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Does size really matter?

Collaborative working between large and small voluntary and community organisations



Executive summary report

Linda Joy Mitchell & Kelly A Drake

Introduction

Why study large and small collaborative working?

Collaborative working is not a new phenomenon within the voluntary and community sector (VCS). However, the different methods and processes employed by organisations to set up and run such partnerships have been the subject of renewed interest. Recent research studies have identified the steps and variables within the development and implementation of collaborative working; however, this study focuses on a new question – does size matter in organisational collaboration and, if so, what works and why?

This study is the first of its kind in the UK. It emerged after initial scoping by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) identified a limited number of large national voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) working in partnership with independent small local organisations. Large VCOs vocalised their enthusiasm for these partnership strategies, but there was no information documenting how small organisations experienced these arrangements. Similarly, there was a gap in the research focusing on how size, organisational culture, identity and mission impact on the success or otherwise of such large small partnerships.

Further understanding about this large small model of collaboration has also been brought about by the growing interest in the role the VCS plays in the delivery of public services. Although contract procurement procedures are opening up, evidence shows that this may particularly benefit the larger and potentially better resourced organisation, rather than the smaller independent one. Ironically, it is often the services and local expertise of small organisations that public agencies are most interested in harnessing.

The government's national capacity building and infrastructure strategy 2004, ChangeUp, is also driving the agenda by encouraging national and local VCOs to collaborate. Funders and, to some extent, the public feel that there are too many charities, which risks service duplication. Additionally, there appears to be a rather negative public perception of the sector as being dominated by the big high profile players. These factors, added to the current positive trend towards localism, are driving the need to better understand and encourage different models of collaborative working.

Scope of the study

One hundred and sixty organisations and individuals responded to an initial call for information about large and small partnerships. 'Large small' was defined as 'in relation to each other'. Seventy separate partnerships were followed up and a diverse sample of 20 was chosen. From this sample, six partnerships were selected for in-depth case study follow-up, and structured interviews were held with both the large and the small partner organisations. While many of the issues the large small partnerships faced were generic to all partnership working, the research aimed to unpick issues that related specifically to the large small dynamic within the collaboration.

A comprehensive literature review of recent research work about partnership working mirrored key findings from this study, namely that trust, approach and motivation for developing partnerships between organisations is of equal importance to structure, legal considerations and methodologies used. Lead organisations have a crucial role to play, and time and commitment are the critical ingredients for successful large small collaboration.

Special thanks must go to all the case study organisations, and to the entrepreneurial staff and leaders who were prepared to be open and transparent about their large small partnership experience. This study would not have been possible without their willingness to share ideas and experiences – 'warts and all'.

Focus of this report

This executive summary report outlines the key findings from the study for the VCS, funders, commissioners and government. Of specific interest are the structures, drivers, benefits, barriers and what works within large small collaboration. The case studies demonstrate innovative practice and thinking as well as the VCS 'doing business' in a new way.

The case studies

Addaction and Action for Change

This partnership was set up in 2000 between a large national drug service provider, and a smaller local alcohol service provider. Together the partnership successfully won a public service contract to provide a single access drug and alcohol service across Brighton and Hove.

Barnardo's South West and Off the Record

The Director of Off the Record, a small voluntary organisation working in the Bath and North East Somerset area, initiated this partnership in 2001. The two organisations work together to run Shout Out, a specialist advocacy service for young people.

Barnardo's South West and the Black Communities Education Support Group

This partnership seeks to provide social, educational and support services to black children, young people and their families across Bristol. The Shakti Imani Inclusion Project is a separate body established by both partners and described as the 'expression of the spirit of partnership'. Barnardo's is the primary funder and the accountable body for Shakti Imani, with additional funding coming from the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB6) and the local education authority.

Lowestoft into Wark Partnership

This community-based regeneration consortium comprises the Shaw Trust and 26 small local organisations, including YMCA Training, the Family Welfare Association, DIAL and the Lowestoft Enterprise Trust Ltd. Together they support people who are disabled or disadvantaged into work. Core projects include a young people's service, new business start-ups, a supported employment programme and a volunteer programme. New partnerships have grown from this initiative, for example ICT Lowestoft has gone on to set up 10 community-based ICT centres.

