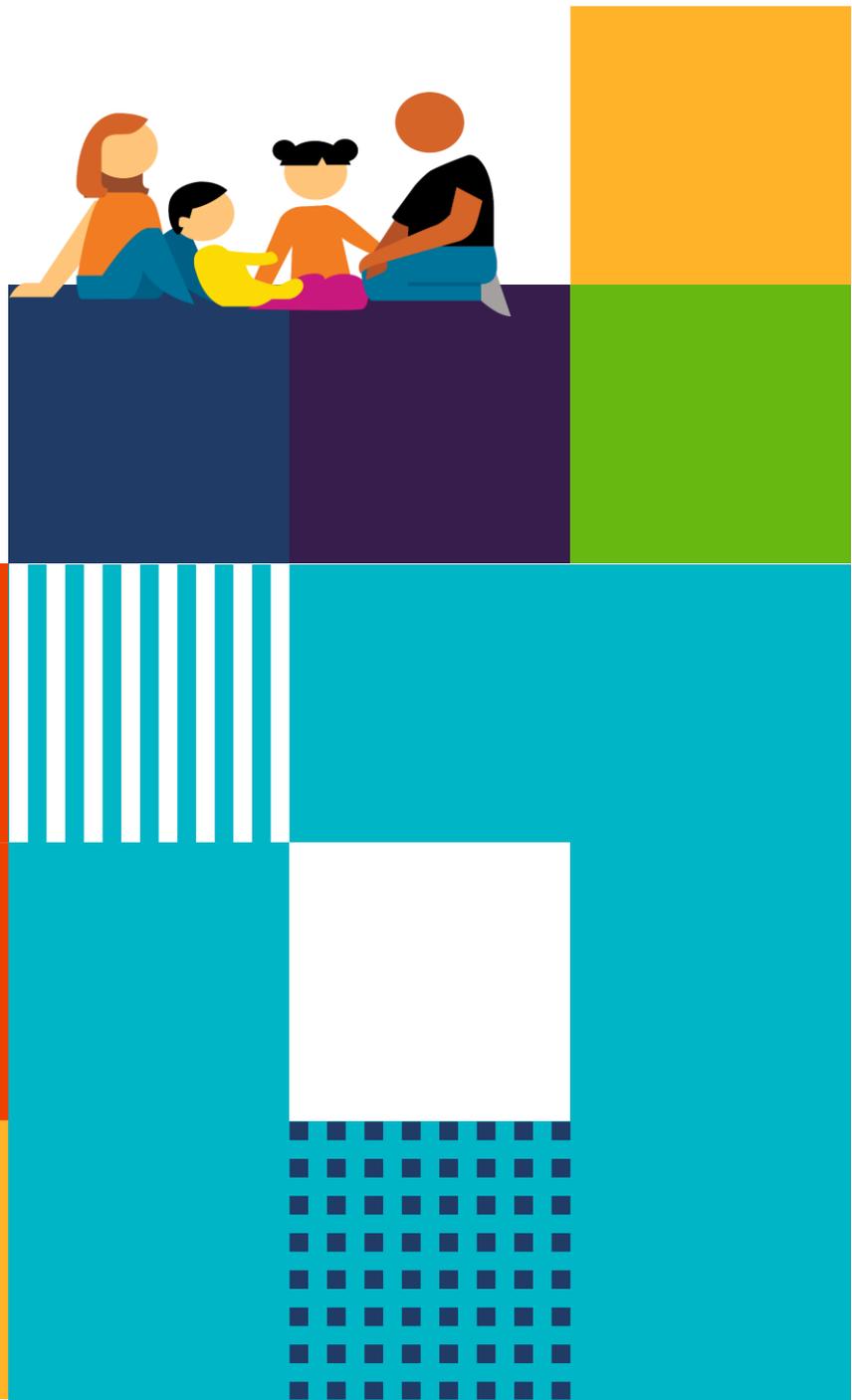


Capturing the Learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme

Partnership Working in the Community & Voluntary Sector

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Reaching Out Supporting Families: Partnership Working in the community and voluntary sector

The National Lottery Community Fund Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme **invested £25 million** in **36 different organisations** working on family support projects across Northern Ireland **over five years**. As part of funding requirements, each organisation was required to have at least one partner organisation to work with from either the community and voluntary sector or the statutory sector. In addition, as part of the learning programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and delivered by The Centre for Effective Services (CES), organisations attended networking events with the other grantees, in some cases developing informal partnerships with fellow organisations. In this paper we capture what the organisations have learned about supporting families through partnership working in the community and voluntary sector. We highlight the learning captured through The National Lottery Community Fund's 'Reaching Out, Support Families Programme' and link this to the existing evidence based on partnership working between organisations.

