



Bold thinking for better health

How to support partnership working

Learning from the
Healthy Communities
Together programme

Healthy Communities
Together programme team

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Setting up a partnership programme: key considerations

Over a three-year period, The King's Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund worked with cross-sector partnerships in five places to facilitate and learn about partnership working that seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of local communities.

We learnt that there is no template for partnership working, and creating the conditions for it to flourish can be complex. The points below give a short summary of key learning points in relation to designing, funding and overseeing ways to support partnership working.

The rest of this report presents the practical details and insights behind these learning points. We hope they can help you to think through how to encourage and support your own partnership programmes at local or national levels.

Establishing partnership programmes

- **Ensure strategic alignment:** Defining how partnership programmes align with or fit the context of organisational strategies and governance mechanisms is important for visibility, securing ongoing support and creating the potential for longer-term impact.
- **'Test and learn' approaches** require a level of flexibility to adapt and evolve. They also involve living with significantly more uncertainty than other types of grant and support programmes. It is important to be explicit about what test and learn means in terms of the delivery of each programme component.
- **Being less prescriptive** can engender a diversity of approaches and test ways of developing partnership working and what can be achieved. However, it is also more challenging to identify common ways of working that enable effective partnering when projects are focused on different issues and adopt different approaches to change.
- **Capture understandings and assumptions around the design of the programme** at the outset. This will act as a reference point for what you set out to do, why and where there are gaps in knowledge, and act as a resource to support changes in staffing and transitions in the programme.
- **Programmes that aim to support organisations to work differently are disruptive:** Be explicit about where there are possible constraints and challenges to doing things differently.



- **Connect with and learn from other places and organisations** engaged in designing and delivering similar programmes of work.
- **Factor in evaluation from the outset:** Approaches to evaluation should take into consideration both programme-level and local project activities.

Budgeting for partnership working

- **Be realistic about budgeting:** Ensure that the budget includes resources and capacity that go beyond the individual components of the programme, including consistent staff resource.
- **Partnership programmes need more resource than expected** due to their inherent complexity. This resource will need to flex and adapt throughout the life cycle of the programme.
- **There is no perfect model:** You have to work with the level of resource that is available.

Facilitating partnership working is a balancing act

- **A balance of input is needed,** between supporting organisations with learning to partner and with the delivery of plans to improve outcomes for communities.
- **There are choices about what you prioritise and when:** Supporting partnership working and letting that evolve comes with the risk of not delivering on outcomes, while a focus on achieving specific objectives risks an overemphasis on delivery, replicating traditional ways of working and limiting opportunities for transformational change.

Enabling and capturing learning is vital

- **A blended approach to the offer of support** may be beneficial, with a balance between bespoke consultancy and core support activities.
- **A clear structure of regular activities that support learning** and bring together the different partners and projects can be valuable, in addition to opportunities to facilitate peer-to-peer learning.
- **Ensure sufficient time and resource for capturing learning:** Working with partnerships to capture learning can facilitate ownership and skills-sharing. Additional time needs to be factored in where this relies on involvement of people where the activity is not part of their substantive role.
- **Organisations involved in delivering test and learn approaches** need to consider how they will take account of their own learning within this context.

Think about communications and influence

- **Include communication and dissemination within programme design:** Consider who you are seeking to influence and what you want to be able to demonstrate to others, and develop a communications plan with appropriate resource built in.
- **Consider the benefits and risks of using organisational reputation and brand:** There are opportunities for funders and support partners to use measures of perceived power to support partnerships with their aims. However, there is also a risk of playing out existing power dynamics, which could limit change in the long term.



Be realistic about expectations of change

- **It takes time to achieve transformational change in ways of working:** Have clear aims and ambitions to work towards, while recognising that this is the start of an ongoing process of building understanding and facilitating change.
- **Be prepared for progress to be variable** and often take unexpected pathways.
- **Change is best understood as a series of phases**, with active review points during which plans and objectives are reassessed and realigned with the aims of the partnership plans and programme.
- **Evaluations need to incorporate realistic expectations of change** and what might be captured given the unpredictable and slow pace of change. This is particularly notable when the approach is one of testing and learning, and within a context of significant complexity.



1 Introduction

In the past decade there has been a move towards greater partnership working within health and care through new models of care, the development of sustainability and transformation partnerships (STPs) and, most recently, integrated care systems (ICSs). In addition to this, policy has increasingly advocated for greater partnership working with communities, realising their potential in the design of services, supporting people with health and wellbeing, and contributing to public health and prevention.

Partnership working offers the opportunity to capitalise on the strengths and resources of different organisations and diverse skillsets of people, and to better inform decisions and to deliver improved outcomes for communities. One of the focal points of partnership working is between voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations, local authorities and NHS organisations. However, in practice, forming partnerships between these organisations has proved difficult.

There have been many local and national programmes to support partnership working in health and care, and findings from these have clarified the characteristics of good partnership working. However, there is less evidence on the practices of partnership working or, indeed, on the design and delivery of programmes of support to facilitate partnerships to develop and thrive.

About Healthy Communities Together

Healthy Communities Together (HCT) was a partnership between The King's Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) to develop and deliver a programme that supports partnership working between local authorities, the VCSE sector and NHS organisations to improve the health and wellbeing of communities. The programme invited applications from partnerships in September 2021 and after an initial development phase, supported five local partnerships across England until February 2025.



The HCT programme provided successful partnerships with:

- grant funding
- consultancy support for those leading the partnerships and to facilitate learning
- a learning support offer, to capture and share learning within local sites on what facilitates partnership working.

The programme was supported by a programme management group, including grant managers from TNLOF. It also received wider input and support from the TNLOF evaluation team, communications teams from our respective organisations, an advisory panel of organisations funding and supporting partnership working more widely, and an overarching governance group that provided oversight and enabled joint decisions on the approach and scope of the work overall.

About this report

A core element of the HCT programme ethos was ‘test and learn’ – to understand what enables partnership working, its potential for supporting positive change, and identifying the challenges and limitations of partnership working. In addition to supporting learning within each partnership, members of the delivery and programme teams committed to the same ethos.