NCH and the Warwickshire Children's Fund

NCH West Midlands runs the Warwickshire Children's Fund. Relate (Rugby North West) and ILEAP were two of the 20 small local VCOs sub-contracted to provide services to the fund since it began in 2003.

Neither of the small organisations interviewed had any previous experience of public service contracting.

Rethink – Severe Mental Illness and Enfield Women’s Aid Ltd

Rethink works with a large number of local and regional partner agencies to deliver 400 community-based mental health services, 120 local support groups, membership and national advice services. This partnership will offer a new service at Enfield Women’s Aid Ltd for women experiencing mental health problems and domestic violence.

Rethink – Severe Mental Illness and The Mellow Campaign

The Mellow Campaign (TMC) was established in 2000 to reduce the over-representation of young African and Caribbean men in mental health services and to develop alternative responses to mental distress. This East London-based partnership between TMC and Rethink will be an early intervention service for care leavers and will provide a new mentoring-style project aiming to engage local black and minority ethnic people and communities in mentoring young African and Caribbean people leaving care.

Sunshine Healthy Living Project

This partnership is a complex cluster of voluntary and statutory, large and small, local, regional and national organisations. All partners are ‘independent’ but have come together under the umbrella of a ‘healthy living project’ to deliver a range of services within a clearly defined geographical rural area.

Key findings

Structures and models

‘We hold the purse, they hold the power – this would never have happened in local government.’ **Shaw Trust**

The structures of the large small partnerships in the study can be essentially defined by the context and the function of their partnership – in other words ‘how’ they do it is dictated by ‘why’ they do it. In some cases it was funders who had stipulated how the partnership should be structured, but this was not seen as particularly helpful to the development of partnership equality. Many partnerships had organically grown their structures, making decisions about

management and governance along the way. The accountable body was not always the large organisation, and interestingly, not always a partner organisation.

The models and structures that large and small partnerships have developed are not easily replicable 'clear bright lines'. In some cases, the employment and management of project staff was an equally shared responsibility and this was thought to be crucial. In the larger consortia examples, dedicated members of staff were required to manage and support the partnerships, especially where there were a large number of small community-based partners. Some partnerships had created separate but merged identities, while others retained a great deal of independence. Successful large small collaborations appeared to be characterised by large organisations who physically share resources and 'power', and small organisations who are realistic and pragmatic about equality.

'As a small organisation you can't pretend you are equal to the large. You develop equality but equality is not only 50:50, it's also about the common respect and dignity against the strengths and weaknesses of both organisations.' **Action for Change**

The study does not attempt to draw overarching conclusions about which 'models' work better than others as they are so context-specific. Nevertheless, within the eight case studies, four basic structures were identified:

- One large and one small organisation, generally described as a **'partnership of equals'**.
- **Consortia** of large and small organisations where the **largest organisation** within the consortia structure is the **accountable/lead body** to the funder.
- **Consortia** of large and small organisations with a **separate independent body accountable** to the funder.
- **A large organisation** which **formally sub-contracts** with a range of small local organisations to deliver a service. This model calls itself a partnership, but recognises that it could not be termed a 'partnership of equals'.

Why they do it – drivers

'We could have moved in and delivered such a service but this can be destructive locally. There is a great need for local alliances and lots to be gained by taking the secondary role in a partnership.' **Barnardo's**

It would be fair to say that a significant number of key players were driven by opportunistic considerations rather than a planned, documented and strategic approach. Funding considerations and organisational growth seem to sit at the heart of why large and small organisations work in partnership.

Primary drivers

These were:

- A significant new funding programme which demanded a partnership approach to bidding.
- The stipulations of local authority commissioning bodies, e.g. to streamline local public service delivery mechanisms.
- A specific strategic or mission-driven decision taken by organisations to find partners who will support development of new/existing service delivery.

Case study organisations also reported being influenced by a combination of these secondary but important drivers:

- Specific exchange or buy-in of specialist skills and capacity building.
- Need to expand service delivery or gain a presence in a new geographical area.
- Building local connections and community alliances.
- Providing a more joined-up service delivery package for community beneficiaries and end users.
- 'Piggybacking' on the kudos and credibility of a larger well-known and reputable agency.