36 project partnerships
sought to improve
outcomes for families
facing adversity

The Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme

Summary of the programme

Reaching Out, Supporting Families was a programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund in Northern Ireland between 2015 and 2023. The Programme included thirty-six different projects aimed at helping families to work towards three broad outcomes. They would:



have greater skills, knowledge and understanding to overcome adversity



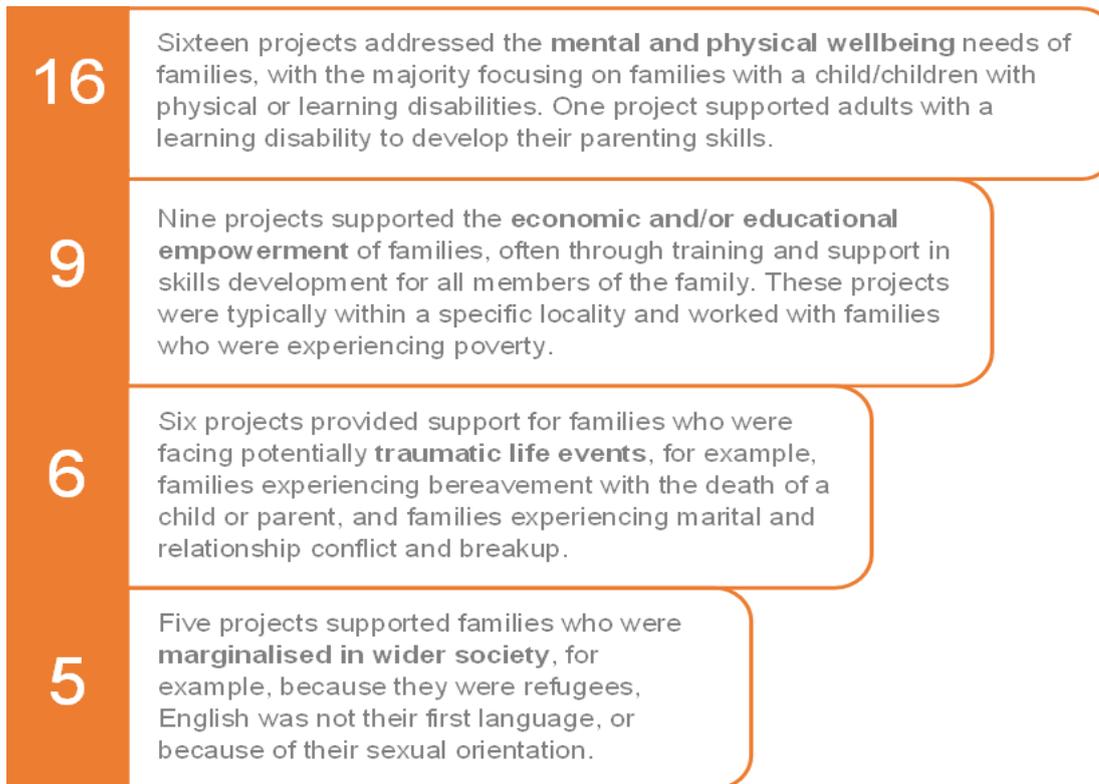
come together to learn



be part of the community they live in

While there were differences in the overarching mission of the organisations funded, and in the activities and approaches of each project, they shared some common features. All projects engaged with families experiencing adversity - including poverty, mental health problems, disability, unemployment, learning disabilities, or domestic and gender-based violence. Funding was flexible to enable projects to be responsive to the needs of the families and communities they worked with. Partnership was at the heart of the programme. The types of activities, services and interventions delivered under the programme included group or family activities, school-based services, one-to-one supports, and capacity building for professionals and communities. One third of projects were delivered across the whole of Northern Ireland,

with two-thirds delivered in specific urban or rural localities, or Health and Social Care Trusts. All projects were initially funded for five years, and one third were later awarded a further two years funding.



Capturing the Learning

This learning paper focuses on what the projects have learned about supporting families through good partnership working to implement a five-year funded project. The organisations that participated in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme were asked to partner and collaborate with at least one other organisation as part of funding requirements. Organisations also had the opportunity to network with others funded by the programme through an annual calendar of learning and networking events provided by CES for the duration of the programme.

Methodology in Brief

This paper is based on interviews with project leads and staff from 24 organisations and five focus groups, three of these were themed and involved with project leads and family support staff while two focused on National Lottery Community Fund funding officers. Funding officers worked closely with the funded organisations throughout their grant.

25 Interviews

- 24 organisations
- 1 programme funding manager

5 Focus Groups

- Funding officers x 2
- Families & education
- Families, health & disability
- Family support & empowerment

The interview/focus group schedule included questions on family support practice, implementation of services and partnership working. We recorded, transcribed, and coded the interviews/focus groups to accurately capture what was said and organised the information into a coherent framework. This allowed us to draw out overarching themes and cross-cutting learning.

We used framework synthesis, as described by Kneale et al (2017), which is divided into five phases:

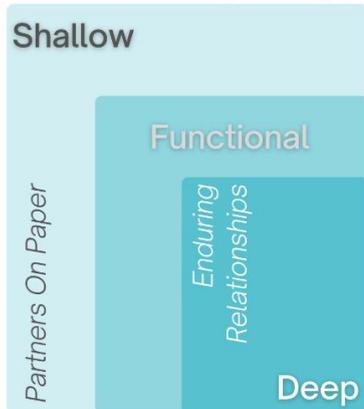
1. We **familiarised** ourselves with the data through conducting the interviews and focus groups, reviewing notes taken during the interviews and focus groups and transcribing the interviews.
2. We worked together as a team of three to first **identify themes** individually and then collaboratively to **build and refine the coding framework**.
3. We **indexed data according to the framework** using MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019)¹, with one team member coding each transcript.
4. We **charted and rearranged** the data according to the framework and modified the framework as needed.
5. We mapped the data and interpreted it.

