Voscur
SUPPORTING VOLUNTARY ACTION

Supporting
Developing
Representing

Collaboration Support Resources

Meeting potential partners ('speed-networking')

Audience	Small organisations considering collaboration (especially subcontracting to larger partners).
Purpose	To give small organisations an opportunity to meet a large number of potential partners in an open environment and to broker introductions, which the smaller organisations are unlikely to have the resources to initiate otherwise.
Intended outcomes	Small organisations will have: ☐ Increased understanding of the other organisations interested in collaborating in the commissioning process – what they can offer and are looking for. ☐ Increased confidence in approaching potential partners. ☐ A number of contacts and actions to follow up after the event to start developing potential collaborations. Potential lead organisations will have: ☐ An overview of the strengths and needs of potential local partners. ☐ A number of contacts and actions to follow up after the event to start developing potential collaborations.

This workshop is designed to be a **facilitated service** – an activity that supports frontline organisations in developing partnerships, which is typically delivered by an independent facilitator, rather than the frontline organisations themselves.

The facilitator in this case is likely to be either the commissioning body (a clinical commissioning group or local authority) or a support/development organisation.

If you are interested in Voscur facilitating this kind of workshop for you, contact Voscur:
0117 909 9949 | http://www.voscur.org/ | info@voscur.org

This document is part of a series of Collaboration Support Resources designed for voluntary and community organisations.

For more information about the whole series, and to use the other resources, go to
http://www.voscur.org/collaborationresources

Meeting potential partners ('speed-networking')

Most commissioning processes allow, if not actively encourage, organisations to form partnerships to bid for the contracts being procured. Depending on the size and scale of the available contracts, the number of organisations interested in bidding may be quite small and localised, or quite high and from across the country. Either way, making the initial contact with potential partners and starting a conversation about how you might work together is often difficult. Organising an event where potential partners have the chance to learn about each other and begin talking in a focused way is therefore often valuable, even if it's not always clear who should take the lead in making such an event happen. This document suggests some guidelines for planning such an event and provides a template for an agenda that can be adapted so an event responds directly to the specifics of a given process.

1. **What kind of commissioning/collaboration process is this?**

   a) Is there just one contract or several lots?
   b) Has the commissioner clearly specified in detail which types of partnership/collaboration are, or are not, acceptable?
   c) Will this opportunity be of interest only to local organisations, or to organisations across the region/country?

   Facilitators should use the details of (a) above to structure the event accordingly. For example, if there are several lots, it is worth asking organisations which they are interested in bidding for – participants can then be split into groups that reflect those interests.

   If the commissioner hasn't specified in detail which types of partnership/collaboration are acceptable (b), or the details aren't clear, they should be encouraged to clarify their requirements, and for this to be shared with participants, as it will help to make developing partnerships a more efficient process and therefore lead to stronger bids.

   If the opportunity is one that may be of interest to organisations from across the region or across the country (c), they could be reluctant to travel to this kind of event, especially if they already have a standard business approach to follow. It's still worth encouraging their participation because:

   ☐ They'll get a unique opportunity to understand the local provider market early in the process.
   ☐ Building on local knowledge and relationships is essential to a strong bid, and it's much better to identify potential local partners as soon as possible, so a collaborative bid can be developed that draws on their particular strengths – rather than calling local organisations at the last minute just so they can be named in a tender that's already written.

2. Prerequisites

When booking a place at the event, participants should be asked to provide:

a) an organisational profile (max. 50 words);
b) one key offer they can contribute to a potential partnership;
c) one key need or requirement they would have from other partners;
d) an indication of whether they intend to be a lead bidder or non-lead partner (if applicable);
e) an indication of which lots they intend to bid for (if applicable).

All of this information should be distributed to the other participants in advance of the event. Consent to share information should therefore be a mandatory requirement for booking.

