

Partnership working for Women and Girls

A briefing paper

Many projects funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) work in partnership with others. Organisations may develop partnerships to shape and deliver services, collaborate on achieving greater voice and influence and/ or to optimise their capacity for attracting funding.

Today, in the context of Covid-19, partnership working is more important than ever. Across the women and girls sector, organisations are pulling together to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and finding that partnership approaches are often the only way of meeting needs in this challenging climate. Many such partnerships involve collaboration between two, three or four organisations. However, across the WGI, there are some partnerships that have taken collaboration even further, forging alliances between a larger number of organisations and working towards an even more joined up approach to improving the lives of women and girls. In this briefing we focus on three of these larger partnerships: the Women & Girls Partnership in Sheffield, Women's Lives Leeds and the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance. There is extensive literature on partnership working but little that pertains specifically to the women's sector so the aim here is to share live lessons about the successes and challenges of these three larger scale partnerships and what they are finding works well in making them effective.

This briefing draws on material produced by the three partnerships and an on-line workshop hosted by the WGI Learning and Impact Team. The briefing will be of interest to commissioners and funders and anyone considering the development of a partnership approach, particularly across voluntary and community sector organisations.

About the three partnerships

- **Women's Lives Leeds** is a partnership of 11 organisations representative of the diversity of Leeds, including small BAME, medium and large organisations. The partnership was formed in 2015 around a common theme of empowering women and girls to lead healthier and safer lives.
- **Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance** has brought together eight organisations to take a whole systems approach to supporting women. The partnership initially had a focus on women in the criminal justice system but is now extended to all women with severe and multiple disadvantage.
- **Sheffield Women and Girls Partnership** involves five organisations in developing more creative service models for the recovery and empowerment of young women and girls. The partnership involves four women's organisations: Vida (the lead partner), Young Women's Housing, Haven and Ashiana along with a children and young people's organisation (Chilypep) which plays a particular role in supporting co-production across the partnership.

What have been the biggest successes?

There are some impressive achievements across these three partnerships, including:

- **Attracting funding from both grant funders and commissioners.** For example, in Greater Manchester, although their WGI funding ended in 2019, the partnership has now been established as a new charity formed of the partners and is being funded by the Greater Manchester local authorities. In Leeds, the Women's Hub has gained four years funding from Comic Relief and in Sheffield, the lead partner, Vida, which was struggling to survive prior to getting the WGI grant has now gained further funding from the National Lottery Community Fund's Reaching Communities programme.

- **Achieving greater voice and influence for women's issues.** For example, in Sheffield, after a period of feeling quite marginalized, women's sector organisations have regained their voice, and in Leeds, the partnership has been instrumental in leading a range of strategic developments including the first city-wide review of women's health.

- **Building a positive profile locally and nationally.** As interest in partnership approaches has grown, these three partnerships are achieving a significantly raised profile and national recognition, helping to spread the word about women-centred ways of working. All three partnerships have gained a more influential seat at the table as a result of working together. A recent example in Greater Manchester was the ability of the alliance to work with Greater Manchester authorities in developing a women-centred accommodation solution for homeless women in the context of the Covid-19 lock-down.

- **Increasing capacity for new and different ways of supporting women and girls.** Working collaboratively has enabled these partnerships to do more than they could have done separately. For example, in Leeds three organisations have come together to develop a housing initiative – sharing both their skills - and the risks - of doing something they couldn't do alone. In Sheffield, the partnership has created capacity for greater service user involvement and co-production as well as facilitating new and more creative ways of working therapeutically with women and girls.

- **Sharing and developing good practice.** Working in partnership is acting as a catalyst for developing practice. For example, in Greater Manchester the alliance has created core standards for delivery across the whole region whilst maintaining an ability to respond to the varying needs of the ten local authorities. Similarly, in Leeds, workers are hosted and managed by the separate organisations involved in the partnership, but work to shared models of good practice.

What are the main challenges?

Developing and sustaining partnerships involving diverse organisations brings a range of challenges including:

- **Differences in systems and practice within the partnership.**

All three partnerships involve organisations of different sizes and characteristics. This can be a key strength, but it also means that priorities can differ and organisations are often working with different systems. A common example is case management and data recording. Whilst all three partnerships have tried to streamline these for consistency, it is not always possible to impose a common approach on all the partner organisations.

- **Developing honesty and trust, particularly in the context of a competitive environment.** Partnerships are based on trust, but this takes time to develop. For example, in Leeds the partnership is learning from some early tensions to establish a competition framework for when organisations wish to compete for a contract. This includes transparency and some ground-rules about being honest.

- **Sharing power. How power is shared across the partnership is crucial for developing and maintaining trust.** For example, it won't work if small organisations feel excluded or marginalized by the larger ones in decision-making. However, people at the top of their organisations are not always used to sharing power and may have to learn different ways of behaving.



- **Capacity for the work of partnerships.** Building and taking forward the work of partnerships takes a lot of time and energy and it is not generally part of anyone's day job. CEO's of small organisations rarely have the capacity to be fully involved and even for the larger ones, playing a full role in a partnership usually involves a lot of juggling of other priorities.

- **Communicating to others how a partnership works.** Although many funders and commissioners are now interested in partnership approaches, some remain uncertain about how to contract with alliances. In Greater Manchester, for example, the partnership has had experience of commissioners being nervous of contracting with something they don't recognise as the usual kind of organization. Their plan to form a new charity from the alliance is partly a response to this so that commissioners have a single, recognisable entity to contract with.

What are these partnerships learning

The three partnerships have engendered some common lessons about what works in developing and maintaining a successful partnership. These include:

- **Building a partnership on shared values including a feminist ethos.** All three partnerships are clear that if the only motivation to forge a partnership is money, then it won't work. Partnerships need to be built on shared values and common aims. All three partnerships are clear about their feminist ethos and woman-centred approach and these values act as the glue for their partnerships.

- **Appointing an independent chair.** The two larger partnerships are clear that this was a priority for them. Building trust across the partners means everyone having a voice and the experience in both Greater Manchester and Leeds is that the facilitation role played by an independent chair has been vital.

- **Allow time for setting up the governance and reporting structures.** This isn't easy especially when organisations are working with different systems and databases, but early efforts to achieve clarity about who is responsible for what, the lines of accountability, how decisions are made and actions recorded, generally pay off in the longer term. Negotiating a partnership agreement which all partners sign up to can be an important early step.

- **Accepting difference and fostering communication.** Even with shared values, there will inevitably be differences of views and perspectives between partners. Organisations vary in their size, capacity, priorities and cultures and it is important to acknowledge these differences and be honest about the impact they have. These three partnerships have learned the importance of partner organisations supporting each other and sometimes going the extra mile to do what it takes to help an organisation remain involved.

Published: June 2020

Information in this briefing is drawn from the Women and Girls Initiative which is a £44.7million investment by The National Lottery Community Fund supporting 62 projects across England with funds raised from the National Lottery.

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), DMSS Research and the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU), are delivering Learning and Impact Services to projects funded through the Women and Girls Initiative. Find out more here.