Analysis of the data gathered allowed us to capture the benefits and challenges of partnership working, for families and organisations. We outline these below and situate our findings in the existing international evidence base on partnership working. We draw on insights from those partnerships between the community and voluntary sector and statutory sector organisations. Finally, we also highlight characteristics and enablers of effective partnership working. We begin by describing what partnership looked like within the Reaching Out, Supporting Families programme.

¹ Qualitative and mixed methods analysis software

What did partnership look like in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme?

Partnership Depth



The partnerships varied in their depth and the level at which they operated within and between organisations. In terms of 'depth' we identified a continuum of partnerships. At the shallow end, 'partners on paper' may have been written into funding bids at the outset or agreed to be partners in principle, but in practice had little to no involvement in the work of the project. At the deep end, true organisational partners already had, or sought to establish, deeper and enduring relationships between organisations and individuals. These partnerships actively worked together towards their shared goal. We also observed informal partnerships that developed through the programme of support and

networking facilitated by CES. These informal partners tended to become part of each other's network of contacts and may have facilitated cross-referral of families to different services with some developing a deeper partnership and pursuing new joint work together. Partnerships also operated at different levels, with the majority operating, at a minimum, at the level of project or service delivery. Others extended across all levels, from delivery to management and board/strategic level.

Partnership Level



The variety of partnerships, in terms of their depth, level of operation and indeed the varying success of partnership, allowed the funder to

learn more about the importance of partnerships being real collaborations. As a result, the funder's approach to partnership has changed. Rather than requiring partnership, the approach now is to identify proposed projects where partnership with other organisations or agencies is likely to enhance their potential for success and fund accordingly.

It has helped us evolve our thinking, in terms of collaboration is more important than those partnerships, which are sometimes in name only. But we try now to make sure the collaborations are really in place, and people are collaborating.

-Funding officer



Benefits of Partnership

Organisations



- Peer support
- Sharing resources
- Greater credibility
- Co-learning

Cross Agency Advocacy



- Fewer gaps between services
- Seamless movement between services/tiers of support
- Improved advocacy and sense of safety and confidence in navigating supports

Families



- Greater awareness of supports
- Access to a network of supports

The benefits of partnership working for families

A key message from the academic literature is that working in partnership delivers benefits to families that exceed those that either partner could achieve alone (Butler et al., 2017; Hodges et al., 1999; Statham, 2011). When partnership was done well, this sentiment was also endorsed by our organisations. However, it is worth mentioning that due to the length of time needed to see outcomes from partnerships, and the sometimes ambiguous and unseen elements of partnership working underlying these outcomes, it is difficult to find rigorous literature on the effects of partnership, with most research instead focusing on processes (Statham, 2011). Similarly in this research we are not claiming definitive, specific outcomes for children and families and instead will focus on the pathways offered by partnership working that could reasonably be seen to improve the family's experience. We acknowledge that our findings are limited as they are based on what organisations told us about the benefits for families rather than hearing from families directly.

Through the formal partnerships and facilitated networking events, organisations were able to develop a **better knowledge of the landscape** of family support services and were able to distribute this information across their partners and to their families. Staff in organisations improved their awareness of supports and this in turn enabled them to direct families to a wider range of services and supports.

So, you know, [informal partner], for example, who were part of this programme, we were able to link our families in with that project and let them know, which we wouldn't have known existed.

– Project staff on informal partner

I think [CES networking events] ... helped us all as projects and organisations, to get to know what everybody else was doing. So then that meant that you connected or that you refer them in, you know, that family in... I think that was very beneficial.

– Project staff on networking with other grantees

Certainly any feedback I have got, especially from [statutory partner lead], they're very appreciative of hearing about the programmes and that their staff and team pass it on. They're very grateful to hear about them, and would say they wouldn't hear about them necessarily, except for ourselves on the partnership and sending the information.

– Project lead on sharing information with statutory partner

For informal partnerships, meeting at in-person networking events helped to establish working relationships between staff members from different organisations doing complementary work. We saw some examples where these new informal networks enabled **smooth referral of families between services**. We also saw evidence of deeper partnerships forming where some organisations **worked together to provide complementary services**, creating a net of support to meet different aspects of the family's needs and alleviating pressures on individual services to 'do everything' for families they are supporting.

I would have attended some of the kind of workshops through CES. And I think that was really useful in, kind of, getting an insight into, well, what other services are out there for a start, because I suppose what we do is quite similar to what [other organisations] are doing, and that's quite good then if we come into contact with a family... we could signpost the family to them or, you know, there could be involvement from the both projects, but in a focused way, you know, to ensure that the family are getting the support from the best placed people, if that makes sense.

– Project staff on informal partnership

We have really tried to make links with other community groups... because we know we can't do everything, and we know we're not specialists in every area - so what we can do we share with other people and make sure they know about it. But likewise, we try and get help from other community organisations. If, so, if it is about debt, or budget, then we would source someone else's help around that. So it's been very beneficial to us to have that approach, and make sure that our families know exactly where to go and get help. And work together with other organisations to do that.

– Project staff on informal partnership

Along with this increased awareness of other services, the improved relationships and communication meant that organisations could develop a deeper understanding of how these services function. This allowed them to understand who has long waiting lists, the specific criteria and likelihood of referrals being accepted, and which providers to trust to deliver appropriate services to their families.

I think we've all sort of grown in empathy and understanding and then we have tried to share our learnings with social work teams as well, and that that work has been invaluable.

