



Interaction
international development
toolkit

Practicalities of International Partnerships

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It is vital that all officers, members and others funded from the public purse who take part in international partnership activities abide by high standards of conduct at all times. Council members are subject to individual local authority codes of conduct. Similarly, there is also a code of conduct for local authority employees, which forms part of the standard terms of conduct for employment. Both the codes apply whenever the individual is undertaking official duties. The key message for overseas partnerships is therefore, that codes of conduct will apply when local authority representatives are overseas and must be carefully observed. The guidance provided here is not comprehensive or definitive, but takes account of the approach taken by these codes.

Financial accountability: Local authorities should ensure that there is a procedure in place to demonstrate that careful consideration has been given to every financial transaction, particularly in the case of expenditure relating to travel and accommodation. For officer and member participation, there should be a process to explain the reasons for the visit/meeting and the benefits to be gained.

Travel costs: Local authorities need to decide their policy for expenditure relating to overseas partnerships and twinning links. For example, whether all travel should be economy class, or whether business class travel is acceptable and, if so, subject to what rules. Government departments, for example, have rules that permit civil servants to travel business class if the journey is longer than a specified number of hours. Local authorities need to set and follow similar rules, and be willing to justify expenditure.

Hotel costs: Where it is necessary to use hotels, local authorities need to have a policy on the type and price range, though the position differs from country to country and continent to continent. Within Europe, there is usually a reasonable choice of mid-range hotels, but in some developing countries the only realistic option may be a relatively expensive 'western style' hotel. The golden rule is to be reasonable. Occasionally, the issue arises about a member on official duty wishing to be accompanied by spouse or partner who has no formal role. It is, of course, for the councillor to understand that he or she is responsible for all the additional costs that arise, however minor, and that he or she must be willing to justify the position, if comment or criticism is made later. The authority also needs to be clear about what, if any, incidental expenditure on hotel bills will be met. Normally, all extras should be paid for personally, and not charged to the authority, apart from reasonable subsistence costs. A degree of judgement and discretion is required for such cases.

Meals and subsistence: Local authorities may pay an agreed sum for subsistence where this is not covered by the host authority, or reimburse expenditure for meals and refreshments. It may

be useful to give general guidance on the financial limits, though costs do vary greatly between towns and countries. In certain situations, for example, if a meal costs more than a specified limit of, say, £30, local authorities may ask individuals to meet the difference themselves.

Hospitality: In any formal visit to another country, there is usually some hospitality, in the form of receptions, meals etc. If this is provided by a public sector body, no difficulties arise. However, if given by a private company, this may need to be declared in the authority's register of hospitality, even though the member or officer is formally representing the authority. If in doubt, authorities should seek guidance from their Chief Executive or Solicitor. Though it is unlikely to occur in the context of twinning, those taking part should take care that hospitality is not used or accepted in a way that could cause criticism later.

Gifts: In many cultures, giving or exchanging gifts is not only normal but also required. It is often considered rude not to accept, or to show reluctance to accept, even relatively generous gifts. Whilst gifts of purely nominal value may be kept by the recipient, any more substantial or valuable ones should, on return, be given to the authority. All gifts should be recorded in the authority's register of gifts and hospitality. Before any visit, consideration should be given as to whether to take gifts to the key people, especially at any main formal reception. These can be good quality and yet inexpensive gifts, which have been customised to reflect the visiting authority. Local businesses can often be encouraged to produce special editions of local produce or products, such as lace or pottery. Once the authority's code of conduct has been agreed, the levels above which gifts should be registered or, in the case of more valuable gifts, given to the authority, will be specified.

Risk assessment: Partnerships will only be perfect if everyone's minds are at rest regarding the potential risks. It is therefore imperative to take the necessary measures to protect the interests and safety of all involved. The first step should be to discuss the implications of the partnership with the local authority's Legal/Insurance section and provide information about all partnership activities both at home and overseas. Any partnership should have insurance cover for travelling, and public liability cover for all activities and events. This applies to all categories of personnel, including officers, elected members and school children. In most cases this can be incorporated relatively easily into existing policies, but information about all activities must be given. Usual health and safety inspections also apply to any placements or activities relating to partnership activities.

Young people: Involving schools and young people in international partnerships is often quite daunting because of the safety implications. While safety is of paramount importance, if adequate measures are taken it should still be possible to have youth participation. Firstly, written consent from parents or guardians should be obtained for all children taking part in exchange visits from both the guest and host towns. It is important that parents and guardians give their permission, not only for particular activities such as work experience or sports, but also for when the young people are travelling, are unsupervised and for outside normal school hours. Safety of young people is a complex issue and there are many sources of advice, ranging from child protection services and the police, to schools and education services, school governing bodies and voluntary organisations such as the Guide Association. When children and young people are involved in transnational and twinning activities, there should be an agreed policy, and advice should always be taken from the appropriate bodies.