

Partnership working learning paper



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Creating Connections
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About the Help through Crisis programme

Help through Crisis is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the Big Lottery Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. Help through Crisis supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The partnerships receiving National Lottery funding through the Help through Crisis programme bring together small voluntary groups and established charities to work together locally. Working together, they offer people advice, advocacy and support which matches their personal circumstances. The aim is to look at the issues people face, and the underlying causes, from their basic needs, to their physical and mental health, to skills and employment. People are supported to draw on their personal experiences to build on their skills and strengths so they are ready to seize the opportunities and challenges ahead.

About the Learning, Evaluation and Support team

The Help through Crisis learning, evaluation and support team is a consortium of organisations commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund to help build understanding and capture learning from the Help through Crisis programme. The team is made up of people from Ipsos MORI (Lead Contractor), NEF Consulting, Revolving Doors Agency and Hopkins Van Mill. The role of the consortium is to help the 69 partnerships involved in the programme:

- Empowering them to evaluate and measure their impact, and capture learning about what works in tackling hardship crisis.
- Supporting their co-production activities, ensuring the people they support have a voice in shaping local services.
- Identifying good practice and disseminating learning to build the evidence base and help partnerships to replicate or scale up approaches from elsewhere.

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INTRODUCTION

How partnerships work together is a critical part of successful project delivery: if beneficiaries are to receive the best possible crisis support, it requires all the organisations involved to work effectively in collaboration. The aim of this learning paper is to explore the factors that encourage successful partnership working.

Partnership working covers lots of different elements. You told us it can include:

- Working with different cultures and organisational priorities across a partnership
- Running effective partnership meetings
- Having difficult conversations with partners in a constructive way
- Agreeing (and keeping to) data sharing protocols
- Building links with a wider network of partner organisations.

We focus on these and other areas in this learning paper, which is **based on insights from three partnership case studies**. For each of these case studies, we conducted interviews with partnership leads, core partners and wider partners. We talked about their partnership model, the approaches that have been successful, and the challenges they've faced. We also conducted background research to explore some of the wider aspects of partnership working.

As ever, if you have anything in particular you would like support with, please feel free to contact us at: HelpThroughCrisis@ipsos.com

Help through Crisis support team



From the [messages and tactics toolkit for influencing](#)



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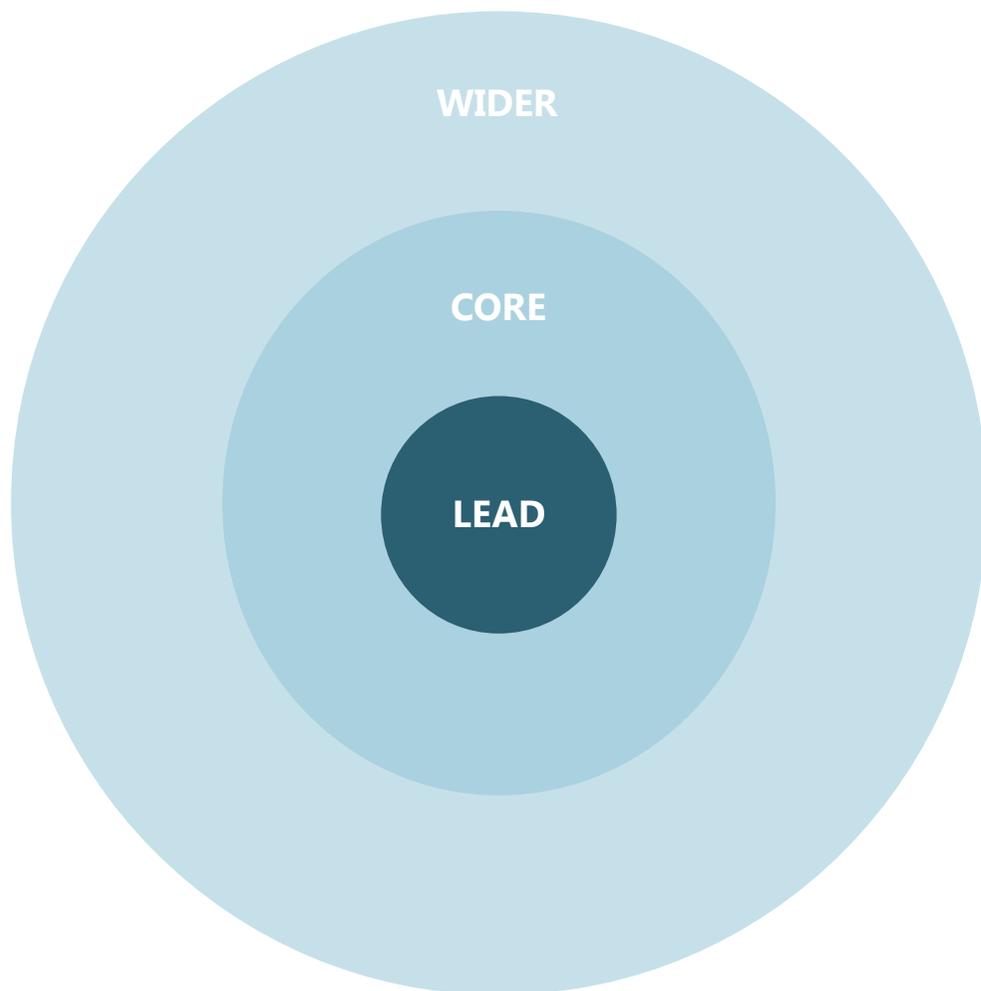


