Partnership working to deliver the extended free entitlement (EFE)

From September 2017 many working parents will be entitled to the equivalent of 30 hours of free early education over 38 weeks for children aged three and four years. Whilst this entitlement is welcome, it creates some challenges for the early learning sector, not least in terms of creating the additional places that will be needed to meet the extra demand.

Following the delivery of a mixed models partnership project delivered by the Family and Childcare Trust between April and July 2016, partnership approaches to delivering the EFE are emerging as a favourable option to managing the challenges of supply and demand.

Partners could include local authorities, childminders, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, independent and maintained schools, voluntary and community organisations, outdoor learning establishments, churches and many more.

Working together has many **advantages** – risks are shared, partners can maximise each other’s strengths and learn from each other, partners can share resources, economies of scale can more easily be realised, working together can increase the reach or take up of provision or provision can be available for longer periods of time (including during less social hours), knowledge and good practice can be shared and quality improved. All of which can benefit providers, mothers, fathers and other carers and children.

However working together can itself be **challenging** and fraught with pitfalls – developing effective and trusting partnerships requires an investment of time which may not be, or be seen to be, justified; there can be an actual or perceived loss of autonomy with decision making being a shared rather than an individual activity; roles and responsibilities may not be clear and staff may be exposed to choices and ways of working which are unfamiliar. Within the context of childcare and early education where providers are often competitors, relationships can be adversely affected by a lack of trust or shared understanding about the motives of each partner being involved.

Managing relationships between partners is essential to developing productive and effective partnerships. Personalities, competition, previous or current poor working relationships, lack of trust, different organisational cultures, language and ways of working, lack of information and experience and resistance to change can all work against successful partnerships. However, with good leadership, a willingness to be open, a focus on the bigger picture, a clear understanding of the mutual benefits and collaborative advantages and time to invest, partnerships can lead to lasting change.

This section includes a range of tools to help local authorities and/or early years providers to explore if and how working together could help to deliver early education generally and specifically the extended free entitlement. This section will help partnerships work through:

* How to get started
* Which organisations and individuals the partnership might include
* How you will work together as a partnership
* Where common ground lies, what differences there are and whether these need to be overcome or whether they add value and strengthen the partnership
* Where conflicts may arise and how these can be dealt with
* The principles which underpin your partnership

**Getting Started**

One partner will probably take the lead in initiating the partnership. This will probably involve:

* Having a general view on why a partnership approach could be the best way forward
* Contacting potential partners to gauge interest and likely involvement
* Convening a meeting and bringing together relevant organisations and individuals for an initial discussion

Use the[**Partnership Preparation Checklist**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Partnership%20Preparation%20Checklist.docx)to help you plan for your first partnership meeting.

**Developing a shared purpose**

A successful partnership will have a clear and shared overall purpose – for example increasing the number of childcare places for children of working parents. In successful partnerships this shared purpose has been discussed and agreed and is written down. In this way the purpose is explicitly stated, avoiding assumptions and possible later confusion.

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that the overall shared purpose of the partnership may be different to what each partner wants to get from it.

At some point, ideally early on in the partnership, it can be helpful therefore to think about what each partner brings to the partnership and what each partner would like to get from it.

Use the[**Give – Get Exercise**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Give%20%E2%80%93%20Get%20Exercise.docx)to help each partner identify what they bring to, and what they want to get from, the partnership. It is often better to ask each partner to complete the activity independently and then to bring their thoughts to an agreed partnership meeting.

**Developing Good Relationships**

Your fledgling partnership is likely to face challenges relating to competition and (lack of) trust. It is better to address this as early as possible by acknowledging these exist and by establishing positive ways of working.

Whilst the partnership may have a common goal – to respond to the increased entitlement to early education – partners may also be competitors.

Whilst you may want and need to work together constructively, partners may question the motivation of the initiating partner or other partners.

It can be very helpful to tease out what you have in common and what is different. This will help all partners to identify where work might need to be done to make the partnership successful. For example, you may need to think about how you share information and whether any changes need to be made to your information sharing protocols or communication with families. One partner may charge separately for meals whereas another may include them in the fees. Decision making in a voluntary sector organisation may have to go through a Board of Trustees or through a Governing Body in a school whereas the owner/manager of a small privately owned business may be able to make an instant decision.

