from Silos to Synergies

A toolkit for cultural collaboration and partnership

www.silostosynergies.org

Imagine what we could achieve
by working together…

Silo-working

Where a person or organisation works principally within their own means and resources, towards their own agenda and purposes

Synergy

Where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – e.g. by working together, existing resources (skills, funds, connections, relationships, influence, buildings, people) go further than they did alone

Culture

The embodiment or manifestation of people's natural sociability and collective expression, including arts, cultural heritage, crafts, food, festivity, identity

Place

A defined locality, where people and organisations are relatively near to each other geographically, and where they may (or may not) be near to each other in their focus, culture and identity

Collaboration

The act or process of working or doing things with other people

Partnership

An agreement, or entity, made up of two or more people or organisations to enable collaboration and partnership-working

This toolkit, produced by World Pencil, is designed for cultural partnerships, specifically place-based partnerships, including Cultural Education Partnerships (CEPs).

This print-based toolkit is a first version of a more extensive toolkit that we are developing, which will be available online at www.silostosynergies.org in Spring 2023.

The toolkit has been developed from our work with CEPs and other cultural partnerships over the past fifteen years and made possible through a 2022 commission from Arts Connect, the Arts Council England Bridge Organisation for the West Midlands, to support CEPs in that region.

Partnerships are about…

Active listening

Partner benefits

Relationship-building

Partner engagement

Engaging young people

Collaboration

People

Partner resources

Synergy

Lead partners

Delivery

Partnership structure

Purpose

Energy

Organisations

Partnership affordances

Influence

Collective strategy

Connections

Opportunity

Trust

Multiple sectors

Identifying need

Terms of Reference

Evaluation

Accountability

Communication

Structure

Governance

Leadership

Energy

At their heart, partnerships are about energy. Partnerships are hard work – so they need energy. They need the energy of partners to get behind a purpose and a vision and bring their support, time, thinking, conversation, effort and other resources.

So where is the energy? And to do what? How can you find the energy and then sustain and grow it?

🔍 Where can you find the energy? Maybe behind a compelling shared vision, that people can *envision*, and see their part in; or from seeing the potential in working on something together; or from being able to meet a need or purpose that couldn't be met alone.

⊖ What will deplete the energy? Maybe battles that are too hard to win; or effort without impact or dividend; or interesting conversation but with little to show for it; or working towards a purpose that is of little relevance.

⊕ What will grow the energy? Maybe from seeing remarkable or productive impact from effort; or from good feedback, communication and story-telling; or from getting well-understood benefits for yourself and work; or from having more fun than other people and making sure they know about it?

Particularly where partnerships need to rely on volunteered contribution, at least at the start, if you can't find, fire up and fuel the energy, the partnership will probably falter.

You wouldn't go away without your phone charger because you know it needs energy. Partnerships are run on energy and everyone in a vibrant partnership knows how much energy there is flowing, but partnerships don't always focus on energy as they should. Sometimes they forget their chargers.

Place-first partnerships

Partnerships that start with place are about finding the capacity and energy within and around a particular locality to work towards a particular local purpose.

Take a broad look at that place – what's going on in the different corners and what could go really well?

Opportunities of place-based partnership

Within a particular locality, people and organisations are closer geographically. Many organisations have a geographic remit – schools, local authority services, cultural organisations, local people – which, with varying boundaries, they share with each other.

Local communities may have a sense of shared priorities, culture, identity, history, need – or, where not, this can be a powerful purpose to work towards.

Places are homes.

Challenges of place-based partnership

Many partnerships start with a purpose – some kind of practical need or opportunity: "we want to make a particular change but we really need these additional skills and resources that you have – shall we work together on it?"

Place-based partnerships don't always have this from the outset – they have to find and agree what their shared purpose will be.

Partners in a place may share a locality, but little else. They may be direct competitors for customers, clients or contacts. They may have a very different set of needs and priorities, and a different outlook and perspective. In this case, finding that shared purpose becomes even more important.

Partnership purpose and vision

If energy is what fuels a partnership, purpose and vision are what hold it together and bring people to its table.

Below are some key questions around partnership purpose.

Have we got a clear, shared purpose?

It is sometimes the case that partnerships lack this clear, shared purpose. If you haven't got one, you need to shape one. You could start with the tools below.

What do we mean by a purpose?

The thing that the partnership wants to achieve, that focusses its efforts, the bigger change that it wants to make, its mission, the reason that the partnership is worth having, the thing that will contribute to the partnership's bigger vision.

Have we got a bigger picture vision?

What does your purpose lead and contribute to, that inspires people contribute their energy to the partnership?

Can people envision our vision?

If you're outlining a vision of which people have little understanding or experience, you may need to help them to see or imagine what that vision could be like.

Who is our purpose and vision relevant to?

Everyone has their own agenda and purpose. The partnership's purpose needs to be relevant to the people and organisations you'd like to share in achieving that purpose.

Arts/culture-focussed vs. personal/social impact-focussed

Central to the relevance of your partnership's purpose is likely to be the extent to which it is really focussed on arts/cultural objectives, or on social, personal, community, environmental objectives being achieved through arts and culture. If your purpose is for there to be universal access to cultural opportunity, that will appeal to cultural advocates, enthusiasts and converts. If your purpose is for accessible cultural opportunity to unlock young people's confidence, ambition and mental health, it will likely appeal to a wider audience.

Is it ambitious enough?

To leverage the potential of the partnership, the purpose and vision need to raise partners' perspectives above or beyond the purpose of their own work and organisation to a bigger picture that can only be achieved through collaboration.

Is it convincing?

Can you plausibly achieve this purpose, including with the resources you might reasonably gather within the partnership? Can the partners you'd like to engage see their potential role in it?
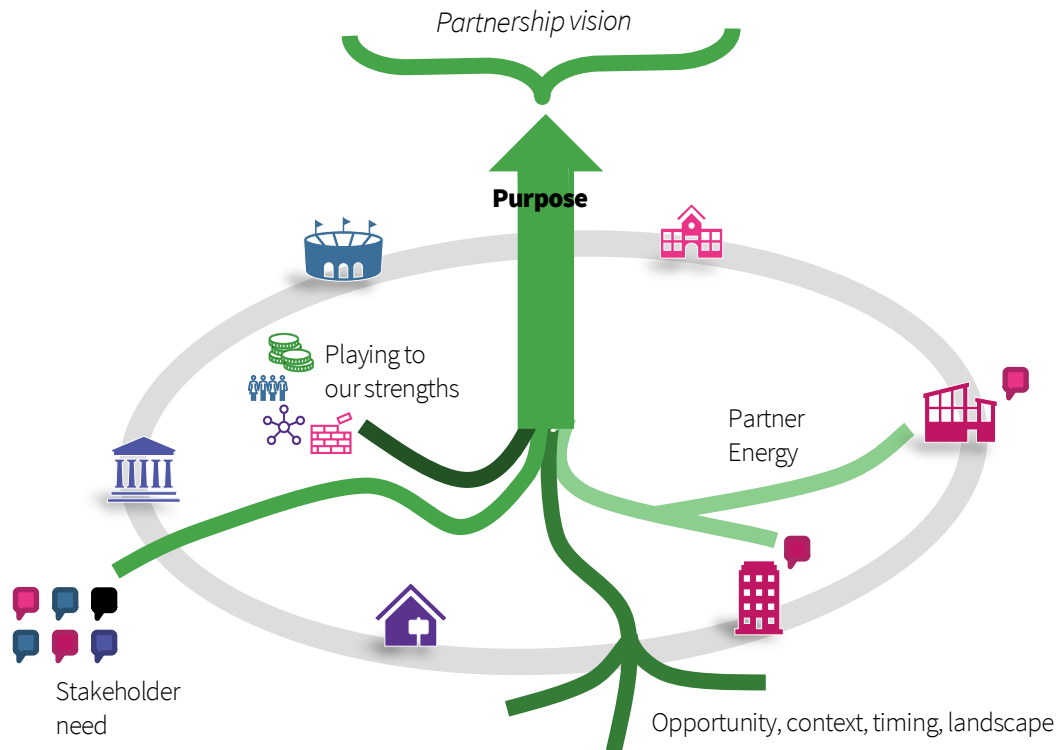
Is it compelling?

