

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

Why we completed this audit

We have undertaken an audit of the strategic approach to partnerships and collaborations in line with the organisations approved internal audit plan for 2023/24. The purpose of the audit was to review the organisations overall approach to collaboration and partnerships including a review of the overall controls and mechanisms in place in respect of the partnership/collaboration arrangements including quality of partnership/collaboration delivery, understanding of benefits of the partnership / collaboration and benefits realisation.

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (BFRS) work in partnership/collaboration with other organisations in statutory and non-statutory arrangements. There is a legal duty on blue light services to collaborate efficiently and effectively working closely with blue light colleagues in Bedfordshire including Police, NHS Trusts and the local authorities. For example, BFRS collaborates with other agencies to achieve certain goals, such as Community Safety Partnerships which includes Police, NHS Trusts and the local authorities.

BFRS also work with other organisations to create, or achieve, something of mutual benefit which enhances what either party could have achieved on their own. BFRS continue to explore opportunities to work with other organisations to improve services, support BFRS's mission and organisational objectives. Partnerships and collaborations are monitored through the use of a Partnership Register which is controlled by the Partnership and Engagement Manager who monitors the register to ensure records are up to date and completed in line with policy. It is the responsibility of the Lead for each Partnership/collaboration to ensure completion of all documentation and approvals for uploading to the register, this includes an approved PC1 establishing the partnership/collaboration and PC2 reviewing the performance of the partnership/collaboration at intervals set at the PC1 stage.

The organisation acknowledges that partnership and collaboration are interchangeable terms and can be interpreted in different ways by different organisations with the definition of partnerships and collaboration used in the policy to be valid.

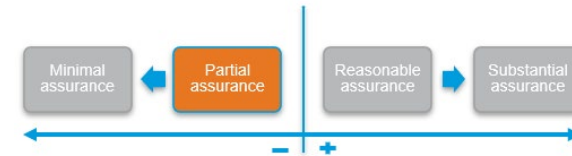
Conclusion

We found that although there was a well designed process for the establishment and forward review of partnerships and collaborations this was poorly applied. We noted that although requirements are designed to be proportionate to the complexity, resources required and risks involved with an individual partnership or collaboration, we found poor compliance with the policy and gaps in the process resulting in a lack of information being held on or linked to the Partnership Register. This included agreements with partners, evidence of data sharing agreements or governance arrangements, absence of approval, failure to perform reviews and unidentified leads. We also noted that where issues relating to the information on the Partnership Register were identified there was no reporting route in the BFRS governance structure for these to be escalated and addressed.

Internal audit opinion:

Taking account of the issues identified, the Authority can take partial assurance that the controls upon which the organisation relies to manage this risk are suitably designed, consistently applied or effective.

Action is needed to strengthen the control framework to manage the identified risk(s).



Key findings

We identified the following weaknesses resulting in the agreement of 7 medium priority actions:



Partnership / Collaboration Agreements

Testing on a sample of 12 Partnership/collaborations/collaborations identified that five did not have an agreement held on the register, although the policy does not require a copy to be held. Furthermore we found that:

- Two make reference to the PC01 as the agreement although this is only an internal document to assess the partnership/collaboration approval to go forward.

Where an agreement is not in place or with an organisation the Service will not be aware of its responsibilities under the partnership/collaboration which could result in financial loss and reputational damage. **(Medium)**



Data Sharing Agreements

We confirmed that for 10 of our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations, it had been recorded that there was no requirement for a data sharing agreement. For the remaining two it was recorded that it was required and was in place. However, these were not included in the documents linked to the Partnership Register so we were not able to confirm they were in place. Additionally, the policy gives no instruction on how these are to be filed.

Where an agreement is not in place BFRS may not be aware of its responsibilities within the partnership/collaboration relating to data protection, which could result in financial loss and reputational damage. **(Medium)**



Approval

We reviewed each of the PC1's in our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations to confirm authorisation and based on the description of resources required from BFRS if the authorisation was appropriate. We confirmed that approval was appropriate in ten of the sample and in line with delegated authorities, although there was no authorisation on two. In addition, when personnel move post there is no formal handover process to a new lead.

There is the potential of reputational damage to the Service where partnership/collaborations are entered into without approval. Where no lead is in place there is the additional risk that activity with the partnership/collaboration will cease and agreed objectives of that partnership/collaboration will not be met. **(Medium)**



Review

From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations nine had a completed PC2 demonstrating that a review had taken place. Of these:

- Three were within the review period.
- Two had the review period changed, but were within the new review period.
- Three were overdue for review.
- One had the same a date of authorisation on the PC1 and PC2.

Of the three without a PC2 form:

- Two were not due for review.
- One was overdue for review.

