



Third Sector Research Centre
Service Delivery Research Stream

Third Sector Partnerships for Service Delivery

Project Brief

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Third Sector Partnerships for Service Delivery

Purpose of this research outline

This research brief outlines the research project on Third Sector Partnerships for Service Delivery which will be undertaken during 2010 in the Third Sector Research Centre.

Key themes which will be explored in this project include:

- Long-term partnership working between third sector organisations (TSOs) and public and private sector organisations
- Partnerships, strategic alliances and mergers within the third sector
- Innovation and learning from partnership working, including lessons from international experience

In addition, the research will provide insights into other research issues in Service Delivery which will be explored in TSRC during this period, including the role of the third sector in service commissioning, governance issues arising from third sector involvement in partnerships to commission and deliver public services, and the role of the third sector in enabling user and community co-production of public services.

Context of the research

Context: Partnerships and the Third Sector

The collaborative agenda has emerged in the context of the changing role of the state, deriving partly from the perception in the 1990s of a crisis in the UK public sector, made up of concerns about governmental overreach, a legacy of departmentalism and an overloaded welfare state.

The process of hollowing out the traditional state had two consequences: firstly, the authority of state bureaucracies was increasingly decentralised, through contracting out to the private and voluntary sector and to arms-length public agencies; secondly, state authority was also fragmented, with the transfer of responsibility towards the increasing numbers of unelected QUANGOS (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). Sullivan and Skelcher also argue that the partnerships that have emerged post-

1997 period are qualitatively and quantitatively different – they are more outcomes-focused upon the needs of specific group or community and more likely to be longer term, even permanent.

Consequently, the third sector is now a major force in public service delivery. It works in partnership with public sector commissioners and with providers in the public sector, private sector and rest of the third sector. There is, therefore, a need to develop a better understanding and a critical assessment of how partnerships and collaborative relationships actually work, what they offer to service commissioners, and what implications they have for the future of the third sector. Particularly topical in 2010 is the response of third sector organisations to the efficiency and effectiveness agendas in public service commissioning, which calls into question the current balance between partnerships, alliances and other collaborative mechanisms and is leading to pressures for outright mergers between third sector organisations.

In particular, this research will explore what drives partnership working in service delivery for TSOs – what are the catalysts which trigger the interest in partnership working and collaborative activity? What are the benefits (and costs) which TSOs experience through working together with other organisations – and do these effects differ significantly, depending on which sector partners come from? What are the obstacles faced in seeking to develop real partnerships? What forms of partnership are emerging and what types of relationships are being constructed? How are different kinds of partnerships leading to different outcomes from public services and how are these outcomes affected by the incentives faced by different partners? Finally, what are the prospects for sustainability in relation to different kinds of partnership?

Building on existing research

Building on existing research

The research will draw upon the existing theoretical and empirical research into inter-organisational relationships, which pays major attention to trust, networking, power relations and social entrepreneurship. It will contrast the lessons from this ‘relationships’ approach with the literature which conceptualises organisational collaboration from a ‘strategic management’ standpoint, driven by resource dependency, economic imperatives and politically and socially desired outcomes.

The project will explore how the collaborative agenda in public services is shaped around the three main forms of collaboration - contracts, networks and partnerships – and contrasts the impacts of these with merger, which is the ultimate form of collaborative relationship.

The project will test conventional assumptions in the literature and in practice about how TSOs and their partners behave, examining the real constraints and barriers being faced by TSOs, the specific opportunities and threats they face by virtue of lying outside the public and private sectors, and how these opportunities and threats are shaped by the economic and social institutional contexts in which their actions are embedded. In particular, attention will be given to how TSOs build trusting relationships and innovative approaches in quasi-markets and competitive environments which emphasise cost and efficiency criteria for services.

The research will also test the conventional assumption that TSOs have a high innovative capacity, and that social entrepreneurs, in particular, are endowed with a special capacity to spot and exploit opportunities in the marketplace and address growing social needs and problems. The literature demonstrates a great deal of confusion and lack of evidence as to what innovation actually means in the third sector context, how it occurs in practice and what are the main factors/forces that promote it. The research will explore how TSOs contribute to making partnerships more innovative, both in terms of the outcomes and values they showcase and the processes which they use. We will test, in particular, the extent to which TSOs have played a role in encouraging partnerships to pursue innovation motivated by a 'for benefit' rather than 'for profit' ethos, and where this has happened, whether it has contributed to the strengthening of social relations, community cohesion, empowerment, and the employability (skills, creativity) of disadvantaged groups in particular.