Drawing on learning from the HCT programme, this report offers some key insights that aim to support others in developing and supporting partnership working.

The following sections are structured according to the three phases of the programme:

- planning and design
- delivery
- oversight, governance and impact.

There is no template for partnership working. Therefore, in each section, we have shared insights into the challenges we faced and the decisions we made, while drawing out key points of learning for those embarking on the same activities.

The next section explores the learning from HCT within the wider context of other funding and support programmes for partnership working, highlighting commonalities as well as different approaches to design and delivery.

The final sections provide a summary of wider learning for those involved in partnership working. They provide a useful reality check on expectations as well as questions that remain unanswered around partnership working.



2 Planning and design

The initial stages of developing a partnership programme began with establishing how the programme would fit the context and approach to work of our organisations, designing the programme itself, and choosing partnerships that would take part in the programme.

Establishing organisational context for a programme

The HCT programme came out of a desire from both The King's Fund and TNLCF to build on work that each organisation was doing around partnership working. This included work at The King's Fund on the role and contribution of VCSE organisations as part of the wider system, and on the development of strategic funding programmes focusing on system change and a partnership model of funding at TNLCF.

However, the programme also took each organisation beyond its current ways of working. Both organisations had to identify how HCT could fit their existing strategies or be incorporated into the future strategic direction. To do this, some adaptations were made to the programme and its framing to ensure strategic alignment.

In retrospect, an area we would pay more attention to is investing time at the start to clarify how we understood the aims and purpose of the programme, and capturing this. It is important to be explicit about this at the outset to provide context and to sense check whether the programme is continuing to meet those aims, particularly when there are changes in the programme and programme staff.

Key considerations

- How does your programme fit with your organisation's strategic direction? For instance, does it align with existing programmes of work, or an ambition to work in partnership? This is important for ensuring that the programme has organisational visibility and support.
- Explore understandings and assumptions around the design of the programme and how you will meet the demands of running the programme as an organisation(s). Capture this as a reference point to understand why you are doing what you are doing, and as a resource when managing changes in staff and transitions in the programme.
- Organisations seeking to deliver test and learn approaches need to consider how they will take account of their own learning within this context.



Design phase

The context of HCT was a recognition of the strengths of the VCSE sector, its knowledge and relationship with people and local communities, as well as the challenges of working in partnership with local authorities and NHS organisations to improve health and wellbeing. HCT was conceived as an opportunity to provide practical support to test the potential for partnership working to tackle established barriers to working more collaboratively, and to deliver transformational change that would address underlying structures and ways of working that limit impact. However, a literature review conducted at the outset to inform the learning strand found that there was not much evidence on the impact of partnership working. This highlighted that the implicit value HCT attached to partnership working was more of an assumption, so partnership working may be valuable for some things but not for others. We also recognised that although we understood the concept of partnership, we did not really know much about how to effectively bring that about.

The HCT programme formed two phases: a development phase to strengthen and develop partnerships and refine original plans, and a phase to support delivery through active partnership working. As a new programme, this was seen as a reasonable way of managing risk. Partnerships were assessed on their progress and how their plans aligned with the aims of the programme, as a means of progression to the second phase. However, the prospect of an assessment inadvertently introduced a feeling of competition between sites and the need to demonstrate their ‘best face’, which could be a barrier to facilitating a culture of learning.

The King’s Fund and TNLOF each took the lead in delivering components of the HCT programme, including the support offer, developing programme-wide learning and grant management. However, lack of attention to the dynamics of this and interdependencies between each component had unintended consequences. For instance, The King’s Fund’s role in delivering the support offer and learning capture led to stronger relationships with the HCT partnerships but also led to the grant management skills of TNLOF being underused. HCT partnerships also developed differential perceptions of each organisation, seeing one as providing the support and the other as the ‘funder’, rather than seeing both as contributing to a core aim.

Key considerations

- It takes time to achieve transformational change in ways of working. It is important to have clear aims and ambitions to work towards, while recognising that this is the start of an ongoing process of building understanding and facilitating change.
- It is important to acknowledge the assumptions that underpin the programme aims, including where the gaps in knowledge are.
- A development phase can be useful in testing, developing and reinforcing ways of working as part of the programme. However, be mindful of any unintended consequences of subsequent processes seeking to assess and determine continuation.
- There is no perfect model; you have to work with the level of resource that is available.



Choosing partnerships – setting the parameters

The HCT programme was very flexible, inviting partnerships to define how they would approach partnership working and the focus and aims of their work under HCT as a partnership. Although we had some ideas about the challenges transformational change needed to tackle, we did not know how it could be achieved. The result was more than 300 applications for the programme, including a huge diversity of proposals, which was reflected in the successfully funded partnerships.

However, many of the applications were for the delivery of individual projects, rather than reflecting the core aims of the HCT programme to focus on developing equal partnership and the ambition of transformational change. Although this was indicative of high levels of interest in the funding and support available, it may also have reflected a lack of clarity in what the programme was trying to do.

Key considerations

- When trying to test ways of developing partnership working and what can be achieved, being less prescriptive in the application stage can engender a diversity of approaches. This presents both an opportunity but also a risk of working in uncharted territory and the need to work with uncertainty.
- Encouraging a diverse range of approaches can be useful when you are seeking to explore change but are unsure how it can be achieved. However, it is more challenging to identify insights across the partnerships when there is limited commonality in plans.



3 Delivering the programme

Although the components of the HCT programme were outlined at the outset, we took an iterative approach to their delivery and day-to-day management of the programme. The result was that the decision-making had to be agile and respond to emerging learning. However, this approach also led to a series of unexpected consequences that earlier consideration and planning could have mitigated.

Supporting progress

Progress of HCT partnerships was impacted by a number of factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic, reorganisation of NHS organisations around ICSs and the deteriorating financial position within local authorities. All of these were unpredicted and reflect the complexity in which this work is taking place. At a programme level, we had to find a balance between maintaining the original aims of the programme while taking account of new challenges HCT partnerships may face at a local level.

Throughout the programme, we used a number of markers to assess the relevance and strength of each partnership, and their plans and progress made in relation to these. As the programme progressed, none of the original plans fully survived contact with reality, and perceptions of the relative strength and weaknesses in early stages were not necessarily borne out later on.