Where a PC2 has not been completed at the appropriate interval there is a financial and reputation risk to the Service where the partnership/collaborations performance is not known. **(Medium)**



Governance

From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations we confirmed that there was adequate explanation of the governance arrangements in nine instances. These arrangements were not explained for one, and for two these involved an organisation that no longer exists (Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group).

Where governance arrangements are absent there is a risk to the Service that the responsibilities of partners will not be clear and objectives will not be met. **(Medium)**



Partnership / Collaboration Meetings & Reporting

For none of our sample was there any information covering meetings between partners. From the Partnership/collaboration Register it is not possible to confirm if there are any agreed actions assigned to BFRS from any meetings between partners or if actions have been completed. If actions relating to the partnership/collaboration in the form of meeting minutes, action plans or other records where meetings are informal are not maintained, there is reputational risk to the Service that actions are not completed.

We reviewed the reports produced in November 2022, March, May and June 2023 by the Partnership and Engagement Manager. We confirmed that issues across these reports remained without resolution.

There is a risk that any actions required to ensure the records on the Partnership Register are complete, accurate and up to date will not be undertaken as issues are not escalated to and monitored by senior staff. **(Medium)**



New Partnership / Collaborations

There is no internal process for Fire Service staff to flag up partnership/collaboration needs, this is often instigated by the Partnership and Engagement Manager who asks the question conversationally when he think there is scope for exploration. **(Medium)**

We noted the following controls to be adequately designed and operating effectively:



Objectives

From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations taken from the register we noted that all had been referenced to BFRS objectives within the CRMP, this was either at the high level objectives of Prevent, Protect or Respond or to one of the supporting priorities such as Reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads or Support community health and wellbeing when delivering our home fire safety visits.



Policy (Service Order)

From our review of the Partnership and Collaboration service order we noted that it gave an overview of its purpose and the process for managing partnerships and collaborations from the initial propose and approval through to the review process. It also included copies of the key documents PC01 and PC02 with instructions on the completion of each section within them, together with tables to assist in the assessment of risks and benefits. Whilst the policy does not make a distinction between a partnership and a collaboration, we were advised that the organisation acknowledges that partnership and collaboration are interchangeable terms and can be interpreted in different ways by different organisations with the definition of partnerships and collaboration used in the policy to be both valid and expedient to adopt it for their Service Order.



Strategic Significance

From our review of form PC1 we noted it requires a Strategic Significance Rating of either Low, Medium or High to be assigned. This is determined by adding scores for the Resource, Risk and Benefit Ratings together (where Low = 1, Medium = 2, High = 3). The resultant score determines the Strategic Significance Rating (where 3-4 = Low, 5-7 = Medium, 8-9 = High).

We confirmed from our sample of 12 from the Partnership Register that in each case there was a score entered for resources, risk and benefits based on the matrices included as appendices to the policy with a significance score based on those scores.

We identified one low priority finding which is included in the detailed findings section below.

2. DETAILED FINDINGS AND ACTIONS

This report has been prepared by exception. Therefore, we have included in this section, only those areas of weakness in control or examples of lapses in control identified from our testing and not the outcome of all internal audit testing undertaken.

Partnership/collaboration Agreements				
Control	A written partnership/collaboration agreement is drawn up for every partnership/collaboration. The level of detail and content of the agreement will be appropriate to the nature of the partnership/collaboration and may vary from an agreement which is not legally binding such as a Memorandum of Understanding to legally binding contractual arrangements between parties.	Assessment:		
		Design	✓	
		Compliance		×
Findings / Implications	<p>From our review of the Partnerships and Collaborations Service Order (Policy) we noted the Leads are expected to ensure an agreement is in place between the partner organisations following approval of the PC1. The policy explains that the level of detail and content of the collaboration agreement should be appropriate to the nature of the collaboration and accordingly may vary from an agreement, it does not prescribe the format and content of the agreement but gives a list of areas to be considered.</p> <p>From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations from the Partnership Register we confirmed all the PC1's had the section covering collaboration agreements completed and referred to a variety of documents. In one case there appears to be a cut and paste from elsewhere and it was unclear as to the source and did not explain what kind of agreement, if any, was in place.</p> <p>Across our sample we found that the PC1 described various forms of agreement covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terms of reference. • Constitution. • Memorandum of understanding. <p>From our sample of 12 partnerships, five did not have a copy the agreement linked to their record on the register, although the policy does not require a copy to be held. Furthermore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two make reference to the PC01 as the agreement although this is only an internal document to assess the partnership/collaboration approval to go forward. <p>Where an agreement is not in place the Service will not be aware of its responsibilities under the partnership/collaboration which could result in financial loss and reputational damage.</p>			
Management Action 1	All authorising managers will ensure Service Order compliance and that all new schemes have associated paperwork in place before collaboration activity commences.	Responsible Owner:	Date:	Priority:
		Ian Evans	31 July 2024	Medium