Research questions

Research questions

The study will examine the following research questions:

- What are the different types of inter-organisational collaborative relationships involving TSOs?
- What are the main drivers of collaboration and partnership involving TSOs?
- How is partnership building affected by the policy environment?
- What are the impacts of different types of third sector partnerships on service outcomes and the quality of service experienced by users?
- What are the impacts of different types of third sector partnerships on organisational efficiency and service costs?
- What are the relative advantages of TSOs forming collaborations and partnerships with each other, compared with merging, as ways of improving service outcomes, quality of service, efficiency and cost?
- To what extent has service innovation and inter-organisational learning been enhanced by TSO contributions to collaborative and partnership working, and by merger between TSOs?

Methodology

The research project will have both a theoretical and an empirical component. The theoretical component will consist of a literature review that explores how the research questions on partnership working in the third sector have been addressed to date, drawing upon both the existing academic literature and the range of policy documents and briefings from government departments, local public agencies and a range of key local partnerships. It will highlight conflicts and gaps in the literature, and conflicts between the literature and the assumptions embedded in current policy and practice. This will be published in the interim report of the project which is scheduled for July 2010.

The empirical component of the research will explore the research questions in more detail, in order to throw light on the current state of partnerships involving TSOs, to suggest emerging trends, to test explore the conflicts in the literature and to fill some of the gaps in previous research. It will consist of three elements:

- Scoping interviews with key national and local stakeholders
- Three short exploratory case studies to refine our research questions and research instruments
- An on-line survey of a range of partnerships involving TSOs, to establish the overall state of play in respect of the research questions
- An in-depth set of case studies to explore the research questions in more detail
- Testing and disseminating findings in national workshop/conference.

Scoping with key national and local stakeholders

The study will be scoped by a number of initial interviews (likely to be between 8 – 10) with key national and local stakeholders, such as representatives from national umbrella bodies for the third sector (e.g. ACEVO, NCVO), local government (e.g. LGA, IDeA, Audit Commission), health and social wellbeing (e.g. NHS Confederation), partnership managers at local level, service commissioners at local level, and key third sector service delivery organisations from the national level (e.g. charities such as Age UK and Barnardo's), and local service delivery TSOs with strong reputations in the areas where we are likely to undertake the exploratory case studies). These scoping interviews will help us to identify the key current issues around third sector partnerships, both to refine the research questions and to ensure that these are tackled in an appropriate way in our exploratory case studies.

Exploratory case studies

These three case studies will allow us to refine the research questions in the context of specific sectors and give us initial feedback on the extent to which the hypotheses arising from the literature review are confirmed or contested by experiences in practical settings. In addition, they will help us to develop the detailed questions for the on-line survey and the topic guides for the in-depth case study, as the next stages of the research.

We anticipate that each of the cases studies will involve both third sector and public sector partners. We expect that one of the case studies will be in a health and social wellbeing partnership (and will involve an actual or prospective merger between at least two TSOs), one in an employment services partnership (involving at least one private sector partner), and one in a more general, non-sector-specific partnership (such as an LSP, a Total Place Strategic Board, etc.). We will also seek to ensure that different types of local governance arrangement are represented – ideally, one case study should be in a metropolitan area (LB or MDC), one in a large unitary council, and one in a county-district two-tier area.

On the basis of the research in the three exploratory case studies, the research questions will be revised and the research instruments will be refined.

On-line survey

The on-line survey will allow us to explore the current state of play in relation to the research questions across a wide range of partnerships.

The range of partnerships to be included has yet to be finally determined. However, it is likely to include partnerships in three of the sectors which we are specifically studying in the Service Delivery stream, namely:

- Health and Social Wellbeing
- Employment Services
- Criminal Justice

In addition, it is likely that a number of LSPs will be chosen for inclusion, representing very different types of local governance context (variables to be considered are likely to include: metropolitan v. rural, unitary v. two tier, high v. low deprivation, good v. poor relationships between statutory and voluntary sector).

