

PARTNERSHIP WORKING



Working in partnership is a vital part of informal science learning.
This guide aims to help you find, build and keep these vital relationships.

WHY WORK IN PARTNERSHIP?

Partnerships are vital to good community based informal science learning or engagement.

Great partnerships are active, open and generous relationships, built on trust with shared values, they recognise and bring together diverse expertise and connections for the greater benefit of all parties.

Partnerships need time to evolve, to understand each other, to share values and to build trust.

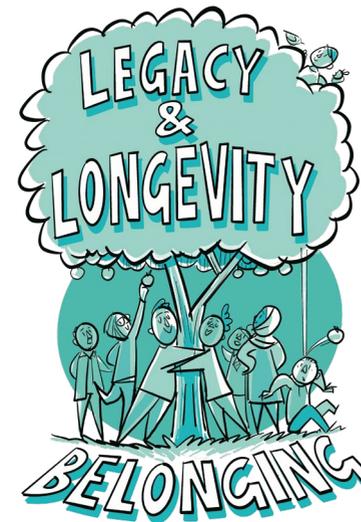
Strong partnerships with community organisations enable the co-production of programmes which work with and for our diverse communities. Relevance to life experience, personalisation and localisation are key elements of STEM engagement. Working in partnership ensures your activity suits the needs of the participant and avoids a "parachuting in" approach where communities are talked 'at' by STEM engagement professionals with the content and approach is decided for them.

Be active and generous in your area.

Consider why you are looking for partners... to explore existing needs and inequities, not just to meet the needs of our own organisation. As science centres we seek partnerships because being an active part of our local community is important and valuable to us.



Working long-term and building trust with a community partner should be the goal for greater depth and sustained impact for both sides. Think beyond projects and embark on partner relationships with an open-ended expectation that it will continue beyond the project delivery. The shared high-activity of a funded project is a great way to develop a partnership through exploring working practices together, but long-term outcomes can go way beyond this, for example, changing representation within your staff team, renewing policies and practice, and developing a more diverse audience.



Added value and practitioner learning. Many community partners have worked with specific participants for a long time, with well established trust, relationships and understanding of needs, awareness of intersectionality, interests and characteristics. Working equitably with these organisations is a huge opportunity for learning, development and practitioner CPD, with partners sharing expertise, tools and supporting staff training.

The most meaningful inclusion partnerships have often grown through the individuals in the wider partner community (such as members, young people etc) as well as with those at the strategic or delivery level.

Partnership is about being part of and building a community not just a route to a diverse audience. What local challenges can you address through strategic partnerships?

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT PARTNERS

Are you already working with one community partner?

Ask them who else they work or collaborate with. There may be community organisation meetings or steering groups you can be invited to attend. Perhaps you already have someone working or volunteering with you who represents or works with a community you don't yet know? Individuals at your organisation have their own personal assets beyond their expertise. Personal connection and word of mouth is a friendly and powerful way to reach out and network.



Why not take a walk in the neighbourhoods and communities you want to be a part of? Look at the ways in which you could align with or support services that are present. Drop in at a community centre and have a conversation, join networks and groups, and aim to become a more embedded and interested participant in your local community.

Research organisations who work with specific community groups, locally or nationally. Groups can be found online, through community message boards, libraries and schools (etc). Leverage the experts! You don't have to do it all yourself – ask councillors, go to the council, or meetings with other community learning or development organisations (local social workers, youth workers, teachers, EDI groups etc.). There are always others who know what needs exist and can put you in touch with the perfect partner organisations.



Who else can I ask?

Are there any existing networks where organisations committed to working towards greater diversity and inclusion come together? Starting from a place of shared values or interests is a great way to meet potential partners.

Why not ask other partnership or community liaison professionals working in science centres, universities, local museums or other arts & cultural organisations. You may also want to reach out to funders (such as STFC) who have experience and knowledge of UK-wide grants that support community-based programmes.



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

It takes time to build trust. This point cannot be underestimated. It is important to put your cards on the table and find out early on if your aims and objectives align. Partnership building requires an investment of time and should have an organisation-level commitment beyond short-term working.

Start to develop a mutual and increasing understanding of each other's expectations, needs and assets. You may want to implement a flexible plan that maps a sufficient series of touch points for ongoing communication. This emphasis on regular communication will allow you to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of your community partner.

Be interested beyond what it means for you in the relationship. At the start, set STEM to one side. Attend your partners' events, celebrations and AGMs when invited. Be generous with your time and support them with small asks if possible.



Always develop your partnership from an asset-based approach. Avoid the perception of any partner as being in deficit ('lacking' or 'missing' something). Always consider what you both bring, such as different approaches, ideas, spaces, networks, skills and expertise.

Your community partner may bring trusted relationships with individuals, cultural and linguistic expertise, safeguarding training, new practices in co-design or evaluation; or bring new practices to training, co-design or evaluation. Working with a partner will bring renewed energy, enthusiasm and expertise in areas different from your own, and add valuable breadth of perspective to your organisation.

Managing expectations.

Whilst the understanding of strengths and requirements will likely develop over the partnership, it is helpful to manage expectations from the start and for each partner to understand their role and responsibilities within the partnership. An open conversation that discusses specific agendas, timescales, resources and funding, alongside the degree of flexibility that is logistically possible should be openly discussed. Understand what your partners' limitations and challenges are. Perhaps there are limits on resources, particularly where a partner relies on unpaid or part time staffing.