Individual, innovative and creative people are personally driving much of this work. Such leaders indicated that further training and knowledge sharing opportunities would be beneficial to support staff motivation and skill development. Buddying and project visit schemes, along with the development of a partnership skills module on voluntary sector training courses, could encourage more skilled people to form successful collaborations and reduce the need to depend so heavily on local personalities.

Many of these partnerships were developed on the back of a prior knowledge and experience of working together. This may be disadvantageous to small organisations, which may not have the spare capacity to engage in conferences and networks. Increased access to opportunities for meeting and greeting new potential partners was requested by a number of case study interviewees.

Benefits

'Despite initial scepticism, I've found that this process has reduced our isolation and has certainly cut down on duplication. Being involved has raised our profile and given us the support of belonging to a larger organisation.' **ILEAP**

Partnership generally does bring advantages in and of itself. The large/small partnerships reported an additional range of benefits:

- Real growth in the small agencies – size, turnover and confidence.
- Capacity building – primarily for the benefit of the small by the large. Small organisations reported being able to access intellectual resources, financial expertise, HR support, assistance with strategic and action planning, free or reduced-cost training, and systems policies and procedures such as monitoring and performance review processes.
- Increase in an organisational sense of risk taking and trust of others.
- Better and embedded community connections for large organisations.
- A joined-up sector lessening duplication – the consortia and sub-contracting examples in particular created new 'joined-up' sectors.
- A reduction in isolation felt by small VCOs.
- An increased ability and willingness to address diversity issues.
- New approaches to collaborative commissioning.
- Improved access to a range of services and benefits for end users.

Barriers

'I don't think there was an appreciation of how much work was needed to capacity build to deliver what was promised.'

Sunshine Healthy Living Project

None of the case studies were convinced that cost benefit savings could be made in the initial stages of development. Many indicated that the real costs were possibly higher, as two sets of management costs had to be recovered and in some cases additional staffing was required to manage the partnership.

The primary barriers were reported as a lack of funded development time, cultural misunderstandings, and psychological barriers about loss of identity or being 'taken over'. Concerns about funding, financial risk and future sustainability also featured heavily and although this is not 'news', it reiterates key messages to

government, funders, local authorities, and commissioners. Barriers identified were therefore:

- Unfunded and unrecoverable partnership development time and costs.
- Differing perceptions of 'the other' and a failure to take into account the complex values, strengths, weaknesses and working cultures of large and small organisations.
- Fears about 'take over' on the part of the small organisations and feelings of mistrust or suspicion about the idea of working more closely with large organisations.
- Insensitivity of approach by the large organisation or a failure to really share power, influence and resources.
- Lack of information about how large small partnerships could operate and a lack of knowledge about replicable role models.
- The operation of funding programmes and in some cases funder stipulations, or scepticism about the benefits of a large small partnership approach.
- Concerns about long-term sustainability and a lack of exit strategies and evaluation tools.

What works in large small collaborations?

'It was key to have one manager, who was jointly supervised. This allowed the whole thing to be one unit. If we had each appointed a manager it would have been a disaster.' **Addaction**

Collaboration and partnership require any organisation to think through a number of key questions: why are we doing it? who do we involve? how will it work? In large small collaborative partnerships, the potential for misunderstandings is increased because of the specific dynamic created by organisations of differing sizes working together. Size affects confidence, real or perceived power bases, capacity, resources, systems capability, methods of working, values and operational processes.

In general, large small partnerships work best for small organisations where they have been realistic about their strengths and weaknesses and are willing to work with others, putting aside issues of history and personal preference. Where it has worked best for large organisations, it has required them to fully address the central issues of cultural difference and their approach. Differing understanding and experiences of hierarchy, informality, formality, value system, communication

style etc must all be teased out, discussed and agreed. Specific attention to this at the set-up phase of a large small partnership is absolutely crucial for its later success.

'As the bigger agency, we have to hold ourselves in check at times and not plough ahead with decisions and ideas – consultation with all the players can take a great deal of time but is absolutely crucial.'

