

How to Collaborate



A learning summary from Comic Relief's
Change Makers Programme



#2 in a series of key takeaways for practitioners & funders
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Introducing Change Makers

Change Makers was a £9.1 million programme run by Comic Relief in the wake of the 2019 Coronavirus disease pandemic. It provided up to five years of targeted funding for 20 different partnerships, totalling 45 individual organisations.

From 2020 onwards, the pandemic shifted the voluntary, community and social enterprise landscape. It has been estimated that charities lost up to £4 billion in income over a few short months at the start of the pandemic, and that a third of charities had decreased access to their volunteers. This direct impact on charities, combined with the general population's restricted ability to access support and need to socially isolate, had a disproportionately negative impact on some of society's more vulnerable populations, whose personal situations had been exacerbated by COVID-19 and their routes to support decreased due to the more unstable charity sector.

Change Makers sought to address some of these challenges and support organisations who work

to tackle some of the serious issues that saw increased strain and demand during the pandemic. This list included racial inequality, homelessness, early childhood development, forced migration, domestic abuse and mental health.

The long-term funding Comic Relief provided, as part of its 2018-2023 strategy, gave stability in an uncertain environment. It enabled individual organisations and partnerships to work at a systems change level, exploring the social and structural changes needed in the aftermath of COVID-19 to best support vulnerable populations who had been overlooked or under resourced at local, regional and national level.

Crucially, each of these grants sought to achieve change which would outlast the funding provided by Comic Relief.

FUNDING THEMES

- 1** Gender Justice
- 2** Safe Place to be - Forced Migration
- 3** Safe Place to be - Homelessness
- 4** Children Survive and Thrive
- 5** Global Mental Health

KEY STATISTICS

- 20** Partnerships funded
- 5** Years of funding
- 9.1** Million pound programme
- 45** Organisations

Working with organisations across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

NPC's role as a learning partner

NPC were engaged at the start of the Change Makers Programme as an evaluation and learning partner. As part of this work, we co-designed 5 learning questions with the Funded Partners, to frame their collective insights and takeaways.

Learning summary series

1. Building understanding

What do we need to understand about our organisation and the context it exists within before we can create meaningful change (e.g. influence policy and structural decisions) for a broad audience?

2. How to collaborate

How can we create and maintain collaborations with individuals, charities, politicians, service providers and other stakeholders that are effective in creating the long-term change we are seeking?

3. How to monitor and evaluate impact and attribute success

What does short and long-term change look like for our grant? How can we measure and present our achievements in robust, interesting and proportionate ways?

4. How to communicate learning responsibly

How do we tell honest stories in accessible language and formats to our stakeholders whilst maintaining privacy and sensitivity? How can we develop a culture of data curiosity and acceptance of outcomes in a resource-stretched environment?

5. How to centre lived experience

How do we develop and maintain positive relationships with all those with lived experience, including with project staff, service users and other stakeholders? How can we enable open communication within these relationships without putting pressure on them in the context of an ever-changing political landscape?

What this learning summary covers

This learning summary focuses on the Funded Partner's learnings on **forming and maintaining successful collaborations**.

To create change at a systemic level, the entire system needs to be engaged. This allows change to happen from both directions, top-down and bottom-up, moving the system towards positive change and impact. This model was central to the Change Makers Programme.

Collaborations to create systemic change share the general fundamentals of partnership working that the Funded Partners had experienced in their previous work, however the systems change lens added a layer of complexity. Coordination became more involved, power dynamics were emphasised, and timelines stretched over years rather than months.

From their work, we have identified learnings in three areas linked to collaboration. Firstly, **identifying who their potential collaborators are** and why they wanted to engage them. Within this, Funded Partners worked with two key groups:

- Collaborators with whom they could build relationships to support systems change through the sharing of knowledge, skills, networks and partnerships
- Partners who they could seek to influence to change policy and practice