In making progress, some HCT partnerships focused on learning about and developing effective partnership working, while others prioritised delivery of activities that seek to engage and benefit communities. We were uncertain of what the balance should look like and over what timeframe, but our discussions and experience indicate that both are important.

A key challenge of the HCT programme was how to balance a test and learn approach with accountability to the programme aims. Input from across the team, including the consultancy support and learning team, was beneficial in informing decisions at programme level and, in more than one case, supporting HCT partnerships to address identified issues or revise plans. However, navigating high levels of uncertainty associated with an experimental and learning programme while obtaining a level of assurance about the direction of travel was tricky, particularly in identifying what constitutes a fair and consistent tipping point for intervention. Where the balance did not meet partnership expectations, there could be a perceived breakdown in trust.



Key considerations

- Be prepared for progress towards developing partnership working and delivery of plans to be variable, take considerable time and often take unexpected pathways. This makes for challenges in measuring progress and establishing mechanisms for accountability.
- There are choices about whether to prioritise and support partnership working and let that evolve, or to support partnerships around achieving specific objectives or issues. The former risks not delivering on outcomes, while the latter risks an overemphasis on delivery, replicating existing ways of working and limiting opportunities for transformational change.
- A balance of input is needed to support organisations with learning to partner, and with the delivery of plans to improve outcomes for communities.
- It is important to recognise and account for change and complexity.

Programme resourcing

At the outset, The King's Fund and TNLCF allocated leads for the HCT programme and capacity at the programme level to support design and delivery. We learnt how it can be challenging to protect this over a multi-year programme. In addition, both organisations experienced changes in personnel during the programme, and there were internal pressures to streamline resources due to financial constraints, and to reduce staffing capacity, including the need to reallocate staff from HCT to support other programmes of work. Continuity and capacity of staffing was managed as part of the programme, but it caused frustration for those involved when they could not contribute in the most consistent or effective manner possible. A lack of continuity could also limit the ability to build relationships at a strategic level.

One of the key challenges to securing and managing resources across the lifespan of the programme was its experimental nature, which led to difficulties in being able to predict activity.

Key considerations

- Be realistic about budgeting and ensure that the budget includes resources and capacity that goes beyond the individual components of the programme. This includes day-to-day programme management and support functions such as communications, as well as support to facilitate learning. This should include consistent staff resource.
- Longer-term programmes need to consider how they are visible and embedded within organisational business models and processes to ensure that appropriate resourcing can be maintained.



Delivery of support and grant management

The HCT programme delivery comprised three key components: consultancy support, learning capture and grant management. We were mindful of having clear lines of communication and not overwhelming the partnerships with requests. As a result, HCT partnerships received most day-to-day contact with their consultant and intermittent contact with the learning capture team. The interaction between grant managers and sites at times was predominately related to reporting requirements. Within this, the grant managers' approach was light touch, so that engagement with sites sought to be informal and discursive, rather than focused on form-filling and documentation.

Consultancy support

The consultancy support offer was delivered by consultants within The King's Fund leadership and organisational development directorate. Each consultant was allocated eight days a year to work with the HCT partnerships. There was no fixed offer; rather, the consultants worked with each partnership to develop a bespoke offer, combining tailored support with the role of critical friend to enable reflective practice and learning across the partnership and its activities.

What we learnt:

Some consultants were initially invited to join the HCT programme, while others were asked to join based on capacity and experience once the programme was up and running. However, in neither case were they involved in the early decisions around programme design. This led to tensions within the programme and a lack of shared understanding about the programme design and aims.

The consultants adopted ways of working that were reflective of their wider consultancy roles, rather than developing a specific approach for the programme. For instance, the consultants tended to work on a one-to-one basis with partnerships they were allocated to initially, rather than matching skills and expertise to the needs of sites. This meant that the offer each site received was tailored to an understanding of their needs but was framed around an individual consultant's skills and own approach to consultancy.

The consultants also started the developmental phase by contracting individually with their site as to how they would work, including an agreement around confidentiality. This recognised the value of trust in being able to work effectively with partnerships. However, it limited information-sharing within the programme and the means of understanding progress. This situation changed for the second phase.

The consultancy support provided an opportunity for many organisations who would not have afforded access to this otherwise. Working out the offer took significant time, as sites were unclear about what they wanted and what was being offered. This is a notable difference from traditional consultancy, where the client has a clear ask and has taken time for the consultants to adjust to as well. Some HCT partnerships also contracted consultancy support of their own. This can make the dynamics more complex.



Learning capture

The learning capture team worked with each of the HCT partnerships to capture learning on what supports partnership working in practice. Aligned with a learning approach, the learning team adopted an approach to co-producing the learning outputs with each site. Each HCT partnership identified a 'learning lead' who supported the team to capture learning, contribute to making meaning of that learning, and identify emerging issues for the focus learning outputs. The learning team and consultants also worked together to deliver a series of learning events that would bring the HCT partnerships together to share learning and provide a further means for capturing learning. The content and focus of each event were informed by, and agreed with, the learning leads and through engagement with the HCT partnerships at learning events.

What we learnt:

Like other components of the programme, the design of the learning capture was not defined in any detail at the outset beyond allocating capacity that could be used flexibly. This created some initial tensions as there was perceived to be an overlap in functions between the learning capture and how the leadership consultants conceived their role. By working together, the teams identified their unique contribution, with the consultants supporting the HCT partnerships to learn and the learning team working with sites to capture learning on what supports partnership working.

The learning events were delivered both in person and online, but our perception is that the online events were less successful as they were limited in being able to support the more informal interaction that was characteristic of in-person events. The initial learning events identified an appetite for sites to come together more frequently and to share learning and support in a less structured way. Sites were encouraged to share contact details and were offered the option of setting up an online channel for connecting. However, this did not happen systematically.

The decision to co-design learning with the sites, and the role of the consultants and learning team in supporting the learning events, resulted in the programme team being less involved in design and delivery of the learning capture. A lack of clarity around the test and learn approach and how this applied to each programme component also led members of the programme team to be excluded from conversations at learning events on the basis of partnerships having a 'safe space' to explore their progress.