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PARTNER TYPES

Throughout this learning paper, we describe three different types of partner involved in Help through Crisis (HtC) projects:



Lead Partner

Lead partners are the grant holders for HtC partnerships. They have overall responsibility for project delivery and reporting back to the Big Lottery Fund.

Core Partner

Core partners are funded through the HtC project. They have a key or strategic role in delivery. They would usually report directly to the lead partner and are likely to have little or no engagement with the Big Lottery Fund.

Wider Partner

Wider (or 'extended') partners have no direct financial relationship with HtC projects as part of the programme. Their involvement may be informal or formal, and they may have very different levels of knowledge about the HtC programme.

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WE SPOKE TO THREE PROJECTS

We chose the case studies based on their different partnership models. The learning described throughout this paper is based on these partnerships. A more in-depth look at each example is included in the final section.

Co-location



Axis Youth Hub

This project provides emergency, temporary accommodation and family mediation for homeless young people in the form of a 'one-stop-shop'. This means all the core partners are based in the same building.

Breaking down sector silos



Manchester Mind

This project involves a partnership model that brings together three distinct sectors locally (mental health, homelessness and disability rights). The aim is to gather and share knowledge and experiences across these policy themes to offer better support to local people.

Adapting to change



Rossendale Crisis Support

This is an example of a partnership model that has adapted to significant changes since it was set up. This is because partners have left or been restructured.

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HOW TO MAKE PARTNERSHIPS WORK

There is no single 'right' approach to effective partnership working. Each partnership has specific objectives and a distinct structure. Partnerships are also working in unique local contexts. But we have identified three common insights from the case studies which cut across the Help through Crisis programme.

We've found there are three key elements to effective partnership working:

1. Co-operation

There is always going to be a project lead or grant holder, and that shapes how a partnership works in practice.

But collaboration can be enhanced when core partners feel there is genuine co-operation across a partnership. This avoids the power dynamic being too skewed towards one partner – for example if decision-making is concentrated in one organisation in a way that reduces effectiveness.



While true equality might not always be possible, ensuring shared decision-making and mutual co-operation is something partnerships should work towards.

2. Flexibility

Taking a flexible approach recognises the value of different ways of working. It also helps include a diverse range of organisations in a project.

In the Rossendale Crisis Support case study on page 14, they have found an arrangement that plays to each of the partners' strengths.

In the Axis Youth Hub case study on page 10, the hub building is a focal point for the partnership. This has assisted in creating flexibility between partners that might not have existed otherwise.



The ability to change an approach to cater for different partners can greatly strengthen partnership working.

3. Communication

Having effective communication structures in place ensures there is a clear understanding about roles and tasks between partners.

The frequency and format of conversations will differ, but could include:

- Scheduled meetings between core partners once every four to six weeks
- Meetings every three months with wider partners
- One-to-one meetings with relevant partners arranged on an ad-hoc basis as needed.