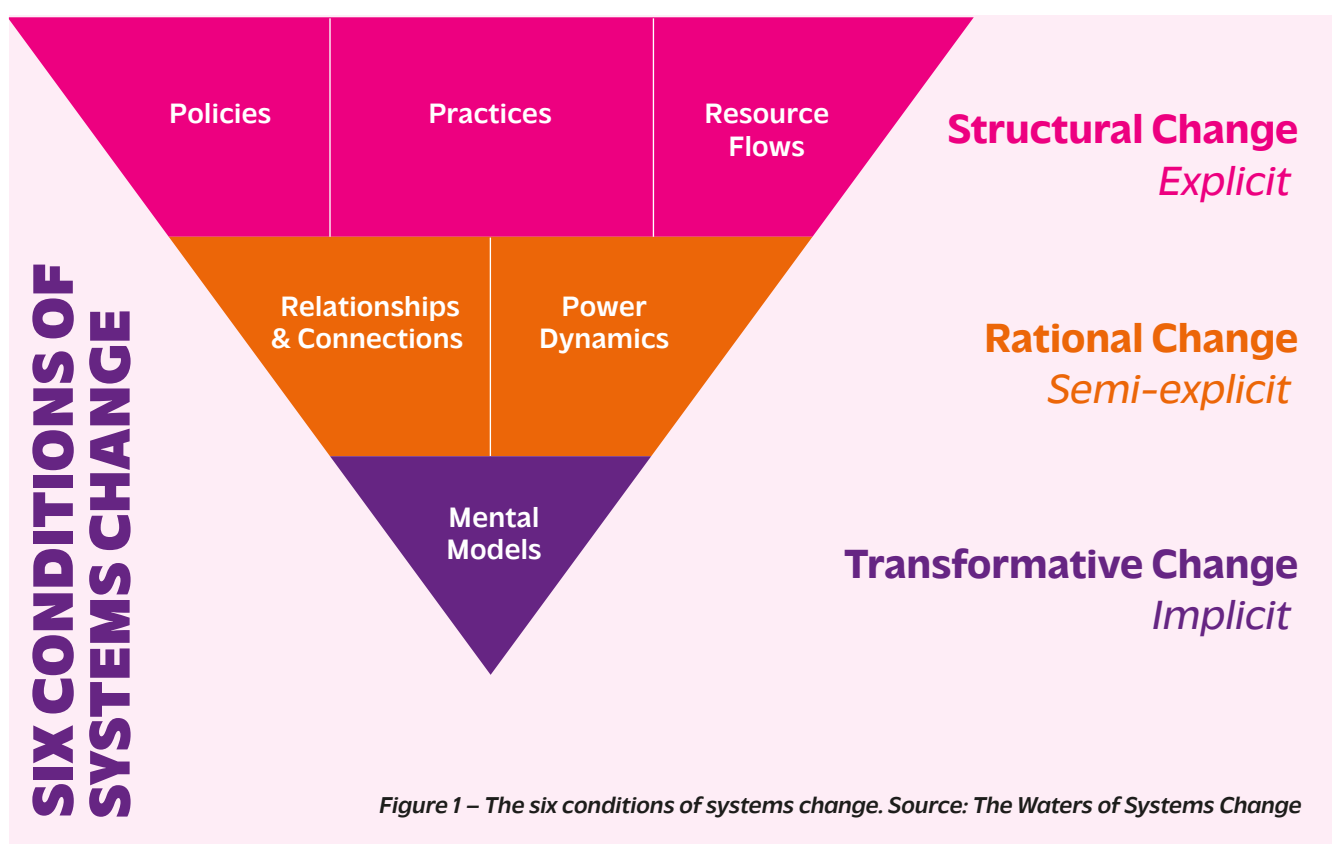
Within each of these groups, we discuss what can be achieved through **forming collaborations, and the challenges that Funded Partners encountered**.

Lastly, we explore how Funded Partners **enabled effective and sustainable collaborations** within their systems by considering the partnership's behaviour, values, communication, and structure. This learning summary presents their learning, alongside case studies showcasing how it was used in practical, real-world settings.

How to use collaborations and partnerships to change systems

Systems are made of parts, which operate in interconnected ways. To affect change at a systems level (rather than an individual level), Funded Partners needed to 'shift the dial' on one of more of the six conditions of systems change, which are summarised in the image below. These six conditions, if unchanged, hold the system in place and prevent progress.

Structural and relational change can be achieved in part by collaborating with relevant organisations or individuals; either in partnership, or through influencing. The next two sections of this piece focus on who the Funded Partners collaborated with, why these stakeholders were engaged, and how they overcame common challenges to form sustained and successful collaborations.



1.