Does it excite you enough to want to contribute your time and effort to the partnership? What about the other partners?

How do we find, determine and shape this purpose?

The next page outlines how four elements – need, strengths, context and partner energy – can be used in conjunction to shape a partnership's purpose. You could use this four-part framework to design a partnership workshop, insights and data audit, confidential consultation, or reflection tool.

How do you develop a partnership purpose and vision?

Partnership vision

Purpose

Playing to
our strengths

Partner
Energy

Stakeholder
need

Opportunity, context, timing, landscape

Stakeholder need

What are the needs and ambitions of children and young people, schools, cultural stakeholders, local authorities, communities and others, both within the partnership and outside it, that might be met through cultural opportunities?

Playing to our strengths: partner resources

With an understanding of our collective resources and capacity (venues, equipment, skills, people, connections, influence, funds etc.), what are we well placed to focus on, in responding to need and opportunity?

What could we uniquely work towards in partnership – i.e. that we couldn't achieve already on our own?

**Opportunity, context, timing, landscape**

What are the opportunities in our landscape right now – funds, up-coming events, particular priorities?

What other work is already going on that we could contribute to or that we should be careful not to duplicate?

Partner energy

With a dose of pragmatism, what are our partners keen and committed to? There is little point pursuing a purpose, however well identified, if there is not enough energy behind it. Where could we mobilise additional energy?

How do you identify stakeholders' needs and priorities?
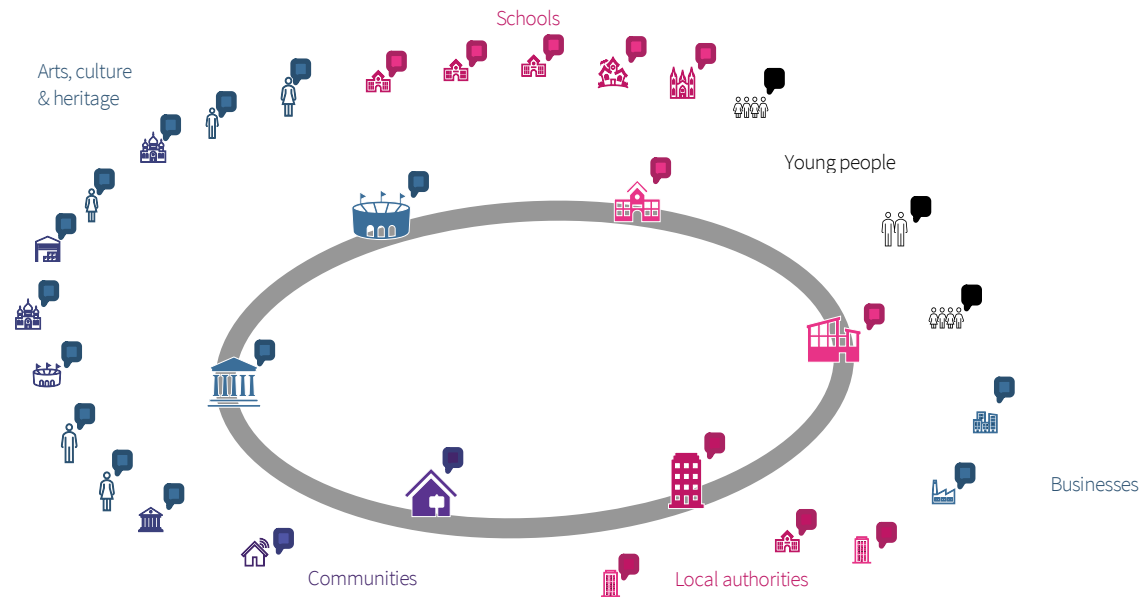
Macro consultations

Working through partners and other connections, macro consultations try to gauge a representative cross-spectrum of views and opinions across a locality or stakeholder group.

This can be useful if you want or need a pan-locality understanding to make balanced decisions or if you're planning pan-locality activity.

Micro consultations

Instead of attempting the often ambitious task of seeking a representative macro perspective, you can consult with a smaller and more local group.

This can be useful for more hyper-local working. Indeed the consultation can often be embedded into the activity, rather than being prior to the activity.

Data analysis

Look at the data that are already available, including public data (ONS, local authorities etc.) and partners' own data.

Partner intelligence

What insights into needs have partners picked up through their own consultation, networking and conversation?

Individual conversations

Pick up the phone and talk to some of the people in the organisations and communities you'd like to work with or support.

Expos and sharing events

Host events where people and organisations can come and meet each other, share what's available, and identify each other's needs.

Partnership round-table workshopping

Go round the table and ask partners to identify their needs, and the known needs of the partnership's target stakeholder groups.

What resources do partnerships have?

For a partnership to make an impact towards its purpose, it will need to source and draw on resources. Those resources are in many places: in the partners, in the partnership, in external funders and benefactors, in the participating beneficiary stakeholders (e.g. schools and young people).