Informal science learning organisations may be able to bring the following to partnerships (beyond the opportunity for accessing science expertise):

- funding (for community partners staff time or expenses/consumables)
- venue or costs to hire a venue
- access to engaging staff or volunteers (educators and communicators)
- learning resources (such as equipment, kit, technology, activities)
- evaluation expertise (often from an external party)
- dissemination and advocacy
- opportunity for youth work experience and developing employability skills

You may want to write up a very basic "Memorandum of Understanding", "Partnership Agreement" or "Partnership Terms of Reference". This should be reviewed frequently as relationships will likely change, but this ensures there is clear expectation and time to reflect on and discuss explicit roles and responsibilities (Who does the risk assessments? Who is responsible for which aspect of the project? What training is needed? Who provides specific materials?).

Try to start with creating a shared vision and a set of shared values. What is it that two organisations would like to achieve that they can aim for together?

Learning from Explore Your Universe Phase 4

The strongest partnerships were where science centre practitioners were constantly responsive, respectful and flexible around the needs of their partner. The organisation that holds the funding usually has more power to be proactive and flexible.

If you're not sure the fit is right, run a pilot with your community partner, or a shorter series of workshops with an aim to be more 'exploratory'. Then reflect together on what worked, explore where the successes were for each partner, what could be developed and whether there is opportunity for more long-term and impactful partnership working. As with all relationships, some partnerships won't work for the intended benefit of both partners, despite best efforts. At this point it is worth considering what a good 'ending' would look like and what element and learning can be taken from the experience. With honest, open and on-going conversation, a partnership that isn't the right fit does not have to be a failure in a project.



Sustaining and nurturing partnerships

may require the development of a shared language as different terms used in informal science learning may not be as appropriate or utilised in different contexts (e.g. there may be sensitivities around using terms like "deprived" or "disadvantaged" or describing or prioritising participants by using measures like IMD).



How equitable is the project funding?

Consider preparing the funding proposal together. This ensures a more equitable and co-produced delivery, evaluation and budget plan from the very start. Alternatively, be open about the project budget. Funding can cause an uncomfortable power imbalance, so keep challenging yourself and your organisation. A crucial step towards equitable working is to ensure staff costs across all partnering organisations (including volunteers) are valued in the budget.



As your partnership grows, unpick assumptions about priorities, perceptions and motivations both parties have made about the other partner.

It's easy to underestimate, or not be aware of, the implicit power that comes from being an 'institution', both as a venue/ space, a nationally-known organisation or as a part of the science sector.

These can all impact on how partners feedback and interact, and changes in these perceptions, over the course of the relationship, can be a useful thing to capture.

Prioritising putting time aside for shared reflective practice and regular communication can help challenge these power dynamics and support a healthy and effective partnership to flourish.

What should we aim for?

Partnerships can reach all levels and departments within organisations and with wider stakeholders. It is important to agree with your partner what level of participation is suitable for your activity. Each level requires different responsibilities and capacities from partners.

Consider the following levels of participation:

Information (the offer is decided and provided by you as the lead partner)

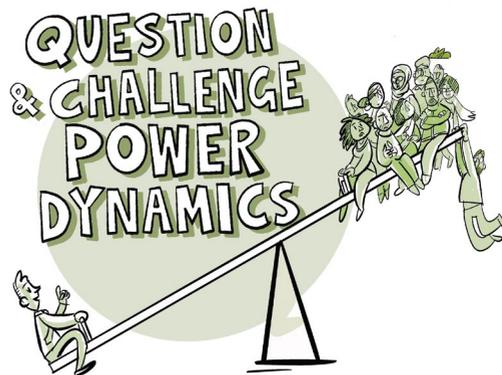
Consultation (you community partner/participants choose from a range of options, involving listening, feedback and discussion, but broader project objectives and delivery are led by you)

Deciding together (co-design – community partners/participants support the creation and design phase, bringing new options and joint decision-making, but delivery is still led by you)

Acting together (involvement of community partner/participant at each stage from the planning and design, to the delivery and evaluation, sharing decision making and forming a partnership to carry out the programme)

Supporting independent community interest (supporting partner agency, including offered funding, advice, support to develop the independent ideas and agendas of the community partner)

It is not the case that partnerships should have capacity or experience to reach for the deepest levels of participation. Some community partners will have very little capacity beyond their core service and may prefer to be involved at a consultation level. If in doubt, ask your community partner.



Learning from Explore Your Universe Phase 4

More often than not, the strength of the partnership rests with a single 'key' individual within the informal science setting and the community partner, who together lead the relationship having developed mutual trust, understanding and respect.



Strong partnerships

had explicit mechanisms for internal staff communication to ensure that the broader organisation are aware of, and can prioritise, the relationship with the community partners. This can mitigate the risk of losing the partnership should one or both parties move on. This might involve, staff meeting or board level presentations, or offering opportunity for staff from other departments to volunteer on or engage with projects.

Opportunities for the partnership to continue beyond the project period can involve the lead partner, as well as opportunities for legacy and continued relationships for the participants (for example):

- running staff training and CPD events for each other
- using your venue spaces for other activities
- free membership or invitations to events
- taking part in project and programming advisory groups
- co-writing future proposals
- shaping policies (such as HR/recruitment)
- representation at strategic board level.

Strong partnerships can bring exceptional and wide-reaching benefits for organisations who are open and striving towards becoming more equitable, diverse and inclusive science learning spaces.