



# Connect more: creating effective partnerships with the charity sector

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### Abstract

To tackle rising costs as well as enhancing positive outcomes, charities are turning to partnership work. This research briefing examines the research surrounding what such partnerships can look like. It presents suggestions on what makes partnerships effective, as well as the potential challenges. Ultimately it argues that the key to a successful partnership is trust and clarity between the two organisations. It concludes that a successful partnership can create a greater, more efficient and localised impact upon communities. People Know How's Connect Four social innovation network represents a good example how successful partnerships can be supported and initiated.

### Keywords

Third sector, partnerships, collaboration, social innovation, Connect Four

### Key points

- Partnerships can cut costs but also enhance current service provision
- Effective partnerships have clear goals and communication, resulting in mutual trust.
- Partnerships can face challenges and fail when the relationship is unbalanced.
- Partnerships with academia can help inform solutions within the third sector.

### Successful partnerships

Much of the research on third sector partnerships focuses on what makes partnerships successful or effective. Lozano-Casal and Rutherford (2016) identify a number of benefits and advantages to partnerships including: the sharing of resources, utilising knowledge from both parties, reducing duplication and drawing on experiences from a wider pool of people to create shared and innovative outcomes.

Clear communication has been noted as a core component of successful partnerships. Chapman et al. (2018) argue that if partnerships are ill-prepared and rushed, it reduces the chances of success. They further note that trust can be built amongst organisations more effectively if opportunities can be anticipated. On a more technical level, they suggest that the performance management systems need to factor in the complexity of the partnership, the difference of activities, and the importance of it being outcome-

focused (Lozano-Casal and Rutherford, 2016).

Successful collaborations often arise between academia and the third sector. Bell et al. (2014) argue that this is because the partners go through several phases. These include finding reasons to work together, discussing goals and issues and identifying responsibilities. Furthermore, contextual processes (for instance, support from faculty members, information technology and administrative staff) are also regarded as highly important in creating successful academic partnerships (Bell et al., 2014). Importantly, Bell et al. (2014) conclude that effective partnerships occur not only through trust, but when the collaborators start to view themselves as part of a singular team.

Cook argues that flexibility is equally as important as clear communication in creating successful partnerships. He states that “the absence of rigid targets and contractual relationships was identified as being central to the success of a partnership” (Cook, 2015, p. 8). His argument is based on the notion that that flexibility aids in tackling the tensions that can occur when organisations with collaborative work environments work with those with a more hierarchical structure. In adopting a more transparent and flexible model, then, partnerships can better build trust and understanding.

Furthermore, Chapman et al. (2019) argue that the third sector ought not to be unnecessarily shaped or changed by partners in different sectors, as the third sector have shown to have passion for their causes and desire to create solutions. An effective partnership should therefore understand they are “free to do things their own way” (Chapman et al., 2019, p. 36). This indicates that the third sector

can be an effective partner but that it is important to make sure that the goals of potential collaborators must be aligned and clearly communicated.

### Challenges

Partnerships are made up of diverse people and organisations and, as such, these have the potential to clash. Chapman et al. (2019) argue that difficulties can arise “when members of the public sector and third sector do not share the same understanding about their organisational values and respective strengths and contributions” (p. 5). This is not the only potential challenge of partnerships. Lozano-Casal and Rutherford (2016) highlight that, in partnerships, tasks can be more time-consuming to complete. They argue that an imbalance of knowledge and power can cause tension. A challenge in partnerships arises, then, when the two sides are not equal; with one side feeling they have nothing to gain by collaboration.

Furthermore, this can cause distrust between organisations, particularly in relation to language and communication (Rees et al. 2012). Language, controlled by one side, can create tension as the other lacks control over the narrative being created around them. Connect Four navigates this issue by highlighting tool kits designed by Nesta and others, to ensure that projects help integrate disparate groups. It also has a social media presence that is designed to encourage feedback. Communication is key to overcoming the challenge that partnerships present.

### Impact

Partnerships can have a real positive impact on the wider community. For instance, Bell et al (2014) note how partnerships between the volunteering sector and nursing students can help the students both acquire skills. The literature also indicates how research can be more impactful when partnered with local third sector organisations as it can be tailored to issues of the area. Shoba et al. (2012) similarly note how such partnerships can be beneficial in “serving underserved populations by better understanding their needs and perspectives”.

### Conclusion

Partnerships with the third sector and academia can be effective to not just reduce costs but enhance services.

However, research indicates that a key focus must be on clear communication between the partners. This research shows that partnerships can collapse and become unproductive due to an imbalance of power, true or perceived, and feelings of competitiveness. Connect Four and projects like it are seeking to bring together businesses and fundraisers to find solutions to problems in discussion with diversity people that would otherwise never occur. Every sector has something to offer the other. For charities – where the intended outcomes are societally beneficial – it is paramount that we help make partnerships with them effective to ensure the greatest impact.

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