Being clear about your differences will help you find ways of dealing with them, will help to ensure they don't get in the way of a successful partnership and may even mean you can collectively benefit from them, for example, by learning from each other.

Use the[**Identifying Common Ground and Differences Checklist**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Identifying%20Common%20Ground%20and%20Differences.docx)to help partners identify things you may have in common and things that are different. The checklist includes some of the formal areas of an organisation’s operation as well as less tangible areas such as ‘working practices’ and ‘language’. However, you may wish to add other headings or remove some of those in the table. The checklist is designed to help you understand and communicate the ethos, working practices and terms used by each other – the more you can do this, the more likely your partnership is to be successful. This is particularly important where partners are from different sectors – public, private and voluntary, community or faith.

Ideally the checklist should be completed collectively although each partner may need time outside of a meeting to think about the information as it relates to them.

**Deciding who should be in the partnership**

At some stage in the development of your partnership you will need to agree who is included and who isn't and understand the reasons why. You will need to be clear about whether or not new partners can be brought on board and how this will be done.

Using a [**Partnership Analysis Matrix**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Partnership%20Analysis%20Matrix.docx) can help you identify which partners might be important operationally and/or strategically and the level of their importance or relevance. This will then help you to decide which partners should be included.

The matrix is best completed collectively.

**Managing the partnership**

All partnerships need to be managed. This usually involves one or more partners taking responsibility for:

* Convening meetings – ensuring that dates are agreed and communicated in advance, that venues are booked, that papers are sent out before and after meetings and that all partners are notified of the times and venues for meetings.
* Chairing meetings – ensuring that meeting time is used wisely and that discussions are relevant to the main topics or issues, that everyone has a chance to participate, that no-one dominates and for challenging partners who are not ‘pulling their weight’.
* Taking notes or minutes – ensuring that decisions and actions are accurately and fairly recorded and that these are distributed to all partners.
* Action planning – ensuring that actions are recorded and followed through, that all partners are clear what needs to be done, who is responsible for specific actions and the timescales within which actions will be completed.

From time to time partnerships will experience disagreements and conflict. Whilst this is often perceived negatively, in successful partnerships conflict can be a positive force giving people space to challenge and discuss options and perspectives so that a consensus can be reached.

Refer to the[**Conflict Management Strategies**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Conflict%20Management%20Strategies.docx)to help you understand how conflict can arise in a partnership, how people respond to conflict and how conflict can be managed.

Being able to identify, monitor and manage risks (both collectively and individually) can significantly increase the likelihood of success of a partnership and can help partners better to reap the benefits of working together. See [**Assessing Risks**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Assessing%20Risk.docx)in partnership working for a guide and template on how to assess and manage risks.

**Partnership principles**

Successful partnerships often have shared and written principles that all partners can sign up to. These principles are jointly developed and agreed. Here are some examples of partnership principles – you can use these to help you develop your own.

* Commitment – we are committed to the partnership because we believe that it is a good way / the best way forward for delivering the extended free entitlement for working parents. We will play an active role in the partnership and do what we say we will do.
* Openness and transparency – we agree to be open in how we do business and make decisions. We will share information with each other, raise issues and problems promptly, share knowledge and expertise and explore issues with an open mind.
* Sharing good and best practice - we recognise that each of us has something to give to the partnership and that equally we have something to get from it. We will share learning for the benefit of everyone.
* High quality services – we are committed to delivering high quality services and will work to ensure continuous quality improvement within our early years provision.

* Flexibility - we acknowledge that there may be times when things do not go according to plan or to expectation. We will work creatively, constructively and flexibly and be prepared to make changes, often at short notice.

**Keeping your partnership on track**

Effective partnerships have an agreed action plan that sets out what needs to be done, by whom and within what timescale. Actions should be agreed and reviewed at each meeting.

You might find the exemplar[**Action Planning Template**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Action%20planning%20template.docx)and[**Action Planning Guidelines**](http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/action%20planning%20guidelines.docx) in this toolkit helpful or may wish to use your own template.