Each meeting should have a clear purpose with an agreed agenda for discussion e.g. project delivery, revision of partnership agreements (either formal or informal) or clarifying understanding between partners.



Creating a time and space to be open and honest with partners strengthens the effectiveness of the partnership.



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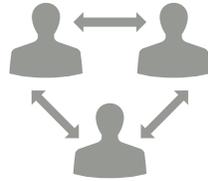


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BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Knowledge and data sharing



Partnership working allows you to:

- Tailor services to an individual by signposting them to services being offered by other members of the partnership. Sharing data about each person can help make sure a service is personalised.
- Gain insights about peoples' wider circumstances beyond their interactions with your service or about the wider context in your area. For example, partners can share important information about an individual's crisis situation that you may not otherwise know or highlight trends in the causes of crisis. This can create opportunities to work together to prevent crisis in an area.

Integration and efficiency



Partnership working allows you to:

- Integrate services and reduce gaps in local provision to help ensure joined-up support. In doing so, the complex needs of those in crisis are better met. For example, providing food parcels at advice sessions or running drop in clinics at food banks.
- Avoid unnecessary duplication and reduce costs overall. This has the potential to benefit each partnership organisation and ensure efforts are directed at supporting those in crisis.

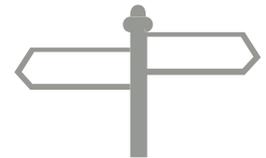
Effective use of resources



Partnership working allows you to:

- Pool your collective resources. This can prove beneficial to both the partners and those receiving crisis support. For example, this might mean sharing venues to maximise the number of support sessions available.
- Play to each organisations' strengths, improving the overall service and experience people receive.

Sharing capacity and expertise



Partnership working allows you to:

- Benefit from the capacity and expertise offered by a range of different organisations working in crisis support, including the specialist knowledge often held by smaller organisations. For example, the Manchester Mind case study on page 12 describes how organisations specialising in mental health, disability and homelessness have learned from each other.
- Promote innovative or highly targeted services that those going through crisis might not have been aware of. This is achieved through these services working in partnership with larger, more established organisations that have a greater reach.

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TACKLING PARTNERSHIP WORKING CHALLENGES

1. Embrace a flexible approach

Partnerships involve different organisations, varying in size and culture. Effective partnership working will therefore always require flexibility. This might involve each organisation modifying the way they work in order to partner successfully. For example, embracing more formal or more informal relationships with some partners.

Embracing a flexible approach can help:

- **Reduce 'friction' between organisations working together:** by creating space for differences in approach, priorities and opinions. This provides more opportunities for effective compromise.
- **Facilitate innovative approaches in tackling challenges:** by encouraging your organisation to embrace other ways of working that might help with different aspects of what you do beyond Help through Crisis. This also helps to spread learning between organisations.

2. Encourage as much co-operation in decision-making as possible

It is important for everyone involved in a partnership to have influence and agency in decision-making, and to understand and agree how this will work in practice. This does not necessarily mean removing hierarchical governance arrangements. However, partnerships need to find ways to ensure decision-making and responsibilities are shared appropriately across lead and core partners.

For example in the Axis Youth Hub described on page 10, it is important for the team to make urgent and quick decisions when they are providing crisis support. Not having to wait for approval from a lead partner can be critical in ensuring someone receives the support they need.

Co-operating in making decisions about a project can help:

- **Reduce competition and tensions between (potential) partners:** by giving everyone a sense of ownership in the programme.
- **Tackle challenges caused by differences in the way each partner works:** by addressing power dynamics directly and encouraging dialogue and deliberation to address problems.
- **Supporting project delivery:** by allowing quick decision-making and empowering team members to take action.

TACKLING PARTNERSHIP WORKING CHALLENGES

3. Establish communication channels early on

Effective communication between partners lies at the heart of successful partnership working. It is therefore important to establish how this communication will happen in practice as early as possible in the partnership – although it is never too late to address problems with communication. This involves discussing expectations around the frequency and type of communication between partners, and agreeing a way of working together. As projects progress, these arrangements may require adjustment to reflect the changing realities of the project. Given this, setting up opportunities to review and amend communication structures is helpful (e.g. once a year).