Collaboration goal: Building relationships to support systems change

Effective systems change depends on engaging a diverse mix of collaborators across the system, each contributing to influence, delivery, learning, and legitimacy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Who

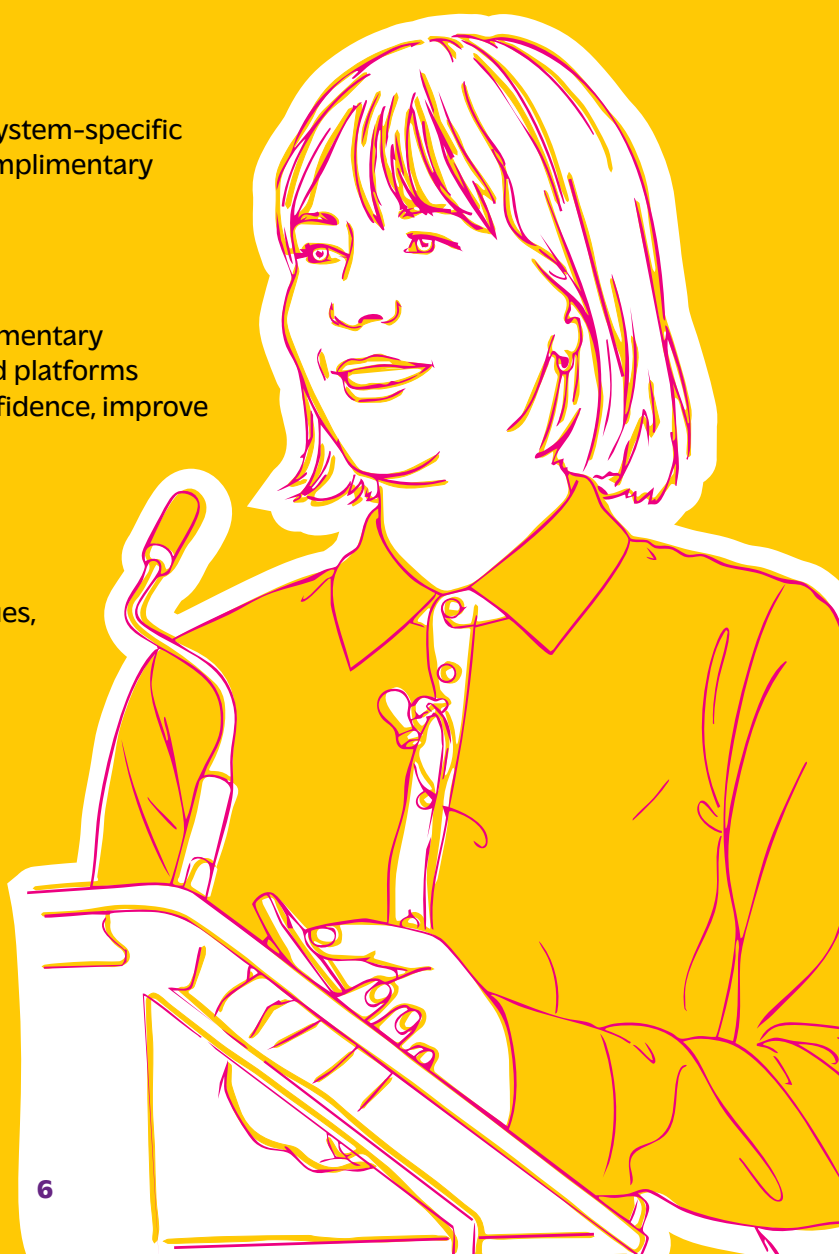
Partners with assets, such as system-specific knowledge, skills, access to complimentary networks and platforms.

Why

Collaborators offering complementary knowledge, skills, networks and platforms strengthen capacity, build confidence, improve efficiency and expand reach.

How

Through careful selection, ensuring that approaches, values, capacity and resources align across the collaboration.



Who to form this type of collaboration with and why?

Partners with knowledge and skills

For Funded Partners, developing the capacity of their system was important, be that through changes in resource flows, such as knowledge, through forming relationships and connections, or through shifting mental models. Funded Partners collaborated with partners who held relevant knowledge and skills to support their social mission, allowing them to develop their own capability and capacity, in addition to that of the wider systems.

What can these collaborations achieve?

1. Develop understanding of the system

Sharing knowledge helps to develop a depth of understanding within a system, and for Funded Partners, it allowed them to better understand their role within the changes and trends that existed at a local and national level. The type of knowledge shared in these collaborations ranged from specific (e.g. sharing datasets or disclosing how to engage a specific target group), to much broader, such as the collaborator's understanding of public and professional opinions on issues.



Housing Justice, Tai Pawb and Oasis

Housing Justice and Tai Pawb, two organisations focused on ensuring equal opportunities and reducing poverty and homelessness related to housing across Wales, collaborated with local Cardiff organisation Oasis. Oasis supports asylum seekers and refugees via a range of holistic services. By working together, they were able

to identify challenges within the integration team at Oasis resulting in strengthened processes in advice and advocacy.

Collaborating with knowledgeable partners also enabled the Funded Partners to deliver activities on the ground and within their target communities.