Key considerations

- When adopting a test and learn approach, it is important to be explicit about what this means in terms of the delivery of each programme component.
- It may be beneficial to have a blended approach to the offer of support, with a balance between bespoke consultancy and core support activities.
- Programmes should look for opportunities to learn across partnerships and across programme components – for instance, through peer learning and support.
- A clear structure of regular activities that support learning and bring together the sites can be valuable, in addition to opportunities to facilitate peer-to-peer learning.
- It is important to ensure sufficient time and resource for capturing learning. This includes working with sites, site visits, and data capture, analysis and dissemination, as well as events to convene partnerships. Additional time needs to be factored in where this relies on involvement of people where the activity is not part of their substantive role.
- Working with partnerships to capture learning can facilitate ownership and skills-sharing, but differential capacity and engagement can risk missing vital learning.
- Delivering a programme that aims to support organisations to work differently can be difficult while being subject to more traditional working practices and decision-making. Be explicit about where there are possible constraints and challenges to doing things differently.



4 Programme oversight, governance and impact

The inevitable focus of grant programmes is on the grantees and delivery of the programme aims. In the HCT programme we realised that the role the programme team play and the decisions they make are also integral to that process, through ongoing decision-making to shape the direction of the programme and by leveraging a wider range of factors that seek to maximise and sustain the impact of the programme.

Programme oversight

The initial stages of the programme required considerable capacity and time from both The King's Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. This reflected the new partnership, as well as the design and development of a new programme and the associated materials and processes. The input evened out over time, particularly in the latter stages of the programme, but remained considerable.

During the application to initial developmental phase, members of the programme team each followed through two HCT partnerships. This enabled members to develop personal knowledge of their partnerships, trajectory and challenges to inform decision-making for phase two. It also fostered a sense of advocacy for partnerships in the process.

Our meetings throughout the application and development stages were delivery-focused, particularly in relation to site selection. As the programme progressed, there was less clarity on what the programme oversight role needed to be and how we would do it.

A lack of 'join-up' between the programme functions within the design of the programme left gaps in knowledge of day-to-day practice at programme level. For instance, the grant managers and programme team were reliant on more formal means of engagement with HCT partnerships to assess progress, rather than being able to draw on the informal learning of the consultants from working with the sites. We recognised the need to avoid duplicating information-gathering, but with each function having a different focus, there was a risk that the information needs of each were different. At times, the grant management team ended up treading a fine line to get the minimum information needed while maintaining healthy relationships. As the HCT programme progressed, programme team members from The King's Fund scheduled quarterly meetings with the consultants, to which programme team members from TNLCF and members of the learning capture team were routinely invited. The consultants provided rich insights, and when capacity at TNLCF was limited, it was reassuring that the consultants still had some oversight and would flag any concerns.



There were notable tensions between the commitment to learning as part of the programme and accountability, particularly in relation to organisational requirements in the use of public money and resources, and in the aims of the programme to better understand the needs of communities and improve health and wellbeing outcomes. A further tension was in the balance between building partnership working and delivering change for communities, with a perceived risk of partnerships focusing on one to the detriment of the other, potentially compromising the underlying programme aims to support systemic and sustainable change.

The test and learn approach brought a level of flexibility that could respond to the needs of the programme and partnerships. For instance, the grant managers were able to reprofile budgets to reflect the evolution and changes in delivery based on what they were learning. They were also able to secure extensions for each partnership based on underspends on the grants and subject to revised delivery plans. This meant that rather than there being a defined time point at which all programme activities ceased, partnerships had differential ending points and were encouraged to plan for sustainability during this period.

Both TNLOF and The King's Fund aimed to work in partnership in the same way that we were asking HCT partnerships to work together. The programme team continued with the aim of making decisions jointly; however, we were challenged on our commitment to capturing and sharing learning on what it means to work in partnership at a programme level. We found it a challenge to balance our role in overseeing the programme with sharing our challenges as a partnership with HCT sites as part of the learning.

Key considerations

- The inherent complexity of programmes seeking to test and develop partnership working means that more resource is needed than one might expect for traditional programme oversight. This resource will need to flex and adapt throughout the life cycle of the programme.
- It is important to consider how each component of the programme contributes to the overall aims, where there are contingencies, and the role of programme management and oversight as part of this.
- Consider how you understand and communicate the expectations of the programme and ensure programme delivery is consistent with the aims.
- Test and learn approaches require a level of flexibility to adapt and evolve.
- Test and learn approaches involve living with significantly more uncertainty than other types of grant and support programmes.



Programme governance and support

The King's Fund and TNLOF developed a memorandum of understanding and set up a joint decision-making forum to oversee the programme. We had relatively light-touch governance, with meetings at key decision-making points, including the initial site selection and the assessment process for proceeding to phase two. This worked well but also meant that the programme did not necessarily have high levels of visibility within our organisations, and further opportunities for partnership working between our organisations were largely mediated by the programme management team.

As part of the HCT programme, we set up an advisory group comprised of representatives from organisations involved in providing grant funding for partnership working or delivering support for partnership working. The group was informal, with a focus on sharing information as much as on defined aims and activities. We found great value in bringing together what we were all doing, and what we were learning about different approaches to driving change through partnership working.

Key considerations

- Locating the project/programme within a governance framework is important for ongoing visibility and buy-in. It is also potentially valuable for creating longer-term relationships that go beyond those directly involved.
- Where possible, seek to connect with and learn from other organisations engaged in designing and delivering similar programmes of work.

Communication, dissemination and influence

Although both organisations secured dedicated resource to deliver the HCT programme, the involvement of our respective organisational communications capacity was not formally planned and resourced. The emergent nature of the programme, its learning and outputs meant that at times it was challenging to obtain sufficient time and capacity from these teams to support our aims. We also had to negotiate time and resource from within the existing budget for those involved in the programme, such as the consultants, to contribute to the process.

Our aim was to share bite-size learning from the partnerships through a series of outputs over the course of the programme. However, the idea that these would emerge as people felt they had something to say did not work.

