research in practice

Strategic partnerships with the voluntary sector:

Messages from research and practice

Introduction

This briefing sets out the key messages from research and practice in commissioning strategic partnerships with the voluntary sector.

Reflections from practice are drawn from a **Research in Practice Change Project** which brought together five local authorities and their voluntary sector partners engaged in delivering innovative services for children and families. Together, these partnerships considered how voluntary sector organisations and local authorities can work together better and how these partnerships can be sustained to achieve the best outcomes for children, young people and their families.

This briefing sets out:

> Lessons from research identified during a literature review at the beginning of the project.
> Reflections from the five partnerships on their experiences of developing and delivering innovative services in partnership gathered through interviews and a workshop.
> Advice and tips for other organisations in the sector looking to develop similar partnerships.

The briefing includes the following sections

Why are we doing this?

While contracting out public services is not new, the relationship between local authorities and the voluntary sector has undergone significant change over the last decade, alongside changes in the financial and policy context in which these organisations operate.

Local authorities and charities are developing innovative solutions in response to the challenges of rising demand and shrinking resources and in the process, re-thinking the way that they work together to design and deliver services in partnership.

Traditional approaches of service level agreements, short-term contracts and target-driven contract management are not necessary well-suited to such a dynamic and challenging context. A different approach is starting to emerge, in which voluntary sector organisations working with children are no longer simply service providers, but are increasingly involved in service design – that is, devising new ways of helping children and families, and testing and developing those ways of working. In strategic partnerships with local authorities, voluntary sector organisations are contributing their expertise and resources to transformational change. They are doing so as strategic improvement partners, as partners in innovation projects and as members of regional adoption agencies.

This new way of working together comes with risks, not least because it challenges many existing assumptions about how commissioners and providers will work together. Attribution, impact measurement and evaluation are difficult in a complex system, and this can be challenging to public sector leaders and charitable funders and trustees, asking 'how do we know if it is working?' (Davison-Knight, 2017).

These relationships are by no means universal, but some partnerships are now delivering and evaluating services, so it is timely to reflect on messages from research and lessons for the sector on how to work effectively in this type of commissioner-provider relationship.

About the participants

Members of the Research in Practice network were invited to join the Change Project based on their involvement in current projects that fit the following criteria:

> a local authority and (at least one) voluntary sector partner were in an existing service contract
> the contract involves providing a new service, or a new approach, to a more standard service
> the contract requires input at the design stage from the delivery partner, necessitating a different kind of relationship and commissioning process.

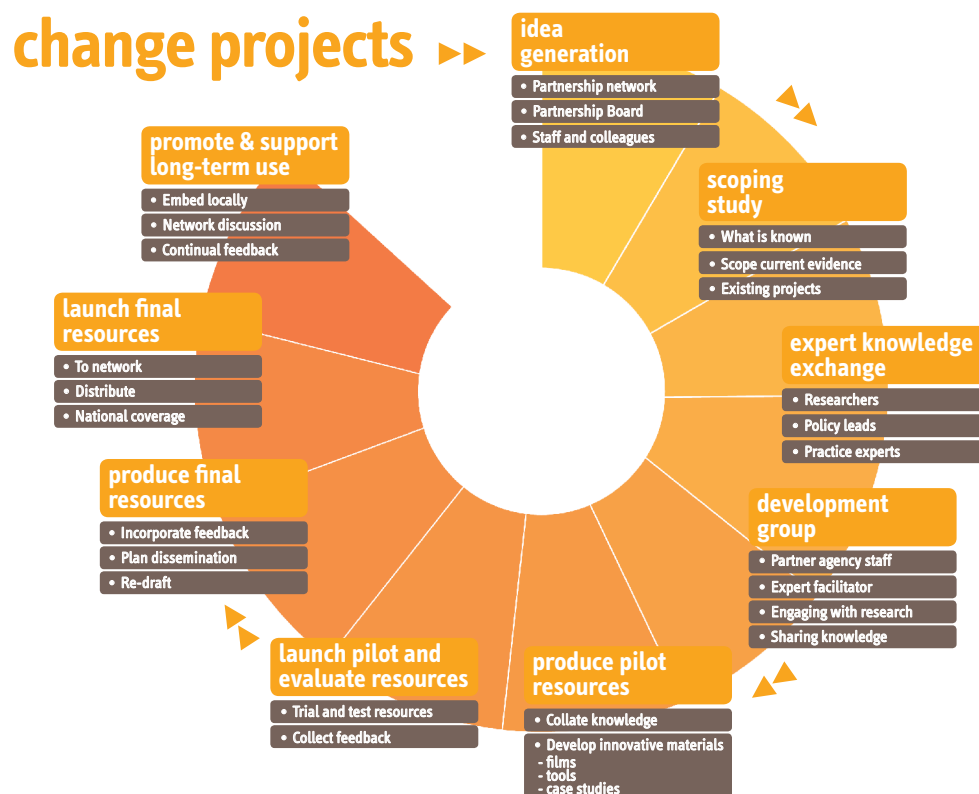The Change Project involved the following partnerships:

> **Essex County Council** and **Barnardo's** delivery of health and wellbeing services for children aged 0-19 and their families
> **Peterborough City Council** and **The Adolescent and Children Trust (TACT)** delivery of a permanence service for all looked after children
> **Wigan Borough Council** and **Action for Children** delivering a range of intensive family support services including Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST)
> **Cheshire East Council** and **Catch 22** delivering FAST, an intensive support service for families working with social care
> **Newport City Council** and **Barnardo's** delivery of family support services.

The following table sets out an overview of each project. Case studies of each of these partnerships are included at Appendix A, providing more detailed reflections.

	Description of partnership project	Project inception	Contracted project term	Additional parties involved
Essex and Barnardo's	Delivery of health and wellbeing services for children 0-19 and their families	Commenced in 20XX. Building on previous delivery of children's centres by Barnardo's	2017 to 2024	West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group (co-commissioner) Virgin Care (delivery partner)
Peterborough and TACT	Delivery of a "permanence service", managing all placements and carer support for a wide range of children	Commenced in 2016.	2017 – 2027	Department for Education Innovation programme (Wave 2)
Wigan and Action for Children	Delivery of evidence-based family intervention, including multi-systemic therapy, parenting programmes and intensive family support	Several projects on separate contracts, with different deadlines	various	
Cheshire East and Catch 22	Design and development of service for children in need under section 17, using differently qualified practitioners	Commenced in 2015.	2015 – 2017 (Project extended and expanded in 2017)	Department for Education Innovation programme (Wave 1)
Newport and Barnardo's	Delivery of an integrated family support service, including services for disabled children and edge of care.	Commenced in 2011	2011-2018 (Contract renewed for 5 + 2 years)	Institute of Public Care (evaluation)

Figure 1 : Summary of partnerships involved in the Change Project

About the Change Project

change projects ▶▶

idea generation
- Partnership network
- Partnership Board
- Staff and colleagues

scoping study
- What is known
- Scope current evidence
- Existing projects

expert knowledge exchange
- Researchers
- Policy leads
- Practice experts

development group
- Partner agency staff
- Expert facilitator
- Engaging with research
- Sharing knowledge

produce pilot resources
- Collate knowledge
- Develop innovative materials
  - films
  - tools
  - case studies

launch pilot and evaluate resources
- Trial and test resources
- Collect feedback

produce final resources
- Incorporate feedback
- Plan dissemination
- Re-draft

launch final resources
- To network
- Distribute
- National coverage

promote & support long-term use
- Embed locally
- Network discussion
- Continual feedback

Research in Practice Change Projects use a method of intensive engagement which enables participants to find solutions to specific challenges and results in new knowledge and resources.

A literature review was conducted at the beginning of the project to help participants reflect on the key issues identified in the literature. A subsequent Knowledge Exchange teleconference provided sector-based insights into the benefits and challenges of commissioner-provider relationships.

Representatives of each organisation within the partnership met with the Change Project facilitator twice over 6 months to explore their experiences and reflections in a private setting. This allowed for franker conversations than might have been held in a group setting.

All the partnership representatives then met together at a workshop to share experiences and discuss what they had learned through the process.

The policy context

Local authorities are facing a 'perfect storm' of pressures on resources, capacity, demand and rising expectations from the public and government to improve the services that they provide (ADCS, 2016).

Commissioning external organisations to deliver services is seen as one way of relieving these pressures. Commissioning processes are seen as the means to reduce expenditure through developing commissioning frameworks that provide greater value for money. Better value for money may be pursued through various strategies, with consequences and risks for potential or existing voluntary sector partners.

Strategy	Benefit to LA	Risk to voluntary orgs
Reducing the price paid per unit of service provided.	Same service at lower cost.	Service may become financially unsustainable.
Outcome-based payment schemes.	Transfer of some risk to the provider.	Requires up-front investment and additional financial risk.
Consolidating smaller contracts into a single contract.	Less procurement activity. More integrated service.	Out of reach for smaller organisations, contract value attracts private sector competition.
Collaborative commissioning by multiple local authorities.	Reducing overheads and increasing bargaining power with providers.	Larger contracts, over a wider geographical area may be beyond smaller organisations.

Figure 1: Cost reduction strategies (Demos, 2016; Children England, 2016; OPM 2014)

The emphasis on value for money and accountability for the use of public funds has led to a changing relationship between the public and voluntary sector and a move away from grant funding towards voluntary organisations being commissioned to provide specific services under contract (Children England, 2016).

This shift to a more formal relationship presents challenges to the voluntary sector. Commissioning instead of grants required voluntary organisations to adapt to what commissioners were asking for, rather than provide the same service they had always provided. This raised concerns within the charitable sector about threats to the independence, 'mission-drift', and a loss of responsiveness and innovation, though a review of the literature found "no clear indication of [the] prevalence, or the causes or consequences of mission drift" (Macmillan, 2010, p23).

The more formal procurement process now required places new demands on the sector in terms of the capability and capacity to engage with the procurement process. Voluntary organisations working across local authority boundaries are faced with an array of different arrangements for finding opportunities, submitting tenders and interviewing potential bidders. At the same time, a tendency in local authorities to move towards centralised procurement functions, rather than departmental grants, has led to increased distance between commissioners (previously grant funders) and providers through the increased involvement of non-specialist procurement teams (Children England, 2016).

More recently, as funding has been reduced further, charities report an increase in the expectation that charities will subsidise public services by providing services at a lower price than they cost to provide (Children England, 2016).

More positively, there is increasing recognition that voluntary sector organisations have ideas, backed by both experience and evidence, for more effective ways of meeting the needs of children and families. Local authorities are keen to draw on the expertise of the voluntary sector in tackling the many 'wicked issues' that they face. This means opening up the process of deciding what services to offer and how. In a 2012 survey of DCSs, almost all reported a desire to develop more co-production with providers to allow 'a flourishing of design' that can offer new approaches to tackling complex problems (Darby and Stockwood, 2012). Voluntary organisations are responding to this new environment by developing their own capacity to design and deliver services on behalf of local authorities, and developing innovative services through central government and grant funding in order to offer these as a bought-in service to local authorities. 23% of projects funded by the Department for Education's Innovation Programme were led by, or co-delivered by, voluntary sector organisations (Spring Consortium, 2016).

In some areas, local authorities are working with strategic delivery partners in the voluntary sector to try and make better use of the skills, experience and resources that the sector can offer. These strategic partnerships are the subject of the rest of this briefing.

Getting motivated

Messages from research

This section explores what motivates public and voluntary sector organisations to enter into strategic partnerships to deliver innovative services. Motivations and goals for forming partnerships matter. **Goal convergence** is where two organisations share similar goals. This convergence is seen as an important element in building and sustaining trust, a core element in any working relationship (Sancho and Sicillia, 2013).

Traditional contracting for and supplying of services is, on the surface, **transactional.** The purchaser gets a pre-defined service and the provider receives a financial reward in return. The motivations are in conflict, leading to mistrust that the provider will try to cut costs, or reduce quality, and the imposition of close service specification and performance management.

Even in profit-making commercial organisations, this single focus on short-term financial reward is open to question: long-term reputation and the potential for future contracts from the same commissioner are strong disincentives for providing a poor service (Bertelli and Smith, 2010; Sancho and Sicillia, 2013). Nonetheless, suspicion about profit motivations are at the heart of much resistance to the involvement of third parties in the delivery of public services. The recent debate about local authority powers to innovate and the possibility of this power being used to allow profit-making companies to deliver services resulted in government giving a guarantee that the powers would not be used in this way, following protests from academics and the children's sector (Tickle, 2016). This is mirrored in concerns about the role of private profit-making companies working to supply and support foster carers for looked after children (McNicoll, 2016).

Voluntary sector organisations providing services are more likely to be perceived as sharing the altruistic aims of the commissioning organisation to improve outcomes for children and young people, as well as offering social value that furthers the aims of local authority more broadly. The legislative framework governing the use of profits, the clear statement of charitable aims and long-standing reputations for social action all provide commissioners with reassurance that financial motivations are not paramount (Gill et al, 2015).