"Alongside this, the strengths of Oasis were identified, which enabled an improvement of referral links between Oasis and other organisations such as Welsh Refugee Council, resulting in better working relationships and preventing duplication within the sector."

2. Draw on the skills of their partners and community to expand reach and capability

Funded Partners found that working with collaborators who held skills they did not meant they could capitalise on opportunities that otherwise may not have been available. Partnerships allowed them to support their target audience in different ways, unlocking new levels of support.

“By strengthening our collaboration with local organisations in neighbouring boroughs, our clients are able to experience benefits from organisations which historically have felt out of reach, due to systematic barriers such as language/cultural acceptance.”

– Change Makers Funded Partner

Scottish Refugee Council

Scottish Refugee Council supports thousands of refugees as they rebuild their lives in Scotland, through the provision of direct support and advice services, and the promotion of integration and campaigning for a more humane asylum system. They noticed that they had underrepresented populations in their decision-making roles and intentionally sought out partners with the right skills and knowledge, gained through lived experience to address this.



“We have found that African and Caribbean communities are most under-represented in our programme, in comparison to communities from the Middle East and North Africa region. We are directly engaging and inviting more practitioners from these groups to join projects, we are also looking to develop collaboration with more grassroots networks.”

Partners with networks

Another strength Funded Partners sought in collaborators was access to a network of communities, stakeholders and other collaborators relevant to the system in which they work. By collaborating with partners who had a specific network, Funded Partners were able to improve their reach and audience, increasing their influence and allowing them to engage more service users.

What can these collaborations achieve?

To promote activities and findings to an audience beyond their own, some Funded Partners collaborated around specific events. This allowed them to draw in a bigger audience, often of people who could be influenced to support their cause.

WWIN Specialist Domestic Abuse Service - Findaway Project *WWIN*

WWIN work across Sunderland, providing specialist support to survivors and children subjected to domestic abuse. Their Change Makers project is an innovative new service which supports family members, friends and other worried community members to safely and effectively support survivors. WWIN works across the North East delivering workshops, engaging with communities, service providers and commissioners, as well as hosting a national phoneline and webchat service.

They have a strong team of passionate people who have worked on their Change Makers project, however their capacity for meaningful and consistent community engagement is an ongoing challenge, as it is one aspect of their work which takes significant time, and they operate as a small team balancing a number of priorities.

Through these collaborations, they hope to expand their reach and amplify their message, unlocking larger and more systemic change across Sunderland.



“To address our challenges around capacity for community engagement we have been building connections with other local groups and networks which already have strong links with communities.”

Image/photo Credit: Ayesha Jones: Comic Relief

Partners with platforms

When collaborators had specific platforms which could be used to promote the work of the Funded Partner or their service users, Funded Partners formed partnerships to promote their cause.

What can these collaborations achieve?

Ashley Community Housing *ACH*

Working to support migrants in the West England and the Midlands, ACH provided housing, training and employment pathways to empower refugees and migrants and help them rebuild their lives. One activist who was engaged in their work was given a platform to share their work, through International Women’s Day, which provided an outlet for both that individual as well as ACH.

“The partnerships International Women’s Day communications campaign gave a platform to a women’s rights activist and former journalist from Afghanistan, now residing in Bristol. In this way, ACH has been working to create a platform for Bristol-based Afghans to share their stories and access opportunities to restart careers in the UK.”

What are the challenges of working with partners?

1. Finding and engaging the right partner

To form a collaboration that lasts, Funded Partners found that they needed to align on their approach,

as well as making sure they have the right blend of skills, knowledge and network. Where approaches of partnering organisations were too different, or had values and methods which didn't complement each other, some Funded Partners found that their collaborations suffered.

Centre for Homelessness Impact CHI

For CHI, a family of organisations seeking to catalyse evidence-led change on homelessness, they managed to mitigate this issue by forming partnerships based on issue, rather than place.



"Our engagement with the third sector tended to lead to greatest impact when it was issue-based as opposed to place-based. We found it challenging to offer sufficiently tailored support to the place-based projects we initiated through our Impact Chapter scheme, with the result that some of these projects progressed more slowly than we would have liked. By contrast, we found that working with third sector partners to trial specific interventions or raise awareness of issues proved a more focussed pathway toward achieving specific outcomes."

2. The capacity of the partner

The next challenge for Funded Partners was ensuring that their collaborators had the time, energy and resources to sustain the collaboration. In environments where a lot of time and energy is

taken up chasing funding and adapting to changes in context and need, having the capacity to form and maintain collaborations was a significant area of learning for some Funded Partners.