– Project lead on statutory sector partner

Cross-agency advocacy

A unique benefit for families arising from partnership working was increased **cross-agency advocacy** and organisations coming together to provide support for families. Organisations that may be working together on different aspects of support for the same family had different perspectives and insights on those individual families. They were able to share these insights across organisations in order to advocate for the family's needs. This sometimes manifested as advocating for an adaptation to the other service, such as working with schools to build their capacity for working with a child's disability, or identifying and removing barriers to accessing the partner service:

If we identified a family where actually getting to an advice centre was a challenge, they agreed then they would do home visits for us. That was really good... and maybe a parent who's terminally ill or something like that, actually going to knock on the door and come for a visit to a community advice centre is difficult. But they, they then would come out. And that was a very simple thing. But it worked. It worked very, very well.

– Project lead

Another advantage for families of cross agency working is that a child or family are more likely to receive consistent messages and agencies can support each other's work. For example, a project working in partnership with local schools communicated with teachers on the work being done with individual children and allowed the teacher to continue to support that child in school to consolidate new skills learned outside of school.

That's what our role really comes into its own, where we can be saying, "Look, when we start a piece of work with a child we'll link in with either our school link, or that teacher, depending on the situation" and say, "Look, this is what this is sent to us for, this is what I'm going to be doing, and I'll keep you up to date". So we can send them a little summary of what we're doing so that the teachers are aware of - actually, one of the key things we are working on is bouncing this back. So if the child is coming to the teacher, [saying] "I need help, I need help"... the teacher, instead of running [to help, is saying], "Hold on a minute. What can you do to fix that problem? Let me see your ideas, because I heard you're brilliant at this" and just see how that works in practice. And that continuum of approach really helps.

- Project staff on working with schools as partners

This theme of cross agency advocacy on behalf of the family also comes into play when it's been identified that there is no service available for the family, or where a family isn't getting the support they need. An organisation can then contact the relevant service and stop the family from falling through the gaps.

We're preventing the gaps from forming; anybody that is falling through gaps; how, if there's concerns or worries or if I am witness to anything that maybe... statutory services should know about. Em, it's just a phone call.(...) So it's how we can come together and support them as a network. And it's just a really good example of how it should work.

– Project staff on statutory sector partner

While in most cases cross-agency advocacy involved advocating for the family to other agencies, in some cases this was reversed, with services recommending another service to the families, to assure their credibility and safety for families.

So by being partners with [voluntary sector partner], they were able to sort of say to their [parents], “they're all right, you know, you can”. You know, they kind of give us the credibility that we were safe people to be involved with, that we were there for those things, that their voices were important to us. So I think, definitely, in the very beginning it helped with our kind of reputation in the network - we were to be a safe place to go.

– Project staff on partner

This benefit for families, and organisations, was particularly evident for families who may have had previous negative experiences of working with statutory agencies or organisations, for example, engaging with schools or child and family social work teams. The partner can help to alleviate some of that fear by vouching for the other organisation and extending the sense of trust and safety a family feels with the voluntary organisation into the relationship with the statutory organisation. Community and voluntary organisations can be a bridge for families to enable them to engage with statutory agencies.

I think that's where, for me... there is a fear of statutory services as well, especially, you know, of social workers. And they're very open to that and admitted it, that people think they're coming to judge them, to judge their homes, to judge their families and their family dynamics, but it's not, ... And I find myself as an intermediary a lot of the time... we're vouching for them. And saying they are here to help you. They, you know, yeah, we're advocating for them. So I think it's, it's been vital that partnership.

– Community organisation

Some of the groups that I work with, they have actually brought together all the statutory services who are maybe involved in the family's life and said, “Look, can we hold the meeting here, because the family feel safe and comfortable here, and we can support them whilst you're doing whatever it is you're doing.”

– Funding officer

While these points relate specifically to family benefits, families also benefit from improvements at an organisational level. In the next section we highlight the learning on the benefits of collaboration and partnership for organisations.

The benefits of partnership working for organisations

There is overlap between what directly benefits families and what benefits organisations, for example staff improved understanding of referral criteria increases the likelihood of families being directed to the appropriate service. The following section aims to detail benefits to organisations that may in turn have an indirect impact on families.

For informal partnerships that developed through networking events facilitated by CES, we found strong evidence that these informal partnerships provided a form of **'peer support'**. This operated at the level of delivery, for example staff working with children with disabilities or families living in deprived areas, could share their experiences and feel less isolated in those experiences and learn from each other. This was also true for networks of managers and leaders that formed and served as a point of connection, shared experience and learning from other organisations working in family support. Frequently, organisations spoke of the feeling of support and the benefits of having access to a sounding board and developing a sense of community:

There's quite a few that we've met along the way that I've exchanged contact details with, where you can just pick up the phone and call. So it's just really, it's that wider support network, which is, which is really good. Yeah, we haven't had to call on anybody too much. But, you know, you know, that they're there. And, and vice versa.

– Project staff on informal networks/partnerships

It was always just really interesting in perspective and what other people are doing and, and how they're doing it. So it's, it's really nice to be part of that community network, and to share that space with other people. And I think, in this kind of sector, all of those things are really important so that we don't end up repeating the same stuff and covering the same ground.

– Project lead on informal networks/partnerships

However, there were some organisations which spoke of how informal partners can become a drain on resources, especially for more surface level or 'shallow' partnerships where no reciprocal support was offered:

We did have many organisations that contacted us you know, for us to give them the support on how we did it - we're so busy, it's very difficult.