Local authorities can have a range of motivations for contracting out services. Commissioning processes are often used with the intention of improving the quality of service provision, rather than simply save money. External providers may have additional or different capacities, skills, and resources to develop and deliver services. There is another motivation for delivery of services by a third party: when the local authority is required to do so due to an adverse inspection judgement and government intervention. Demos (2016) argues that outsourcing during a period of failure may not be the best foundation for a successful contract, as the authority is unlikely to be sufficiently stable or have sufficient capacity to oversee the contract or develop an effective relationship with the provider.

Complete goal convergence is very unlikely, given the different political and organisational pressures on public and voluntary sector organisations. Nonetheless, each organisation will have motivations for wanting to enter into and continue the contractual agreement. Honesty about these motivations, even when they are not mutual, can help both partners to understand what the other needs to achieve and what they value in the partnership (Hardy et al, 2003). For example, the public commissioner might be seeking better public perception of a service delivered by the voluntary sector, while the voluntary sector organisation might be seeking to generate evidence to support the policy process more broadly (McGhee et al, 2016).

These differences are not necessarily in conflict, and where made explicit, can be the foundation for 'acts of kindness' by the other partner going beyond the contractual terms, for example by the local authority agreeing to talk publicly about the partnership to promote the service, or the voluntary sector partner working with the wider community to change perceptions of public services (Bertelli and Smith, 2010).

Some motivations can come into conflict, however. Many voluntary organisations have a dual role of service provision and campaigning for change. This external campaigning role can cause tension between the 'insider' work with the public sector and its 'outsider' work critiquing public policy, particularly when the relationship is contractual, rather than grant-based (McGhee et al, 2016). Further tension can arise between public sector and voluntary sector bodies because they have different objectives. Public sector bodies carry out government policy (and meet government targets) whereas voluntary sector organisations' main objective is to deliver person-centred, high quality services to individual service-users. In a contractual relationship, the power of the commissioning organisation can overwhelm the ideological commitment of the voluntary partner, "*through conformity to the dominant partner's operational culture and expectations*" (McGhee et al, 2016, p37). A strong sense of purpose, internal governance structures and clear non-negotiable statements of principle focussed on the organisation's mission are crucial to resist this threat of subversion of purpose (Mcghee et al, 2016).

Reflections on practice

The organisations in the Change Project echoed many of the messages from the literature review about their motivations for entering into strategic partnerships. The local authorities in our Change Project looked to bring in external capacity and expertise to run services that their own self-assessment and external inspection have identified as weak, or where they want to 'do things differently', rather than waiting for government intervention.

> **A desire to do things differently** in order to address identified issues in local systems. All the partnerships expressed a consistent set of beliefs about what needed to be done differently:
>   - recognition that the current system was complex, fragmented and difficult for families to navigate
>   - a desire for earlier intervention for families
>   - a commitment to using evidence to design innovative services.

> **The aspiration to address the impact of reduced resources and increased demand.** The converging pressures on local authority budgets, the steady reduction in grants and increased competition for contracts in the voluntary sector gave both types of organisation the appetite for taking risks to try new things.

> **Recognition that local authorities can't always do everything themselves, and do it all well.** Some of the local authorities were homing in on child protection activity as the council's main focus for in-house delivery, and looking to voluntary organisations' specialist expertise in other key areas of child and family services provision. Voluntary organisations are felt to be able to focus on the core competencies required to get the innovation right, and that commissioning would reduce the risk that project leaders' attention and resources might be diverted to manage unforeseen events in other parts of the service.

> **A drive to establish (or build upon) a strong reputation for partnership working, service delivery and innovation.** This was particularly important for the voluntary organisations, as successful involvement in the development of an innovative service in one area provides evidence for other local authorities looking to solve a similar challenge that the organisation might be a viable partner (see below).

Practice example: Peterborough and TACT

For **Peterborough** and **TACT**, a shared conviction that the care placement market was not meeting children's needs was a core driver for proposing a radically different approach to placement provision. The authority and charity are committed to a number of beliefs about what works for children in care that challenged the status quo, including:

> with the right support, more children could benefit from being cared for at home, or in a family environment

> supporting placements means supporting carers to care for children according to their needs

> children and carers should receive similar levels of support regardless of placement type or legal status, including if they leave care for adoption or a Special Guardianship Order, or return home to their parents.

"Children don't see legal orders, so neither should support services"
(Chief Executive of TACT)

These values directly informed the development of a proposal for a permanence service, in which a single provider would:

> control the placement budget for all of Peterborough's Looked After Children,

> provide an enhanced level of support for carers of all kinds and

> attempt to shift resources away from residential provision towards foster care.

The Council recognised that child protection activity would always be the council's main focus, whereas TACT has demonstrated expertise in recruiting and supporting foster carers and adopters.

An understanding of the risks and challenges involved in demonstrating the benefits of this approach shaped the contract, which runs for at least ten years and offers financial benefits to both organisations if savings are made. The risk of the project not having the desired effect was felt to be outweighed by the risk of doing nothing, for either organisation, given the financial climate for local authorities and voluntary fostering agencies. Once both organisations were signed up to the project, the level of trust, commitment and initial investment alongside the reputational and financial cost of failure making the project work were key drivers in making the partnership work.

Getting the right approach to commissioning

Messages from research
Local authorities are seeking to redesign and re-commission services within shrinking budgets, to address rising demand. Many authorities are trialling new ways of working, some either directly funded through, or inspired by, the Department for Education's Innovation Programme. Many of these innovations involve new ways of working, as well as new discrete services, through bringing different groups of practitioners together, adopting new models of practice and adapting systems and processes to better support practice with children and families (Sebba et al, 2017). As noted above, many of these involve working closely with the voluntary sector. One of the biggest challenges highlighted by voluntary sector organisations was getting the partnership off the ground, and through the procurement process.

This difficulty is not surprising, given the challenges that innovative services pose for commissioners and procurement teams. Traditional commissioning cycles in which service specifications are decided upon and fixed before the tender is awarded, and tightly-specified contracts can constrain the ability of both sides to be flexible at both a strategic and an operational level. Charities in these types of contracts report experiencing 'salami slicing' of contracts with little dialogue about how service expectations are revised, or sudden termination of contracts due to funding cuts (Children England, 2016). This contrasts with research in implementing innovation, which highlights the importance of co-design of ideas with stakeholders, a design-test-refine cycle for new ideas and a commitment to on-going learning and adaptation (Glisson, 2015). These changes to ways of working threaten the robustness of cost calculations, certainty of delivery and the relevance of performance measures on which traditional contracts are based.

Traditional procurement	Innovation
Rule-driven	Mission-driven
Process and output-orientated	Results-orientated
Pre-defined service and standards	Improvement-directed
Single line of accountability	Relationship-centred
Based on authority	Participation-based

Figure 2: Cultural differences between traditional commissioning culture and culture for innovation (Glisson, 2015)

Much innovation is iterative, the service adapts and changes in light of experience and feedback. The ability to adapt to meet the needs of the partnership and of service users is crucial to addressing complex challenges and helping people with complex and multiple needs. For those with the most complex needs, an approach focused on measurable outcomes may make it more difficult to meet the range of interacting needs that people face. People's lives are complex, as are the systems in which services seek to help them. Complexity theory suggests that linear approaches to improving outcomes will have unpredictable results in such a complex system (Davison-Knight et al, 2017).

A project investigating alternative approaches to commissioning highlighted the following features as beneficial to managing complexity:

> developing a shared understanding of the local context drawing on data, experience and co-production
> funding mechanisms that allow for trusting relationships to be established and developed over time
> a focus on learning rather than accountability
> a culture that promotes collaborative behaviours, such as flexibility, communication and long-term thinking
> support for developing the workforce to think differently about how social problems can be tackled (Davison-Knight et al 2017).

Reflections from practice

Local authority commissioners attempting to work with the voluntary sector to provide innovative services are left trying to reconcile two opposing processes, the commissioning and procurement cycle, in which the local authority closely specifies and monitors a specific service for a relatively short period, usually three years, and the innovation cycle, in which collaboration, dialogue and adaptation are prioritised and substantial commitment is required both upfront , in terms of investment, and sustained, in order to see the benefits in both outcomes and cost savings.

The local authorities we spoke to were keen to emphasise that, while they had redesigned the procurement and commissioning process, they had been careful to stay within procurement rules. They had however, tried to overcome some of the most significant barriers:

> Potential providers were involved at very early stages, in the process of identifying opportunities and challenges and possible solutions, and involved in designing the tender documentation – *See Finding the right partner.*
> Tender documents stated outcomes to be achieved, values and a vision for services, and providers were expected to give some details about how they would meet these in their bids. *See Getting over the bureaucracy*
> Contracts were designed for longer periods to allow for innovation to take hold and see returns, and in some cases to share any financial savings with the voluntary sector partner.

Getting the right partner

Messages from research
Pre-procurement dialogue is important for identifying options and opportunities to meet strategic objectives. The voluntary sector and other providers may have a different perspective on problems to be addressed, innovative ideas or services for how they to meet those needs and access to additional resources to support service delivery. Strong communication of the commissioner's strategic intent and aims with providers and contracts and commissioning processes that give providers the opportunity to put forward solutions can stimulate innovative responses and opportunities for co-production with providers (IPC, undated).

In a 2012 survey of DCSs, almost all reported a desire to develop more co-production with providers to allow 'a flourishing of design' that can offer new approaches to tackling complex problems (Darby and Stockwood, 2012). However, it is not that simple. Voluntary sector organisations involved in the Department for Education's Social Care Innovation Programme reported that they had struggled to engage local authorities in discussions about the potential for the innovative service (Spring Consortium, 2016). Similarly, Sellick (2014) found that procurement rules prevented providers from discussing innovative plans with commissioners at an early stage.

The right partner is one who complements your own strengths. Commissioner and providers will each have strengths and weaknesses, assets and capacities that the other does not have. Mutual understanding and appreciation of what each organisation brings to the partnership supports the division of roles and responsibilities based on which organisation can deliver the best impact in a given situation. For example in the Newport Family Support partnership mentioned above, as well as the majority of the budget, the local authority brought 'statutory credibility'; an 'interface with other agencies'; and a strategic approach to transformation, while Barnardo's as the strategic partner brought 'areas of practice excellence'; a research function, flexibility; and national influence (IPC, 2016, p3).

Trusting your partner is crucial to developing an effective relationship, and trust comes from repeated interactions over time. It can be part of the motivation for collaboration, or an incidental outcome of collaboration for other purposes (Thaddieus et al, 2016). Trust is built through demonstrating and receiving:

> - mutual respect
> - honesty
> - empathy and forgiveness
> - co-operation
> - flexibility and responsiveness.

But this presents a paradox, as identified by a participant in the Knowledge Exchange:

"The literature tells me I need to find a trusted provider, but how do I know which organisations I can trust?"
(Knowledge Exchange Participant)

Organisations as a whole also have characteristics that can make them more trust-worthy in the eyes of partners or potential partners.

> Have appropriate governance and processes that promote learning
> Develop a culture that recognises complexity and in which leaders model the behaviour that they want to see
> Be part of established networks
> Be willing to innovate.
(Davison-Knight et al, 2017)

Reflections from practice

Given the messages about trust developing over time in the literature, it is perhaps not surprising that all five partnerships stemmed from existing relationships between the organisations, with the voluntary sector partner having sometimes substantial history of working in the local area. There were therefore already some shared foundations for the partnerships, including:
> knowledge of the local context and challenges
> connections with the wider network of local stakeholders
> demonstrable ability not only to deliver services to a high standard, but, crucially, to respond to challenge appropriately.

In some cases, it was from these existing relationships that the idea for a new approach or innovative service initially emerged, though it is important to note all were subsequently put out to a competitive tender.

The qualities that Change Project participants identified in each other as the basis for generating trust are set out in the table below:

The qualities of a good local authority partner	The qualities of a good voluntary sector partner
Bravery and willingness to take a chance	Energy and enthusiasm for the concept underpinning the innovation
Ability to respect the charity's independence	Access to networks and learning from other places
Accessibility of key decision-makers	Flexibility in changing circumstances
Trust that both parties want to 'do the right thing'	
Open to challenge and willingness to learn	

Voluntary organisations seeking local authorities to try out new ways of working identified the accessibility of key decision-makers from the start as a key indicator that the authority would make a good partner.

"*If you can't get in front of the Chief Executive, DCS and lead member early on, it is probably not worth taking it any further in that authority*" – voluntary sector workshop participant.

Senior leadership support was reported to be crucial in securing wider buy-in, managing expectations and removing roadblocks as the project evolved.

Believing that both parties want to 'do the right thing', requires a shared understanding of what the right thing to do is. This can be specified in the procurement phase, so that tendering organisations have to demonstrate their commitment to the published principles.