Barnardo's

Although much has been previously reported about cultural clash in partnership development, there seems to be very little attention paid to understanding how it actually affects practice, and the processes that people can employ to work with differing organisational cultures. The way that staff and volunteers of organisations of differing size 'feel and think' about working in partnership can have a far-reaching inhibiting effect. Issues such as the fears and realities of 'take over' and 'market squeezing', sensitivity of approach needed by the large agency, and an openness to build on the best elements of each other's culture by the small agency need to be taken on board. The potential for a 'power' imbalance within large small partnerships is much greater. For it to work, both the large and the small have to be prepared to take risks, share resources, be less defensive and territorial, open to change, and transparent about communication, needs, strengths and weaknesses.

'It's all unknown territory really as I have never worked with Rethink as an agency before – it will be a telling time when differing ways of working come to light.' **Enfield Womens Aid Ltd**

Although this large small model of partnership achieves great benefits, it should not be seen as a panacea to the challenge of increased public service delivery by small- and medium-sized organisations. Indeed, the researchers question whether the public service driver should be promoted as key. The danger in this is a skewing of the sector's unique role. Partnerships have to be about more than just competitive advantage; organisations crucially need to share the same vision, and partnerships have succeeded where time has been taken to thrash out the nuances of their shared vision.

The case studies demonstrate that organisations are driven by far more than 'just the money'. However, all of them have still needed to make a business case for investing in future collaborations and indeed the continuation of their

current ones. This large small model of working, while hugely successful, will not be for everyone. Some small organisations will not wish to join in partnerships with large national agencies, preferring instead to form local collaborations. Indeed, an alternative model was suggested where a large national agency contracts with the small community organisation not to come into the local area, but instead to build an alliance and leave local delivery almost entirely to the small organisation.

'We had to do a lot of talking about risk scenarios and management; this was then written into the partnership agreement. There is a sense of mutual dependency in this partnership – openness and trust about the tricky and complex areas.' **Off the Record**

Conclusions and recommendations

The study concludes that this collaborative model has great benefits for organisations as another way of developing innovative services and building organisational capacity. It also concludes that the relative size of partner organisations really does matter and a conscious acknowledgement of this factor works to support successful structures and implementation.

The researchers strongly encourage anyone thinking about this working model to read the full study report, specifically the in-depth case studies. This can be read online or downloaded for free at www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/oneplusone. NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborate has links to information and guidance for voluntary and community organisations considering whether and how to work together. www.ourpartnership.org.uk features best practice guidance and discussion forums on partnership working.

Recommendations have been developed based on consultation with the case study partnerships. They focus on specific ideas and suggestions about support services that the large small partnerships would have found most useful in the set-up and development phase. The recommendations aim to critically address skill gaps, the need for further piloting of this model and access to development support.

A marketing, communications and training strategy should be developed to build sector capacity to engage in further large small collaborations

Better communication is required about the particular issues large and small organisations face when working together and how to overcome specific problems related to this partnership dynamic. In addition to providing practical information about partnership, which some existing publications already address, information has to change ‘hearts and minds’ and convince both large and small that this is a beneficial way of working. The most effective way to do this is to show how it has been done before and what the benefits have been.

Further action research – demonstration pilots

There is a need to build on existing knowledge about which large small partnership structures work best in which circumstances. This study has considered a limited number of such partnerships, but has uncovered a much larger number of initiatives currently in the pipeline, particularly among large national organisations looking to develop this way of working as a new strategic objective. A pilot round of supported large small partnership working would help to deepen understanding and build interest.

Large small development fund

Overwhelmingly, the biggest request from the partnerships was for more hands-on support during the development and delivery phase, and access to monies to fund ‘capacity to build capacity’ and development time.

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Regent's Wharf
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL

Tel: 020 7713 6161

Fax: 020 7713 6300

Textphone: 0800 01 88 111

Email: partnership@ncvo-vol.org.uk

Websites: www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Need to know? www.askNCVO.org.uk

HelpDesk: 0800 2 798 798

or helpdesk@askncvo.org.uk

Charity Registration: 225922



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Study funded by 
Home Office
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