Partnerships typically have five kinds of resources that they might look to draw on:
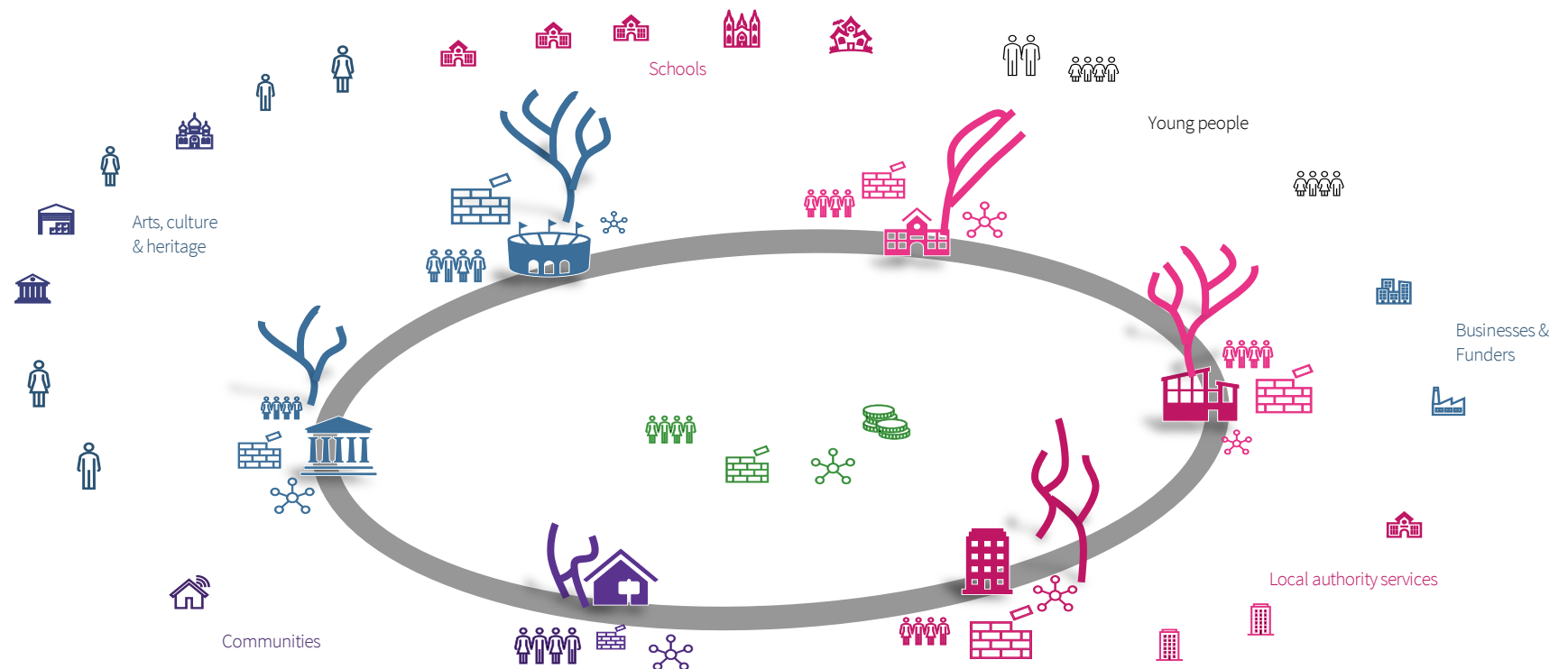
- Funds
- People, skills and energy
- Spaces, facilities and equipment
- Connections, contacts and influence
- Strategies – the plans and activities that are already being developed by organisations

Partners' resources – partnerships' resources

Partnerships often look at what resources they might need to draw into the partnership for its own strategy and activity, e.g. through fundraising.

But they should also look at the resources that partners have:

Prior alignment: *"Our partnership is really working towards the same agenda that my own organisation is pursuing so it will make sense for us to share much or our work and capacity with and through the partnership."*

If the partnership's purpose is closely aligned with that of an individual partner, the partner may be able to avail its resources (e.g. its people, its existing strategy) to the partnership for greater impact.

Re-alignment: *"I can see that our partnership is really getting closer to the heart of what these young people need than our previous work had been so we will try to reorient some of our own work in that same direction."*

If the partner can be persuaded of the value of the partnership's purpose, it may be able to re-orient its work towards that purpose;

Synergy: *"The fact is that our venue is empty in the daytime for much of the week, so we could combine the skilled facilitators they've got with that budget you have to make some new opportunities."*

If a partner has resources that are under-utilised (e.g. spare venue availability) or that can be shared (e.g. skills/know-how), the partnership may be able to make these resources go further.

Partnership value added: *"The truth is that my organisation is already running a bigger programme than our partnership could do but, even so, we could grow our programme through the partnership and its connections with schools and different artforms."*

If the partners are already delivering significant strategies and programmes of activity, it may be unclear what additional value the partnership, with the funds it can muster, really adds. But these existing programmes can often be extended or enriched through the resources, skills and connectivity a partnership brings.

How do you find out where the resources are?

Inventory workshop

Run a creative participatory session with partners to identify where, across the partnership and locality, there are resources that could be freed up or harnessed by the partnership towards its shared purpose.

Confidential inventory

People are often reluctant, or restricted, in how much they can share, particularly if levels of trust are low. Working through an independent third party, or an anonymising online platform like a survey can help with this.

Round-table updates and conversations

Conversations round the table, even just through partner updates, can be effective at revealing potential resources the partnership could harness. One partner's leftover paint tins and theatre sets might be the beginning of another partner's playground imaginarium.

Expos and sharing events

Events where partners and stakeholders can share what they have to offer, or what they've been working on, can be great for other people seeing not just opportunities but resources that partners have, and which they might be put to greater use.

Galvanising around an opportunity

In many cases, an open-ended 'what resources have you got' brief can be stifling if partners have long lists of resources, or things they're reluctant to speak out about. Instead focusing on a specific need or opportunity can be more effective: *"So we'd like to put on this festival for the whole town at the end of the year. Have people got existing resources and projects that could feed into it?"*

Galvanising around the partnership purpose and vision

At a larger scale, if the purpose is right, and relevant, the partnership, and particularly its chair, can work strategically to see where partner resources can be aligned and leveraged towards that purpose, both in meetings and in conversations behind the scenes.

Partnership nature

How is your partnership going to work together? The table below outlines six natures of partnership and partnership strategy. Which are the most appropriate for your context and purpose/objectives?

Communication

The partners, particularly arts & cultural organisations, communicate their individual cultural offers collectively, e.g. to schools – a one-stop shop.

Opportunities: Helps existing provision go further and reach new communities by being better and singularly communicated to stakeholders.

Limitations: May have little impact on how provision could be most strategically positioned or offered, or on how partners could draw collectively on their individual strengths.

Co-operation

The joined-up partners, particularly arts & cultural organisations, consolidate and review their collective cultural offer, e.g. to ensure there is minimal duplication or super-serving of particular locations, and to ensure provision is targeted where it is most needed.

Opportunities: Helps existing provision be harnessed more strategically by avoiding duplication and endeavouring to target provision where it can have greatest impact.

Limitations: It draws minimally on what partnerships could do collectively and so is unlikely to engage partners beyond those who have eligible provision to be coordinated.

Community

People and organisations coming together more informally to share, learn, grow and develop together, often with projects and activities developing within clusters of the community rather than spread across its entirety.

Opportunities: Engendering the spirit and sometimes acts of collaboration across a locality may be more practical in areas that are remote or have little infrastructure.

Limitations: Looser more informal partnerships may be harder to govern, steer or have consensus. They may have less robust funder appeal than other partnership natures.

Collaboration

The partners adapt, design and/or deliver cultural work together, e.g. so as to be able to combine their individual specialisms and resources to create synergies, particularly in responding to a challenge or need that they couldn't address individually, or so as to have strength in numbers for funders and commissioners.

Opportunities: Offers partners the opportunity to retain and develop their individual specialisms, to create together something that couldn't have been done alone and to develop synergies.

Limitations: Likely to be difficult in contexts where there is little trust between partners or capacity to coordinate the collaboration; may require additional resource (e.g. funding) if partners need to take on additional work, which itself needs that resource to be managed.

Concomitance

The joined-together partners develop a shared brand and identity that takes on and fundraises for work of its own, often in place of the work they might have done individually.