Practice example: Essex and Barnardo's
In Essex, a set of principles that should guide the behaviour of organisations within the partnership – Adapt, Collaborate, Learn – formed part of the extensive pre-procurement consultation process and the final tender that was issued. The pre-procurement process itself was an opportunity for both partners to demonstrate their commitment to these values. The commissioners (the local authority and West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group) collaborated to run the pre-procurement process, which was driven by learning from listening to communities, practitioners and families and adapted ideas in response to potential providers' comments. For providers, consultation and design workshops were opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to these principles by sharing their own experiences in delivering services, and contributing to the new design, without any guarantee of winning the contract to deliver it.

Practice example: Wigan and Action for Children
In 2011 **Wigan** Council adopted the 'Wigan Deal', a series of reciprocal promises to the local community about working together to improve life in the borough, accompanied by a set of principles for how the authority would work with families, other services and its own staff. These values are used throughout the council, and so form the basis for scrutiny from elected members.

Action for Children worked with the Council to ensure that the existing Action for Children services were meeting these expectations – for instance in using an asset-based approach, engaging in co-production and encouraging self-reliance and independence – and contributed to discussions about how the wider system could be redesigned to better support these aspirations. The values in the Wigan Deal aligned with Action for Children's own value base. The charity had already done a lot of work to develop internal practices and culture to promote their own behavioural standards. This alignment, and prior experience of changing ways of working to embed these values resulted in Action for Children being commissioned to undertake training for practitioners across the borough and work in partnership on workforce development, as well as delivering specific services.

Getting over the bureaucracy

Messages from research

Commissioning, and particularly the technical procurement and contracting management activities associated with commissioning, is focussed on getting value for money and ensuring the quality of services provided in return for the money spent by the local authority. The activities are *transactional* – in that the contracts produced as part of the process make clear what each party to the contract can expect to receive as a result – for the commissioner the level of service provided and/or the outcomes to be achieved, and for the provider, the level of payment that they can expect to receive (Bertelli and Smith, 2010).

However, contracts can be 'incomplete'.

> They do not fully define the **goals and processes** to be undertaken as part of the contract. Defining goals is particularly difficult when commissioning complex human services, rather than goods or more clearly defined services such as waste collection (Sancho and Sicillia, 2013).

> Contracts do not, and arguably, cannot define **responses to all situations** that may arise through the life of the contract. In a high risk service where a child death or poor inspection result could dramatically change strategy and priorities, where government funding is volatile as well as reducing and where social and demographic predictions of future demand are weak, the ability to adapt and respond to crises not envisaged in the agreement are crucial (Sellick, 2006). Austerity has put pressure on the relationships between some local authorities and independent fostering agencies due to a freeze on recruitment, increased expectations on providers for no additional money and no response to increased living costs (Sellick, 2014).

> While contracts may make provision for recompense following poor performance, and a breach of contract can be pursued through the courts, **the high costs of putting these sanctions into practice can leave commissioners feeling that they have few levers to pull** in order to influence the provider's performance other than not re-commissioning at the end of the contract term. Unused sanctions can lead commissioners to lack credibility with providers in the future (Bertelli and Smith, 2010).

> Contracts **can over-specify what must be provided and reported**, risking creating a '*tick-box mentality that will get the money, rather than what families actually need*' (Kippin and Billiald, 2015, p23) adding costs and bureaucracy related to data collection and stifling innovation and strategic vision. But being very specific about performance data and monitoring can lead to too strong a focus on what is being measured, over less measureable aspects of service delivery, such as capacity to work with other service providers, the quality of user experience and the support and development of staff within the provider organisation (Carson et al, 2012).

Voluntary sector providers need to understand the difference between commissioning and procurement teams and have on-going relationships with both (NCVO, 2014). Commissioners need to engage with procurement about the strategic aims of the tender to prevent "high-level objectives being transformed into highly specific, or even process measurements" (Harwich et al, 2017).

In practice, the relationship between the commissioning organisation and the provider fills in the gaps in these incomplete contracts. Relationships can help to enable flexibility in the face of changing circumstances or unexpected results, and for the organisations to grow and learn together to improve the quality and impact of services (IPC, 2017).

Reflections from practice

Negotiating the contract
The partnerships taking part in the Change Project were clear that the current framework for procurement in local authorities placed significant, but not insurmountable, barriers in the way of forming and sustaining strategic partnerships for innovation. For these partnerships, the scale of funding (both from the Council and other investment), the length of time covered by the contract and the lack of specificity that was common at the contract stage all posed challenges for 'business as usual' processes in legal and finance teams.

Practice example: Essex and Barnardo's
Both partners having a clear vision for the principles and outcomes driving the partnership becomes crucial when navigating the technical hurdles associated with negotiating and signing contracts. Essex County Council was keen not to dictate what the services provided would look like, but put forward a clear vision, a set of principles and outcomes that they wanted to achieve. A clear and concise 'Plan on a page' setting out the principles was found to be a helpful way of communicating that lack of specificity of services or outputs did not mean a lack of accountability nor clarity of purpose. The process was still described as 'complex' and 'exhausting'. The fact that two commissioning organisations were involved (Essex County Council and West Essex CCG) meant that commissioners could offer each other moral support and boost each other's conviction that the process was worthwhile for the outcome.

These barriers were overcome through:
> buy-in from senior leaders with influence over the commissioning function, procurement and legal teams
> persistence, and a shared commitment that the partnership was the right thing to do
> careful engagement of legal and finance teams throughout.

In a number of the projects, legal and finance officers from both partner organisations were members of the governance structure, at least for the contract negotiation and post-procurement design phase of the project. In some cases, this continued as a sub-group during delivery to ensure that technical issues could be addressed quickly and efficiently. Nonetheless, the transfer of funds and of information about families and staff transferring to the new service was challenging and took a number of months in some cases.

Moving past the contract
Once the contract was agreed, however, it was perceived as largely '*gathering dust on the shelf*'.

"If you find yourself reaching for the contract to check details, it is already over"
(Change project workshop participant)

The statement above was met with vigorous agreement by all of the participants in the final workshop of the Change Project. The various partnerships felt that the detail of the contract had been supplemented by the expectations of behaviour and ways of working developed through frequent interaction in the design and delivery phase of the partnership.

The partners had shared expectations of what issues needed to be raised in what context in order to reach resolution, and crucially, a shared conviction that everyone involved in resolving those problems was equally motivated to find the best solution for families and for the service. For those developing a completely new service, this flexibility was even more necessary, to allow the service to adapt and develop iteratively.

Contract re-negotiation
The contract did re-emerge in two of our projects, once when the partnership was re-commissioned at the end of the first contractual term, and the other when the local authority faced significant funding cuts near the very beginning of one project and the contract had to be renegotiated.

Practice examples: Newport and Barnardo's
In **Newport,** the partnership with Barnardo's was re-commissioned after a successful seven year term. This happened during the course of the Change Project. A new competitive tender was issued and a number of bids submitted and assessed. It was not a certainty that Barnardo's would bid for the renewed contract, nor that they would win it. The significant financial commitment required of the provider meant that the tender and contract came under additional scrutiny from Barnardo's head office as a high risk contract.

Reflecting on that process, the partners noted that:

> While the local authority context has changed quite significantly since the first tender in 2011, the close cooperation and challenging conversations that were established as part of the first contract meant that the revisions in the specification for the new tender came as no surprise.
> The council were determined to ensure a fair process, and the consequent uncertainty was felt and commented on among Barnardo's staff.
> Both partners had to articulate the rationale for the project and the benefits of the organisations continuing in partnership to their respective management, and having done so, felt that the process led to a renewed commitment to the project from the wider council and Barnardo's nationally.
> The partnership had developed so far beyond the original contract (in developing ways of working and new services) that it was difficult to articulate those benefits in a competitive tender that assumed an organisation starting from the beginning. Reviewing what was actually being provided by the time the contract was renewed was a helpful process.

Practice example: Wigan and Action for Children

In **Wigan,** where Action for Children hold three separate contracts for various elements of intensive family support provision, the contract for Multi-Systemic Therapy had only just been introduced, when the council found it necessary to reduce the resources available for the service. The conversation was not a confrontational one, however, but a collaborative effort to understand what could be done to achieve the continuation of the service but with a reduction in the financial support from the Council. The conversation was had in the context of the introduction of the Wigan Deal (see above) and the introduction of new expectations on providers to demonstrate that their services applied the values in the Deal. The result was new commitments from both sides:

> *Time-limited support*: Reflecting on the length of time families were offered support, Action for Children identified that the service might be encouraging dependency rather than the self-reliance envisaged in the Deal's principles. The result was an expectation that support was time-limited, with a multi-agency conference call overseeing families reaching the limit where practitioners felt that an exception should be made. This was felt to ensure that families' needs were prioritised over efficiencies.

> *Integrated services*: Wigan committed to introduce multi-agency conference calls involving in-house and commissioned services to improve co-ordination and mutual understanding of services' roles and capacity. This both embodied one of the Deal's principles and supported the Multi-Systemic Therapy team in reaching sufficient numbers of eligible children and families to demonstrate value for money.

Getting buy-in

Messages from Research

Each organisation will have its own stakeholders and through the commissioning relationship, two organisations become part of each other's' network of stakeholders. Stakeholders includes government, regulators, staff, service-users and the wider public, each of which place demands on and give legitimacy to both the commissioning and providing organisation. These demands place inescapable constraints on the partnership activity within the relationship, and these demands can change, sometimes with little warning. Not all stakeholders have direct power over the organisations' behaviours but can exert influence, for example the local and national media and public protests or campaigns.

Getting "buy-in" from staff is perhaps most important. Each commissioner-provider partnership will be built on the individual relationships between staff members that form and evolve over the life of the contract. These relationships exist at every point that the two organisations come into contact, including between practitioners, managers and administrative staff. Trust develops over time and through repeat interactions (Thaddieus et al, 2016). Staff members' freedom to act and make commitments on behalf of their organisations and the timescales within which decisions are made may vary significantly depending on the organisational culture. Individuals will have their own position and status within the organisation, while each organisation will have its own governance, policies and practices that shape the behaviour of the individual members of staff.

Both commissioner and provider organisations are part of a wider network of systems of services for children, young people and families. Other agencies' actions will help or hinder the achievement of the partnership's goals. Interactions with these agencies can be at a strategic or operational level. Understanding existing relationships with other organisations locally and how these can be used to promote and support the services delivered through the partnership between commissioner and provider helps to identify new opportunities and make the most of existing assets and resources. This includes relationships with different parts of the local authority.

Accountability may become a barrier to collaboration (Davison-Knight et al, 2017). Commissioning of individual providers to provide discrete services risks fragmenting the system of services so that children and families do not receive a holistic service, or experience 'start-again' syndrome as they are passed from one provider to the next (Munro, 2011). New commissioning models that span a greater range of services and levels of need than traditional service contracts are increasingly being used. The hope is that this will encourage collaboration between providers, a focus on prevention and a holistic approach. A number of different models are in use, including lead provider model, accountable care organisations and Alliance collaborations between independent organisations.
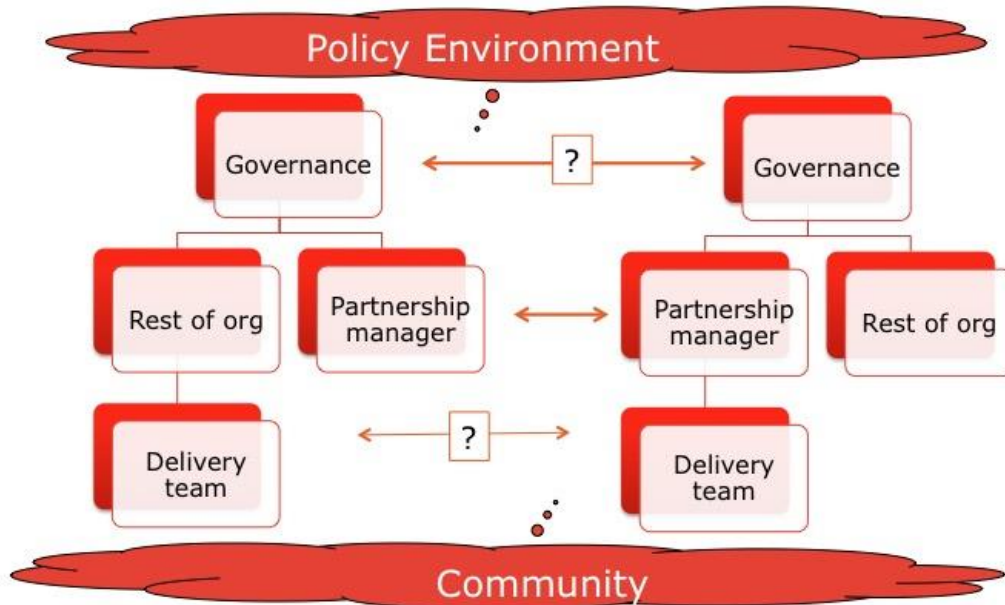
Figure 3: Thinking about relationships within the partnership

Reflections from practice

Engaging stakeholders beyond the local authority officer responsible for commissioning and the responsible manager in the voluntary organisation was felt to be crucial to the success of any partnership.