Throughout the programme, we thought creatively about using all of our channels and seeking to platform HCT partnerships as well as sharing learning from the programme. For instance, we consistently identified opportunities for HCT partnerships to contribute to The King's Fund conferences and events. An important part of this was enabling sites to articulate a narrative of what they were doing, and their learning, to a public audience. Both organisations also shared learning internally.

The HCT partnerships fed back that the support of both organisations (The King's Fund and TNLOF) gave their work authority at a local level, making it easier to engage more stakeholders. However, some HCT partnerships shared that they would have liked to have used our perceived power more to influence local decision-makers. We did not actively consider what power we each had within the context of the programme and how we could



use it, or the influence our partnership brought externally. The latter may reflect that the HCT programme was exploratory, rather than rolling out or advocating for a particular approach.

Building on the HCT programme, TNLCF obtained an internal agreement to provide grant funding and support to an additional 14 partnerships who were at earlier stages of partnership, with a focus on addressing health inequalities. Their new strategy also includes a specific mission on health and partnership working within the context of their funding programmes.

Key considerations

- It is important that communication and dissemination are considered as part of the programme design and appropriate resource built in. As part of this, you need to consider who you are seeking to influence and what you want to be able to demonstrate to others and build this into an ongoing communication and dissemination plan.
- Consider how your reputation and brand can bring different stakeholders and audiences to the table, both at a national and local level, within partnerships.
- There are opportunities for funders and support partners to use measures of perceived power to support partnerships with their aims. However, there is also a risk of playing out existing power dynamics, which could limit change in the long term.

Evaluation

The HCT programme did not factor in a formal evaluation from the outset. However, TNLCF agreed to commission an evaluation of the programme, which was done in partnership with The King's Fund.

TNLCF and The King's Fund developed a theory of change to support the commissioning of an evaluation. This proved to be a useful exercise in thinking through our assumptions about the programme and the impact we expected to see as a result. The theory of change was subsequently adopted as part of the evaluation and adapted as the programme evolved.

We had to think carefully about how the evaluation sat in relation to the programme's own learning capture activities, and that the work was synergistic and additive rather than duplicative. As such, the learning capture focused on sharing learning about activities that support partnership, while the evaluation focused on understanding the difference that partnership working made for HCT partnerships and what types of support and funding are most useful to enable partnership working.

We decided not to make local evaluation a prerequisite for applying to the HCT programme. However, some sites commissioned independent evaluation of their activities in addition to the national evaluation.

The evaluation started in January 2023 and concluded in June 2025. Learning from the evaluation and the experience of the programme team was that the true impact of these grants and the activities of the HCT partnerships is likely to be much longer term. The diversity of approaches taken by sites also created challenges in being able to identify and draw out meaningful insights at a programme level.



Key considerations

- There is a need to factor in evaluation and an associated budget from the outset of the programme.
- Approaches to evaluation should take into consideration both programme-level and local project activities. Often, strategic partners in an area are more responsive to local evaluation.
- Evaluations need to incorporate realistic expectations of change and what might be captured given the unpredictable and slow pace of change. This is particularly notable when the approach is one of testing and learning, and within a context of significant complexity.

Sustainability and legacy

HCT was designed as a three-year programme with the ambition to deliver or identify mechanisms for achieving transformational change. Each HCT partnership approached this aim differently through their plans, with some seeking to create small change that could be spread and scaled, and others seeking to foster cultural change that embeds sustainability in a different way. On reflection, the expectation of transformational change within the three-year timeframe was unrealistic. It took the partnerships time not just to develop but also to work out what they were really trying to achieve, and just what was the nature of the problem they were trying to address.

HCT partnerships started to raise questions about the potential sustainability and legacy of the HCT programme in year two. This was subsequently picked up as an area of focus and work through our learning support and support from the consultants. As a result, some of the partnerships developed a clear view of what they wanted to happen next. We came to consider the HCT programme as a phase in a much longer process.

We also needed to consider how we would continue to work with the HCT partnerships and as a programme management team, as many of the activities and learning were likely to go beyond the original timeframe of the programme. Now that the programme has ended, our approach to building on this work is having to be considered alongside a wider range of organisational priorities.

Key consideration

- The complexity of long-term system change means that change is best understood as a series of phases, with active review points during which plans and objectives are reassessed and realigned with the aims of the partnership plans and programme.



5 Common learning across partnership programmes

There are an increasing number of organisations developing programmes to support partnership working in health and care. The diversity of these programmes and their aims demonstrate that there are different ways of thinking about supporting partnership working. At the same time, it is clear to see that there are many similarities in terms of learning, which indicate areas that are important to consider and plan for when embarking on this work.

This section draws together some common areas of learning from across programmes supporting cross-sector partnership working. Further information on each programme can be found in the appendix.

Being comfortable with uncertainty

A feature of partnership working that seeks to change outcomes is that it involves operating in a context of uncertainty. Commonly, partnership working is framed by aims of doing something new and bringing together different views and expectations and exploring opportunities for creativity. As a result, partnerships may not have clear plans, or plans may be subject to considerable change.

Programmes have found that working in situations of uncertainty comes with a psychological toll. An inherent risk is that partnerships resort to traditional ways of working and old habits, such as fixed positions or exercising too much control over the process. Alternatively, partnerships may undermine the potential of system change by resorting to technical solutions and the lure of simple service changes.

This means that funders and those who provide support must be prepared to be comfortable with operating amid uncertainty. As the Lloyds Bank Foundation found, this could mean tolerating plans with less shape at an early stage and enabling things to change, rather than risk settling for small, well-formed ambitions. Others shared the importance of encouraging partnerships to test and learn or explore how existing agencies could work in partnership to use money differently, rather than setting up shiny new services. Both come from a position of recognising that the current system is not working and trying a different approach.



Stakeholders should also be mindful of mechanisms to manage uncertainty. This includes funders signalling their flexibility around expectations, while at the same time supporting partnerships to develop shared ambitions and expectations, balancing clarity and certainty. For instance, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) has found that the risk of being overwhelmed by scale and complexity can be overcome by initiating change by just doing things, while staying focused on the overall purpose of the initiative. This can help build a sense of momentum and reassure sceptics.

