

# Working in partnership

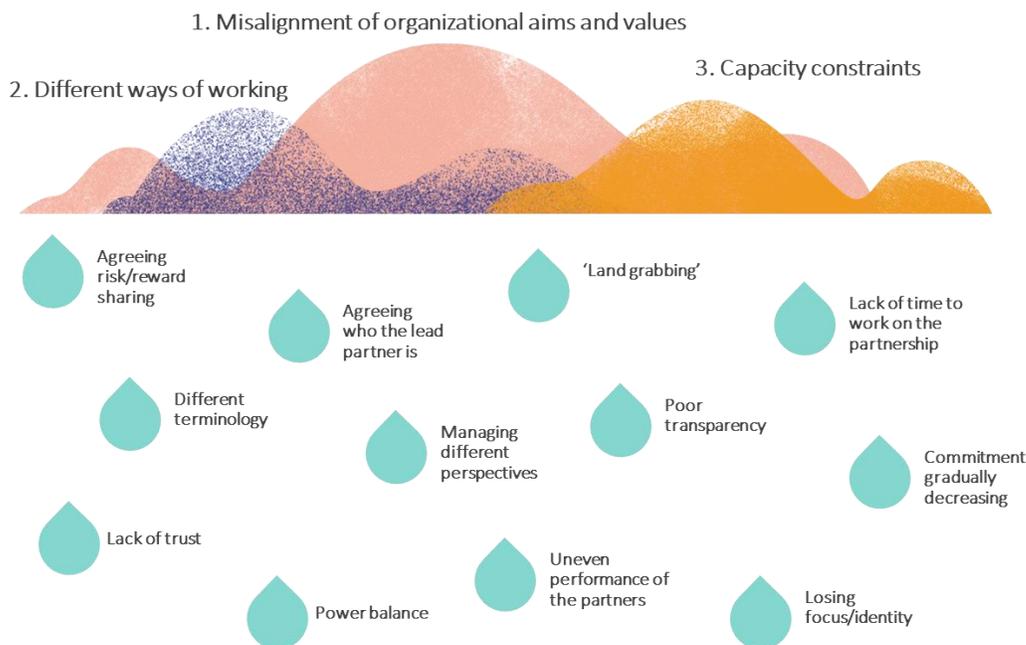
## Challenges

Once a decision to go forward in forming a partnership, Mutuals, like any other organisations, face a number of operational challenges. The challenges highlighted by our respondents varied greatly. In order to conceptualise these challenges, it is helpful to think about them in two categories: primary and secondary challenges. Our analysis revealed three main primary challenges:

- (1) Misalignment of organisational aims and values
- (2) Different ways of working
- (3) Capacity constraints

The secondary challenges can often be traced back to these three primary problems.

**Figure 7:** Primary and secondary challenges of forming and working in partnerships experienced by the respondents



### 1. Misalignment of organisational aims and values

Differing professional agendas, end goals, and values can generate practical challenges that may impact on nearly all practical aspects of a partnership: negotiating who the lead provider is, agreeing risk and reward sharing, financial obligations, and poor performance.

*“The energy required to develop and maintain the relationships with our partners was a challenge, especially in cases where partners had interests that did not always fully align with ours.”*

### 2. Different ways of working

A substantial number of challenges were a direct consequence of differences at an operational level: from triage systems and terminology used, to governance and decision-making processes.

*“The biggest one was them not doing things as quickly as we wanted to. As a small, agile organisation we can make decisions really quickly, but our partners had to go to three board meetings to agree on one thing.”*

*“You just need to communicate like mad and it’s exhausting, but you need to keep on top of it.”*

– Education PSM

To avoid unnecessary conflicts resulting from operational challenges Mutuals found frequent communication and sound project management practices helpful.

### 3. Capacity constraints

Despite good intentions and relationships, finding the capacity to work on the partnership can be difficult. Forming partnerships requires the commitment of time, money and resources often on top of the day-to-day activities. As Mutuals already operate under constrained budgets, capacity constraints were found to be a common source of challenges related to staff commitment, performance, and power balance.

## Benefits

Where Mutuals have attempted to partner for contracts, they felt the experience was largely successful for the specific task of securing new contracts. On average, partnering with other organisations improved Mutuals' ability to:

- Secure different contracts (80% agree)
- Secure bigger contracts (65% agree)
- Secure more contracts (50% agree)

However, the research shows that Mutuals recognise that working in partnership offers benefits far beyond the purpose of bidding for contracts. The participants perceived the conceptual distinction between partnerships formed to bid for contracts and partnerships in general as artificial. The most commonly mentioned benefits of forming and working in partnership are:

- **Ability to access new markets and diversify incomes**  
Partnerships can often open up new revenue generating opportunities in markets where public sector commissioners are not the only buyers of services.
- **Combining expertise, learning from each other, and sharing best practice**  
With a growing number of multi-specialist contracts, partnering often becomes a necessity. However, the benefits of sharing expertise extend beyond meeting procurement requirements. Interviews revealed that Mutuals see a lot of value in sharing best practice and learning from each other. Working in partnership was often highlighted as an opportunity for professional development for staff members.
- **Access to new geographies**  
Partnerships are often used as a means of accessing or learning about new geographies. Mutuals see value in partnering with small voluntary organisations who have links to the community that they don't.

- **Better outcomes for service users**

Anecdotally, Mutuels observed better outcomes for service users as a result of delivering a contract in partnership. This has been most noticeable in health and social care services where partnerships help patients access services in a more timely and appropriate way.

*“Partnerships brought together previously patchy services to a seamless patient journey.”*

– Health PSM

- **Risk sharing**

Partnerships can help reduce risk by increasing capacity and sharing risk. In case of delivery failure of one partner, Mutuels reported being able to utilise other partners’ capacity and skills.

- **Added credibility**

Partners’ specialisms and reputations are seen to add credibility when bidding to secure a new contract.

- **Networking and building relationships**

Forming partnerships was often perceived as a long-term investment in building relationships with key players in the sector.

- **Shared infrastructure, additional systems and assets**

Mutuels reported that entering partnerships allowed them to utilise partners’ facilities and share infrastructure. Co-locating staff and sharing back-office functions were common examples of such practices.

*“Strategically, it helped us with bid writing and getting some of our foundation ready to bid with another organisation.”*

– Social care PSM

- **Bidding skills**

Gaining experience, skills and knowledge of forming partnerships to secure contracts is seen as beneficial in terms of developing practical commercial skills related to bidding. Mutuels reported gaining bid writing skills, insights into partnership formation, improved financial modelling and costing, and developing marketing skills.