Important stakeholders

Internal	External
The cabinet of the local authority	Central government
Trustee Board of the voluntary organisation	Regulators
Staff, both those moving to the new service and those working with the new service	Donors and other grant-makers
Legal, finance and human resources functions in both organisations	Local authorities and partners in wider collaborative arrangements – e.g. regional adoption agency, sector-led bodies

Engaging elected members appropriately requires an understanding of the political composition and culture of the authority. Given the large sums of money committed to some of the projects, it is unsurprising that the elected members of local authorities took a keen interest in the development of the projects from the start.

Elected members were engaged through existing committee structures (such as scrutiny and corporate parenting boards), with representatives of the voluntary organisation often attending and giving direct feedback to members. This was felt to be an effective way of developing trust. Locality-based services were sometimes visited by ward councillors, as part of community engagement activities. Voluntary organisations felt it was important to be clear about the different responsibilities that elected members have in different roles (e.g. ward councillor, lead member, scrutiny chair). Awareness of political rules and roles helps to avoid the perception of inappropriate closeness between the charity and the council – for example an elected member acting as a ward councillor providing a community grant to a local centre run by the charity might also sit on the scrutiny committee providing challenge at a strategic level. While not always inappropriate, it helps to be clear about how such interactions might be perceived.

Voluntary organisations noted that local authorities operate in a variety of local political contexts. Political stability was seen as an asset to long-term partnership working, whereas a change in political control from one party to another can absorb time and energy in getting a new set of stakeholders on board. All the authorities in the Change Project had stable political leadership and a long history of the council being run by one or other main political party. Local authorities under No Overall Control, or subject to frequent changes in the governing party, it was felt, would make risky partners for such a substantial project.

Engaging with voluntary organisation governance structures requires a similar knowledge of the organisational context. The level of involvement of central governance structures in individual projects varied. Some projects were part of a voluntary organisation's routine monitoring on a regional basis, using well-established metrics and risk management processes. The Head Office function of these organisations provided support in business development, human resources, legal and financial matters and workforce development. The voluntary organisation representatives in the partnerships welcomed this practical and the professional support, particularly when taking difficult decisions that they had never been asked to make before, such as redundancies. More innovative, and therefore risky, projects had more direct senior involvement within the voluntary organisation, including consideration of the risk by the Trustee Board. Ensuring that the senior management team and the Trustee Board had the right skills mix to deliver and provide robust challenge respectively was part of the preparation for entering into the partnership.

Engaging staff about potential and future changes was felt to be necessary (but not sufficient) to embed the partnership throughout the organisation from the very start. Where staff were being transferred from one organisation to another, as in Essex and Peterborough, engagement during the transition was of paramount importance for staff morale and retention. For newly established external services, the challenge is one of promoting understanding of what the service does, who it is for and how to access it. Under-promotion can lead to a lack of appropriate referrals and friction between different services and teams.

Examples of staff engagement activities

> Engaging staff in the pre-procurement process so that the tender specification includes an element of co-production
> Leaders using joint communication and shared platforms to model partnership-working.
> Holding staff events where the leaders of both organisations heard feedback and resolved issues together.
> Shared training and learning opportunities bringing staff together to combine the practice wisdom of both organisations.

Practice example: Peterborough and TACT
Staff in the fostering and adoption teams and local authority foster carers were all asked to transfer to the employment of TACT under TUPE regulations. The partners went far beyond the mandatory consultation requirements in order to maximise the number that chose to transfer. Peterborough staff and carers were involved in the design of the tender, and expressed a strong value-driven preference for a not-for-profit organisation. After the contract was awarded, the partners communicated the benefits of TACT's support and professional development offer to both staff and foster carers.

Engaging external stakeholders
The partnerships were acutely aware that the success of the project required support from external stakeholders, particularly when the service was innovative. Partners worked together to identify stakeholders and decide which organisation was best placed to engage them, using the different existing relationships, good reputation and other assets brought by each partner.

Stakeholders identified by the partnerships include:

> Department for Education, including the Chief Social Worker
> Ofsted
> the Family Court system for those working with children in or on the edge of care
> other voluntary sector organisations working in the local area.

Practice example: Cheshire East and Catch 22
In **Cheshire East,** the **Catch 22** project "Project Crewe' (now FAST) was exploring the use of differently qualified practitioners in working with families where a child in need requires support under Section 17. The partners wanted to be sure that central government and Ofsted understood the proposal and agreed that the social work supervision and oversight provided met the requirements of statutory guidance. The bid to the Innovation Programme for funding was one opportunity to engage central government in the proposal and the project structure was amended after initial feedback that the level of social work support was insufficient. At an early stage, they invited the regional inspector and the Chief Social Worker to come and visit the project, meet the workers and raise any questions about the project.

Getting going

Messages from research

Relationships between managers and practitioners in the two organisations are what allow any commissioner-provider agreement to function, despite the "incompleteness" of contracts described above. As partnerships move into the set-up and delivery phase of innovation, there is a need to:

> > establish and develop working relationships between senior managers
> > establish ways of working together, and develop and refine processes and procedures
> > establish the working culture, including how problems are resolved.

Traditional commissioner-provider relationships have been described as "command and control", or "we say, you do". The power of the local authority to remove funding or not renew a contract gives the commissioner significant influence over the future of the provider's service (and with smaller organisations, the voluntary organisation's whole existence). As psychosocial theories of social work highlight, situations of anxiety are not conducive to building trust or forming relationships. The anxiety produced by uncertainty and mistrust between commissioner and providers also affects motivation and retention of practitioners within each organisation (Children England, 2014).

Delivering innovative services or new ways of working requires a different relationship. The longer contract length in many of the innovative projects in children's services aim, in part to reduce that anxiety, and allow relationships to be developed and sustained over time.

Trust is the core characteristic of an effective relationship. This includes personal trust between individuals and institutional trust between organisations, though how organisational culture and individual motivations interact is an area that requires further research. Because organisational relationships are enacted through individual interactions and behaviour, personal characteristics matter. Davison-Knight et al (2017) identified characteristics of individuals that promote trust between commissioners and providers.

Individuals need to:

> > have a 'can-do' attitude, while being honest about risks and uncertainty
> > be knowledgeable about their field and willing to use evidence to continue building that knowledge
> > have a track record of working in partnership and be willing to take difficult decisions and manage expectations of those they work with
> > share values of commitment to user outcomes and experience, be open to difference, be humble and act with integrity.

Individuals are more than just representatives of an organisation and have characteristics beyond those required of them as an employee. The ability to be authentic, to bring oneself to the conversation as well as fulfilling an organisational function, to have a sense of humour and to be excited about the opportunities that the partnership presents can all contribute to developing the trust required in a successful partnership (Citeralla, 2016).

It is not just relationships between senior leaders of the commissioning and provider organisations. Building a culture of collaboration is equally important. The culture and management style within an organisation influences practice and managers and leaders should seek to mirror the behaviours and attitudes that they wish to see in practitioners (Munro, 2011). Institutional values are enacted through layers of interactions between managers and practitioners (Gibson, 2016). When those values are positive and inclusive, this can reap benefits in terms of staff engagement. In the evaluation of the Newport strategic partnership delivering children's service, the leaders of this successful partnership noted that "*The partnership culture appears to have stimulated genuine practitioner ownership and engagement in service delivery. The sparks of innovation are ignited at all levels.*" (IPC, 2017 p4)

As in social work, a good relationship does not mean a "cosy" relationship, but one that is "high support, high challenge" and feeling able to challenge each other is an important part of a functional commissioner-provider relationship. Turney (2012) proposes three elements of relationship-based practice with families that resonate with discussions of effective commissioner-provider relationships:

> **recognition** of an individual as a morally accountable, independent agent and acknowledgement of the individual's achievements and abilities
> **respect**, rooted in recognition of the above, a lack of which can lead to anger and indignation acting as a barrier to an effective working relationship.
> **reciprocity,** an acknowledgement that both parties have something to offer and something to gain from the relationship, even where there is an imbalance of power, and a mutuality of respect.

Relationships are not without risks. Perceptions of the nature of a commissioner-provider relationship can change depending on context. As one contributor to the sector Knowledge Exchange put it:

"What was once seen as a strong partnership can come to be seen as over-dependence if things go wrong."

Commissioners must find a balance, being close enough to voluntary sector providers that the charity feels able to challenge local authority practice and bring about change based on their experience and expertise, and not being so trusting of their altruistic motives that problems within the charity are not identified. Two high-profile examples show the different risks:

Not close enough:
The side-lining of the voluntary sector organisation working with vulnerable women and girls in Rotherham was identified as a key factor in the lack of recognition of the extent and damage of child sexual exploitation over a number of years (Jay, 2014).

Too close:
In investigating the collapse of Kids Company, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee found that the close and public relationship between the leader of the charity and individuals at the top of government and the high public profile of the charity in the media resulted in preferential funding and a lack of monitoring (PAC Select Committee, 2016).

Reflections from practice

Building trust between the key leaders in each organisation was seen as a crucial aspect of the move from contract negotiation to service delivery. Participants found that the process of developing the service together helped to build that trust, for a number of reasons:

> explaining how the system currently worked and the quality of practice within the local authority required transparency about the challenges – this honesty built trust
> reaching compromises in areas of disagreement required increased understanding of each other's motivations, and the financial and operational context in which they are working
> troubleshooting problems as they (inevitably) arose during transition gave each partner the opportunity to put their values into practice, and to demonstrate their willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the partnership.

Establishing ways of working was a work in progress in many of the partnerships. Specific issues that partners have sought to address include:

> **roles and responsibilities** of each partner in delivering the service
> **procedures for working together** on cases
> attitudes and behaviours of staff toward each other, including the need to give positive as well as negative feedback
> **communication methods**, such as the use of meetings, telephone calls and emails.

How these ways of working were established was felt to be as important as *what* the ways of working were, with the process seen as an opportunity to establish shared culture and expectations within the partnership. Where they had the opportunity and capacity to be involved, practitioners made important contributions to service design, quickly identifying potential barriers to be avoided and suggesting improvements. In addressing practitioners' concerns, the partners felt that they had designed better services. In some authorities, practitioners did not have the capacity to get involved in these conversations initially (due to pressures of demand and resources) and this was felt to have affected the time taken for the partnership to be really effective at an operational level. This made subsequent efforts to build a collaborative culture based on mutual respect even more important.

Practice example: Cheshire East and Catch 22
In **Cheshire East**, the working practices between the Council and **Catch 22** are enshrined in an operational manual, so that there is a concrete document to which all staff can refer. It is frequently referred to, and regularly updated as refinements are made and working practices evolve in response to learning generated from practice. This has been found to be helpful, particularly for new staff and new managers and when scaling up the service to other localities and local authorities.

Establishing the method and frequency of communication for different types of issue was felt to be important. In some partnerships email had been rejected for all but the most mundane matters, with phone calls and meetings the preferred means of communication. Emails were felt to hinder good communication because they are one-way, so don't encourage dialogue; can be mis-interpreted in content or tone, leading to conflict or confusion; and can be copied to a wide range of people, diluting accountability for acting on the content.
Face-to-face meetings were generally the preferred format for strategic discussions, conflict resolution and learning opportunities for practitioners, as this was felt to promote empathy and mutual understanding and respect. Conference calls were used to support operational multi-agency working in some places as they made best use of staff time while ensuring a steady flow of information exchange. In Wigan, the format and frequency of multi-agency conference calls was developed over time to improve understanding of each agency's role and capacity and improve working relationships.

Where staff from each organisation were co-located, this had a significant impact on the quality and quantity of information-sharing and collaboration.

Practice example: Newport and Barnardo's
In **Newport**, the **Barnardo's** team is co-located with the children's social care teams. Over the ten years of the initial contract, they became 'part of the furniture', to the extent that many local authority staff were surprised at which members of staff were at risk when the contract came up for renewal. Practitioners from both organisations get together to discuss their practice, and to develop the services provided, based on their shared experience of working with local families.

The troubleshooting process appears to have been an important one. A number of the partnerships identifies the first 'bump in the road' as a key time for testing and increasing trust in each other. If communication channels weren't established the first time a problem needed resolving quickly, the need for such channels was quickly appreciated. Raising problems early and informally, rather than letting problems develop and emotions heighten, established that the partners had a shared understanding of which issues needed escalation and increased the commissioner's trust that the provider would not hide things. The process provided the leaders of the partnership with an opportunity to model behaviours of collaboration and mutual respect. Over time, as the design phase moved into delivery, team and service managers took on the role of managing disputes and disagreements.