Facilitators should use (b) and (c) to identify potential themes that can be addressed. For example, if lots of organisations intending to be non-lead partners identify 'a unique client support model' for (b), it is clear that there will have to be compromise in developing a collaborative bid, and this expectation can be addressed and/or discussed briefly at the event. Similarly if lots of potential lead bidders identify the need to organise property/office space for (c), this might be an issue for further support in the commissioning process.

3. Planning issues

Feedback from similar speed-networking sessions, delivered as part of previous commissioning processes, suggests the following issues should be considered when planning this kind of event:

a) **Timing**: this kind of event should be early in the procurement process so organisations have a good understanding of potential partners as soon as possible, and therefore have time to build relationships into bids. However, there's no point running it before the commissioning strategy and specifications are published, as people won't know what they're aiming for. And in long procurement processes, running two events (one at the start for initial introductions, and one later when organisations have had time to develop initial plans) could be the best option.

b) **Venue** – it should be:
   ☐ big enough for people to move around and have conversations away from tables;
   ☐ suitable for lots of people to speak at once, i.e. minimal echo and external noise;
   ☐ physically accessible;
   ☐ accessible by public transport or have ample car parking;
   ☐ appropriate to all cultural groups.

c) **Pre-booking**: organisations should register in advance, participation should be limited to one person per organisation, and organisations should submit the above prerequisites for sharing before being sent details of the venue.

d) **Extra time**: in addition to the formal activities below, the venue should be available after the event has finished for participants to continue discussions on the day, rather than having to arrange separate follow-up meetings with lots of different people.

e) **Commissioner input**: as much information as possible from the commissioner about the procurement process should be made available in advance. Ideally a representative from the commissioning body would attend the networking event (if so, additional time should be added for questions after the recap in the timetable below). After their input, however, organisations may well prefer to undertake the rest of the activities **without** the commissioner being present.

f) **Arranging participants**: identify the target/maximum number of participants for the event and plan the networking accordingly so everyone gets the chance to meet. For example, 48 participants can be seated at six tables of eight people. Everyone will have the chance to meet everyone else if the same four people move from one table to the next five times. Alternatively, if there are five potential lead bidders, they could each sit at a table and the other organisations be split into five groups that move round to meet them all.

g) **Participant feedback**: during events such as this it can be useful to share feedback, and questions asked, among all stakeholders, in order to identify further types of support that would be welcomed to help the commissioning process and to inform an evaluation of the process. So design feedback forms to capture this kind of information, and make it clear to participants if and how their feedback and questions will be used.

4. Event timetable

Below is a generic timetable for a speed-networking event, based on feedback from previous sessions.

30 mins	Arrival and registration. (Icebreaker/people bingo.)
10 mins	Welcome and introduction (and housekeeping, etc.). Overview of event/timings.
10 mins	Recap on commissioning process. Clarification of requirements/latest info. Address any themes identified in prerequisites (see above).
15 mins	Icebreaker/mixing-up exercise (if no predefined table plans). OR Explain rationale for table plan and ask organisations to sit accordingly (e.g. one intended lead per table).
60 – 80 mins	People move between tables after 15 – 20 mins. After moving four to five times, all participants should have had the chance to meet.
15 mins	Identify any new issues/questions raised by the activity. Any other initial feedback.
10 mins	Wrap up formal event. Identify next steps in procurement/support timetable.

	Collect feedback forms. Encourage participants to stay and continue discussions.

5. Follow-up

An introductory event such as this can be very useful to kick-start collaboration discussions, and especially to help smaller organisations have initial conversations with potential partners they might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet.

It is also likely to raise additional questions and requests for support. So it is important to decide in advance what follow-up support or further events can be offered as the procurement process develops. If resources don't allow for further direct support, at least organisations should be told this clearly and be directed to other resources, such as their local support and development organisations or online resources, such as the rest of this series.

For example, if this event is facilitated near the start of the procurement process, it may be some time before organisations have worked out their approach to bidding and thus who they may want to collaborate with. And even if participants exchange contact details, they may not find it easy to continue discussions a few weeks or months later. So holding additional events later in the process to bring potential partners back together, once they've developed more concrete approaches, is recommended – if resources allow.