Establishing communication channels can help:

- **Break down differences in expectations between partners:** by ensuring a foundation of clear and open dialogue.
- **Reduce the time it takes to maintain partnership relationships:** by making communication channels more efficient and therefore less resource-intensive.
- **Tackle challenges around managing and sharing data:** by addressing any technical or legal issues early-on and embedding good practice as soon as possible.

And finally . . .

Accept limitations

As one core partner describes: *“you can only work with those who are willing to work with you!”*

While your partnership may have big ambitions for what can be achieved, it is important to accept that in reality some things might not prove possible. For example, it is not worth pursuing a collaborative relationship with an organisation if it is not practically possible.

 **Embrace the benefits of partnership working while recognising the limitations of your partnership.**

AXIS YOUTH HUB

Background to the partnership

The Axis Youth Hub consists of four core partners (Wyre Forest Nightstop and Mediation Scheme, Kidderminster & District Youth Trust (KDYT), Our Way and Basement) and approximately 25 wider partners. The wider partners have no financial involvement and consist of a diverse range of organisations, including emergency mediation services, a youth trust, housing advice, a job centre and a university.

The project provides emergency, temporary accommodation and family mediation for homeless young people in the form of a 'one-stop-shop-approach' where all the partners are based in the same building. These services are complementary, improving project delivery.



25 wider partners including...



"Obviously we had to have a lead organisation, but at the same time we all have a part to play and it is up to us to have responsibility and not let things fall to the lead...we are all involved in the decision-making."

Core Partner



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AXIS YOUTH HUB

Key aspects of the partnership approach

- Wider partners were approached during the project inception (at the bid-writing stage), establishing relationships early on. These existing relationships have helped the dynamic between partners.
- When core and wider partners were asked what worked particularly well with the partnership, the same theme often emerged: *communication*. This took many forms: the open-mindedness and *flexibility* of Axis staff; having wider partner meetings every three months to keep each other well informed; and the early emphasis on the importance of honesty and transparency.
- One wider partner described how a strength of their partnership model was its 'formal but relaxed' nature. It is structured enough to be clear and work effectively but also enough *flexibility* to adapt. One example of this is having a formal agreement with core partners about when and where they are based at the Hub, but relatively informal arrangements around how they might use the space and engage with people. This flexibility allows a diverse number of organisations to get involved at a level of engagement suitable to them.
- One core partner spoke of how an equal power dynamic between core partners has been key to the success of the partnership. This facilitated rapid decision-making, empowering partners to act without consulting others.
- Having a central hub where all the partners can be based enhances the support provided to people. This approach also encourages good relationships and familiarity between partners in a way that would be more difficult working across different locations. One partner noted that the relatively small area of the Wyre Forest region meant that partners already had close bonds with each other. The Help through Crisis partnership builds on these.

Case studies

“A lot of it is down to communications and building relationships. It wasn't a partnership contrived for bid purposes, it was a partnership that was already formed and this grant has allowed it to bring it together in a shared project.”

A core partner highlighting the importance of communications and building relationships

“I knew it would be safe to make that decision because everyone in the partnership is on the same level.”

A core partner describing one of the benefits of an equal power dynamic between other core partners