Agreeing key messages and use of language was important in staff engagement and communicating values. For example Cheshire East and Catch 22 agreed to talk about '*differently qualified*' practitioners, rather than '*not social work qualified*' and to describe the transition between the Catch 22 service and the core social work services as '*step-across*' rather than '*step-down*'. This was felt to express the parity of esteem which staff should extend to the two services and sets of practitioners.

Getting better

Messages from research
In exploring new ways of working and new forms of partnership, local authorities and funders are trying to find new ways of ensuring that partners are delivering on their commitments. This is not just a question of ensuring contractual agreements are being met, or satisfying funding requirements. Capturing impact is a key part of the process of learning and adapting innovative projects to refine design ideas in practice.

Outcomes-based commissioning is increasingly being used in children's services, but is "*tricky to get right*" (Demos, 2016, p28).

Risks and challenges include:
> All concerned understanding the differences between outputs and outcomes and being able to define short, medium or long term outcomes specific enough to be meaningful
> clearly defining, agreeing and measuring outcomes, including managing issues of attribution – knowing which service made the difference to outcomes
> the capacity to collect and analyse the relevant data
> sufficient providers able to manage the additional risks and
> the possibility of system failure if too many providers fail (Harwich et al, 2017).

Relationships that focus on performance targets rather than a culture of care or outcomes for children and families can distort social work practice as practitioners and managers seek to find coping mechanisms to manage increased demands on their time (Broadhurst et al, 2012). Leigh (2017) suggests that too strong a push for performance targets to be met can create conflict between managers and practitioners and affect the whole team's attitude and motivation. While these studies relate to culture within a single agency, it is likely that an inter-agency relationship between a commissioning organisation and a provider that focuses on performance targets might have similar effects on practitioners. If social work practice is affected by the organisational culture in which it operates, then the relationship between commissioner and provider of social care services forms a crucial part of that environment.

A drive for more personalised provision has also highlighted the need for user-defined outcomes to be included in commissioning models. This requires on-going negotiation between commissioner and provider beyond agreeing the overall contract (Sancho and Sicillia, 2013). For those with the most complex needs, an approach focused on measurable outcomes may make it more difficult to meet the range of interacting needs that people face. People's lives are complex, as are the systems in which services seek to help them. Complexity theory suggests that linear approaches to improving outcomes will have unpredictable results in such a complex system (Davison-Knight et al, 2017).

A project investigating alternative approaches to commissioning highlighted the following features as beneficial to managing complexity:

> a focus on learning rather than accountability
> a culture that promotes collaborative behaviours, such as flexibility, communication and long-term thinking
> developing a shared understanding of the local context drawing on data, experience and co-production
> funding mechanisms that allow for trusting relationships to be established and developed over time
> support for developing the workforce to think differently about how social problems can be tackled (Davison-Knight et al 2017).

In the most open and honest relationships, commissioners and providers may enter into 'open book accounting' practices to help each other understand the costs of the service. Less dramatically, voluntary organisations should work to understand the various constraints (regulatory, financial, organisational) within which public sector organisations work, while commissioners should consider how to gain a better understanding of what voluntary organisations do and how they operate, for example through visits to the service, job shadowing and meeting service-users (Joint VSCE Review, 2016). Arguably, unless each organisation understands the constraints and interests, acts of altruism and compromise that demonstrate commitment to the partnership might go unappreciated – as the recipient of that altruism does not perceive the extent of the sacrifice it required by their partner (Hardy et al, 2003).

Learning and development for partnerships can be supported by:

> Formative evaluation, that provides on-going messages about what needs to improve and what is working well,
> Discussions about individual cases that highlight the benefits of working together and provide motivation for flexibility in order to achieve the shared goal of improving outcomes
> Shared problem-solving discussions that seek to identify the best solution for all concerned, rather than a top-down solution imposed by commissioner (IPC, 2017; Davison Knight, 2017, Citarella, 2017).

Reflections from practice

All the partnerships had identified outcomes they hoped to achieve in working together, including outcomes for families and system outcomes (such as reduced cost of placements). None of the five partnerships were operating a payment by results or outcomes-orientated commissioning process.

Agreeing performance measures together is as important as using them to hold partners to account. Stating the outcomes to be achieved was seen as important in establishing a shared purpose. For the projects that were in their early stages, outcome measures were often undeveloped. This was not seen as problematic, but rather a means of ensuring that the measures were developed in partnership, and recognition that, in the early stages of the partnership, the delivery partner would be focused on set-up and implementation of the offer, and outcome measures might not be a suitable measure of performance.

Practice example Essex and Barnardo's

In **Essex,** the partnership noted that:

> it would take a number of years to improve the outcomes that they want to achieve, in terms of early years development, family resilience and community capacity.

> there are not necessarily well-established measures of these outcomes and that development work was needed with the provider to define suitable measures

> data cannot tell the whole story, and family voices are crucial for commissioners to understand impact.

The partnership are using a range of approaches to monitor performance. Barnardo's uses video stories, case studies and practitioner feedback to report back on progress in developing the service. Essex commissioners understand the value of qualitative feedback, and they originally used these methods to better understand the problems in the local system before commissioning the partnership. Hard-hitting stories from practitioners about the struggles that families face in accessing services were described by the commissioners as one of the most powerful motivators for change across the system.

Outcome and other performance measures are used as 'conversation starters', a foundation for conversations about what is working well and to identify and remove barriers to improvement. The performance measures (both process and outcome measures) used have developed over time to ensure that they focused on the right issues and were proportionate to the effort needed to collect them.

Involving staff in conversations about improvement generated learning and feedback that shaped the development of the service. It also helped to build relationships and mutual respect among practitioners. Encouraging staff to identify barriers, raise issues in a constructive way and contribute to the development of the service had been an area for development for some projects in the early days, particularly in local authorities that were under pressure from budgets and Ofsted. Using individual cases as a basis for these conversations helped to show staff how their reflections could impact service design and management practice. Senior managers modelled active listening behaviours and respectful dialogue as mechanisms for dispute resolution during these sessions. In the early stages, voluntary organisations were acutely aware of these pressures and reluctant to make

additional demands of staff in the authority. Initially, the voluntary organisation's staff undertook remedial work and modelled the good practice for local authority colleagues. As local authority staff saw the benefits of new approaches they adopted them more willingly.

External evaluation does not move at sufficient pace to inform service development. Two of the partnerships had been involved in external evaluations of the project through the Innovation programme. Conversations with evaluators about what impact they would expect to see, and what measures were appropriate to capture that impact, were found to be useful, as an aid to clarify the partnership's thinking, even if they struggled to reach agreement with the evaluators. The final product was useful to encourage reflection, though participants reported that these evaluations 'felt historical' by the time they were published, as the pace of change in the service was much faster than publication deadlines. External evaluations did serve to raise the profile of the projects, provide evidence for on-going investment and attract inquiries for other local authorities seeking to take a similar path. Newer partnerships were still considering how to capture impact through evaluation, with those seeking long-term impact contemplating how best to capture the longitudinal benefits over a child's life from access to additional support.

Looking out to wider networks can be difficult when there is so much complexity to be considered within the partnership. Yet one of the benefits of working in a partnership is that it increases the breadth of both organisation's networks. Working to develop these networks gives the partnership access to new information, new resources, new ideas, and even new potential partners. Aspects of networking apparent in the Change Project were:

>   access to peer learning and support for developing these new partnerships, recognising that other people are navigating these difficult waters (the point of the Change project)
>   access to learning about practice from other areas where the voluntary sector partner operates, or from regional networks of local authorities
>   opportunities to influence the system context through engaging with the wider policy community and the media to promote the values behind the project.

Conclusion

Relationships between commissioners and providing organisations matter. No partnership can be fully described in a contract or performance monitoring system, due to the complexity of the problems these partnerships are trying to address, and the complexity of the system in which both organisations operate. Relationships fill in the gaps. While public sector organisation and charities are bound by legislation and regulations around procurement, accountability and performance, the relationships that exist in the space within these constraints affects whether or not the partnership will be ultimately successful.

The nature of the relationship affects the culture of both organisations and the ways in which they work together. The relationship influences short-term service delivery and longer-term strategic planning – a good relationship can support the development of excellent practice and create an environment in which innovation can thrive, while a poor relationship can hinder learning, reduce flexibility and create an environment focused on compliance and meeting the letter of contractual agreements. Failed relationships can have catastrophic effects, for children and young people and for the organisations and the employees.

Effective relationships are built on trust. Trust cannot be dictated but must be rooted in shared goals and values, mutual respect and honesty. These abstract concepts are hard to define and measure. They are demonstrated by individuals and organisations through the interactions that they have with each other over time. Good communication and opportunities for reflection are therefore key.

Organisational relationships between commissioner and provider do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of a network of relationships with other organisations and stakeholders. Relationships must operate within the constraints of governance and regulation and public expectations of probity and value for money. Relationships with the wider system of organisations working with children and families are crucial to the success of the partnership and need to be developed alongside the central commissioner-provider relationship itself. Understanding the network of organisations that can help or hinder the partnership's goals helps to develop a shared plan to engage with this wider network.

Relationships must stand up to the test of the real world and be resilient in the face of changing circumstances, emerging problems and when crisis hits. Established working relationships and channels of communication will help, but developing a risk register and a crisis management process before they are needed provides a firmer foundation for responding to unexpected challenges. Similarly, being willing to adapt and be flexible to changing needs is important, but needs to be done systematically and embedded into practice, so putting in place a process to record and disseminate learning as it is generated from evaluation and monitoring might be valuable.

Lessons for the sector

1. *"Get senior leadership buy-in from Day One"*. It will make everything else easier.

2. *"Build a partnership to last a childhood"*. The level of investment and system change needed to make a significant impact on outcomes takes time to pay off. Transformative partnerships will struggle to deliver within three year contracts.

3. *"Understand your role"*. Draw the line between commissioning and delivery and navigate that boundary together. Local authorities need to know when to step back and when to step in.

4. *"Be flexible"*. Willingness to adapt to changing circumstances is a sign that the organisation is in it for the long haul.

5. *"Know the system"*. Partnerships don't operate in isolation, but overlap with numerous other networks. Draw on their expertise and build wider collaborations.

Tips for building relationships

1. '*It's about relationships all the way down'*. The quality of the relationship at the top of the partnership is crucial, but relatively easy to develop. The relationships between operational staff, and between staff and managers in each organisation are important too, and require more time and effort to embed.

2. '*Every interaction matters'*. Every time you talk, you are communicating something about the relationship, as well as the content of the conversation, Think about how your words, body language and attitude are influencing how your partner sees you.

3. '*Model the behaviours you want to see'*. Let staff and stakeholders see what effective collaboration looks like, show them how you have constructive, challenging conversations. Choose the right language and use it consistently.

4. '*Don't be afraid to get to know your partner'*. Talk about things other than work, develop a shared sense of humour, show them you care about their personal as well as professional life.

5. '*Use the right format for the conversation'* – telephone calls for speed, face-to-face for challenging issues.

Case study: Cheshire East and Catch 22

The project
The project is the provision of family support services to children and young people and their families who need support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Families referred to the service run by Catch 22 receive support from family support workers, managed by a qualified social worker consultant.

The project was initially funded in Crewe for three years by the Department for Education Innovation Programme, and was subject to evaluation as part of that programme. After the end of external funding, Cheshire East and Catch 22 decided to continue the service, though with a new name – Project Crewe has become FACT22 – and to introduce the service into other areas of the authority.

Over the life of the Change project, Catch 22 have expanded the service to another local authority, drawing on the learning from this pilot in Cheshire East.

Context
The project arose out of a long-standing relationship between Cheshire East Council and Catch 22 delivering services to families in the local area. Catch 22 had provided services for 11 years prior to the contract. Local experiences of working together gave participants confidence that the partnership would be effective.

There had been concerns about the performance of the local authority in the period prior to establishing the project. Social work teams had high caseloads and due to competing priorities children in need were not a priority. Historically, family support was seen as ineffective by partners and as such there was some suspicion about the proposals. The historic poor performance also meant that Ofsted had undertaken regular monitoring visits, although these concluded shortly after the project commenced.

When exploring the potential to work together on developing a new service, the partnership considered the use of a Social Impact Bond to provide initial funding, but decided not to pursue that option. The conversations had when exploring the potential for a Social Impact Bond helped to clarify the partners' logic model and develop a shared understanding of what the project would achieve and the benefits of working together. This formed the background for the bid to the Department for Education.

Values

The belief that a strong relationship between a practitioner and a family positively influences children's outcomes has shaped the design of the service model. Similarly, relationship-based, solution focussed approaches have also been developed in Cheshire East's early help offer and child protection safety, including the introduction of Signs of Safety approaches and tools.