Be prepared for change to take time

A finding in common with HCT is that changing the system takes time, trust cannot be rushed and this is just the nature of this type of work. Within this, partnerships will have to navigate additional challenges, including pressures on capacity among the partnership and the organisations they are working with, and changes in personnel. This can have an impact both on the partnership itself and links into partner organisations.

Programmes have also found that even positive change can be hard. Change represents a loss and threat to the status quo, which can be met with resistance, and there may be additional support required to enable change. They have also found that finding a way forward requires experimentation, failures are to be expected and making change sometimes takes more than one try. Partnerships should also be clear about the commitment to test and learn and have a clear sense of permission and time to see what happens before a way of working is rolled out more widely.

Resource and support needs

Most grant programmes provide both funding and support. An exception, Lloyds Bank Foundation, has found that funding packages can be a distraction and the absence of funding has not been a barrier to local engagement. Rather, it has supported greater collaboration to change local ways of working. Even with funding for partnership working, other programmes have found that a lack of subsequent funding or associated buy-in from relevant organisations can limit the ability to put ideas and plans into practice.

All programmes, however, identified that resource is crucial to change. One of the key resources is a project lead, providing local capacity and ability to keep momentum. This includes project management and delivery of the communities' ambitions for change. Other programmes identified the value of support to help address specific skills gaps among partners, as well as creating space for reflection and learning.

The programmes also highlight the importance of communication and messaging in supporting the partnership in its work. Within this is an emphasis on communicating the nature of the work, approaches they are using and sharing messages of hope and positive stories. This can give people something to grasp and help make expansive change and abstract concepts psychologically manageable. It was also important in encouraging others to invest in partnership and show the benefits of working in this way.



Characteristics of partnerships

Although the criteria that each programme seeks to work with varies, some common areas of learning have emerged about what supports success. The first is working with partners/ organisations that are not starting from scratch, including where there are pre-existing relationships between partners, shared goals for a particular community and shared values among partners. The second is going where there is energy, vision and enthusiastic people.

An outlier is the Lloyds Bank Foundation, which is working in areas with existing partnership working as well as areas where this is inherently weak from the outset. This work has highlighted the vital role of VOSE infrastructure and the strength of the sector in working to effect change. Equally, the Foundation has found that where this is not present, its involvement can help with building infrastructure support, and strengthen the contribution of the sector.

It is notable that HCT is an exception among the programmes to support partnership, in being open to change at any level, but with the aim of system change. All the other programmes conceptualise change within the context of projects or at a local level, which partners then seek to scale up or influence more widely. For instance, IVAR has found that working at a local level creates space for experimentation and cross-sector collaboration. Furthermore, in working with communities and people using services from the outset, it is starting from a different place. This then provides a platform for moving to joint working with commissioners and initiating different conversations. However, responsibility cannot sit lower than the level of primary care networks and the VOSE sector for partnership working to be effective in driving change.

Plan for sustainability beyond the programme

Most of the programmes highlight the importance of considering sustainability within the context of a time-limited programme. Findings suggest that conversations with health system leaders and those working at a local level in systems need to take place at the start of the process, and pathways and processes need to be in place for learning to flow to the wider system. There are also opportunities to ensure that people involved in the work, such as through steering groups, include those who are influential in supporting sustainability. This can include understanding what is needed to support sustainability, such as collecting data, testing models and developing action plans that ensure there is a ready plan for securing funding.

Use of power: the role of funders and support partners

As part of its learning about delivering a programme of support for partnership working, the Lloyds Bank Foundation identified a number of lessons about its role and its use of power.

The first is the importance of speaking hard truths. The team providing the support offer noted occasions when their work with partnerships raised concerns, but a hesitancy and a reluctance to use positional power (ie, as the supporting organisation) had led to a decision not to intervene. However, with hindsight, the team recognised that their observations, experience and intuition had been correct, and there were missed opportunities to provide meaningful intervention and support. Their conclusion was that critical friends need to challenge and speak out sooner.



The second is that change must be locally owned and cannot be driven by the funder, with funders and support partners actively guarding against owning or being expected to drive the approach. This requires not only a focus on supporting local communities' ambitions to change the system, but also a relentless focus on ownership and leadership at a local level.

Finally, the Foundation found that supporting partnership working to drive change is about getting the balance right across many of the above factors, but notably, pace of change, clarity of purpose, shape of plans and power; too much or too little has a negative impact. Funders and support partners should seek to support achieving that balance by using their power lightly.



6 Leading systems change

The ambition and potential value of cross-sector partnership working within health and care has been promoted over a long period. However, a growing focus on seeing health and care organisations as part of a system of care, and within this a focus on organisations within the context of ‘place’ and neighbourhood, means there is an ever-growing movement towards working in partnership to meet health and care needs.

This section summarises key learning points for supporting partnership working and highlights some unanswered questions where more learning is needed.

Support for partnership working at a local level

Much of the focus in the emerging learning on partnership working aims to support individuals and organisations involved to build their approach and make progress. The outcome is a range of resources that can both guide and reassure individuals and organisations involved in local partnership working (see box).

Resources to support partnerships

Healthy Communities Together: A variety of resources, including a reflective learning framework for partnership and exploring issues such as working with power and uncertainty.

Shaping Places for Healthier Lives: A guide setting out seven key learnings on how to take a systems approach to create place-based change. This includes insights and tools on understanding and navigating local systems, developing a vision, relationship-building, thinking about impact, experimenting with new ways of working, reflection and communication.

Connecting Health Communities: Resources on partnership working, harnessing the power of collaboration and what good looks like, alongside case studies drawn from the programme.



Health Equalities programme: A storybook of learning, including how to work with multiple stakeholders, benefits and shared challenges, working with and influencing statutory sector organisations, governance and delivery structures, with case studies.

Lloyds Bank Foundation development team: Learning on getting started and a system maturity model – a tool for understanding how your system is changing over time to achieve its ambitions.

Expectations of partnership working

Learning from programmes provides key insights into what can facilitate partnership working. It also provides a ‘reality check’ and can help to set expectations – for funders, those providing support and for wider stakeholders – about the nature of change.