Opportunities: As with collaboration, but likely with a stronger partnership community, and more extensive potential for partnership affordances. May break down unproductive barriers to partners availing their resource. Likely to present a stronger branding for beneficiaries.

Limitations: Requires more comprehensive partners' buy-in to the shared assets (brand, strategy, programming etc.) which may be hard to achieve, and for that buy-in to be sustained, which may be challenging as partners' individual priorities change.

Incorporation

The partnership comes together to form a new legal entity in its own right, with its own assets and strategy, where the original partners may have a governing or executive role.

Opportunities: Gives partnership strong identity, independence and legal status, which may be particularly valuable for holding contracts and grants. These otherwise need to be held by contract-holder lead partners, which may bring complications and conflicts to the partnership.

Limitations: Establishing and incorporating a new organisation can take considerable time and effort, as can sustaining one. In some cases, when a partnership becomes an organisation in its own right it may cease to be a partnership; it may introduce a new competitor into the environment it originally sought to

Partnership affordances

It's important for partnerships to have 'partnership affordances' – the opportunities that are afforded, and the things that can only be done, or done as well, by working in partnership – because if partners could undertake the partnership's strategy on their own, it would in many cases be more efficient for them to do so. Partnership working is, after all, hard work.

All of the six natures in the table above have partnership affordances, although it is when partnerships are collaborating on new or adapted work that draws on their individual strengths collected together that the partnership affordances tend to be strongest.

Partnership value added

Closely related to partnership affordances, partnerships need 'partnership value added' – they need essentially to do more than the sum total of what the partners were already doing – the synergies in the title of this toolkit.

Partnerships need these two things because without them partnership-working can be a lot of effort but with little discernible impact or benefits as far as the partners see. In cases where involvement in a partnership is largely voluntary this discernible impact and benefit is vital.

Freedom to specialise

One of the greatest affordances of partnership is that it often allows individual partners more freedom to specialise in what they do particularly well, rather than needing to be a jack of all trades. Focus and specialism can be critical to an organisation's success – not being too distracted by everything that could be done but concentrating on what you can do particularly well.

Benefits for partners

Partnerships need to aim for benefits for the partners as well as benefits from the partnership – ideally as win—wins but sometimes as a balance too. Partnership affordances, value added and freedom to specialise can all be distinct benefits to partners. We discuss partner benefits more extensively below.

Partnership strategy or partners' strategies?

One of the decisions many partnerships have to make, as described in the above table, is about how much work the partnership wants to take on itself, as opposed to how the partnership's role is to better coordinate the partners' own work. Do you carve out an ambitious collaborative partnership programme, or agree to cooperate on existing work?

There are many influencing criteria in this decision, and no one ideal answer. The idea behind these pages on partnership nature is to pose some of the questions that the partnership should consider, alongside looking at its partners, resources, landscape and other aspects, to identify what will work most productively in its case.

How do you develop partnership strategy?

What is the partnership going to do together? Partnership strategy starts with the topics above, including purpose, resources, nature. To stitch these together, and work out how the partnership, and its partners, are going to do what, below are some common approaches to partnership strategy development.

Start with purpose: what do we want to achieve?

What is the need and bigger picture vision and how could we achieve it collectively? Working towards this purpose, what needs to be achieved, what are the steps along the way and when can they get done, if you did x, and we did y? Or working back from the purpose, imagining that we'd already achieved it, what is the story of what happened? Ideally, partnership strategy would start with purpose but not all partnerships are ready to do so.

Start with partners' needs: what do you need?

What do the partners want from the partnership, where are the opportunities and what will it take to realise them?

Start with resources: what have we got?

What resources (people, organisations, skills, capacity, connections, funds etc.) have we got round the table and what could we uniquely make with them in combination, or how could we collectively make them go further, around a shared purpose?

Start with partners' agenda: what do you want to achieve?

What are we individually trying to achieve and where is there alignment? Are there areas where we are duplicating effort, or where one partner is seeking solutions another has found? Are there areas where it would make sense for us to work together, or commission shared resources?

Roundtable discoveries: what could go well?

Let's give roundtable updates, responding to a provocation, and see if a collective focus emerges instinctively and cumulatively.

Collective workshopping: co-design

Much partnership strategy is, of course, developed round the partnership table, with clear agenda and briefing, good facilitation and a conducive atmosphere, and productive distillation of progress and action at the end.

1-1 conversation: can I just talk to you about…

Perhaps the most important activity in a partnership is the work that goes on behind the scenes: listening to partners' perspectives, identifying shared action and partnership contribution, following up on group conversation – but all in a safe, confidential context.

Governance

Governance is not perhaps the most exciting part of partnerships and collaboration but it is important, essentially for maximising and harnessing energy so as to result in impact.

Good governance is important for:

- **Energy:** if partners are motivated by a common purpose, see how their energy is being productive, and feel their participation is fair and their voice heard, their energy is more likely to be sustained;

- **Perspectives:** it can be difficult to operate a partnership smoothly if it comprises people and organisations with very different perspectives, priorities and levels of experience and strategic thinking. Governance can help organise the responses to this;

- **Productivity:** good governance, structure and strategy are essential to making sure that all the breadth of potential in a partnership can be maximised for greatest impact, within all the multilateral complexity that the collection of partners is likely to represent.

- **Contribution:** different people and partners can contribute to a partnership in different ways and governance and structure can help make sure everyone can contribute productively, e.g. by managing confidentiality and ownership;

- **Power, decision-making and authority:** an important role of governance is to ensure that there is appropriate apportioning of power, influence and decision-making responsibility across the partnership;

- **Priority:** relatedly, different partners will have different priorities, including for the partnership itself, which governance can help to manage;

- **Participation:** governance and terms of reference are important in clarifying the basis on which partners are participating in a partnership – what they're getting themselves into and what they can and can't expect to get out of it;

- **Trust:** it's very important that people know what they're responsibilities and liabilities are, and what other partners will do with their contributions to and take-aways from the partnership;

- **Accountability:** and it's important, internally and externally, that the partnership can be held accountable for the things it takes responsibility for, including other people's money and contributions;

- **Interoperability:** governance can also help clarify the limits and remit of a partnership and its inter-relationship with other organisations and partners, to ensure that the partnership works productively in a wider 'partnership of partnerships.'

### How much governance do you need?

In the same way that good governance should maximise and harness energy by providing an enabling platform for collaboration and innovation, it will be counter-productive if it gets stuck, if it goes too far, becomes burdensome and isn't reviewed with time. Governance shouldn't be the mother of bureaucracy or the gatekeeper of progress.

Partnerships are a thing but collaboration and partnership-working is an approach, an activity, an ethos. It's often the act and mindset of collaboration that's really needed, rather than the partnership entity. But it's also common that collaboration can only go so far before it starts to need some kind of agreement, contract, principles, structure, leadership, decision-making etc. – i.e. the elements of a partnership.

Partnership structures

Below is an outline of some of the common partnership structures, with some of the pros and cons in each case. In reality, partnerships may have elements of several of these structures at the same time.