The two organisations share a commitment to learning and improvement, evolving the service to meet the needs of children and families. It was this commitment to learning and adaptation that led to the innovative service being developed in the first place, and has continued to shape the relationship as the project has developed.

Relationships

A Strategic Board oversees the project and provides opportunities to take a overview of both sites within Cheshire East, Crewe and Macclesfield, and to share learning from each site. The Board monitors re-referrals, the outcome of audit processes and outcome measures to assess if the project is effective. Administrative support for the Strategic Board has been challenging, and felt to make it more difficult to ensure actions are taken from the Board and implemented. The Board has had a crucial role in managing risks associated with a changing demand profile for Cheshire East children's social care services, as numbers of children in need or on child protection plans has risen, and more cases from FACT 22 are being escalated to social care. The established partnership working has meant that these conversations have been constructive and focussed on how best to help families, and how the service can adapt to the changing context, rather than solely on financial issues.

Like some of the other projects, changes had occurred in managers in both organisations during the life of the externally funded project. This had led to some reduction in the organisational memory for why particular decisions had been taken at the start of the project. Nonetheless, the current managers of both the authority and voluntary organisation felt that they had developed good personal working relationships. The newest member of the group reported initial anxiety about not understanding the project or how it fitted into the wider system, but that these concerns had been allayed and that she was now a core member of the strategic governance of the project.

Operational managers meet regularly to discuss how the teams are working together, consider thresholds and how they are being applied, and to talk about performance and quality of services:

> Ways of working are documented in an operational manual, 'the bible', which has gone through several iterations, adapting to lessons learned through the period of implementation.

> Discussions in these meetings identified refinements to the referral criteria that would ensure that the right families were referred at the right time to make the most impact.

> While the joint protocol does set out accountability for operational matters, including transition and escalation of disputes, the partners felt that these issues were always best addressed through conversations at an early stage.

> The engagement of partner agencies in supporting the work of the project are also discussed at operational meetings.

The frequency and format of these meetings has evolved over time to meet the needs of the project while ensuring that they did not place to much of a burden on operational managers' time. Team managers in particular found it difficult to find the time to attend meetings to discuss cases and share learning. However, these operational meetings have provided opportunities for operational managers in both organisations to build relationships and a forum to unpick some of the difficult historical issues faced by the partnership.

Relationships between practitioners in the two organisations took time to develop. Initially, case handovers were described as 'tense' and 'brisk', though this has since improved so that handovers involve consultation and discussion between the teams. The partners identified several factors that they felt posed challenges to developing these relationships:
> caseload and resource pressures within the local authority social work teams made it difficult for LA social workers to assess children and young people for referral to the service
> perceptions of differently qualified practitioners in Project Crewe as not peers of social workers
> different workforce culture, language and understanding of risk in the two organisations
> separate offices encouraged a feeling of referring out, rather than working in partnership between the LA and voluntary organisational teams.

Stabilisation of the local authority service gave LA practitioners more time to understand what the service could offer, and increased exposure to the family support workers and seeing the impact on the families worked with increased respect for the Project Crewe team. The Project Crewe team themselves increased in confidence in their skills and their ability to manage risk rather than refer back into child protection. A stable workforce of family support workers and social work consultants in Project Crewe and the local authority social work workforce has helped to maintain this trust over time.

Close working between operational managers from both organisations began to tackle the difference in culture and language, looking to establish:
> a shared culture of solution-focussed talk between social workers, as well as with families
> a sense of being one team, and recognition that families are stepped *across* to Project Crewe, rather than stepping *down*
> improved practice and tools for listening to and reporting the child's voice
> managers that can balance the tension between operational matters and more strategic discussions.

Staff from both teams attend shared training and reciprocal training arrangements give opportunities for practitioners to share learning across both organisations. The same assessment tools, the Graded Care Profile and CSE screening tools, are used in both teams, again providing a shared understanding of risk.

As the project moves into the locally-funded phase, arrangements have been made for co-location of FACT 22 (the former Project Crewe) staff with Cheshire East social work teams. While only very recent, managers felt that this had embedded a feeling of being one team and a shared culture, and that it would have been beneficial to have done this earlier. This co-location was seen as sufficiently important that when the project began in Macclesfield, staff were co-located from the beginning.

Engaging with external bodies was seen as crucial, given the innovative nature of the project and the need to test the limits of statutory guidance on social work oversight of cases under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Early engagement with the Department for Education occurred through the bid for funding from the Innovation programme, and subsequently by a visit from the Chief Social Worker. The government are supportive of the model and urged the partnership to expand the model further.

The partnership also sought to engage early with Ofsted, given concerns about how the new arrangements would be judged during an inspection. Inspectors were invited to come and see the project outside of a formal inspection to familiarise themselves with the project. The partners felt that the strong evaluation results (see below) made them feel more confident in responding to concerns raised by Ofsted inspectors about the model.

Performance and quality

The operational meetings regularly discuss a range of performance information, including data on impact and outcomes for families using the service, case studies of individual families and reports of children's views of the services they received. The same data and quality assurance process is used in both Project Crewe and Cheshire East to allow for comparison and collaboration.

An escalation process has been put in place to ensure learning is captured from individual cases. Team managers were evolving and developing skills for case review and generating learning from individual cases, though this process was still a source of frustration for some managers, who struggled to find the time to unpick the details of a case and to apply analytical skills to understanding what went wrong. Using individual cases in this way requires a mix of management skills and familiarity with the family.

The required performance information has changed over time as the two organisations discuss what information they need to judge impact. Both Project Crewe and the local authority teams have begun to use outcome stars and Signs of Safety rating to better understand the impact on the lives of children and families. Project Crewe managers reported adapting the stories they tell and how they tell them to demonstrate how the service meets local priorities. These discussions about performance are framed around learning and improvement, the 'so what' question – how can the two organisations work better together to solve problems and remove barriers.

As a condition of external funding, the partnership committed to undertaking a randomised controlled trial of the service's performance compared to the usual council service. External evaluators were appointed to conduct the trial, requiring additional time and resource from the partnership to help the evaluators understand the service and how it worked. In particular discussions about how to interpret performance data as outcomes – for example whether case closure was an appropriate measure of success – were felt to be time-consuming, though helpful in clarifying the partnerships' own views of how impact should be measured.

Implementing the trial was challenging, particularly for practitioners referring families into the service, who struggled with the knowledge that the families only had a 50% chance of receiving the service, rather than the control. The findings from the final report were positive, but the partnership could not yet determine the influence on how the project is seen from the outside at the time of the first interview. By the time of the second interview, the evaluation had been published and a series of events held to share the findings with the wider sector. Internally, the report felt 'historical' by the time of publication and so did not further influence the development of the project.

The number of parties interested in performance led to a feeling that there were 'too many cooks', that is too many voices calling for different performance measures or using the measures for different purposes. This reduced clear accountability for delivery and reporting, causing some confusion and duplication of work.

Next steps

The project is moving from being externally funded to internally-funded and a longer term part of the system of services for families. The project is being extended to a new area of Cheshire East (Maccelsfield) and Project Crewe staff have moved into co-located offices with local authority staff. While this is a more stable foundation for service development, these changes will require developments in the relationship and ways of working, including:

> Consideration of how to further develop the model, including managing edge cases and adapting based on experiences of children and families.
> Developing real-time data for generating learning and adaptation.
> Testing the model in a new location to see how far it is scaleable.
> Evidencing the potential for transformation within the project and how it can affect wider practice in Cheshire East.

Case study: Essex and Barnardo's

The project
Essex County Council is working with Barnardo's and Virgin Care to deliver integrated health and social support for families in the county. The scope includes health visitors, school nurses, family support and children's centres. Staff have been transferred to Barnardo's and Virgin Care from the local authority.

The history and context
Essex is a large and diverse county with pockets of derivation and low educational attainment surrounded by more affluent areas. Services in the county are delivered across quadrants. Barnardo's has delivered services for families in Essex since 1979 and has been running Children's Centres in two out of four quadrants. Essex for more than five years.

Essex County Council commissioning team for children's services reviewed the early years system to identify potential improvements. The review found that there were multiple providers offering a wide range of services and lots of resources were available to families. However, families reported feeling lonely, and being confused by the system of services available to them. Data analysis revealed that, while many children arrived at school ready to learn, a small cohort did not and this was a barrier to their learning. Consultation with staff identified concerns about a focus on performance indicators and the energy and resources going into meeting targets, rather than on learning what went well and what didn't and how the system can adapt to remove barriers to better working.

Designing the system (1st interview)
A decision was taken by the local authority to move to a more collaborative and alliance approach to delivering services across the county and across health and family support. The County Council was interested in finding new ways of achieving good outcomes for children and young people, rather than dictating a particular model or service specification or looking for a provider or providers from a particular sector. The County Council invited a wide range of providers to have a constructive and honest conversation about how to shape the system to focus on outcomes.

Barnardo's were keen to engage in this process and participated in a number of meetings with the county council and other providers. Providers, including Barnardo's were initially sceptical about whether these conversations would lead to changes. Some providers were reluctant to contribute to these open conversations in what was perceived to be a competitive environment. As the formal procurement process came closer, this reluctance became more apparent.

For the Barnardo's lead, the opportunity to collaborate and to learn from others was an exciting opportunity to improve outcomes. He felt that his identity as a parent of children living in Essex helped him to see the benefits of this new way of working. This is not to say that Barnardo's blindly accepted the reassurances given by the local authority. Rather they offered challenge and robust questioning of the council's commissioner to ensure that the charity understood the scope of the project and what would and would not be considered. These conversations helped Barnardo's to test the local authority's claim to be indifferent to the type of provider or their history, or lack of history, in providing services in the county.

Barnardo's valued the expertise of Virgin Care in contract negotiation and specification, and felt that the formal elements that Virgin Care required as part of good governance were beneficial.

Moving from design to delivery (2nd interview)

In order to deliver the aspirations of the partnership, a staff restructure was a necessary part of reshaping services. Delivery was proposed to be through 29 locality family teams with integrated teams made up of practitioners from early years, health and family support. The aim is for practitioners from different backgrounds and service areas to build working relationships that will help to provide integrated support to families. Staff were supportive of the idea of integration.

The partnership allowed the service to transfer in a stable form from the Council to the delivery organisations. Staff consultation was undertaken and some redundancies were necessary. The restructure was challenging for a number of reasons:

> Navigating Human Resources rules on consultation and redundancy across the three organisations was complex.
> The strategic manager of Barnardo's had never been through such a large staff restructure of managed redundancies. He found the experience difficult and stressful.
> Securing the right IT and premises to support the vision as challenging.
> Staff found the consultation and redundancy process emotionally draining.

The changes to multi-disciplinary teams required changes in management structure, culture and behaviour, including building the skills to use matrix management and coaching in a 'mixed economy' of practice.

At the point of the second interview in October 2017, both the Essex commissioner and Barnardo's strategic lead felt that the project was over an important hurdle in establishing how services would be delivered.

In the delivery phase, challenges have begun to become apparent, including the emergence of historical commissioning arrangements with other providers that were not identified at the contract specification stage. These difficulties have been managed through the informal meetings described in the 'Relationships' section.

Roles and responsibilities

Essex County Council's role is to identify the outcomes that they want the system to achieve, provide the funding within a pre-determined funding envelope and monitor the delivery of the contract.

The providers' roles are to design the system, including any restructuring of staff teams and locations, deliver services and gather feedback from children and families. Barnardo's also leads on establishing agreements with the wider voluntary sector in Essex to deliver services for families.

Values and motivations

The local authority was motivated to take this innovative approach by learning from the early years system review described in the history and context section. Essex also wanted to build on the successful collaboration with the Clinical Commissioning Group in West Essex to work with the four other CCGs in the county to integrate health and social support for early years.

For Barnardo's, the outcomes-focussed contract was perceived as an opportunity to develop a new approach and to contribute learning to other parts of the organisation operating elsewhere in the UK. The freedom to develop services in line with the organisation's values and in particular to explore a targeted outreach approach. The organisation wanted to expand on its current service contracts in Essex, and avoid many of those existing services being taken over as part of the larger contract.

Barnardo's involvement has helped to mitigate political opposition to the involvement of Virgin Care in providing health services to families in Essex. The clear ethos and culture of prioritising what is best for families within Barnardo's provides reassurance to those with concerns about private sector organisations working in this space.

Relationships

The relationships in this partnership are particularly complex, as there are two commissioning organisations, the local authority and the Clinical Commissioning Group (the CCG) and two providers, Barnardo's and Virgin Care. The relationship between the local authority and Barnardo's is the focus of this case study, but these wider relationships provide important context.

The relationship between the two commissioners is built on a very close relationship between one of the five CCGs in the county, through which the local authority is modelling deeper integration between health and local authority children's services. The CCGs are all part of the governance arrangements for the partnership, which reports into the multi-agency children's trust.

