

# Conversation starters

## Partnerships in environmental engagement

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National  
Co-ordinating  
Centre for  
Public Engagement



Natural  
Environment  
Research Council

## Introduction

This resource was developed by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) with and for environmental researchers and project staff, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

As part of the NERC Researcher Engage Academy, we ran a series of workshops with researchers and project staff who are working in partnership that explored what it means to develop and hold mutually beneficial partnerships in environmental engagement. This resource summarises our discussion, and we offer it as a conversation starter as you develop your own environmental engagement partnerships.

Public engagement practices are often discipline-specific, therefore a core challenge to creating a resource for public engagement with environmental research is the breadth of disciplines and practices it intersects. This research community includes physical and social sciences, with work in labs and in the field, with large data sets and groups of people. Working in partnership is equally broad, from one-off engagement projects to sustained multi-year engaged research, bringing together organisational colleagues, local institutions, communities, or national or international collaborators.

The partnerships you create and the work you do together will vary according to your and your partners' needs, wants, and resources. In one workshop, co-hosted with Lewis Hou of Science Ceilidh, we explored how we might define partnerships in this space. Lewis shared that

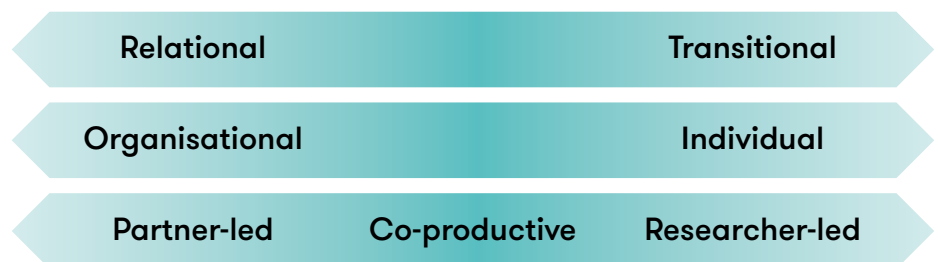
*'We really shouldn't try to define or encapsulate partnerships as a single thing - they should differ based on each partners needs and can evolve as the relationship develops.'*

**Lewis Hou, Science Ceilidh**

Partnerships exist on many spectrums and each play a role in public engagement. The cohort discussed partnerships that focus on building relationships (relational) to partnerships that focus on outputs (transactional); partnerships between organisations to partnerships between individuals or people within organisations; and partnerships that are led by researchers, by our partners, or that are co-produced.

### Spectrums of partnership

Where might your current or developing partnerships sit on these spectrums?



At the start of any partnership, have a conversation with your partners so everyone has a clear sense of expectations. The NCCPE developed the [purposeful partnerships cards](#) and [conversation starter cards](#) for this. While developed for museum-university partnerships, these cards explore how you can build meaningful partnerships and can be applied to other contexts.

## The partnership cycle

The **partnership cycle** visualises nine steps of partnership working in three overarching stages: getting started, working together, and what's next. In our workshops, we worked through this cycle and reflected on what good partnership looks like through researchers' own environmental engagement work.

### Getting started

Getting started is about scoping needs and options, finding potential partners, and building relationships to explore what works for everyone involved. It can be difficult to connect with potential partners, especially when you are exploring partnership work for the first time.

Our researchers reflected on how to address this challenge and that there are many ways to connect with people. Identifying likely groups might mean doing some desk research, asking colleagues or networks. Having identified likely organisations or groups, you can connect by email or phone, or you might use social media platforms like LinkedIn, go to events that your potential partners are attending or organising to find out more about them. The best way to connect could be through a mutual contact. We have a **guide** to finding a partner on our website. Workshop co-host Lewis Hou shared this advice:

*'Find out who else they are partnered with! Have conversations with other organisations who partner with them already and build with them.'*

**Lewis Hou, Science Ceilidh**

Whether developing a partnership with an individual or organisation, we must put people first. One researcher reflected on this:

*'Create a genuine connection before deciding to "sell" them the project. If that connection isn't there, maybe that's a good indicator of an incompatible partnership. Or maybe it means you just need to meet a different person from the same organisation, who might be in a better place to form partnerships.'*

**Erika Neave, Natural History Museum and Liverpool John Moores University**

At our workshops, we reflected on what makes for good practice throughout the stages of working in partnership. We share these good practice principles for each stage.

### Good practice principles for getting started

**Be honest with your wants and assumptions.** Check in on the expectations, wants, and assumptions you and your partners have for a project and be honest about these from the start. Do you really want to work in partnership or would buying a service meet your needs?