The survey questions would explore relationships between commissioners and providers (vertical relationships) and relationships between providers (horizontal relationships) and would focus particularly on the mechanisms which have allowed TSO partnerships with other organisations to have a significant impact on outcomes, outputs, efficiency and costs.

Invitations to complete the on-line survey will be issued to people identified in each area as active in the partnership – this would certainly include all formal members of partnership boards and

committees but we would seek to 'snowball' the survey to a wider group of people, particularly from the third sector, by means of contacts with the CVSs and other umbrella bodies for the third sector in each area.

Respondents will be asked to fill in the on-line survey in their own right, rather than as representatives of their organisation. This will allow the possibility of having several respondents from many organisations, so that different perspectives can be included and views can more easily be triangulated.

The survey data will allow statistical analysis of how views on partnerships differ from different organisations, across sectors, between levels in organisational (and partnership) hierarchies, and between different types of organisation.

In-depth case studies

Finally, a set of case studies will be chosen for more in-depth analysis of each of the research questions. It is likely that each case study will be chosen because it throws light on one or more of the research questions – in that sense, they will be thematic case studies rather than generically considering all aspects of the partnership experience in the case studies concerned.

On some key issues, a pair of contrasting case studies may be chosen, in order to make comparisons across settings on that specific issue.

It is expected that the exploratory case studies used in the first phase of the research would continue to be used as case studies in this final phase, although it is likely that only some aspects of them would be explored in detail at this stage.

In total, we expect no more than seven case studies to be developed and investigated in this phase, although it may be less if the possibility emerges of using a single case study to explore more than one research question in detail.

We expect that some of these seven case studies may involve one or more of the Real Times case studies, so that we can make use of the knowledge base already developed on those case study organisations, and add further to it.

Testing of findings in national workshop/conference

The findings from the overall study, including the two sets of case studies and the on-line survey, will be tested in a national workshop towards the end of the project, which will consider the pre-circulated draft final report.

Timetable and input plan

Timetable and input plan

The timetable and expected inputs are set out in Table 1 below.

Time		Tony Bovaird	Sabrina Edwards	Other Researchers	Total
February - March 2010	Scoping and inception	2	2	-	4
March – April 2010	Review of the general literature	3	6	-	9
April – May 2010	Key stakeholder interviews	3	3	-	6
May 2010	Exploratory case studies	3	6	-	9
May – June 2010	Preparing on-line survey	2	4	2	8
July 2010	Analysis of survey	3	6	-	9
July 2010	Preparation of interim report	6	6	-	12
Sept 2010- Nov 2010	In-depth case studies	6	-	12	18
Nov 2010	Preparation of draft final report	4	-	8	12
Dec 2010	Workshop	2	-	2	4
Dec 2010	Final report	2	-	2	4
	Total no of days	36	33	26	95

Outputs and dissemination

Outputs and dissemination

There will be a series of outputs from the study:

- *Interim report*, setting out the findings from the literature review, the exploratory case studies, and the on-line survey
- *Final report*, setting out the overall findings from the study, including the in-depth case studies
- *Short policy briefings* will be prepared for different policy making audiences such as Office of the Third Sector, Department of Health, DCSF, etc.
- *Academic publications*: Publications will be submitted to academic journals in the management, public policy and social policy fields
- *Proposals for further funded projects*: The research will be used to develop a range of research project proposals for a variety of research commissioners and funders.

References

References

Tony Bovaird (2004), "Public Private Partnerships: From contested concepts to prevalent practice" *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 70 No. 2 (2004), pp. 199 – 215.

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Helen Sullivan and Chris Skelcher (2002), *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in Public Services*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The third sector research centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Service Delivery

From housing, to health, social care or criminal justice, third sector organisations provide an increasing number of public services. Working with policy makers and practitioners to identify key priorities, this work will cut across a number of research streams and cover a series of key issues.

Critical understanding service delivery by the third sector is important to policy making as the third sector now provides a major - and very different - option for public services, which may be more responsive to the needs of citizens and service users. At the same time, there are dangers inherent in the third sector becoming over-dependent on funding from service contracts – particularly in terms of a potential loss of its independence. The centre's research will help to inform the debate on the way in which service delivery is developing, the potential role of the third sector in commissioning as well as contracting, and the implications of different approaches to service delivery on the overall impact of the third sector.

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