Data Sharing Agreements

Control	If the collaboration involves sharing of personal data, then in accordance with statutory requirements and Service policy a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) will be required and a Data Sharing Agreement will be put in place prior to the implementation of data sharing.	Assessment: Design ✓ Compliance ×
Findings / Implications	<p>We confirmed from our review of the PC1 forms for our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations from the Partnership Register that there was a section on data sharing to be completed by the Lead. If there will be sharing of personal data they are instructed that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) will be required.</p> <p>We confirmed that for 10 forms the Lead recorded that there was no need of a data sharing agreement. For the remaining two it was recorded that it was required and was in place. However these were not included in the documents linked to the Partnership Register so we were unable to confirm they were in place. Additionally the policy gives no instruction on how these are to be filed.</p> <p>Where an agreement is not in place the Service will not be aware of its responsibilities under the partnership/collaboration which could result in financial loss and reputational damage.</p>	
Management Action 2	<p>The Service will ensure a data sharing agreement is in place for each applicable partnership/collaboration and a copy is linked to the register entry.</p> <p>Organisation Update:</p> <p>Following the internal Audit, those Partnership entries requiring a Data Sharing Agreement have them in place and they are lodged in the Partnership documents repository on SharePoint</p>	Responsible Owner: Ian Evans Date: Implemented Priority: Medium

Partnership/Collaboration Approval

Control	<p>The designated BFRS lead will make a recommendation whether or not BFRS should proceed with the collaboration. This should be based upon their assessment of its potential benefits compared to the risks and resources that will be consumed and the actions and resources required to deliver it.</p> <p>The authorising manager must hold the necessary authority to obtain/commit the BFRS resources required to implement and deliver the collaboration including staff, budget, etc.</p>	Assessment: Design ✓ Compliance ×
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Partnership/Collaboration Approval

Findings / Implications From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations from the Partnership Register we found that a lead had been identified for each. We noted that the Lead and authoriser was recorded on both the PC1 and PC2 were in place. However we were informed by the Partnership and Engagement Manager that when personnel move post there is no formal handover process to a new lead, we also confirmed from the report raised by the Partnership and Engagement Manager covering issues with the register there were cases where actions were outstanding due to the lead having moved post and no new lead appointed.

We reviewed each of the PC1's to confirm authorisation and based on the description of resources required from BFRS if the authorisation was appropriate. We confirmed that to be the case in ten of the sample and in line with delegated authorities, however, there was no authorisation on two.

There is the potential of reputational damage to the Service where partnership/collaborations are entered into without approval. Where no lead is in place there is the additional risk that activity with the partnership/collaboration will cease and agreed objectives of that partnership/collaboration will not be met.

Management Action 3	<p>The Service will ensure that unauthorised PC1's will be considered incomplete with no further action until authorised.</p> <p>Organisation Comment:</p> <p>Authorising Managers will follow policy and sign off PC1 and PC2 when received. The PC1/PC2 process will be converted into a Sharepoint form with process flow so that the requirement for approval is routed directly to the authorising manager by the system. This could make completing the process easier and more efficient and increase accountability.</p>	<p>Responsible Owner:</p> <p>Ian Evans</p>	<p>Date:</p> <p>31 July 2024</p>	<p>Priority:</p> <p>Medium</p>
Management Action 4	<p>There will be a formal process by which partnership/collaboration leads will handover to a successor, this will include using role title in the place of name on the register.</p> <p>Organisation Comment:</p> <p>Role title will be added to the register as well as the name of the individual. Sharepoint process flow will include the facility for transfer of lead or authorising manager including notification of the individual who is being made responsible as lead/authorising manager.</p>	<p>Responsible Owner:</p> <p>Ian Evans</p>	<p>Date:</p> <p>31 July 2024</p>	<p>Priority:</p> <p>Medium</p>

Review

Control	<p>The designated BFRS Collaboration Lead will be responsible for reviewing the performance of the collaboration at the interval set by the authorising manager.</p> <p>The review will be recorded using form PC2, the Partnership and Collaboration Review Form.</p>	Assessment:	
		Design	✓
		Compliance	×