**Work with existing knowledge.** Recognise the different knowledges you and your partners bring to the table and recognise when you need help from elsewhere. This may mean hiring in an external evaluator or designer or asking your colleagues to share their expertise and skills.

**Beware of reproducing privilege.** We don't want to look for partners who are like us because it is comfortable and easy. A difference in personality, ideas, or ways of working can lead to new and exciting things.

**De-centre yourself.** Consider why a potential partner wants to work with you and what you can offer them. Your engagement and research may be only one aspect of your partnership. What else can you provide? Perhaps it is venue space, access to funding, or materials and resources. It may also mean acknowledging when someone else is better suited to a particular partner or goal.

Do these principles resonate with you? What else should you consider at this stage?

## Working together

Working together is about clarifying responsibilities, delivering your partnered work, and reviewing your partnership as you work together. This requires us to work across academic, political, social, and creative cultures.

One researcher reflected on their experience holding an international collaborative research project which began with some challenges. Their partner had different expectations about communication styles, timelines, and project processes, largely due to cultural differences in work-life balance. There were also differences in political and funding pressures, languages, and knowledges. To support their work together through these differences, this researcher found that diplomacy was an essential skill.

Diplomacy requires cultural awareness, tact, and the ability to communicate effectively. We explored how to develop diplomatic partnerships. One method is to take cues from your partners and adjust your expectations accordingly. Another is to have a frank conversation about how you would like to work together before you begin your partnership.

### Good practice principles for working together

**Be reasonable with responsibilities.** You and your partners have a host of experiences, contacts, knowledge, skills, but your capacity and availability may differ. Agree with partners how to share responsibility and accountability for your work together. This may mean you share equally, or it could mean one of you takes the majority of responsibility so the other can focus on specific aspects.

**Centre respect and an ethics of care.** Trust is crucial in any partnership, and it requires respect and care. Communicate openly throughout your work together. Tune in to what's working well and not working well and adjust accordingly.

It might mean transparent communication about what you can and can't offer, for instance acknowledging the constraints of a university finance policy, or not pushing for conflicting deadlines, such as with school term-time schedules.

One researcher shared

*'this part felt key to me, when working with partners – we must have open communication, reasonable deadlines that are suitable for all members of what's contractually and ethically allowed.'*

**Rhys Williams, Teesside University**

**Consider power dynamics.** Power dynamics are relational and contextual.

In one workshop, the cohort reflected that in some spaces they are deferred to as the experts when they want to be equals, such as when working with a community partner. In other spaces they struggle to present themselves as 'worth the time', such as to funders and policymakers. We reflected on how to manage these dynamics. When working with communities, they might highlight the expertise of community members. When trying to reach a politician, they might leverage a contact or connect through public forums, consultations, or an All-Party Parliamentary Group.

What power dynamics have you experienced in your partnership work? How can you change or challenge them?

## What's next?

What's next is about revisiting your partnership to reflect on what is going well and what needs adjusting, deciding if you would like to sustain or end your partnership, and considering the potential to scale your work together.

It is important to think about a project end from the beginning. However, relationships change over time, and the project end is an opportunity to decide if and how you would like to continue working together.

Our researchers reflected on what this means for their partnership working. They reflected on the resources that partnership working requires. One researcher shared:

*'Building relationships takes time...  
I should just start seeking out partners  
now and making those connections.'*

**Jasmeen Kanwal, University of St Andrews**

### Good practice principles for what's next?

**Iterate.** Make space in your partnerships to go back and reiterate. This can improve not only your projects but your processes and relationships with the people involved.

**Take your time.** Not all partnerships will be long-lasting, but all partnerships require time to develop. At the start of a partnership, this might mean taking the time to get to know each other. During a partnership, it may be having the occasional check-in phone call. If you are between funding, small actions to sustain your relationship can make all the difference: go for a walk, drop an email, have a coffee, attend each other's events, or apply for small grants to maintain action through workshops, fun activities or other opportunities. At the end of a partnership, it means giving time to end the partnership well.

Have you gone through a partnership, and did you take time to discuss what worked and what didn't? Were you able to adjust your work together? How can you attend to and nourish your relationship?

## Next steps

The NCCPE developed the [partnership cycle](#) to help you think through the common steps of working in partnership. Visit the cycle to read more about each stage or take a [journey around the partnership cycle](#) through four different kinds of partnerships: working with schools, cultural organisations, artists and creative practitioners, and community organisations.

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