TRUSTED PARTNERSHIPS

UNLOCKING THE VALUE IN STRATEGIC ALLIANCES IN PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

By Pieter Johnson
Consultant Director
XTPMedia

Public sector buyers are under unprecedented pressure. Budgets are tight, programmes are increasingly complex, and expectations regarding delivery, innovation, and social value continue to escalate. AI-driven processes add further pressure, increasing scrutiny, lengthening buying cycles and making partners harder to distinguish.

In this environment, strategic partnerships are no longer optional, they are fundamental to delivering outcomes, that no single organisation can achieve alone.

Yet despite this importance, many partnerships underperform. The evidence is clear. Where trust is low, results suffer and in most cases the root cause is relational breakdown, not technical failure.

This article draws on evidence from the Trusted Partnerships white paper to provide a practical, evidence-based perspective for public sector buyers.

The message is direct: trust is not a soft concept, it is a measurable performance driver, and buyers play the defining role in enabling it or building barriers that can hinder it.

The Trust Deficit

Across 48 strategic partnerships surveyed, 96% of respondents identified trust as critical to success. Yet the same data reveals a stark contradiction:

- 44% describe their partnerships as lacking openness
- 38% cite a lack of honest feedback as a primary barrier
- Over half characterise their partnerships as “transactional and creaking.”

For buyers, this should be a moment of reflection. Procurement processes often unintentionally create the very conditions that erode trust:

- Overweighting price versus partnership capability, creating transactional behaviours
- Lack of equitable risk sharing, with risk often held by the wrong party
- Engaging suppliers late in the procurement lifecycle, when they

> The UK does not need new procurement law to build trust, it needs the confidence to use the flexibility it already has.

are often the experts in service modeling
- Failing to take advantage of evaluating supplier behaviours during the procurement process

The result is predictable. Partnerships that look robust at contract award often hinder opportunities to respond to changing needs, flexibility, and innovation.

This is not a criticism of buyers; this is an observation highlighting the pressure buyers are put under by their client, with little direction on the client's expectations for the relationship to build trust, grow and blossom.

Why Buyers Can Lead on Behaviour

Trust in partnerships does not emerge organically after contract award. It is shaped (often decisively) by the approach taken during procurement.

Critically, trust takes time to build. Research cited in the white paper shows that organisational trust can take 2.5–3 years to start embedding and maturing. The 'Trust Clock' begins ticking from the moment of first engagement. Yet many procurement processes do not recognise pre- contract time as an opportunity to build relational trust. The paper argues that the contract start date is far too late to influence behaviours that may have already formed.

This creates what might be called a "trust deficit at day one."

Buyers who want high-performing partnerships should rethink when and how trust-building begins. The most effective large procurement processes now start 1–3 years ahead of the procurement process. This allows the buyer to:

- Understand market capability and behaviours
- Test cultural alignment by observing supplier behaviours that will manifest in the contract
- Establish mutually shared objectives

Importantly, this must be done transparently and fairly, maintaining compliance while enabling insight.

> Trust should be treated as a designed capability, not an assumed outcome.

The Six Behaviours That Define High-Performing Partnerships

The white paper consistently identifies six core behaviours present in successful strategic alliances. For buyers, these provide a practical framework for both evaluation and governance:

1. Early Joint Planning and Shared Objectives
2. Transparent Procurement and Genuine Risk-Sharing
3. Joint Metrics and a Single Definition of Success
4. Integrated Teams and Deliberate Governance
5. Leadership Behaviours and Open Communication
6. Long-Term Value Focus Over Short-Term Wins

Buyers who prioritise whole-life value unlock innovation, resilience, and sustained performance.

These behaviours are not theoretical. They are repeatedly evidenced in high-performing programmes and their absence is often linked to transactional and underperforming partnerships.

AI is adding new pressures. Automated proposals make suppliers sound alike, and buyers use AI tools to challenge claims more aggressively. At a time when AI should be speeding processes up, reducing cost and reducing complexity, the buying process is in fact moving the other way! The LinkedIn Trust Advantage report (of 10,000 worldwide buyers) shows 40% of buyers now have to satisfy larger buying committees and 76% say they have lengthier procurement processes. Balanced against this, 76% of buyers report having larger buying budgets.

With this increased pressure on procurement leaders, balancing additional requirements earlier in the buying process cannot be ignored. But that investment will lay the foundations for future partnership success.

Case Study Evidence: Trust as a Performance Multiplier

The most compelling argument for trust-based procurement is the data from real-world delivery:

- Welsh Mutual Investment Model (MIM) 10–15% under budget and zero disputes. Equity retained by the public sector, ensuring aligned incentives

- London Transport and Adshel 28 years of dispute-free collaboration and £400 million in public savings through shared risk and shared equity
- Anglian Water @one Alliance - 15% productivity gain and 30% fewer disputes using behavioral assessment at selection stage

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges where trust is designed into procurement and governance, outcomes improve materially; cost, time, innovation and risk all benefit.

The Buyer's Levers to Change

For public sector buyers, the implications are both strategic and practical. Trust should be treated as a designed capability, not an assumed outcome.
Three shifts are critical:

1. Place greater weight on partnership capability when evaluating proposals
2. Design Trust into contracts - trust cannot exist without fairness.
3. Hold leaders accountable for Trust - not just short term deliver.

"The UK does not need new procurement law to build trust, it needs the confidence to use the flexibility it already has."

> As fiscal pressure, AI disruption and political uncertainty intensify, trust stands out as the most powerful performance lever in complex partnerships.

The Strategic Opportunity

The survey data is unequivocal:

- 76% expect at least 5% additional value from trust-based partnerships
- 53% believe the opportunity exceeds 10%

At scale, this represents £billions in potential public value.
In an era defined by complexity and constraint, these are not marginal gains; they are transformative.

A Final Thought for Buyers

Public procurement has long been structured around control: managing risk, ensuring compliance, and driving cost efficiency. These remain essential. But on their own, they are no longer sufficient. The next decade of public sector delivery will hinge on the ability to effectively balance fairness and power. Trust is the enabler of that shift.

The evidence is clear. The behaviours are known. The case studies are proven. The question for buyers is no longer whether trust works, but whether they are prepared to build it into future partnerships from the outset

As fiscal pressure, AI disruption and political uncertainty intensify, trust stands out as the most powerful performance lever in complex partnerships and one leaders can no longer afford to leave to chance.