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MANCHESTER MIND

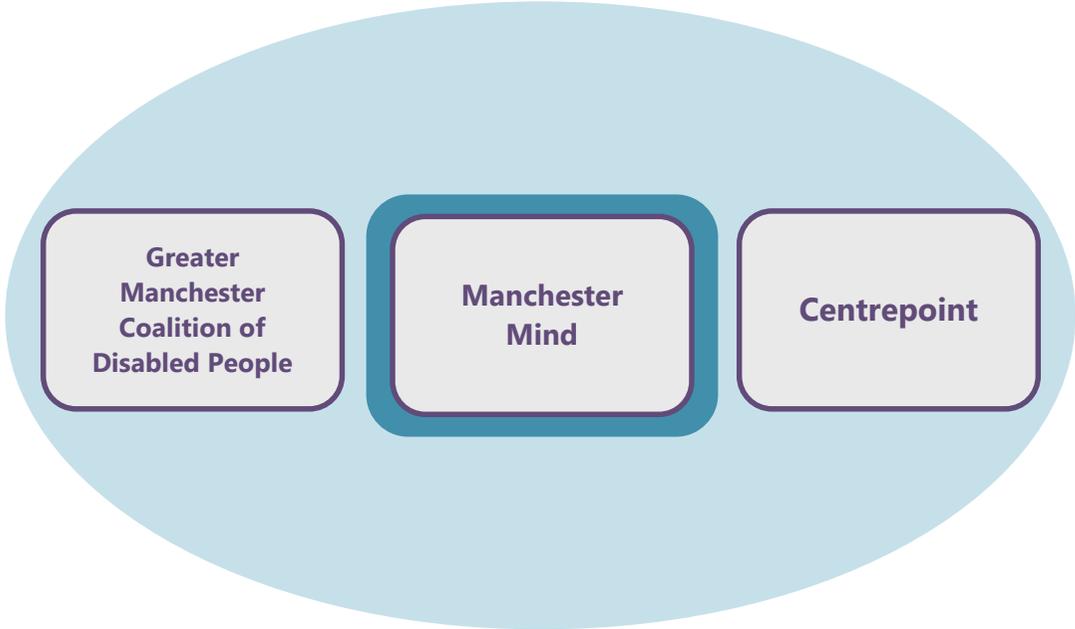
Background to the partnership

Manchester Mind recognised connections between mental health, disability and homelessness. This led to Centrepoint and Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP) joining Manchester Mind to deliver the Help through Crisis project. The aim was to gather and share knowledge for the benefit of the people they support.

Despite Manchester Mind's lead partner role, there is an advisor at each of the organisations working the same number of (part-time) hours. This approach to allocating resources reflects how the partnership organisations work together as equals.

"We recognise that we all have a specialism...we all respect and know each other's work in the different areas."

Lead Partner



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MANCHESTER MIND

Key aspects of the partnership approach

- The timing and location of meetings between the three part-time advisors is important to ensure effective collaboration. A balance is required: not too often to avoid meetings taking up too much time, but regular enough to ensure each organisation is kept up-to-date.
- Partnership agreements and working arrangements are reviewed every year to reflect on what is working and what could be better. This involves one-to-one consultations between the partners. These are considered a better way to gather ideas for improvement, rather than expecting staff to raise suggestions in a meeting.
- The biggest difference in organisational culture between the three partners is that GMCDP are completely user-led. This governance by people with lived experience is hugely valuable for the partnership. However, it does mean that in practical terms things take longer. For example, a decision that a member of staff can make at Manchester Mind might require a presentation to the board and discussion at GMCDP. Therefore, the partnership has needed to allow time for these decision-making processes.
- A key benefit to partnership working involves knowledge sharing, facilitated through regular meetings of all three advisers. For example, GMCDP might find a particular way to describe physical disabilities and a mental health problem which better reflects the criteria used for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) applications. This can be shared with the caseworkers in the other two organisations, so that they can learn from each other and adapt their approaches quickly.
- Learning has also taken the form of changing the language organisations use. GMCDP staff have shared their good practice and influenced the way Mind communicates around disability. This is important to the people they work with and has also helped to make their other services more accessible to disabled people.

“Because there’s only three organisations we really do all need to be there in the room.”

Lead Partner

“We are able to share information about frontline issues in real time.”

Lead Partner

“When people have had bad experiences with services they are listening out for these terms, so it’s important to be mindful of the way we speak and communicate.”