Core partnership group
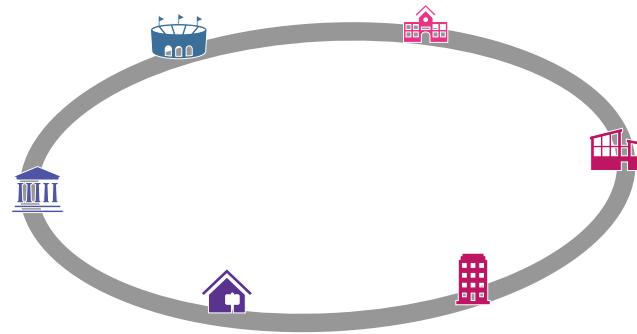
This is the most common grouping for partnerships and partnership-working: a focussed group of people and organisations who are compatible with each other, can focus together, and who are complimentary to each other.

Many people will say that when the size of the group exceeds 10, it might need some restructuring and focussing – to make sure that the energy and collective perspective can be effectively harnessed.

Steering group & wider membership
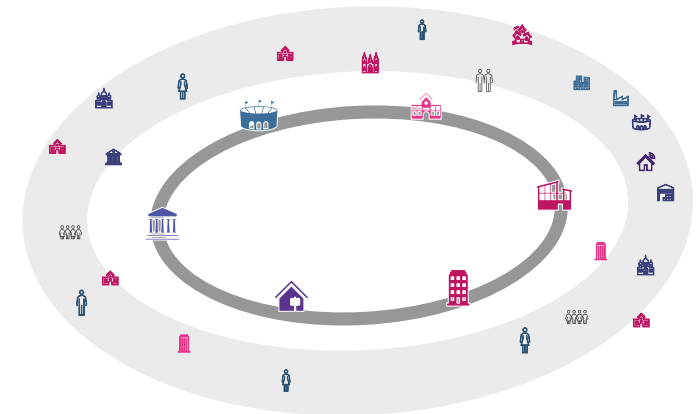
This is the structure that often emerges, and works well, when:

- There are more partners than can or need to be on a central steering group;

- There are partners who are pro-active and those who are interested;

- There is great energy and enthusiasm in a wide partnership, but the collective strategy and decision-making need to be focussed and democracy, or open space decision-making, will benefit from guiding.

It's important in this grouping to ensure that there is good communication between the two groups, and that the wider membership is happy with the composition, brief and governance of the steering group.

Central and sub-groups
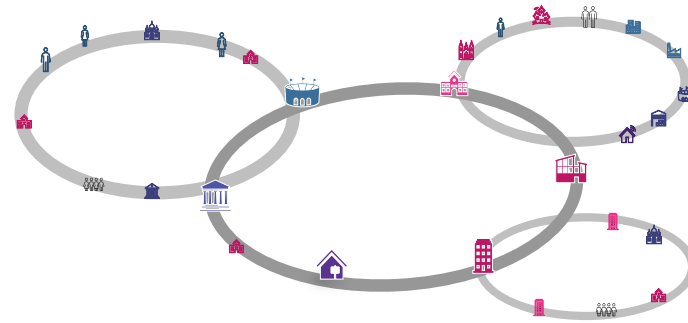
This structure works well for a variety of contexts, e.g.:

- For large territories, where energy is more effectively harnessed by local groups working locally, and liaising with a central group;

- Where some partners have a wider remit (e.g. for a large locality) whereas others' remit is more focussed (e.g. for a local area within the larger area);

- For task-and-finish action groups that rally around particular activity;

- Thematic sub-groups that focus on particular interests, needs and specialisms (e.g. mental health, fundraising, school leadership).

In all cases, it is important that:

- There is clear need and brief for the sub-groups because the more complicated the partnership's structure becomes, the more work it will be to manage and coordinate it;

- There is strong communication between the groups;

- The responsibilities of the groups collectively is clear and, in particular, the central group doesn't get too big for its boots.

Informal network
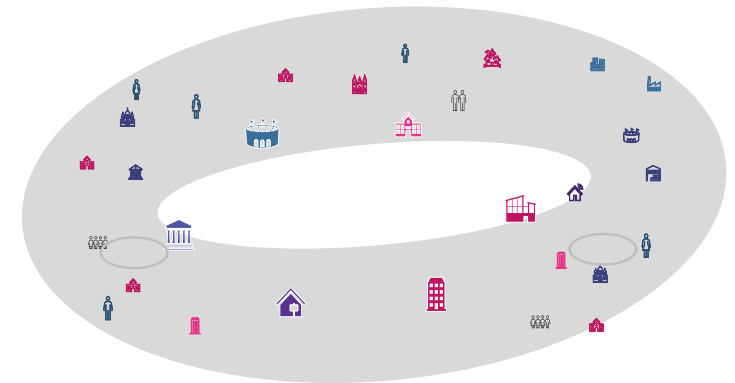
Informal networks, where people communicate with each other around some kind of shared focus (place, purpose, problem, opportunity etc.) are one of the loosest forms of partnerships. But they have many of the same needs: a clear focus or purpose, agreement on who can participate, support to coordinate etc.

Networks are an important structure to consider in how a locality manages its energy. It may not make particular sense, for example, to devote the time and energy into establishing and maintaining a partnership around a particular locality if what is really needed in that locality is a networking of people that will give rise to smaller partnerships that focus on particular purposes – more of a collaborative ecology than a partnership.

In some cases, a partnership may dissolve into more of an informal network, e.g. if its purpose is achieved or its resources used up – *"let's keep in touch"*.

In many cases, an informal network may lead to more established partnerships – *"I think we need to formalise this collaborative discussion into some shared action."*

Incorporation
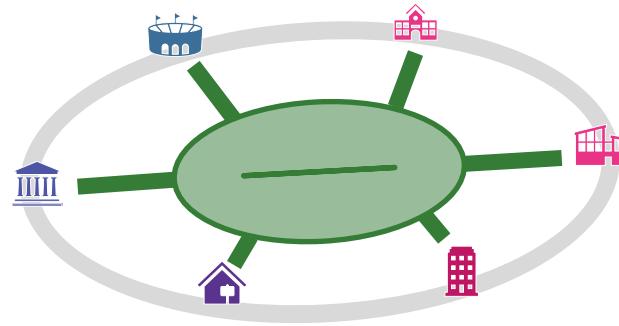
In some cases, partners may decide that the best structure for a partnership is as a new legal entity – a company, charity, CIO etc.

This has many advantages:

- A legal entity can hold contracts, grants, bank accounts, employees – many of the things that partnerships quickly need and otherwise have to find a partner to take on;
- In some cases, a legal entity may find it easier to carve out a clear identity, brand, remit, income.

There are also disadvantages:

- Setting up and running an organisation is a lot of work, and more expensive than the £15 company registration fee.
- In many cases, when a partnership forms into a new legal entity, it ceases to be a partnership and where partnerships are convened to help build collaboration in a locality, a new organisation may end up just being another competitor in that locality.

Part of another partnership

Partnerships take time and effort and so nobody can afford to have too many of them, nor does any place or issue want more partnerships than is productive.

Moving into another partnership has many advantages:

- It can provide smaller partnerships with the influence, recognition and connectivity that they otherwise struggle with;
- It can lessen the administrative burden, by sharing this within a wider partnership administration;
- It can give the smaller partnership an opportunity to take its purpose and shape and influence the wider partnership's agenda.

