

Is a Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP) right for my team?



A **Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP)** is a way of strengthening projects / services by working closely with local organisations that have direct experience of the topic you are focusing on.

This document provides a short overview of what a COAP is, why you might use one, and key questions to consider when deciding whether this approach is right for your team.

What is a COAP?

A COAP is a **small group of up to ten representatives** from local Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations.

These representatives are invited to take part because of their direct work with communities affected by the topic your team is exploring. They bring practical knowledge, insight, and experience that can help shape and strengthen your work.

Why use a COAP?

By sharing their on-the-ground experience, COAP members can help your team gain a deeper understanding of the challenges people face and what support works in practice.

Working with a COAP can help you:

- Develop solutions that are practical and realistic
- Better understand the needs of local communities
- Design work that is more inclusive and sustainable

COAP members can also advise on meaningful and respectful ways to engage with communities. They can help co-design and review materials and resources to ensure they are **clear, accessible, and relevant** to the people you want to reach.

What can a COAP support?

A COAP can be involved in a wide range of activities, including:



Research and evaluation

Community organisation representatives can help shape questions, advise on appropriate ways to gather feedback, reach people who are often overlooked, and support clear communication of findings. This can lead to more accurate insights and better informed decisions.



Policy development and review

When creating or reviewing policies, input from organisations that work closely with affected communities helps ensure policies are practical and genuinely meet local needs.



Service design and improvement

Feedback from organisations supporting people in the community can help services become more accessible, effective, and compassionate.



Changes to services and infrastructure

Community organisations can help you understand the real-life impact of proposed changes, highlighting practical implications that may not otherwise be considered and ensuring decisions are grounded in residents' experiences.

This is not an exhaustive list, and teams are encouraged to be creative in how they work with their COAP.

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Do we have the capacity for a COAP?

A COAP is an **active partnership**, not a one-off consultation. While this way of working can be highly rewarding, it requires time, planning, and the right support to work well.

Before setting up a COAP, consider the following questions:

Is there a clear timeframe?

Have you mapped out the stages, identified how many meetings will be needed, and allowed enough time for meaningful partnership working?

Will COAP members have genuine influence?

Is there real space for members to shape decisions, guide the work, and share their expertise in a meaningful way?

Can roles be agreed together and adapted over time?

Will members be able to co-design their roles, and is there flexibility for these to change as the partnership progresses?

Are there opportunities for reflection and feedback?

Are there regular points for members to share what is working well and what could be improved, and is your team prepared to respond?

How will you check the partnership is working?

Do you have a plan to gather ongoing feedback and adjust your approach where needed?

How will COAP members be recognised and rewarded?

Members should be fairly recognised for their time and insight. Is there a budget for this, and can you offer additional benefits such as training or access to relevant opportunities?

Being honest about your team's capacity helps build trust and supports a positive, sustainable partnership.

What next?

If you think a COAP is the right approach for your team, please [contact the HDRC](#) for support in setting one up.

You can also use the **How to set up a Community Organisation Advisory Partnership handbook** for step-by-step guidance.

Contact: somersetdrc@somerset.gov.uk