– Project staff on 'shallow' partnerships

Many organisations spoke about the benefits of **sharing resources** with other agencies. Throughout the interviews, groups spoke about sharing tangible assets such as training resources, facilities, and specialist knowledge:

So, it was, it's lovely just having them use our building and having that connection with them.

– Project staff on partner

Just to give you an example – things like different courses, different training that we wanted to provide for our families, such as sleep therapy, behavioural therapy, we were able to contact the [health trust] as a partner and ask them could they send out one of their therapists to deliver the training, and they done that and they would deliver the training. Most of the sessions were booked up and we had to put on additional sessions.

– Project lead

Sharing of more intangible assets such as reciprocal learning or 'co-learning' was evident in many partnerships:

We would rely on them, you know, particularly around governance and things like that, you know, what should we do? You know, what tools have you invested in? Or what training have you invested in? So we, we used information from them to help build us. But what they took from us was our flexibility about the services, how responsive we could be to the needs. And I think that's, that's really what worked with us, we were all willing to, to learn from each other, and take things from each other.

– Project lead on 'co-learning'

Organisations expressed a sense of satisfaction when they shared their knowledge and expertise and then saw their recommendations being taken on and implemented by their partner organisation.

Over the years with them, I saw the changes have been implemented back in their organisations, because they had better understanding of the families and the issues that they were affected. They were taking that learning back to their organisations and sharing it, which I thought was very refreshing as well.

– Project lead on statutory sector partner

A final benefit to organisations that we observed was the development of **cross-agency respect and credibility**. This was particularly evident for community and voluntary sector organisations working with statutory services.

We have a good working relationship ... I think we've become quite respected. That we, we don't overreact, that we're not, you know, always looking for the Trust's solution. But so that when we do come to them, they're quite open to what we're asking, or what we're suggesting...so I think we have quite a good relationship with them in that way.

– Community organisation on statutory partner

Spotlight on partnerships between community and voluntary and statutory sector organisations/agencies

Although not all partnerships in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme were between statutory and community/voluntary organisations, there are unique challenges and opportunities for these partnerships worth highlighting. One difficulty was in navigating the different priorities and perspectives between the two sectors, in relation to stringency of referral criteria and use of resources (Edgley & Avis, 2007). There was a feeling from some organisations that the community/voluntary sector was not respected or taken seriously or was seen as less professional than statutory services. Statutory services were often perceived as gatekeeping resources and/or families, highlighting a power imbalance between community and statutory organisations or agencies. For example,

We're working for families' mental health. And so when people come in here, and we think this person is suicidal, and we immediately get them an appointment with the GP, they go to the GP, the GP assesses them and says, "No, you don't meet my threshold for suicidal." So we can't achieve our outcomes for this family. Because the additional supports that we can't provide, we can't get for them, because the statutory service does not respect our sort of professional opinion that this person is at risk.

– Community organisation lead

So the main barriers we found were that the statutory agencies saw themselves being much more important than we were.

– Staff member, community organisation

I think some of the people from the schools who maybe would have class(ed) what they did as family support, it wasn't family support, and they find it very hard to let go and let us give the families the support.

– Family support lead, community organisation

The strong partnerships evidenced in the programme between community and voluntary sector and statutory sector organisations clearly demonstrated that this need not be the case. These relationships took work and were not always easy to navigate but were acknowledged as worth the effort:

There was very constructive feedback. And, but we did take a lot on the chin. And they took, they took constructive feedback from us as well. We've always had a relationship with social services. But I don't know if there was ever, like a full understanding before the project but our relationship definitely has grown and communication has been key... I think we've all sort of grown in empathy and understanding and then we have tried to share our learnings with social work teams as well, and that that work has been invaluable.

– Community sector lead on statutory sector partner

This power imbalance was overcome when both parties were able to acknowledge their different roles and responsibilities and ways of working while maintaining the view that both were equal as experts in different domains. In the following example this was acknowledged by simply rotating the chair for meetings to effectively share power.

In the steering group, you see, there was a rotation of chair one year to be statutory one year to be voluntary community sector.

– Community organisation lead

Another community organisation highlighted the importance of empowering each other and working to reduce defensiveness and improve mutual understanding.

I kind of wonder when it comes to different professionals in different roles, it's really important that we, in the work that we're doing, are empowered as well, in order to be able to do our work, that is empowering... I imagine the social workers' defence would be 'it's on a need to know basis'; that's the thing that we get a lot. But actually, whenever we talk about really effective sharing of information, and that, of course, the service user is at the core of that and knows exactly what's going to be shared because it's about their life... if we can approach that in a way that is... solution focused thinking, because we can get so disillusioned, because it is frustrating. But taking the approach of 'help me understand why this decision has been made, or I wonder if this is something that could be tried and worked in this context'... But we need to be empowered to be able to do that, too.

– Community sector organisation

As mentioned previously, an opportunity to the intersection of community/voluntary services partnering with statutory services was the ability for the former to vouch for the latter. The voluntary sector is generally perceived more warmly (Research in Practice, 2019), and the statutory service can evoke more fear and suspicion. In this case the voluntary sector can advocate on behalf of statutory services and improve their perception among service users. We also observed converse benefits for voluntary organisations, where they were able to gain credibility and become recognised and respected among the statutory sector, opening opportunities for funding and further collaboration.

There has been a shift now ... where there's more, there's more sort of appreciation for voluntary sector and what we can offer and that partnership working has been invaluable.