And there are potential disadvantages – essentially reverse of the advantages, where the smaller partnership's identity and purpose are compromised and subverted into a different agenda. Migrating partnerships need to act carefully, strategically and with clarity to ensure they reap the advantages.

Partner engagement

Engaging partners is a priority for every partnership at some stage in its development, and perhaps permanently. Cultural partnerships might be engaging local authorities, cultural organisations, schools, young people, businesses, funders, communities…

The main insight shared about how to engage partners is about careful active listening to (or research about) their perspectives and then finding a way in which they might want to contribute.

Potential partners might consider every aspect of your partnership, as they hear about it, as outlined below.

Questions from a potential partner's perspective

Brand: "Do I get what this is all about and does?"

Partnership vision: "Am I inspired by or do I buy into this vision?"

Purpose: "Does this align with our purpose and priorities?"

Strategy: "Can I contribute to and will I benefit from this strategy? Are they capitalising on their resources effectively?"

Impact: "What does or could this partnership achieve? Is there any evidence?"

Membership: "Who else is involved? Is this partnership significant and plausible? Can I afford to miss out?"

Structure and governance: "Can I trust group? Is it viable? Is it well run? Will my involvement be productive?"

The answers need, at least mostly, to be Yes.

Questions from a partnership's perspective

Who: Which partners do we want and need around the table to achieve our purpose?

Accessibility: How can we reach and engage them?

Feasibility: Engaging partners can be hard work. Is engaging this particular partner worth the effort or will we just expend to much energy on trying?

Techniques for partner engagement

Active listening to potential partners

The consensus from many successful partnership builders seems to be that the first thing is to ask for the potential partner's perspective, and listen very carefully to the answer.

Bigger picture vision and strategic purpose: what can culture achieve?

Having the right vision and purpose is important for engaging partners: something that they can get their head round, that they're convinced by, that they want to be a part of, and where they can see what that part might be.

Ambitious, strategic strategy

The partnership has a clear vision and purpose, but is it at a scale that is both ambitious enough to be inspiring and plausible enough to be realistic? Is the strategy for getting there resourceful, timely, secure, intelligent, and planning for consequences?

Soliciting potential partners' views on the partnership

Having asked potential partners about their perspective, and sold them your vision, as a first call, what would be their insights on how this purpose and strategy could be developed?

Role of the chair

A key role of a partnership chair is help identify and recruit useful partners to the table. It doesn't have to be a role played just by a chair but it is a necessary role that the partnership will need to fill.

Influence of the chair and existing partners

Everyone in the partnership will have their connections and circles of influence, which will often be the best starting point for engaging partners, and a key reason for appointing a particular chair.

Clear succinct communication and 'what does cultural activity look like?'

Everyone in the cultural sector has an idea of what cultural activity looks like, and so does everyone in other sectors. Is that that activity that the partnership is developing? Can you communicate what you're working towards effectively?

Evidence of impact from the partnership or comparable work

Can you provide robust evidence of the impact of your work, or of comparable work from elsewhere that you look to build on? Does that evidence meet the standards of robustness required for this potential partner's engagement?

Consideration of partner benefits

Having listening to the potential partner's perspective, how could the partnership realistically benefit them and their agenda?

Good structure, governance, terms of reference

Many potential partners will want to know if the partnership is robust, viable, accountable, fair etc. before they can afford to get involved.

Effective operation and coordination

As well as being well set up, is it well run? Can the potential partner be confident their contribution will be used productively?

Inclusive, collaborative ethos

Do your potential partners feel welcome, valued, able to contribute, sufficiently understood?

Engaging schools

Engaging schools – either as partners in the partnership or as participants – is a focus for most cultural learning partnerships. As with all potential partners, the school, once you can reach them, will look at the partnership and weigh up if it's right for them.

So, as an extension to the partner-perspective questions above, below are some of the most commonly cited barriers why schools may not engage.

Barriers for school engagement

Priority: *"This sounds great but it's not a priority for us right now."*

Ofsted: *"I don't see how this can tie in with Ofsted."*

Time: *"We haven't got time to do this."*

Money: *"We haven't got the budget for this."*

Staff turnover: *"Sadly our arts lead has just left."*

Leadership: *"Our head doesn't really get the arts."*

Cultural concept: *"We already do lots of arts. I don't see how this sounds different."*

Local advocate: *"You'd be better off talking to Ms X."*

Unknown entity: *"I don't know anything about this partnership."*

Past: *"We've had bad experiences of this kind of thing in the past."*

Overcoming the barriers:
- The responses to some of these barriers are in the partnership's needs analysis: how can we respond to schools' priorities now?
- Some are in its strategy: how can we carve out a strategy that will respond to schools' accountability and performance targets, as well as its own agenda?
- And many are in how a partnership shapes its communications with schools: which are the right people to target; how well do we convey and communicate the activity and purpose we're looking to achieve; do we present ourselves as a trustable entity?

Techniques for engaging schools

Consult with schools from the outset

As with any potential partner, the first step is to build an understanding of the school, through consultation, conversation and data analysis.

What communications work well with schools?

There are many answers to this, depending on the school and context. Have you carefully considered how this communication or that will land at this busy school in the pile with all the others? What do you know works?

Expo events for schools

School get-togethers (expos, tea parties etc) can be very effective ways to meet and consult with school staff, and for them to meet each other, and to share the cultural offer with them.

'Inverse expo' events where schools showcase their work

Instead of sharing a cultural partnership's offer to schools, ask schools to come and share what they've been doing, and then respond accordingly.

Cultural development fund for schools

Set up a pot (could be money, could be surplus materials or artist time) that schools can apply for to develop their cultural capacity, as a bespoke and needs-based first start.

Helping cultural organisations to work with schools

Not all cultural organisations, or those from health and other sectors, have expertise or track record of working with schools, but the partnership might be able to help them with that.

Centralising school needs in the partnership

If schools are a significant focus for the partnership, make their needs central to it, perhaps before the needs of the partners themselves.

Evidence of impact – from the partnership or comparable work

As with many sectors, schools increasingly must base decision making on a robust evidence base. Particularly in cases where the school is not already committed to culture, having strong impact evidence to hand, and on the tip of the tongue, will be vital.

Dedicated school liaison person

If schools are significant to the partnership, many partnerships have found great value in appointing a person whose role it is to work out how school engagement works most effectively.

Championing headteacher advocates

Where a school leader advocates for culture, cultural development will generally happen. If schools are important to a partnership, it should advocate for those school leaders, feed them with insights and opportunities, amplify their voices, and draw on their connectivity.

Schools in the steering group

Having schools represented in the top governance layer for a partnership can be a very effective way of centralising schools' perspectives, showing commitment to schools, and of drawing in other schools.

Drawing on school networks

Most schools are already wired into many partnerships. See if you can join in with them.

Benefits for partners

All partnerships are designed to have their own benefits and their own impacts – to result in things that it would have been difficult, or unlikely, or inefficient for the partners to achieve alone. But partnerships also need to bring benefits to the partners themselves, not least when, as with many cultural partnerships, they rely on a significant degree of volunteered time and effort – borrowed energy.