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland WAFNI

WAFNI took time within the first two years of their funding to focus on capacity building within their collaborators and internally. They provided training on trauma informed understanding to build a strong foundation for their third year. During this third year they developed programmes such as You and Me Mum, which was a 10-week course for mothers to educate them on the effects of domestic violence and Helping Hands for Early Years, a preventative education curriculum for primary school children to increase their understanding of feeling safe.

Equally, where collaborators lacked skills and knowledge, this lack of capability reduced their ability to engage effectively. For one Funded Partner, this required them to pivot their partnership from one organisation to another. Their initial partner, whilst excited to work with them, "did not have the capacity to work with the numbers of [service users] we had committed to." They transferred the work to an alternative partner, who was able to put the time and resources into making the partnership a success. As such, it was delivered effectively.

3. Maintaining the collaboration

I. Maintaining engagement within the collaboration

Once formed, collaborations required consistent work to sustain them and ensure key stakeholders remained engaged. Funded Partners found that creating 'buy-in' to the collaboration had to take place at the start of their partnerships and maintained throughout.

This was achieved partly by following the principles of good collaboration outlined earlier, in conjunction with ensuring all their collaborators had a role in the initial design, to foster a sense of ownership. Finally, to maintain a successful collaboration, continued communication across all levels of a partnership was essential to make clear: individual responsibilities, direction of travel and progress to date.

Power the Fight

In their mission to tackle violence affecting young people, Power the Fight collaborated with schools within their target communities. Their experiences through the Change Makers funding taught them a lot about working with schools. Their key takeaways were:

- 1. Planning and co-producing support** with schools needs to happen in the summer term to ensure that delivery can begin smoothly from the start of the academic year.
- 2. Effectively communicating** with stakeholders at all levels of the school system to ensure there is buy-in across the board.
- 3. Allowing enough time** to research, plan, develop, reflect and implement new ways of doing things, can be challenging in a sector which feels very reactive and responsive to 'firefighting' rather than reflective, iterative ways of working.



II. Turnover within collaborating organisations

Turnover of staff across all of the Funded Partner's systems was a very significant blocker to successfully maintaining a collaboration. Working relationships tended to form between individuals, and so the impact of a single staff member leaving had a significant impact on collaborations.

This is a particular stressor for Funded Partners who had to form collaborations to enact change. In their work to end modern slavery, Justice & Care engaged with law enforcement, a partnership benefitted from an incremental, long-term approach to relationship and reputation building.

Often this was people-based, meaning that if key contacts left, partners were back to square one.

The same truth was echoed by multiple System Partners, impacted by changes of the Mayoral model for ACH, or by staff turnover for CHI and UK Youth. These latter Funded Partners reported impacts in their work's progress because of gaps in employment as they recruited for new staff. The delays caused in delivery were exacerbated by the nature of Funded Partner's work, often in contexts with a need for a high level of responsiveness to changes in the external environment.

Several potential solutions were identified. Firstly, Funded Partners worked to retain staff members within their own organisation to preserve relationships and knowledge, and as an additional measure, spent time closely documenting work processes so that less knowledge was lost. Retention was aided by advertising flexibility with roles and ongoing support with personal progression goals. Additionally, Funded Partners recognised the need to build relationships at both an individual and organisational level, with the end goal to make sure several people from within the Funded Partner were in contact with several people within any collaborator or partner.

III. Lack of available funding

In order to continue or grow their work beyond the scope of Comic Relief's Change Makers award, Funded Partners consistently identified a lack of funding as a significant barrier to developing and sustaining meaningful collaboration. Organisations highlighted how

limited or short-term funding constrained their capacity to scale promising work or build on existing relationships, while consistently seeking 'patchwork' funding took time away from the Funded Partner's activities.

"If you are a service delivery organisation, campaigning is always the secondary aim. Finding funding for campaigning is challenging. Most of the grants are short-term."

– Change Makers Funded Partner

For example, Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group described how, with adequate funding, it would be possible to expand place-based initiatives such as establishing "Refugee Tales Scotland" and deepen engagement with devolved institutions, building on earlier successful connections with Westminster. However, without this investment, these public affairs and partnership-building activities remained delayed, limiting the long-term impact of earlier relationship-building work.

2.

Collaboration goal: Influencing decision-makers and practitioners to change policy and practice

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Who

Decision makers in positions of power and knowledgeable or influential practitioners.

Why

Engaging local and national decision makers can influence policy, practices and resources, while working with practitioners builds internal capability and supports sector-wide learning through training, knowledge-sharing and applied practice.

How

By recognising that getting in front of the right people may be tricky, so make the most of any opportunity that's given.