Findings / Implications	<p>From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations we confirmed that a PC2 was in place for nine. Within these forms there was an evaluation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance against expected outcomes. • Any changes to resources and risk. • Delivery of benefits. • Effectiveness of governance arrangements. <p>Of those nine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three were within the review period. • Two had the review period changed, but were within the new review period. • Three were overdue for review. • One had the same date of authorisation on the PC1 and PC2. <p>For all nine there was a recommendation that each should continue.</p> <p>Of the three without a PC2 form:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two were not due for review. • One was overdue for review. <p>Where a PC2 has not been completed at the appropriate interval there is a financial and reputational risk to the Service where the partnership/collaborations performance is not known.</p>
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Management Action 5	<p>The Service will ensure internal governance arrangements enable the monitoring of compliance against the policy for partnership/collaborations performance.</p> <p>Organisation Comment:</p> <p>Sharepoint process flow will be designed which notifies collaboration lead and authorising managers of review requirements. For the next 12 months a quarterly report will be made to CMT on the partnership register, highlighting outstanding tasks, then moving to six months.</p>	Responsible Owner:	Date:	Priority:
		Ian Evans	30 April 2024	Medium

Governance

Control	<p>In order to achieve their objectives, governance arrangements are in place for each collaboration and partnership. This includes processes and structures for decision making e.g. for the expenditure of funds or use of resources and changes to activities.</p> <p>Meetings include representatives that hold sufficient authority to make commitments on behalf of their organisation. Governance should also include arrangements for oversight e.g. measuring progress, achievement of outcomes and appropriate public accountability.</p>	Assessment:	
		Design	✓
		Compliance	×

Findings / Implications	<p>We confirmed that the policy requires that the governance management arrangements need to be explained for each partnership/collaboration, although it does not explain what if any evidence for those arrangements need to be held.</p> <p>From our sample from the Partnership Register we confirmed that there was a section where this should be recorded and this had been completed for each within the PC1, however the quality of that information and the evidence supporting it varied.</p> <p>We noted that the PC1 included a section to describe the governance arrangements and the PC2 included an assessment of the effectiveness of the governance arrangements.</p> <p>From our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations we confirmed that there was adequate explanation of the governance arrangements for nine. These arrangements were not explained for one, and for two these involved an organisation that no longer exists.</p> <p>Where governance arrangements are absent there is a risk to the Service that the responsibilities of partners will not be clear and objectives will not be met.</p>
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Management Action 6	<p>The Service will ensure that governance arrangements have been set as part of the PC1 and remain up to date.</p> <p>Organisation Comment:</p> <p>A review of existing partnership PC1/PC2 will be undertaken to ensure that governance arrangements are in place and adequately recorded.</p>	Responsible Owner:	Ian Evans	Date:	31 July 2024	Priority:	Medium
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Partnership/Collaboration Meetings

Control	Although the PC1 explains the governance arrangements, there is no link within the Partnership Register to the output from meetings whether formal or informal.	Assessment: Design × Compliance N/A
Findings / Implications	<p>We noted from our review of the Partnership Register and our sample of 12 partnership/collaborations that the amount of supporting information varied between partnership/collaborations.</p> <p>Information covering meetings between partners was not recorded for any of the sample tested and from the Partnership Register it is not possible to confirm if there are any agreed actions assigned to the Service.</p> <p>If actions relating to the partnership/collaboration in the form of meeting minutes, action plans or other records where meetings are informal are not maintained, there is reputational risk to the Service that actions are not completed.</p>	
Management Action 7	<p>The entry of each partnership/collaboration on the Partnership Register will be linked to the record of meetings and outputs in the form of actions assigned to the Service.</p> <p>Organisation comment:</p> <p>Amend policy to highlight that minutes of meetings or other documents may be added to the document repository where they provide evidence of partnership performance. Amend the policy to provide guidance that where appropriate partner organisations will be invited to provide written feedback on partnership performance.</p>	<p>Responsible Owner: Ian Evans</p> <p>Date: 31 July 2024</p> <p>Priority: Medium</p>

Reporting

Control	<p>Reports based on the content of the Partnership Register together with any issues are completed by the Partnership and Engagement Manager.</p> <p>These are not prepared at set intervals but are sent to Senior Service Management. They are not reviewed at any group or board.</p>	Assessment: Design × Compliance N/A
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Reporting

Findings / Implications

We reviewed the reports produced in November 2022, March, May and June 2023 by the Partnership and Engagement Manager. In November 2022 there were 19 partnership/collaborations reported with an issue with missing information, the majority being overdue for the completion of a PC2 as evidence that a review had taken place. By March 2023 the number of partnership/collaborations with queries had grown to 22. Within those 22 there were six waiting on a PC1 and 16 awaiting a PC2 including eight awaiting an agreement.

In March 2023 there were 16 issues requiring action that had also been reported in November 2022. Of those 16, 14 remained outstanding in June 2023. We were informed by the Partnership and Engagement Manager that these reports go to no group or board within the Service's governance structure.

There is a risk that any actions required to ensure the records on the Partnership Register are complete, accurate and up to date, will not be completed if issues are not escalated to and monitored by senior staff.

Please refer to action 5