From the start, the local authority wanted to move away from a traditional commissioner-provider relationship which was perceived as one-sided, with the local authority holding the power and resources and directing the provider as to what needs to be done and how. Rather, Essex wants to recognise the expertise and long experience of providers in supporting families and trust them to use that experience to design and deliver services.

Both parties agreed that the challenging conversations during the pre-procurement process has laid the foundations for an open and honest relationship once the contract was awarded. Negotiating the unknown landscape of pre-procurement discussions with potential competitors and collaborators with openness, consistency and transparency helped to build providers' trust that the County Council could deliver on a new way of working. The bravery shown on both sides during pre-procurement helped to generate personal trust between the senior managers leading the partnership.

The result was that at this very early stage in the contract, Essex and Barnardo's feel that they have a shared understanding of their roles and the expectations of the contract and they were already convinced of the other's commitment to improving outcomes for children, and willingness to collaborate with others to improve the system. As the participants noted, "you can't write this kind of relationship into a contract", roles and activity are shaped through on-going dialogue, built on trust that your partner shares your values and motivations.

This relationship was sustained and tested through the mobilisation period between contract award and the beginning of delivery through fortnightly meetings to discuss operational matters. While challenges have, inevitably, arisen, the partners found that these forums were useful for shared problem-solving and ownership, blockages could be addressed together and mistakes acknowledged and learned from.

These informal meetings continued as they move into service delivery. Both partners noted that, as problems arise and are resolved, this builds trust in the reliability of partners to tackle difficulties together and have the right attitude to problem-solving. Commissioners have been cautious about their involvement in service design and the restructure, so as not to create a precedent for their involvement in operational matters. Balancing their accountability for services with the need to give providers the freedom to design services has been managed through dialogue.

During the announcement and transition period, the partners showed visible leadership, with both commissioners, the county council and the CCG, and Barnardo's attending introduction and consultation events. On reflection, the partners felt that this modelling of the working relationship was done less often since moving into service delivery in the face of delivering business.

Operational managers and the commissioning team attended joint training and consultation regarding the different management needs and styles needed in the new structure, with an emphasis on the need to listen to each other, understand different professional cultures and understand the demands of cultural integration. Giving new managers the space to sit down, listen and think about their new roles, outside of the demands of the day-to-day work was felt to be important.

Barnardo's long history of delivering services in Essex means that it has existing relationships with other organisations locally, including having a place on local children's trusts in two of the four quadrants in the county. The organisation is seeking to extend these relationships across the county as well as reaching agreements with the wider voluntary sector to deliver services. Conversely, Virgin Care had no history of working in the county and has been on a steep learning curve to understand the local context, building on Barnardo's existing local knowledge, and in building trust with the commissioners, the practitioners and the community.

As part of a national organisation, Barnardo's representatives also had to manage the relationship between the contract and wider services provided by Barnardo's and report to Head Office on progress and emerging risks. Barnardo's provides services locally that are not part of this contract and the technological challenge of integrating systems and co-ordination between different Barnardo's services is seen as a challenge. Barnardo's Head Office has provided support and challenge throughout, mobilised additional resources to support delivery and managed reputational issues associated with the contract.

During the delivery period, operational relationships between the contracted services and services provided by the council, such as children's social care, and by partners, such as schools, have begun to develop. Work is underway to review local processes and agreements about ways of working and how the teams communicate with each other. District council structures within the county add an extra layer of operational and strategic relationships. A single county-wide strategic partnership is seen as helpful in developing these relationships, and there is one culture and a clear single statement of purpose across all the localities, while the locality operating structure supports tailoring of this culture and purpose to local needs. Locality structures also help to retain practitioners' local knowledge and relationships.

Performance and quality monitoring

Achieving measureable outcomes is at the heart of the contractual relationship and the shared value base of the partners. The outcomes were specified in the original procurement process. Collecting, monitoring and understanding outcome data is the main way that the local authority will hold the providers to account. Clarity that it is outcomes that are important allows the authority to step back from system design and process decisions and give the providers freedom to restructure teams and services.

Senior managers and staff at all levels had been affected by hearing the voices of practitioners working with young children and their families during the initial investigation into potential for system change. Staff and family voices form part of the on-going monitoring process.

In the transitions period covered by this project, it was recognised that outcome measures will not be available for at least 12 months. As such, the focus is on measuring the quality of relationships and the experiences of families using services to ensure the right direction of travel. Collecting these experiences has required:
> a change in culture of management, such that user stories are collected from practitioners
> a focus on community development and community capacity as part of the service, as a platform for collecting user experience.

Contract monitoring meetings use case studies and user stories to inform discussions about the service offer. Capturing family experience has been crucial in deflecting criticism of the radical and disruptive approach to service delivery at a political level.

Risks

Safeguarding risks are recognised as inherent in working with vulnerable children and families. As Barnardo's are responsible for service delivery, so management of this risk rests with them. A crisis management plan has been drawn up for this scenario.

Financial risks rest with the providers who have a fixed financial envelope in which to deliver improved outcomes. The partnership is therefore inherently risky for the provider. The freedom to design services and change the culture of service delivery is seen as balancing this risk. Restructures are planned to make better use of resources, including property and to improve staff morale.

Strategic relationships rest significantly on trust between individuals. The partners are acutely aware that the length of the contract means that the people who have built trust through the procurement and mobilisation process are unlikely to still be in post at the end. Modelling a good relationship and changing the tone of interactions at all levels is seen as crucial in sustaining the organisational relationship beyond a change in personnel.

Regulatory risks, the potential for criticism of arrangements by Ofsted, is felt to be manageable given the authority's good performance and reputation. This confidence provides the freedom to innovate.

Lessons for the sector

> Develop a shared vision, even if you don't share it at first. Develop and refine the vision together.
> Give people and systems time to evolve and develop shared responsibility. Don't jump to solutions.
> Develop a shared culture that includes how you challenge one another and how the partnership responds to risk.
> This is difficult, and if it feels uncomfortable, you are probably doing it right.

Case study: Newport and Barnardo's

The project
Barnardo's has been a strategic partner for the delivery of family support in Newport for 7 years under a 5+2 year contract. The process for re-commissioning a strategic partner, this time for a 5 + 5 year contract, was imminent when this interview took place. Barnardo's intend to bid for the contract.

The Barnardo's family support service is integrated into local authority services for children and families.

Context
In 2010, Newport City Council children's services was facing a range of challenges, including high numbers of looked after children, 'old-fashioned' attitudes to family support and a demoralised workforce. The newly-appointed Director of Children' Services sought a strategic partner to take over the delivery of family support services.

The partnership operates in a different legislative and regulatory environment to the other case studies, as responsibility for services for children and families is devolved to the Welsh government and assembly. As well as the changes faced by English authorities (the Family Justice Review and Munro Review of Child Protection, Welsh authorities have also had to respond to new Welsh legislation on promoting wellbeing and social services reform. This was felt to be challenging when giving advice to English local authorities, as the context in Wales was a key enabler to forming and sustaining the partnership.

Motivations
In appointing a strategic partner, the local authority aimed to:
> leverage in additional resources
> provide additional capacity in family support
> create space and flexibility to develop new services and ways of working
> be responsive to changing demand and expectations.

The initial tender for a strategic partner set out the following aims:
> reduce the number of looked after children
> increase access to evidence-based models of family support
> increase skills of the workforce.

For Barnardo's, the motivations to join the strategic partnership were opportunities to:
> be involved in delivering statutory services for children and families
> to develop new ways of working with families and test out new services
> demonstrate the organisation's capacity to work as a strategic partner to a local authority and promote the model to other authorities in Wales
> build on the existing relationship in Newport
> obtain secure and stable funding.

Relationships

The core relationship

In the early years of the partnership Barnardo's were afforded a large degree of freedom to develop family support services in Newport. A shortage of capacity and experience within the local authority led to Barnardo's taking the lead on defining the relationship:

> The initial contract was not specific about what should be provided or how, and the legal and financial relationships were not well-defined.

> Contract management was sporadic in the initial period, relying on Barnardo's own quality control and performance monitoring.

The lack of detailed requirements and guidance meant that the initial relationship between operational managers on both sides relied heavily on goodwill and willingness to allow time for the model to evolve. The original vision for the intensive family support service to manage families in emerging crisis, but this developed into a more preventive model in dialogue with operational managers and staff. The additional resources committed by Barnardo's as part of the contract has meant that the voluntary organisation has been able to be responsive to new requirements from the local authority. In addition, the partnership benefited from individual funding streams to deliver specific services, for example disability and substance misuse services, that complemented the core intensive family support service offer.

During this phase, the Barnardo's team sought to make themselves 'indispensible'. They sought to develop and then use their understanding of the local context in order to demonstrate that they could evolve and adapt to meet the local authority's needs, for example, Barnardo's developed a service from scratch in just four months, drawing on staff's creativity and expertise. The approach to building relationships was to allow them to develop organically, by being present and familiar, reliable and flexible.

Relationship at a strategic level were complicated by changes in personnel, vacancies and secondments. The original manager of the Barnardo's service was seconded into the local authority as the Head of children's social care. This role includes managing the contract with Barnardo's as well as the statutory social work service. A new manager was appointed from within Barnardo's. The new appointments signalled a step-change in the relationship, as the local authority social work function stabilised and communication and oversight improved. The participants noted that the two phases of the partnership, the development phase and then the stable delivery phase, required different skills and personal characteristics from the managers concerned.

The secondment of a manager from Barnardo's into the local authority proved challenging in that it provoked some suspicion. This was exacerbated in the early days of the secondment as the manager was working I day at Barnardo's and 4 days at the local authority each week. It was clear from the conversation that both participants were acutely aware of the potential for perceived conflict of interest and worked hard to prevent any appearance of impropriety. The post-holder reflected on the difficulty of separating the personal from the professional and managing her commitment to Barnardo's as a long-standing employee and supporter, to her new role in the Council. The secondment lasted for 4 years, up to the point when the contract was due for renewal, at which point the seconded manager was successful in applying for a permanent role within the Council.

The length of the contract at the time of the Change Project meant that operational relationships between the two organisations were well established, the point where not all staff were aware of who was employed by Barnardo's and who by the Council. Staff from both organisations come together for training and professional development and work together in Practice Development Groups focusing on specific issues.

During the re-commissioning process that took place during the Change Project, these relationships helped to manage the pressure of uncertainty about whether the partnership would continue. While staff at Barnardo's inevitably found the process stressful, they were supported by their managers and peers in the local authority to keep 'business as usual' activity going during negotiations. Managers saw it as their responsibility to protect staff as far as possible from the impact of on-going negotiation.

At a management level, the relationships were sufficiently robust that the individuals felt they could bring a sense of humour to the process, which helped them negotiate the uncertainty. They also clearly felt an obligation to each other to not put the other in a difficult position that might compromise their integrity or the integrity of the process. Barnardo's avoided using the existing relationship to press for more information than would be available to other potential providers on one side, and Newport avoided asking for more detail or commitment from the existing provider than potential ones. The support of a central business development function separate from operational management within Barnardo's was felt to provide helpful separation between the negotiations and the delivery.

Nonetheless, the re-commissioning process was felt to be awkward and cumbersome for achieving the purpose of renewing the partnership and the commissioner felt strongly that competitive tendering and procurement were not the right vehicle for making these decisions.

Governance relationships

Over the first contract, governance relationships were not well-established and relationships at an operational level were the driving force behind service development. This lack of engagement with elected members was seen as a risk to the partnership, and the two managers were discussing ways to make the work more visible. It was felt that elements in the new contract relating to looked after children would increase that visibility.

The re-commissioning process also triggered increased attention on the partnership from the governance structures of both the council and the voluntary organisation. While it was felt that the original agreement had 'slipped under the radar' of governance, allowing the partners to just 'get on with it', the second commissioning process attracted a lot more questions about how the partnership operated. Both Barnardo's Head Office and Newport City Council required information about what services would be provided, what the risks were to both organisations and the justification for Barnardo's financial investment. While this process was time-consuming and used up energy, both partners reported finding it useful to re-visit the rationale and to reflect on what had and hadn't worked in the first contract.

The role of Barnardo's as both a local delivery partner and a national campaigning organisation was noted as adding tension into the relationships at a local level. National campaigns criticising local authority policy and practice were felt to be unhelpful due to the lack of recognition that local authorities are facing, and implying that local authorities were 'just not trying hard enough'. Operational managers locally knew from their experience that this was not the case, that local authority officers worked hard in difficult circumstances to make the best decisions that they could.

Learning, performance and quality
Newport and Barnardo's had brought in external evaluators to capture learning from the first contract to inform re-commissioning. The process of the evaluation was felt to have been useful in promoting reflection and generating new ideas. The publication of the evaluation report had raised the profile of the project and promoted increased interest from other local authorities and other Barnardo's services. Over time, the partnership had become adept at distilling key learning for these other services.