Who to form this type of collaboration with and why?

Decision makers

'Decision makers' is the broad title that can be given to individuals holding significant power within a system. They often have the ability to influence the structural change level changing policies, practices and resource flows, as well as impacting power dynamics, which sits in the relational level of change. This makes them an influential group to collaborate with.

Funded Partners typically collaborated with the following types of decision makers:

Ministers, who lead government departments, with junior ministers leading specific policy areas. The opinions of ministers are an important factor in departmental decision-making.

Special advisers, who advise ministers. Ministers cover various policy areas and will often have more specialised special advisors to advise them.

Backbench MPs, who are not ministers. Those who sit on Select Committees or All-Party Parliamentary Groups are particularly influential.

Civil servants, who work within government and are responsible for implementing policies.

Mayors / elected councillors within local authorities, who run local services and manage spending around community priorities.

National government and statutory authority bodies

, such as Border Force, the Home Office safeguarding team, or the Department of Health and Social Care. These are bodies with formal legal powers to enforce law at national level and provide guidance and funding frameworks in line with national policy and legislation.

Local statutory services (Place-based authorities), who operate within a specific locality and deliver frontline services, such as the local police force or local housing providers.

What can these collaborations achieve?

The collaborations formed with these stakeholders focused primarily on influencing work in order to change policies, practices and regulations. They are often time-bound, or last as long as is needed to achieve a specific goal, such as policy change or awareness.

When working with decision makers, Funded Partners sought to create diverse networks across various levels of national and local government. As subject matter experts, Funded Partners were able to target individuals across the government with a goal to develop longer-term, systemic solutions to challenges relevant to themselves, through influencing policy.

Dingley's Promise

Dingley's Promise exists to give every child with special educational needs the best start in life by providing tailored specialist support in early years centres, outreach support to families, training of inclusive practice to professionals, and by lobbying decision makers to achieve policy change.

To further the success of their work and create sustainable change, they have partnered with local authorities to create a repository of evidence, including best practice examples, case studies and testimonials. This helped them develop long-term and sustainable relationships with both these local authorities, and those they hadn't engaged yet.



A key learning from this work is that "methods for engagement and maintaining momentum cannot be one size fits all" which makes a "tailored approach for each local authority critical."

Practitioners

Practitioners do not hold decision making power at the same level as the individuals and organisations outlined above. However, as specialists in their fields they do have the power to influence organisational practice. Collaborations with practitioners was typically limited in scope to days or weeks, depending on the knowledge and/or skills that were being shared.

There were two main routes by which this sharing occurred. Firstly, where a practitioner provided training in an area connected to a specific skill or system, such as disability awareness training where a practitioner would support a team to deliver their services in a more inclusive way. The second route was by sharing their knowledge, research and/or skills with Funded Partners to influence programme design, research and strategy, thereby changing organisational practice.

What can these collaborations achieve?

1. Shifting organisational practice

RECLAIM, a Manchester-based youth charity that empowered young people from working class backgrounds, engaged Save the Children to provide consultancy support around safeguarding measures. Through an increase of skills, confidence and capability in their staff, RECLAIM could build internal structures and practices, which helped avoid a build-up of safeguarding pressures.

2. Shifting systems and sector practice

Collaborations between the Funded Partners and relevant practitioners supported the sharing of learning and expertise across the wider system. This played a role in increasing sector-wide capacity and enabled knowledge to continue beyond the lifespan of individual grants.

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland WAFNI

In service of their work addressing domestic abuse and providing services for women and children, WAFNI provided training to create specialist practitioners in a psychoanalytical approach to be used when working with families. These practitioners were then able to spread the approach and relevant support further than would have been possible for WAFNI as a single organisation.



"So what we end up doing was we devised different types of capacity building models, and we ended up training about 140 staff throughout Northern Ireland in psychoanalytical approach to working with families and then also looking at the neuroscience of brain development. So across the region, although we've delivered the training out to a lot of the projects and practitioners already, there is the capacity now for them to continue to deliver that training."

What are the challenges of working with decision makers and practitioners?

1. Finding and engaging the right people to influence

The first, and sometimes biggest, hurdle to a successful collaboration was finding the right organisation to work with. One funded partner reflected on the difficulty of getting in front of the people they wanted to collaborate with.

"Ongoing difficulty in engagement with decision makers within statutory bodies. Getting the attention of established statutory bodies at a decision-making level and persuading change or even acknowledgement of our work is no small matter. The immense bureaucracy and momentum of these bodies means that they are very slow to change."

Quote by?