Most notably, our work on HCT and across other partnership programmes highlights how all forms of partnership working take time. Within that, there needs to be an overt focus on, and investment in, building and maintaining relationships as well as on delivery. Finally, a level of uncertainty and flexibility around plans and delivery should be expected.

These approaches are often at odds with much of the prevailing culture of public sector funding and commissioning. Funders and commissioners need to consider the strategic value of a partnership programme and a governance framework that will facilitate the programme and ensure visibility, buy-in and sustainability over the life course of the programme and beyond.

Funders and commissioners should also have an understanding of the overarching aims and ambition of the programme, but which allows for a level of flexibility. Consideration should also be given to resource requirements, including funding, the support offer, and what is needed to facilitate wider influence and impact, such as support for communications and evaluation.

Finally, funders and commissioners need to consider how they can best balance appropriate governance of the programme and respective partnership activities with opportunities for experimentation and learning. Learning from HCT and other programmes indicates that it is important to set expectations early, but also to model the approach with partnerships themselves. Most notable within this is the balance of focus on building relationships that support partnership working and on delivering activities for communities themselves.

The challenges of adopting new ways of working, particularly where they run counter to existing practices, should not be underestimated, and there is an ongoing need for reflection and dialogue on how progress aligns with the overarching aims and ambition of the programme.



Scale and pace of change: some unanswered questions

The commonalities in learning between programmes indicate areas that are important in supporting partnership working. However, some unanswered questions remain.

One question is around the scale of change possible through partnership working and the mechanisms for achieving this. From the outset, HCT sought to test the potential for transformational change that aims to address some of the systemic issues which influence the potential of organisations to work in partnership, and particularly the role of the VCSE sector. The approaches taken by the partnerships within HCT sought to do this through very different mechanisms. In some cases, this was through testing and embedding new ways of working with communities that could influence decision-making at a systemic level. In others, the aim was to directly disrupt structures and approaches to decision-making in order to centre new approaches around communities and their needs.

The scale of change implicit in the aims of HCT is in stark contrast to the majority of programmes featured in this report, where partnership working itself (including who and how people and organisations are involved) is framed as the mechanism for delivering improved outcomes for populations and communities. The membership and action of partnerships is predominately within the context of local places or neighbourhoods, rather than seeking systemic change during the timeframe of the programme.

HCT highlighted that there is unlikely to be a single approach to partnership working that centres on improving outcomes for populations. Although there is clear learning on what supports partnership working across these approaches (see [Healthy Communities Together](#)), there are also limitations on being able to extract generalisable learning about the likely applicability of each approach in different contexts.

A second question is around the timeframe for delivering systemic change. One of the current weaknesses is that there is little follow-up beyond the timeframe of existing programmes. Learning from IVAR indicates that relationships built as part of partnerships working to address health inequalities have endured and have formed the basis for new change projects. As such, learning to work in partnership and building relationships is the mechanism for further change. The Lloyds Bank Foundation, however, has found that partnerships vary in resilience, and the need to support and build relationships requires ongoing and active investment, without which the potential benefits of partnership working may be lost. Its 10-year programme may help understand how this approach can be sustained and, importantly, embedded to ensure systemic change. For the part of HCT, the timeframe of the programme was insufficient to realise the ambition of systemic transformational change that was originally envisioned. Rather, the programme has served as a phase in a journey with the hope of this leading to longer-term sustainability and spread of new ways of working over time.



Appendix: Alternative approaches to design and delivery

The HCT programme was supported by an advisory group of organisations, all funding or supporting partnership working. It proved invaluable to have a network of others who are designing and funding support for partnerships, as it enabled sharing of learning about common issues and how different programmes have tackled them.

The following is a brief overview of the design and delivery features of some of those programmes.

Lloyds Bank Foundation development team – Lloyds Bank Foundation

What	‘The Team’ is a 10-year programme that seeks to explore and facilitate new ways of strengthening small charities and designing and resourcing local services, with the ultimate goal of stronger, more sustainable services for people facing complex challenges in their lives.
Who	The Team identified six communities in England and Wales with high levels of disadvantage and complex issues, where local public, voluntary and private sector organisations shared an appetite to find new ways of working together that result in better outcomes for local people.
The offer	<p>The Team does not offer a financial grant programme for system change. Rather, the offer is to work alongside local partners as a neutral external partner, exploring how the local system and its component parts need to change to create a more sustainable footing for the services people need. They act as both a facilitator of change and a critical friend. This includes the offer of facilitation, support, access to knowledge and skills, and the opportunity to learn together how to work differently, alongside providing tailored resources to support communities, based on their needs.</p> <p>Both The Team and local areas are invested in exploring the process of change, as well as what is required to support that. Within this, they are testing and evolving new approaches. Through this, they have identified a process and tools that they have found beneficial in progressing the work during the first three years.</p>
Evaluation	The Team has commissioned an organisation to work alongside them as a learning partner and developmental evaluator since 2019. The developmental evaluation helps support The Team in learning what does and does not work about the new approaches local areas are testing.
Resources	<u>Learning from the first three years of working with communities</u>



Connecting Health Communities – Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) and The National Lottery Community Fund

<p>What</p>	<p>Connecting Health Communities aims to enable cross-sector partnerships to address health inequalities in integrated care systems (ICSs) and/or primary care networks (PCNs) in partnership with the voluntary sector and communities facing health inequalities.</p> <p>The focus is on supporting local leaders to deliver improved health outcomes for vulnerable groups and strengthening the foundations of partnership working by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – building the evidence base and case for change – adapting systems and structures – initiating and introducing new services – identifying and achieving opportunities for a more sustainable and fairer model of health care. <p>Central throughout will be developing opportunities to engage community groups and voluntary organisations in the design, commissioning and delivery of health and care services.</p>
<p>Who</p>	<p>Over phases one and two of this work, they worked with 14 areas. Of these, six received a shorter bespoke intervention to enable their partnerships to embed the partnership working already under way. In the final third phase of this work, they are working with four areas over two and a half years.</p>
<p>The offer</p>	<p>The programme is a 30-month facilitation support package. It is underpinned by a set of core principles that guide delivery of the programme. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – creating space to support partnerships to build relationships, define the problem and co-design actions – convening, holding the process and the bigger picture for partnerships as collaborative working starts – facilitation, which supports collaborative working and brings in creative methods to facilitate difficult and cross-sector conversations – providing a core offer that can be adapted for each partnership area, in collaboration with local steering groups – starting with health inequalities at a neighbourhood level and building on existing approaches, energy and ideas. Then looking at how whole systems need to change to address those inequalities – championing, promoting and enabling VCSE organisations within the process to be valued and influential partners in health and care design and delivery – drawing out implications in local areas for both policy influence and practice development.



