legal** firm to establish a formal association of some kind and there are costs involved in that.

¹ Formerly the Hampshire Sixth Form Colleges' Partnership

In addition, the implications of becoming a direct employer of staff would need to be addressed with contracts and policies relating to insurance, employment, redundancy, liability etc. Careful scrutiny of college memoranda and articles of association would be needed to determine whether there was provision for investment in other companies/ organisations and the role of existing governors in that.

The **financial** implications of a more formal arrangement would also need to be carefully reviewed as an organisation would need to pay tax on any profits. In addition, there is a risk that services provided by a separate but joint service may be liable for VAT (not recoverable by colleges) unless benefits are solely provided to members.

TIP

When working as a formal umbrella organisation, it is important that all colleges benefit and that there are no 'lead' providers – otherwise VAT is payable on those providing a particular service to others in the group

Any new entity would need to prepare accounts and may require an audit. It would need banking, accounting and payroll facilities and may need to register for services that are currently provided under the umbrella of existing college services. 14-19 partnerships have faced these issues and some local authorities have developed guidance for local consortia of schools, colleges and employers² which may be of use if more formal arrangements are preferred.

Within the Wessex Group, other partnerships have developed; some are subgroups of the partnership working on a specific large-scale project, others are partnerships of different institutions working across the same geographical patch. The Solent Colleges Innovation Partnership group³ is investigating the creation of a **membership association** to provide a more formal structure for the development of shared services. Portsmouth College has established a **soft federation** of schools and local education providers⁴ to work collaboratively on shared aims for the city.

² Setting up collaborative arrangements for service provision - a discussion paper. Hampshire County Council 2009

³ Solent Colleges Innovation Partnership which is made up of six Wessex Group colleges

⁴ Federations, Academies and Trusts - The Collective Benefits of a Collaborative Approach. A Case Study of Portsmouth Schools and Portsmouth College. Steve Labeledz and Steve Frampton 2009

⁵ Franklin College, Greenhead Sixth Form College, Hartlepool Sixth Form College, Huddersfield New College,

John Leggott Sixth Form College, Longley Park Sixth Form College, NEW College Pontefract Sixth Form College, Notre Dame Sixth Form College, Prior Pursglove Sixth Form College, Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, St Mary's College Middlesbrough, Scarborough Sixth Form College, Stockton Sixth Form College, Thomas Rotherham Sixth Form College, Wilberforce Sixth Form College, Wyke Sixth Form College

⁶ The CENBASE group of colleges operates across a wide geographical area and collaborates on peer quality review and validation

HOW SIMILAR ARE YOU?

The geographical proximity and the density of sixth form college provision do contribute to the existence and success of the Wessex Group. Yet they are not critical factors for a partnership and there are many good examples of partnerships of colleges in different situations.

For example, the Wessex Group visited the NorVlc⁵ group of sixth form colleges to share experiences and to learn different approaches. It was not difficult to find characteristics which distinguished the groups from each other:

- The average Wessex Group sixth form college is larger than NorVlc
- Wessex Group sixth form colleges do nearly three times the amount of adult work
- NorVlc colleges have a slightly higher proportion of A Level work
- Wessex Group colleges have a slightly higher proportion of students with the highest GCSE grades on entry
- Nearly twice as many NorVlc students are on low incomes

Yet these differences did not prevent an effective exchange of ideas and approaches between the two partnerships. It is most certainly possible for a successful partnership to work across a much wider geographical area and there are even examples

of colleges working together without either geographical proximity or identity⁶. In addition, it may be that the differences between the colleges within each partnership are greater than the differences between different partnerships.

	HAMPSHIRE		NORVIC	
Smallest	St Vincent	£6.1M	St Mary's	£2.8M
Largest	Peter Symonds	£16.9M	John Leggott	£12.3M
Difference		X2.7		X4.4
Least White (%)	Portsmouth	83%	Longley	53.7%
Most White (%)	Totton	96.2%	Hartlepool	98.2%
Difference		13.2%		44.5%
Most EMA	Portsmouth	52.2%	Longley	71.7%
Least EMA	Peter Symonds	17.2%	Prior Pursglove	33.4%
Difference		35%		38.3%

The colleges in the Wessex Group and NorVlc partnerships are therefore hugely diverse yet work effectively in partnership.