This was echoed by other Funded Partners, who found that, to get in the room with policy makers specifically, they had to first interact with them in other contexts, such as conferences or events.

On a more positive note, Midaye noted that within central government there is a growing trend in working more purposefully with communities and community organisations, which they felt would help to mitigate this challenge in the future. This has been reflected in practice by the launching of the Office for the Impact Economy which prioritises forming partnerships between the Government and key players in the impact economy – which includes VCSE organisations.

2. The instability of the VCSE and political landscape

The turbulent times during which the Change Makers programme ran presented Funded Partners with a consistently shifting landscape. From the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic to frequent shifts in Government, there was general instability in the systems where they worked.

This posed risks to their collaborations, as turnover was high in all settings and relationships that took time to build could be lost overnight. Some smaller VCSE organisations disappeared after the pandemic, so previously-established partnerships could no longer be relied upon.

The most effective solution to this challenge was the development of a broad range of partnerships, which insulated Funded Partner's work at an organisational level, even if individual collaborations were impacted. They also reported deliberately engaging with MPs from multiple political parties, to ensure that regardless of the UK's political direction, they had warm leads through which to advocate and influence.

3.

How to maintain & sustain collaborations: Principles of successful collaboration

Sustainable collaboration is underpinned by four core principles

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Behaviour

Reliability, responsiveness, flexibility, and strong relationship management build trust and enable effective engagement.

Values

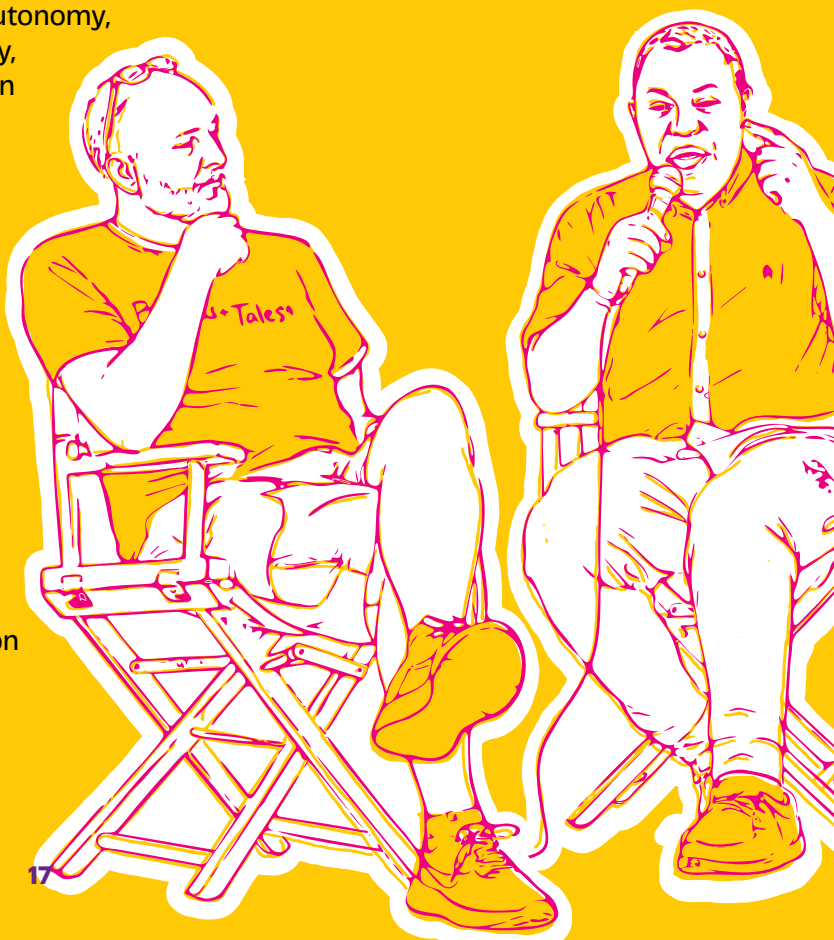
Shared values, such as trust, autonomy, mutual respect, and reciprocity, help create a strong foundation for collaboration.

Communication

Clear, transparent communication, with defined roles and tailored approaches, supports alignment and effectiveness.

Structures

Simple, practical structures, built incrementally and leveraging existing networks, enable sustainable coordination and growth.



Behaviour

Modelling the right behaviour was particularly important in building trust and maintaining effective collaborations. The main goal was to keep things as straightforward and practical as possible. Funded Partners highlighted the value of being reliable, predictable, and responsive, particularly when they were engaging time-poor or overwhelmed stakeholders. Running regular events and signposting them clearly allowed

stakeholders to understand the opportunities available and factor them into their calendars. Conversely, being very flexible with dates and times for meetings better enabled positive collaborations with decision makers who needed that flexibility.