– Community sector on the outcomes of successful partnership with the statutory sector

Having the [statutory sector partner] and all of that that brings with it - it gives credit to our work.

– Community sector lead

You can hear more about the benefits of cross-sector partnerships [in this video](#) from our conference focused on sharing the learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme. Three partnerships share directly what enabled their partnership to work for the benefit of families. [A short summary of the conference is available here.](#)

We have alluded to the enablers of good partnership working above. In the next section we focus on the enablers and challenges in building and maintaining successful partnerships between organisations.

What enables good partnership working?

The key enablers identified from our conversations with organisations included the importance of a shared goal while maintaining distinct roles. Successful partners brought mutual benefit, mutual respect, and complementary expertise. Partnerships were established and maintained through the conscious investment of time and effort to establish and maintain good communication, positive relationships, and trust between partners. Partnerships that were acknowledged and recognised as important at all levels of the organisations (delivery, management, strategic/board level) were better supported and less likely to fail.



Shared Goals

Ultimately the purpose underpinning each partnership in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme was a shared goal of improving the lives of families. Existing evidence demonstrates that this shared goal is a core aspect for achieving strong interagency collaboration (Hanleybrown et al., 2012) and building and sustaining trust (Sancino & Sicilia, 2013). This was reflected by the partnerships in the programme.

There's no point having partners on board unless they're ideologically shared vision with organisations.

– Funding officer

The reason why it's worked is because this felt like something very new, just with that whole family approach and something that was very much needed in the area. So everyone that was on that partnership group felt the same and had the same the same goal.

– Project lead

While a shared vision is essential it is not sufficient and is instead ideally accompanied by a strategic plan and common values towards achieving that vision (De Carolis et al., 2007; Statham, 2011) as differences in organisational philosophy and mission can hamper the collaboration (Grosso et al., 2019). An example from our data highlights two organisations which had a shared goal of supporting families with disabilities but were not aligned in their approach or understanding.

We found we were working in partnership with one of the organisations - it ended up very bad. [Funder] had to get involved... they were looking to put two workers in their place for children who would have communication issues like my own grandchild has one, that's not a disability, you understand, you might class it as a disability but it's not - you have core services out in the community that work with that. Really that resource was being wasted.

– Project lead

Distinct roles, mutual respect, and complementary expertise

As noted earlier, partnership between voluntary and statutory sector organisations thrived when they respected each other. Having distinct roles and not 'stepping on each other's toes' was seen as an important enabler.

Recognising and respecting and learning each other's roles and being big enough to say this isn't working.

– Project lead

You're all in the same space in terms of supporting families, but nobody's stepping on anyone's toes that you're all actually getting, there's a mutual benefit.

– Project staff

We also made an appreciation of their service, we respected and understood their roles, and they respected and understood [our project]. So there's a mutual understanding there.

– Community sector project lead on statutory partner

It was being very open and transparent about what our roles were from the start.

– Project lead on what enabled their successful partnership

There was particular synergy where services were distinct from each other, for example large organisations benefited from smaller organisations on-the-ground knowledge and responsiveness, and in return could demonstrate higher level governance structures and tools to the smaller organisations. This mutual culture of sharing and partnership may work towards overcoming some of the disadvantage smaller organisations face when bidding for tenders (Lamothe, 2015).

We have a belief that this needs to be done. And it's better done together. I think there's greater power we can do together. We could do so much more.

– Project lead

We benefited from it with [community partner]; that partnership is fairly strong, it's fairly strong.. they were mainstream, but it did work, you know, they have benefited from training and they would ring for advice, if they have anybody presenting with autism, we refer one of them into the family support team, you know, so that relationship worked really well with a mainstream organisation, we will get some money for resources and they do activities and different things like that.

- Project staff

Another key element was not acting, or feeling like, partners were in competition with one another. When resources are limited organisations working in the same space can be reluctant to share ideas and resources. Having distinct roles diffused that sense of competition:

So what works really well for us is, I suppose, because we do different things, there isn't that sense of competitiveness - that we can support each other in that.

- Project staff

Mutual benefit

Partnerships were most successful when each partner stood to benefit. Partnerships that were viewed as “a one-way street”, where one partner gave more than they received, generated frustration and bad feeling. The breakdown of partnerships was more likely when partners did not contribute equally to realising benefits, for both partners and the families they served. For example, National Lottery Community Fund funding officers consistently commented on partnerships that were one-sided and “there in name only”.

There's something that's missing in any partnership, in terms of, I mean, some of these partnerships, they're people just there in name only. And they turn up because it looks good for [partner] to be seen to be involved [but]... that's as far as it goes.

– Funding officer

Mutual benefit was more likely to be realised when goals were aligned, and each organisation played a distinct but equally valued role in working towards the goal. Recognising the mutual benefit of a partnership can sometimes mean acknowledging the weaker areas in your own organisation and being able to ask for help from other organisations in their particular area of expertise:

We have really tried to make links with other community groups, and make sure that - because we know we can't do everything, and we know we're not specialists in every area - so what we can do we share with other people and make sure they know about it. But Likewise, we try and get help from other community organisations. If so, if it is about debt, or budget, then we would source someone else's help around that. So it's been very beneficial to us to have that approach, and make sure that our families know exactly where to go and get help. And work together with other organisations to do that.