	<p>The programme involves a number of activities, as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing a steering group of eight or more key stakeholders from the local area, representing different sectors, who drive and support the work outside the facilitated partnership sessions. - Partnership sessions/co-designing days, involving all interested parties within a local area. - A Champions Network of cross-sector leaders who share ideas and ways of working and devise strategies to maintain and build on the practice of collaborative working to support action and sustain change in their areas. - Local co-ordinating organisation(s) that support involvement of communities experiencing health inequalities. Each organisation is responsible for cascading information to communities and co-ordinating with other communications leads in the local area to disseminate national learning. There is a small budget to support these organisations working at a local level. - Community involvement budget to support VOSE organisations and people with lived experience to attend, as well as recognising the time of people who take a more action-focused role.
<p>Evaluation</p>	<p>There is no formal evaluation for this programme.</p>
<p>Resources</p>	<p><u>Connecting Health Communities – Health Partnerships – IVAR UK</u></p>



Shaping Places for Healthier Lives – Local Government Association and The Health Foundation

<p>What</p>	<p>Shaping Places for Healthier Lives was a programme to support local government-led partnerships to tackle the wider determinants of health, and to share learning about effective ways of shaping places for healthier lives for all.</p> <p>The programme aimed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – mobilise cross-sector action on the wider determinants of health through sustainable system change at a local level – support local authorities to facilitate and enable local partnerships for system change on the wider determinants of health – learn how to make changes that impact on the wider determinants of health. <p>Recognising that meaningful change in outcomes would take time, the programme focused on how and whether councils could be a key partner to lead system change.</p>
<p>Who</p>	<p>The programme was designed with an initial discovery phase, providing support to 30 partnerships to develop a proposal. Between 10 and 12 proposals were subsequently offered a development award of £20,000 and support to design their programme, conduct system mapping, develop a theory of change and develop the partnership. Five partnerships were selected for funding over a three-year implementation period.</p>
<p>The offer</p>	<p>Partnerships were supported to develop their projects through a three-stage application process, during which they built their partnerships, engaged and involved residents, and built an understanding of the types of factors that influence their chosen topic. They implemented an aligned approach across these systems, learning and adapting over the three years.</p> <p>The programme included a delivery support partner to provide support through stages two and three of selection. The support partner advised on programme design features to assist the development of the project. The programme sourced subject matter expertise to support particular projects as they developed and provide constructive challenge.</p> <p>Partnerships took part in a learning network to share learning and experiences over the course of the programme. This included the five successful partnerships and those who were unsuccessful at the final application stage. The programme was supported by a technical advisory group comprising complex systems experts and experienced evaluators who provided expert guidance for the programme and for the evaluation.</p>
<p>Evaluation</p>	<p>A programme-level evaluation was commissioned, which focused on the process of establishing local partnerships and the impact of adopting a systems approach. The evaluation aimed to support project teams by providing ongoing and timely feedback. The evaluation also assessed the delivery and value of the programme.</p> <p>Projects received evaluation support to design and develop a system approach and evaluation framework.</p>
<p>Resources</p>	<p><u>Shaping Places for Healthier Lives – Local Government Association</u></p>



Common Ambition – The Health Foundation

What	Common Ambition was a grant and support programme for partnerships to build sustainable change in health care through collaboration between those who use services and those who deliver them. The programme invited partnerships from the VOSE sector and the NHS to apply, but also included universities, commissioning organisations and local authorities.
Who	The programme supported four partnerships across the UK. Each partnership focused on different areas of health care or communities through delivery of a project.
The offer	<p>Each team received funding of between £400,000 and £500,000 for projects that ran for between two and a half and three years.</p> <p>The programme had two technical support partners. Partnerships received a series of support-planning workshops that brought the sites together to share learnings, updates and reflections. In addition, each partnership was provided with a bespoke package of support, including technical expertise, coaching, training, facilitation and learning events.</p>
Evaluation	<p>The programme was supported by an external evaluation of how the programme was working, what enabled or inhibited success and effectiveness in terms of the partnerships, and influences on the sustainability of partnerships. In addition, the evaluation aimed to assess the overall success of the programme.</p> <p>Each area was required to identify a local evaluation partner to support the measurement and evaluation of their activities using the allocated grant funding. The aim of local evaluations was to measure local impact, reflect on how successfully the organisations involved were collaborating, and to capture experiences of members of the public, health care professionals and researchers working together on the projects.</p>
Resources	Common Ambition – The Health Foundation



Health Equalities programme – The National Lottery Community Fund and The Innovation Unit

What	The Health Equalities programme aims to support local areas to develop effective and sustainable partnerships between the VCSE, the NHS and local authorities to improve health and wellbeing, reduce health inequalities and empower communities.
Who	The programme is supporting 14 VCSE organisations to work with the NHS and other stakeholders who are looking to address health inequalities in their local area.
The offer	<p>The National Lottery Community Fund awarded initial funding for a development phase of £700,000 across 14 local areas.</p> <p>Following completion of the development phase, 12 partnerships were successful and received up to £450,000 of grant funding over three years.</p> <p>The programme is also supported by a learning and support partner, The Innovation Unit.</p> <p>Each area also receives a combination of bespoke one-to-one support and a series of learning activities bringing them together as a cohort to share experiences, gain support and develop their practice. They also hold external events that are open to the wider sector. This includes insights and practice experience to support with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – coaching and reflective practice – evaluation and learning – strategic and organisational development – communication – working partners and communities.
Evaluation	<u>Health Equalities – The Innovation Unit</u>



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