- There may be more variety within partnerships than between different partnership groupings
- Lessons from one partnership can be relevant to all sixth form colleges and partnerships

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO MAKE A START?

The following information also appears in booklet 2.

PATIENCE

It takes time to create and sustain an effective partnership; time to build relationships and develop trust. This is especially true when organisations may be competing for students. A decision to join forces, for whatever reason, can only signal the beginning of a process rather a permanent reality. There are likely to be threats and risks to a partnership throughout its life and its long-term viability could depend upon the degree to which its members chose to address or ignore them.

For example, although the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges formally established itself initially to become a bulk purchaser with specified traders (including exam boards); it had its antecedents in joint quality initiatives such as External Quality Review (EQR) which was established by Hampshire colleges in 1993 to continuously improve teaching and learning through peer review – see booklet 5. This background, with its focus on mutual improvement, led to a wider growth of activities under the partnership umbrella which was crucial in developing trust amongst participating colleges. By sharing expertise and intelligences, collaboration and mutual support increased and the impact of competition was moderated to a degree. The growth of trust was gradual and, to some extent, has to be nurtured each time a new group is created or when new individuals join. Even after being in existence for well



over a decade, the need continues for the Wessex Group to address the impact of competition on the nature of the partnership. At a recent strategy discussion Principals agreed to develop a shared understanding of responsible competition. They have developed a Concordat which recognises that the driving value of the partnership is in looking after the needs of the local communities – rather than individual colleges.

TIPS

- Don't expect overnight success
- Starting with one activity and moving on to others can work but;
 - regularly revisit the purpose and values of the partnership
 - review the risks to the partnership and agree how to tackle them
 - keep working on relationships – especially if tensions emerge

INVESTMENT

Wessex Group members invest **time, money and commitment** to sustain the Group. The benefits of the partnership are dependent upon governors and staff at all levels contributing time and expertise – via peer groups, input to staff development activities, peer reviews, sharing resources and by simply being available to respond to queries that emerge from colleagues in other colleges.

To a large extent, this commitment and the resulting time given and taken is the life-blood of the Wessex Group. It would severely undermine the strength and purpose of the partnership if it were not there, and contributes to the development of strong relationships. However, Principals decided that for this to be used most effectively, a Partnership Manager would be appointed. This part-time post is funded through an annual subscription as is the part-time post of Curriculum Network Development Manager (see booklets 2 and 6).⁷ As a result, each year the Principals commit to the future of the partnership by agreeing to jointly fund these posts. The leaders of the partnership have invested in senior staff with the right **skills and attributes** to run and develop the activities and networks of the Wessex Group.

TIPS

- Consider appointing someone at a senior level to manage the work of partnership
- Recognise that time and money will be needed

LEADERSHIP

Principal-level commitment to the partnership is vital. Their leadership provides a precedent for all other partnership activity. They establish a **common purpose** and a shared vision. They articulate the values of the partnership. They condone and encourage collaboration at all levels in partner colleges so long as it has an outcome linked to the shared goals of the Wessex Group. They are key to the development of effective working relationships throughout the partnership.

VALUES

These are the things that the Wessex Group thinks are important and which drive its actions. We believe:

- that working collaboratively helps to strengthen the services offered to young people
- in promoting educational excellence and opportunity across the area
- in fostering a learning culture through honesty and openness
- that collaboration and mutual support moderates competition
- in developing staff through shared development opportunities, succession planning and networking
- we need to understand and respond to the wider operating environment
- in valuing diversity within the partnership and beyond.

⁷ Each contract is for two years and the dates are staggered so that in any one year, only one contract is up for renewal

In addition to the belief of Wessex Group members that by working together they can have a positive effect on the quality of provision for young people in the area, there is a strong sense of **perceived necessity**. There is a need for partnership in providing a strong local and national voice for members; in affording some protection in numbers and organisation; and in creating a recognisable entity with which other bodies can have a dialogue.

TIPS

- Establish a common purpose
- Agree a set of values
- Lead by example
- Remind each other of the benefits from time to time



'If it wasn't there, we'd have to invent it'

There are a number of different routes to building an effective working partnership. There are various models for organising the work that you do; different types of activity that can be managed; different lifespans and ambitions; and different aims and missions. Whatever you decide to do and however you want to organise yourselves, the most important starting points are **shared goals** and a commitment to **invest** in something that will lead to short and long-term benefits for the group and for your own college.



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