– Project lead

Good Communication

Open, consistent, and frank communication has a role in establishing a shared vision and accompanying culture and strategy for achieving those goals, but it is also essential for identifying and addressing ongoing challenges within the partnership (De Carolis et al., 2007) and developing clear roles and expectations for both partners, which research points to being one of the key barriers to effective collaboration (Grosso et al., 2019; Statham, 2011). Our organisations recommended a good balance of formal and informal communication and endorsed having both a deliberate meeting schedule and a culture of casual contact, without becoming either too sparse or too overbearing (Grosso et al., 2019).

(It) was a very, very positive partnership from, from the very start, we even make them on a quarterly basis to do a formal review of the service.

– Project lead

Having a clearly established formal agreement of roles, expectations and direction between partners can ameliorate a lot of problems before they arise and limit the degree of disruption when there are staff changes.

I'm sure that we will still have community partners in whatever form our project takes moving forward. But it will be very considered. Again, for the community partners, to be fair to them, there was no clear criteria set out of what was expected from them or how that reciprocal relationship would work. So you're trying to forge a relationship by saying, "Well, look, we'll put this into your service". Then there's very little come on back the

other way. How do you broach that as a worker, when that's not a) not your role and b), then go back to them and go, "well wait, we didn't agree to that." Yeah, we've got all this to do, we don't have time for this too

- Funding officer

We saw evidence that efforts to improve day to day communication was important for projects to succeed. Examples included regular communication through different channels such as leaflets and reminders, emails, informal conversations, co-location of staff and a formal schedule of meetings – all had a positive impact on communication.

That's been the real difference that we are having - the schools have confidence in us and in our abilities and are very willing to pass on referrals and ...communication is absolutely essential for that to happen.

- Project lead

Investment of Time and Resources

From both our data and the international literature, one of the key elements in developing and maintaining partnership relationships is a conscious and deliberate effort to invest time and energy (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2008; Statham, 2011), and a prior understanding that partnerships aren't easy. They don't "just happen".

It was difficult, but they then took the time to trust one another, and build up the relationships to realize that they were coming together for the, you know, for the good of the families.

-Funding officer

It's getting buy in before we applied for the funding. So obviously going in partnership, that's where it begins, you begin looking at a project development, and we did a scoping study. we involved social services at that time, and we brought social workers to a meeting and we did a scoping study with them to say, you know, we're seeing an identified gap, give us your thoughts, give us your views. So we did a huge scoping study with our women, with our children with our staff. And so I suppose if you go back to the beginning, I think that's where we formed the relationship and the working relationship.

- Project lead

Partnerships are difficult. And we found that the partnerships were difficult through the five years in our programme, and statutory agencies may have a named person sitting on the partnership, and the box is checked for them. But if that individual doesn't attend meetings, or bring something to the table, then the value of having them there is questionable. So however, when people take a real interest in the project and bring their own ideas to it, then the partnership can be enhanced, and also change of staff and different organisations, people moving on to different jobs and things, that had a big impact on the partnership being

strong over the past five years

– Project lead

This involves a significant upfront time investment in developing good relationship and strong foundations and continuing commitment by means of **dedicating specific employee hours** to actively working on the partnership rather than hoping that the partnership work will be absorbed into their current workloads.

But I think there was an awful lot of work on my part of the start - really sustaining what the partnership, making sure everybody felt as equal as a partnership - that one wasn't more important than the other. It was difficult, but they then took the time to trust one another, and build up the relationships to realise that they were coming together for the, you know, for the good of the families.

-Project lead

One of my groups - I don't think their statutory partners ever turned up. They always have excuses. And then it gets handed over to somebody else and their workload's too great so they can't come along. So really, it's partnership in name only

– Funding officer

And somewhere to the best of their ability, that's not because they were being selfish, it's just because they have a mountain of work to do to and we have to think about what's realistic for them. And also, they have parameters for their own funders.

-Project lead

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that partnership work will come with some difficulties.

Their ideas about interventions and training often created difficulties for us. So only their own tutors could be used within the structures that we had set up. And where we went outside of that, we had to create a different structure so that we could get these people paid. So partnership work - it worked and has some positive effects, but still, it had some negative effects as well.

-Project lead

Retaining employees is also important for the development and maintenance of relationships and trust across organisational partnerships (Butler et al., 2017) and our research highlighted that those individual relationships could make or break a partnership, with conflicting personalities disrupting partnership aims, and partnerships ending with the loss of the relevant staff.

So each time something changes, a new person comes in with their interpretation of the partnership - with how they see it, and what they think it should be. And so yeah, managing just personality changes and personnel changes is definitely a challenge in it.

-Project lead

Existing research echoes this point as staff attrition leads to the shedding of institutional knowledge, credibility and interpersonal relationships which are key to sustaining partnerships (Grosso et al., 2019; National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2008). Organisations expressed frustration that the majority of funding streams are on a short-term cycle which limits their ability to offer long term contracts to staff and in turn negatively impacts staff retention. Successful partnerships overcame churn in staffing, to some degree, through consistent effort and communication to keep the partnership 'live' in both organisations.