Similarly to how charities cannot prioritise gains for trustees, not all partnerships can or should prioritise partner benefits, in the way that companies do for shareholders or unions do for members – that might risk taking the focus away from the partnership's purpose. But neither can they afford to overlook partners benefits.

In our work with partnerships over the years, a minority say that they proactively focus on the benefits for partners. The partners themselves are invariably aware of the time and effort they put into the partnership but often they have to be pushed or prompted before they uncover or articulate the benefits of the partnership to themselves.

Cultural partnerships should look for win—win, synergistic benefits that partners accrue from the partnership. And they should ensure that partners are reminded of them – to keep the energy flowing.

Below is a selection of some the most commonly cited benefits that partners identify they yield from cultural partnerships.

Commonly cited benefits for partners

Networking & partnership building

Partnerships can bring partners very valuable networking opportunities, connectivity to new sectors, access to levels of hierarchy, new relationships and partnerships.

Developing outlook and understanding landscape

Working in a partnership often means being exposed to and being part of a wider perspective and landscape than in your 'day job'. Broadening your perspective can then help you to do your day job better.

Keeping up to date

Partnership events can be an effective way of the latest updates and activities in other organisations and relevant sectors.

Part of a bigger agenda: strategic belonging

Many organisations, particularly smaller ones, describe the value of being part of, and being seen to be part of, a wider agenda and purpose than their of organisation alone – the value of strategic belonging.

Partnership affordances

Partnership affordances are the things that partnerships can do that partners alone can't (see above). They can be a benefit to partners if, e.g., partners can show that their resources have been more extensively harnessed through the partnership, or indeed if their resources have been conserved by working in partnership.

Cross-cultural opportunities

For many cultural partnerships, a key partnership affordance is being able to build cross-cultural collaborations – where different arts and cultural forms come together to create something new.

Freedom to specialise

If working in partnership means that partners don't have to do as many different jobs themselves, that can mean that they have more capacity to specialise in what they really want to do, or do well. This in turn can help with branding, productivity and other areas of organisational development.

Personal capacity building and skills development

Working with a breadth of people from different sectors and walks of life can help develop the people in the partnership – building their strategic thinking and skills, their relationship-building and people management, their understanding of governance and strategy, their perspective and landscape understanding etc.

Partner capacity building and organisational development

Partner organisations can gain from relationship-building, access to funding and resources, development of strategic capacity and positioning, ability to develop their own core work, help with governance, business planning etc.

Engagement with schools

Cultural partnerships can effectively pool connections and relationships with schools which can otherwise be important but elusive for many cultural stakeholders.

Partnership's impact – relevant to partners

In many cases the impact that the partnership achieves will be directly relevant to the core work of its partners, in which case they may be able to include this in their accountability and reporting.

Engagement with children and young people

Working with children and young people, the priority of cultural learning partnerships, is, of course a priority too for many of their partners, who can include the partnership's work in their own output. For other organisations, working with children and young people can be a welcome new component to their organisations programming and reach.

CYP improving partners' work

Beyond working with CYP as beneficiaries, many cultural partners describe how working with CYP has improved their own work, e.g. by benefiting from CYP's ideas, ingenuity or perspective.

Social networking

The social aspect to partnership working can be a significant benefit, particularly for those organisations and individuals whose work is more isolated, or for people who feel isolated within their organisations.

New opportunities for partners
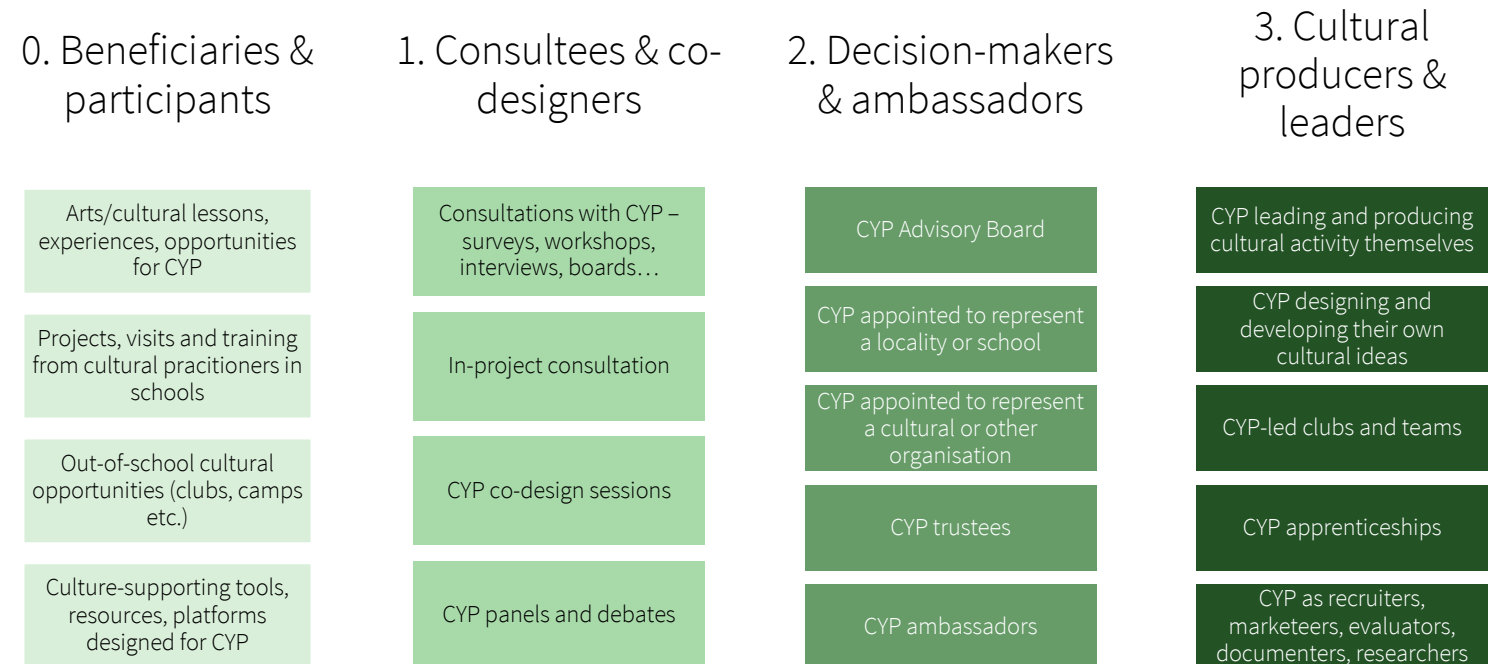
For many partners, working in a partnership can bring new business, work, income and other financial opportunities that were difficult or impossible to access alone. In particular, partnerships may allow organisations to apply for consortium funding, or for other funds and commissions for which they would not have capacity, scale, resource or track record to apply on their own.

Engaging children and young people

Engaging children and young people is a central priority of all cultural learning partnerships. Clearly children and young people (CYP) are intended to be the ultimate beneficiaries of these partnerships but they can also be engaged in the design and operation of the partnership. The diagram below summarises four different categories of engaging CYP, with typical activities in each case.

(We've numbered the first category as zero as it is a given that CYP will be engaged in this way in cultural learning activity. As such, categories 1-3 are different ways in which CYP can be engaged not just as participants but as agents, designers, decision-makers, producers and leaders. In this toolkit, we focus on categories 1-3.)