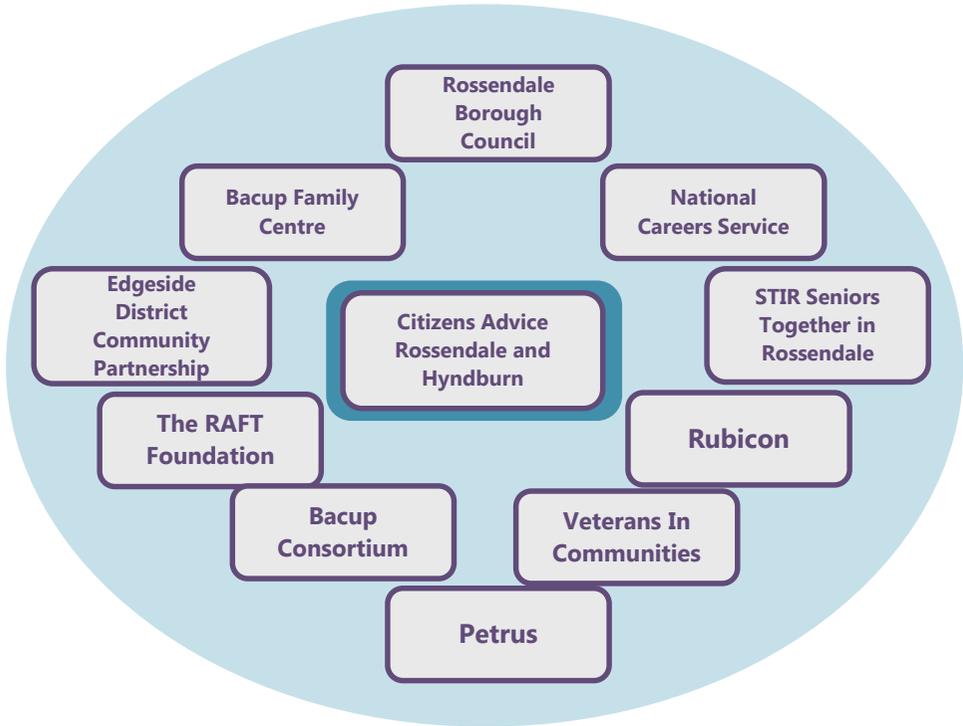
Lead Partner

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ROSSENDALE CRISIS SUPPORT

Background to the partnership



Wider partners including...



Citizens Advice Rossendale and Hyndburn (CARH) leads the Rossendale Crisis Support project. This seeks to provide both access to emergency interventions for those in need, and support to tackle the underlying issues that contribute towards a person’s crisis situation.

Since its inception, the partnership has seen changes due to partners dropping out because of a lack of funding. The project initially involved twelve partners but has now reduced to ten. The partnership has had to find ways to adapt to its new circumstances.

“Work with the willing’ - that is my mantra. There are organisations out there, no matter how hard you try, they will not work with you. So work with those that will.”

A core partner outlines the importance of accepting that you will not be able to work with some organisations



ROSSENDALE CRISIS SUPPORT

Key aspects of the partnership model

- CARH is a large and well known organisation in the area and has historically worked with partners. As such, the Help through Crisis partnership has been a way of formalising relationships that already existed.
- The partnership can draw on these established relationships partly because of the relatively small geographical area they work in. People feel confident to pick up the phone and discuss things.
- There are quarterly partnership meetings, with each partner bringing their knowledge about the area. This setting facilitates connections between partners and offers an opportunity to raise any challenges they might be facing and work together to find solutions. These meetings are a place for praise as well criticism.
- CARH helps to publicise partners' services and reach out to potential clients who might not otherwise know about them. This emphasises one of the key strengths of the partnership: the wider partners are able to enhance their outreach while the CARH can make effective use of their skills and resources.
- Rossendale's linear valley geography presents challenges for the project in terms of outreach. Although the area is relatively small, the population is widely dispersed, contributing to issues of isolation. The wider partnership model allows the project to reach beyond the immediate resources and connections of core partners.
- One wider partner described how CARH does not have a fixed model that requires working in a specific way. Instead, CARH is seen as trying to work with the strengths of each partner. In practice, this might include having the scope to adapt protocols to fit with other partners. The project's *flexible* approach ensures it avoids the pitfalls of what one wider partner described as *"taking a blinkered approach that does not take account of people on the ground."*



"We are fortunate in this area that there are many others who are willing to work in partnership. In an area that has seen dramatic changes and its traditional industry just disappear, it has felt like an area abandoned to its own devices. People are used to working together to achieve more. It is open looking."

A wider partner describing why Rossendale is well-placed to facilitate partnership working

FURTHER READING

There are plenty of resources out there discussing a wide range of topics around partnership working. Below are a few suggestions for further reading:

- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA): A practical guide to collaborative working - http://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-resources/a_practical_guide_to_collaborative_working.pdf
- Sencot Legal: Guide to Collaboration and Partnership Working - <http://se-legal.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SL-Partnership-Guide-2016.pdf>
- The Wallace Foundation: Quality Measures: Partnership Effectiveness Continuum - <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/quality-measures-partnership-effectiveness-continuum.aspx>



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