Partnership in a pandemic

The programme operated throughout the COVID pandemic that began in early 2020. Through both our data and the wider research literature, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to publicly promote and recognise the work of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE). Organisations were able to mobilise quickly and use their existing partnerships or form new functional relationships from their networks to meet the immediate needs of communities, particularly in areas like food or fuel poverty (Barker & Russell, 2020; Power et al., 2020). Rapid adoption of digital technology boosted connectivity across organisations in a time and cost-effective manner, supporting communication as a key enabler of good partnership working. Existing partnerships enabled innovation in response to a crisis while maintaining a strong focus on meeting the needs of families. Our data suggests crisis strengthened ties between voluntary and statutory organisations through necessity, and because they were enacting '**person-centred**' care (Brynnner, McBride & Weakley, 2021). The grantees provided vital socio-emotional and practical support where vulnerable families had nothing else to fall back on when statutory services were forced to close their doors or severely limit their in-person services in the early stages of the crisis and lockdowns. This phenomenon was not unique to the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme (Weeks, 2020; Davies et al., 2021). However, it's also important to recognise these stronger communication links and referral pathways exacerbated the workload and emotional strain some VCSE staff were facing. They were taking on more than ever before, with less funding than ever before (Nottingham Trent University, 2021; Young & Goodall, 2021).

Although some partnerships formed during lockdowns responded to immediate needs and already have dissolved, the pre-existing needs of families have heightened during the pandemic, putting both VCSE and statutory sectors under immense pressure. Maintaining partnerships necessitates time, resources, and sensitivity, all of which are challenging to maintain given the ongoing economic recession and the emotional exhaustion or compassion fatigue staff face. Organisations told us that they need community and voluntary

and statutory partnerships to be embedded within our statutory systems, incorporated into budgets, and pursued proactively over the longer term rather than reactively or on a short cycle.

If anything, COVID has shown [that the] community and voluntary sector was able to continue to work when the chips were down, I think [statutory agencies/funders] need to stand up and see that, you know, and how much statutory services have used the charity and voluntary sector, you know, over this last year. And yeah, there needs to be payback.

– Project lead

Conclusion

The Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme and the generous and honest reflections from the organisations and projects has generated a rich understanding of what worked, and what did not, in partnership working for family support. Partnerships *did not* always work out in practice. For those that did work they delivered benefits for families *and* the partner organisations.

Successful partnerships were characterised as: having shared goals, involving partners that respected and valued each other's distinct role, realising mutual benefit, needing time and effort invested. In this programme, there was particular success where partner organisations were able to acknowledge their differences and respect each other as equal, as experts in different domains. Conversely, we have observed that where mutual respect is lacking, there are consequences for families and that the inequalities they already face can be exacerbated.

To summarise our key learning:

- Partnerships can benefit organisations and what is beneficial to organisations is, in many cases beneficial to families.
- Partnership for partnership's sake is unlikely to work. A focus on incentives, the motivations, and reasons for partnership working by funders/ commissioners is important.
- Partnerships take time, attention, and effort to build and sustain.
- Organisations may benefit from practical external support to get off to a strong start and overcome any problems that arise.
- Learning from this and other projects in relation to effective statutory and VCSE partnership working is important in informing service planning, delivery and in contributing to wider discussions about the integration/complementarity of statutory and VCSE services, supports and relationships across NI.

Short term funding undermines partnership

A key **message for funders** is that one of the barriers to collaboration and partnership working is short term funding. Effective partnership working and collaboration are dependent on shared vision, relationship, and trust and these take time to develop. Can funding be made available for longer periods?

Stronger partnership working benefits families experiencing adversity

The **key message for those providing services or families** is that the benefits of strong partnership working for families and partners was clearly evident in our data. Building good partnerships requires effort, trust, and respect, and takes time and investment. We recognise that time and resources for anything outside of the core work is precious and scarce, but without investment in partnership working, there will be holes in the safety net that you work so hard to put in place for families.

Value community and statutory sector partnerships

Mutual respect is vital for successful and sustainable partnerships. The value of the community and voluntary sector was writ large in a crisis. As we begin to emerge from the pandemic and attention shifts back to the ongoing needs of families facing adversities, will the recognition and respect for the community and voluntary sector be maintained?

We'll give the final words on the value of partnership to a project lead who worked to build a partnership that faced numerous challenges but ultimately continues to successfully deliver services for some of the most marginalised families in Northern Ireland:

“We have a belief that this needs to be done. And it's better done together. There's greater power when we can do together. We can do so much more.”

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Appendix 1: Reflections on Partnership Working from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Conference

There was robust discussion about partnership working in the breakout rooms which reflect the findings in this paper. Partnership requires effort, mutual trust and respect and has the potential to expand and improve services for families.



There is legislation in NI to mandate Departments and agencies to work together for better outcomes. This does not seem to be realising its potential yet. Good structures such as CYPSP exist

What actions are necessary to build effective partnership working within the V/C sector and between the V/C sector and statutory sector? It takes all partners to see the value of each other. Takes a long time to build – coming to the table with openness and willingness to share for the benefit of the partnership and families and not focusing on what your organisation can ‘get out of’ a partnership.

Partnership needs to be at all levels in an organisation; on the ground, middle management, and senior leaders. When resources are stretched and teams understaffed you’re fighting fires so time for partnership is limited – making sure there is time and staffing levels to enable people to do their jobs well AND have the time to develop and maintain partnerships.

Need more respect for the C&V sector and lose the old view that the statutory are the professionals... We need to recognise each other’s skills and expertise. It will help us do our jobs better. Families suffer when it doesn’t happen.

Trust mutual respect and equality across the sectors are key to building effective partnership working.

Building effective relationships creates such a strong foundation for innovation, problem-solving and sustainability.