0. Beneficiaries & participants

- Arts/cultural lessons, experiences, opportunities for CYP
- Projects, visits and training from cultural practitioners in schools
- Out-of-school cultural opportunities (clubs, camps etc.)
- Culture-supporting tools, resources, platforms designed for CYP

1. Consultees & co-designers

- Consultations with CYP – surveys, workshops, interviews, boards…
- In-project consultation
- CYP co-design sessions
- CYP panels and debates

2. Decision-makers & ambassadors

- CYP Advisory Board
- CYP appointed to represent a locality or school
- CYP appointed to represent a cultural or other organisation
- CYP trustees
- CYP ambassadors

3. Cultural producers & leaders

- CYP leading and producing cultural activity themselves
- CYP designing and developing their own cultural ideas
- CYP-led clubs and teams
- CYP apprenticeships
- CYP as recruiters, marketeers, evaluators, documenters, researchers

1. CYP as consultees and co-designers

The most common way, in our experience, for cultural learning partnerships to engage structurally with CYP is through seeking 'children and young people's voice', particularly in the design and curation of cultural learning and cultural opportunities.

E.g. a partnership might run a **consultation** with CYP to find out about their cultural experiences, wants and desires, and then use the results of that consultation to inform (but not necessarily to direct) what the partnership does.

Or a partnership might engage CYP to **design** cultural learning provision itself, perhaps in the artistic material, artforms, nature or focus of performance, structure of activities etc.

This approach to CYP engagement is common in cases where cultural learning opportunities are more delivered to CYP than created by them. It is arguably an essential part of good practice – in the same way as market research is good practice in commercial product development – although it is possibly not a standard part of most education design.

What is it?	What does it work for?	What does it need?
Consultations with CYP – surveys, workshops, interviews, boards…	Creating opportunities relevant to CYP	Clarity about what you're asking and why
In-project consultation - embedded into the activity itself	Finding out about your participants	Including a good representation of CYP from your target demographic
CYP co-design sessions	Increasing quality and appeal of opportunities	Appropriate consultation/co-design techniques & skills to work with CYP
CYP panels and debates	Persuading stakeholders by being able to present what CYP have said	Being prepared to listen and change in response to consultation, otherwise it is tokenistic
		Keeping participants informed of what's changed as a result of their input

2. CYP as decision-makers and ambassadors

The second category is to engage and recruit CYP so that they have some kind of governance role, which might be on a CYP advisory board, or in group of CYP who are asked/chosen to represent a particular constituency of other CYP, or a particular artform or organisation, or having CYP as trustees in an organisation.

This is a popular and growing approach. It isn't always easy though:

- Traditional decision-making processes such as board meetings and consultations aren't always the most immediately appealing or stimulating experiences for CYP, who might often be more interested in the cultural activities themselves and the social experience of working with other CYP;

- If CYP are attending as representatives then consideration needs to go into what they're representing and the extent that they can do this. E.g. they might be simply representing themselves, as CYP; they might be representing a particular community – e.g. a locality or demographic; or they might be representing an organisation, e.g. where they are a participant in a youth orchestra or a theatre's youth board. The central finding seems to be that when CYP feel strongly allied to that community/ organisation/cultural form then they have stronger motivation to represent it, and without that alliance, they may be more likely to represent themselves;

- The activity of representing needs to be fun/engaging as well as meaningful;

- Attendance, logistics and administration can be a significant workload.

This second category of CYP engagement is often used for influencing or directing the shape of a partnership's programme that is delivered by partners and other adults, but in some cases, CYP will progress into taking more proactive, leadership and ambassadorial roles themselves, including as young arts leaders with other CYP.

What is it?

CYP Advisory Board
CYP appointed to represent a locality or school
CYP appointed to represent a cultural or other organisation
CYP trustees
CYP ambassadors

What does it work for?

Representative democracy & decision-making
Finding out about your participants
Increasing quality and appeal of opportunities
Persuading stakeholders, by having CYP in a governance role
Personal development of the CYP involved
Increased relevance to other CYP: with CYP for CYP

What does it need?

Informed participation and representation
Activities that are engaging to participants
Appropriate support and skills development to help CYP
Being prepared to listen and respond
Adequate support to sustain the activity
Fair and representative selection

3. CYP as producers, agents, leaders

A third category of CYP engagement looks to mobilise CYP as the primary agents of cultural learning activities – unlocking their own ability to create, devise, investigate, experiment, collaborate, lead, produce, advocate, evaluate etc.

An example in this category is activity which supports CYP to lead, design, run, produce and evaluate their own arts-rich projects that seek to make a measurable impact to social or environmental issues that the CYP want to address. This central CYP-led purpose and ownership can be very powerful in unlocking their own motivation and abilities in arts, creativity, project management, collaboration, research and change-making. This orientation doesn't have to a social/environmental impact focus – it could be that CYP want to run a festival – but the emphasis remains on CYP-led activity and 'adults' standing back and facilitating when expertise or intervention are requested or necessitated by CYP's own project needs.

There is much that is new to many CYP in this approach: collaboration and teamwork, being given responsibility and authority, working on longer project timescales rather than single lessons, and perhaps most importantly, working with their own ideas, designs and plans – all are reported as relatively new experiences for many CYP, and where they may therefore need help.

In this orientation too, there are challenges for the adults: essentially adults have often to shift from providing activities (be they passive, active, instructed, participatory) that they have designed that evolve around CYP learning something the adult knows how to do, to being a surrounding supportive infrastructure or service that facilitates CYP to learn, create and produce things themselves. This can be a hard shift for many educators, artists and cultural organisations to make, but if you're interested in mobilising CYP and galvanising in them their own independent ability, it is worth the effort.

What is it?

- CYP leading and producing cultural activity themselves
- CYP designing and developing their own cultural ideas
- CYP-led clubs and teams
- CYP apprenticeships
- CYP as recruiters, marketeers, evaluators, documenters, researchers

What does it work for?

- CYP-led design by giving CYP responsibility
- Developing responsibility, maturity, real-life experiences
- Drawing out, rather than teaching arts-based skills, because CYP discover they need them to fulfil their own ideas
- Developing CYP as arts-based change-makers
- Developing independent arts advocates & mobilisers
- Schools and other contexts that are invested in the possibilities

What does it need?

- Facilitation in CYP-led design and activity
- Support and skills development
- Patience - sometimes giving the answers would be quicker than giving CYP time to work things out
- Energy and commitment
- Adequate support to sustain the activity

These three categories are not mutually exclusive – you can prioritise CYP-led production and still do CYP consultation around central partnership strategy. They are in many ways progressive – certainly if you compare the above to the similar Hart's Ladder of Participation[1] – but that doesn't necessarily mean that later categories are always most desirable – e.g. an arts organisation might have many reasons for adopting traditional, adult-led and canon-led approaches.

But for a CYP-led cultural partnership, these three categories should provide a helpful framework for honing the shape of partnership strategy – essentially the partnership should identify which orientation it wants to prioritise – which orientation, with time and likely resources, will unlock the greatest dividends.

[1] https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-childrens-participation/