Having the right people in the room made a big difference. Staff with strong relational skills had a consistently beneficial impact on partnerships, due to their ability to adapt their approaches to meet collaborators' needs and constraints.



Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group

GDWG

GDWG works to improve the welfare and wellbeing of people held in detention, by offering friendship and support and advocating for fair treatment. Following a meeting with Diana Johnson at the Labour Party Conference, GDWG were given the opportunity to address the Home Affairs Select Committee. The Select Committee were time poor but had the power to significantly advance GDWG's work. So, they put in the work upfront.

"The preparation for the session we gave was intense in order to show the Select Committee the respect of thorough preparation and responses that gave sufficient statistical evidence and that drew on the key knowledge bases of other NGOs in the sector. Our existing relationships with AVID and Medical Justice were beneficial and showed that co-operation in the sector is crucial when we need to share expertise for the common good."

Values

Ensuring that values were aligned across a collaboration allowed momentum to build quickly and created strong foundations from which to build. Key values included:

Positivity – Starting from a positive working relationship allowed collaborations to be more resilient – even in the face of external pressures and challenges.

Trust – Collaborations thrived when the individuals or groups were given some autonomy over their activities and could adjust them to respond to changes and need.

Mutual respect – Collaboration worked both ways. Forming reciprocal relationships where ideas and activities from both collaborating parties were supported strengthened the total system in which the partners worked.

Communication

Funded Partners recognised that transparency and clear communication across partnerships supported longer-term, more positive collaborations which had a greater impact on their service users and systems. There were two key ways to achieve this:

Providing clarity on roles Making sure everyone understands their personal role and the role of their organisation increases confidence and reduces the risk of duplication. For smaller working groups, the creation of a Terms of Reference was beneficial, as it allowed convening organisations to retain a level of control on

the tone and ethos of the group. That sense of ownership was found to translate into more proactive action.

Using varied communication styles

Different partners communicated in different ways. For those who were time poor where the primary goal was to influence, briefings and seminars worked well. For those with more time, deeper engagement worked better. In practice, this can look like a very formal collaboration with structured and regular meetings, or lighter touch / one-off engagement, such as participation in events or workshops.

Structures

Structure was the final principle identified in enabling collaborations to become sustainable, scalable, and capable of driving long-term change. Funded Partners emphasised the importance of embedding practical structures that supported relationship-building, knowledge-sharing, and collective action. This included drawing on existing networks and steering groups to identify new contacts and opportunities, being flexible about how collaborations emerged, and creating opportunities for engagement in both formal and informal settings.

Funded Partners highlighted the value of starting small and building partnerships gradually, allowing trust and reputation to develop over time. Organisations also noted the value of building relationships across different levels of seniority within partner organisations, as this allowed their message to be embedded from the ground up, as well as from the top down.

Groundswell

Groundswell is a homeless health charity that centres people with lived experience of homelessness in their fight to access the healthcare they deserve. Groundswell demonstrated how strong and sustainable partnerships could develop incrementally through consistent relationship-building and small-scale collaboration.

Rather than relying solely on formal collaborations, they invested time in attending events, inviting partners to meetings, and building trust through regular engagement. Groundswell highlighted the importance

of being visible, responsive, and willing to engage in person, describing how meaningful partnerships often emerged through

“getting people’s feet on the ground, visiting in person, going to say hello and being more responsive.”

This approach enabled Groundswell to define their priorities and seek partnerships that aligned with their goals, rather than simply responding to externally-driven opportunities. This reflected an intentional approach to partnership working, grounded in trust, clarity, and mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION

Overall, these examples highlight that effective collaborations are not only shaped by the willingness of organisations to work together, but also by the practical realities around the partnership. Partners need to have capabilities which complement each other and can be used to address the shared challenges. They must have the capacity to put time, energy and effort into the work of the collaboration. In instances where one or both of these are not present, the collaboration will struggle. Overall, partners need to be operationally ready to undertake a significant partnership that can achieve change at a systems level.

In an environment with fractured funding and continued instability caused by national and global events, it is important for collaborating organisations to grab any opportunities presented in order to create systemic change. This capacity to adapt to the current context is especially helpful when working with vulnerable populations and can ensure that the work being done within a collaboration is of maximum relevance and support to service users. A capacity to form multiple, diverse partnerships to overcome challenges in turnover helps foster sustainability, and lastly, the ability to clearly communicate and align behaviours and values results in a partnership that is able to overcome most of the common challenges of working in collaboration.



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