Developing the service to respond to local conditions, new funding streams and new government policy had become 'business as usual' for the partnership under the first contract. Over the years, the partnership had taken on new responsibilities as they arose. Following re-commissioning, the partners were starting to think about how the service might develop over the next five to seven years. Ideas included extending family support principles to looked after children and support for rehabilitation. This proposal stemmed from an appreciation of the pressure that services for looked after children were putting on local authority budgets, and a shared belief that continuity of relationship for children moving in and out of care was important and not currently provided for under the terms of the contract. The length of the contract meant that the partnership could consider how they would show long-term impact on children's outcomes from this new form of support.

Both Newport City Council and Barnardo's were involved in wider collaborations and networks aiming to influence policy in Wales. This was felt to be useful in promoting the partnership with other authorities, and in sharing learning with other authorities and Barnardo's services across South Wales. During the interviews, the partners shared informal intelligence with each other about how policy proposals were progressing through the Welsh Assembly and discussed how they could use both local authority and Barnardo's skills and connections to get more influence.

The participants felt that Barnardo's as an organisation had not taken full advantage of the learning available from the partnership to influence service delivery and policy in Wales and further afield. The close relationship with the local authority offers insight into the delivery of statutory services and informal intelligence that could have been valuable. However, there had been little communication of this learning to the wider voluntary organisation.

This lack of learning was in part attributed to the low profile of the partnership in the early stages. Subsequently, and in particular after the publication of the external evaluation, Barnardo's has sought to share learning from the partnership with staff across the organisation, with visits from other area managers and staff to observe the partnership in action. Similarly the publication of the evaluation report attracted attention from English local authorities exploring similar arrangements.

Case study: Peterborough and TACT

The project
Peterborough City Council has commissioned TACT to design and deliver a permanence service for all looked after children in the local authority. The permanence service includes provision and support of all placements of looked after children, regardless of placement type. A Family Group Conferencing service and edge of care service aiming to prevent entry to care is also in development.

The contract is for 10 years, with an option to extend for another 10 years. The unusual length of the contract is intended to:

> support innovation and provide time to develop and refine the permanence service model

> allow children and carers to build and maintain relationships with supporting practitioners and with TACT as an organisation.

The project is governed by a board which includes representatives of both organisations, including strategic managers, an elected member and a trustee, and representatives from the finance and legal teams. Separate boards of financial and operational managers work through technical issues and report to the main board.

A team of social workers employed by TACT hold mixed caseloads of children in different types of placement. The majority of children are in foster placements directly provided by foster carers and adopters recruited and supported by TACT. Where there are no available internal placements, TACT commissions placements from other providers, both fostering agencies and residential care.

During this Change Project, the partnership was awarded £1.2m from the Department for Education Innovation Fund, to support the development of the new arrangement and to capture learning from it for the whole sector. This adds another layer of stakeholders and reporting arrangements.

Roles and responsibilities
TACT is responsible for finding and supporting all kinds of placements for looked after children, including fostering, residential, adoption and special guardianship placements. A regional manager from TACT oversees delivery and the learning and development team provide training and professional development.

The local authority retains its statutory corporate parenting responsibilities, care planning and decisions about entering and leaving care. The permanence service within TACT uses the local authority case management IT system and information governance arrangements have been put in place to ensure data security.

The two organisations engage external stakeholders jointly, or decide which organisation is best placed to act, whether that is negotiating with a provider for flexibility, talking to Ofsted or to the local family judiciary.

Objectives
The overall objectives of the service are to:
> support looked after children in stable long-term placements
> keep children out of care, and prevent returns to care after reunification
> save money by reducing the use of expensive Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) and residential care.

Values
The local authority and voluntary organisation have a shared commitment to improving outcomes for looked after children through a placement-blind approach to securing and supporting permanent placements. It was noted that this poses a challenge to recent government policy promoting adoption over Special Guardianship Orders.

High-quality support for carers to allow them to provide high-quality care for children is another shared value. TACT already provides high levels of support for foster carers and adopters, including peer support groups, and an out of hours service. These services are highly valued by carers, and TACT believes that this improves placement stability and carer retention.

The council representative said he and the authority as a whole were much more comfortable embarking on this innovative journey with a voluntary sector organisation than with a profit-making one. The knowledge that any financial return accrued by the provider would not go on shareholder dividends but would be invested in pursuing charitable aims made the idea of sharing savings with the provider more acceptable.

The partnership's commitment to family placements as better for the child, and the need to provide high intensity support where necessary to secure and sustain that placement was a challenging view for some social workers. In particular when these values were applied to individual cases of children in residential care moving to foster care where the social worker knew that the child had a history of placement breakdown. Reassurances about the level of support and the commitment of the foster carer, and discussion in supervision about the values of the organisation helped to offer a different perspective. Where opposition was because practitioners believed that the placement change was for financial reasons, the Head of Service took time to explain the rationale and value base to staff, and was clear about expectations. Some social workers in the council's Looked After Children team found the change too difficult and left the authority.

Motivations
Peterborough recognises that it is not an expert in fostering and adoption and that other parts of the service can draw attention and resources away from supporting placements for looked after children. TACT has significant expertise in supporting foster care and adoption placements and the provision of practical and financial support to carers is a core competency for the organisation.

Elected members and senior management in Peterborough recognise that as the authority is small, receives relatively low funding and is surrounded by much bigger authorities, they need to find new ways of working that are suited to the local context. Entering into a previously untried arrangement to improve outcomes for looked after children was therefore part of a wider drive for innovation.

TACT is keen to promote the model of a single permanence service as it aligns with the organisation's values. By being involved in designing an innovative service, and showing that the model works, they hope to spread the practice, and be in a position to win tenders from other authorities to deliver it.

Both representatives felt that the current system for looked after children placements was 'broken' and that innovative solutions are necessary. They suggested some of the problems were too much focus on adoption, a lack of support for Special Guardianship Orders and involvement of the for profit private sector in fostering and residential markets. Both organisations feel that the new model of a permanence service will address some of these challenges.

Mobilisation

The partnership has been in place since September 2016, with the majority of that time being spent mobilising resources to begin delivery in April 2017. During this phase, TACT sought to establish relationships with staff within the authority. TACT led the staff consultation process within Peterborough's existing fostering and adoption service to shape decisions about service delivery. Staff had initially expressed significant anxiety, but regular meetings and consistent reassurance had addressed most concerns. Internal recruitment of managers and experience of the culture within TACT had further built positive relationships with staff after the transfer. TACT also took over recruitment of foster carers and adopters from January 1st 2017.

From mobilisation to delivery

Over the time of the Change Project, the permanence service moved into the delivery phase with TACT taking responsibility for the placement budget and relationships with providers. Taking on responsibility for commissioning residential care was a steep learning curve for TACT and required additional skills and capacity to move to a strategic approach to residential placements.

Additional pressure was placed on budgets by an increase in the number of looked after children in Peterborough in the first few months. This was managed through careful dialogue to ensure that the additional spend did not jeopardise the wider aims of the project. Peterborough's prior experience of juggling the placement budget made them sympathetic to the struggles TACT were facing with erratic placement demand.

Nonetheless, progress was being made in reviewing residential placements and establishing alternatives. The number of carers and the number willing to work with children with challenging needs was increasing. TACT has begun to develop good working relationships with some residential providers, though it was noted that some providers 'get it', while others are still in a transactional mindset.

Relationships

The core relationship
There was an existing relationship between the local authority and the voluntary organisation as one of many providers of fostering placements. The idea of developing a permanence service developed, in part, through conversation between TACT and Peterborough during this time.

The formal relationship between the local authority and the voluntary organisation is described in the contract and service specification developed as part of the procurement process. However, the contract is 'left on the shelf' while representatives of the two organisations discuss and debate what should happen and how. Similarly, formal escalation processes are in place in the contract, but both parties recognised that the best approach was through constructive conversations between the two organisations.

The local authority described the relationship as not "we say, you do", but a more trusting and supportive relationship. The voluntary organisation representative jokingly described the relationship as, partly, one of "mutually-assured destruction", explaining that both organisations have a lot to lose if the partnership fails.

The personal relationship between strategic leaders of both organisations is seen as crucial for the initiation and mobilisation stages as difficult issues are discussed and challenges overcome. These conversations between strategic leads would continue to be important, especially when problems inevitably arrive. One example of such challenges was the case of a young person with learning difficulties in a residential placement; quick decision-making and negotiation with new and existing providers were required to secure a placement that met his needs. The existing relationship between the strategic leads meant that conversations happened quickly, and the tasks were completed by the best organisation to achieve the desired result, rather than any formal division of roles.

By the time of the second interview, initial teething problems had begun to emerge, inevitably, given the design of a whole new system for managing placements. In addition, difficult conversations were had about the pressure on the budget from an increase in Looked After Children numbers in Peterborough. Addressing these issues through constructive dialogue had strengthened the partnership, demonstrating to staff that the partnership had the capacity and relationship to resolve challenges as they arise.

Delivery relationships
It was felt that the primacy of the relationship between the two organisations' senior leaders should become less important over time, as the project enters the 'business as usual' stage and relationships begin to develop at other levels of the partnership. Embedding the relationship and the shared processes is the immediate priority for the service, particularly working with child protection services on planned entry to care and prevention services. By the time of the second interview, the partnership reported that these relationships were starting to take shape, and in individual cases partnership working can be seen to be working well. The partnership has established expectations about how individuals and teams interact to help build these relationships, including giving praise when it is due, meeting face to face wherever possible and maintaining constructive approaches to dispute resolution.

Similarly, gaining the support of foster carers was seen as crucial. Foster carers are independent of the local authority and could have decided to transfer to a different fostering agency. TACT were able to offer stability through the length of the contract, and demonstrate the level of support and training offered to foster carers in order to persuade them to transfer along with the rest of the fostering service. The high level of support, including timely and correct foster carer payments, out-of-hours support and access to training and development has cemented the trust of transferred carers.

Relationships between the permanence service and the local authority social care service are being developed through contact between staff members working directly on cases. TACT staff sit on care panels and care planning meetings at which decisions are made about children entering care and the support that will be available to them. This is an area for further development, building relationships between staff delivering services in both organisations so that they work together to ensure entry to care is avoided where possible, and planned where it is necessary.

TACT had to develop new relationships with residential providers, an area that the organisation had never operated in before. This required understanding the structure of the sector and the interests of the different parts of the system: the senior management of residential care providers, regional managers involved in negotiating placements and the practitioners in residential homes. It was noted that different providers have different cultures, with some able to take a 'long term view' of the benefits of working with TACT to reduce unnecessary residential placements while developing an improved offer for the children and young people for whom residential was thought to be the best option. Practitioners in residential providers needed to see demonstrable benefits of the additional carer support and engagement for young people to allay their concerns that decisions were being motivated by financial concerns not the best interest of the child. As such evidence was provided, individual practitioners in residential care came to support the process.

Governance relationships

Relationships have also been established between the governance functions of the two organisations, with the lead member for children's services sitting on the partnership's governance board alongside a TACT trustee and legal and finance staff forming a sub-group to oversee technical details and disputes. A Board 'away day' is planned for those involved in direct governance of the partnership to improve relationships and provide an opportunity for regular contact and discussion. The managers of two organisations jointly attend meetings of the Corporate Parenting Board and plans are in place for the Assistant Director of Social Care to attend the TACT Trustee Board. Developing these relationships at a governance level was felt to build trust between the two organisations, rather than the individuals involved in day-to-day operations.

Performance and quality

Inevitably the partnership has faced a number of challenges during the mobilisation process. including:

> access to LA IT systems, and information governance arrangements for the transfer and storage of personal and sensitive data
> HR
> difficulties in individual cases.

The partners are aware that how mistakes or difficulties are handled is important in shaping staff attitudes to the partnership. These difficulties have been managed through dialogue between the two organisations and co-operation to find solutions. Technical issues have been referred to meetings of finance and operational managers to identify ways of removing barriers to developing the service.

Developing and testing the interface between the local authority and the permanence service during mobilisation, required the local authority to "show our workings", and be transparent about their ways of working.

> The local authority undertook a survey of foster carers and an audit of existing cases before the permanence service went live in April 2017. This provides a shared understanding of current strengths and weaknesses.
> TACT has identified practice that does not accord with their values, including the language used in case files and ways of communicating with children and young people. This is being challenged through joint working, in particular TACT representation on care panels making decisions about placements.

Similarly, throughout the mobilisation process, there has been financial transparency on both sides and dialogue about issues that arise. This was felt to be important because of the volatility of expenditure on care placements.

The local authority receives reports on key performance indicators, with a particular focus on placement stability for the children placed by TACT. Discussions about the data have already highlighted difficulties with national targets for the length of care proceedings when Special Guardianship Orders are being considered. Strategic and operational managers from TACT are leading on engagement with the Judiciary and with the Department for Education to increase understanding of the technical challenges in assessing family members within the 26 week timescale.

It is proposed that data will be complemented by quality assurance activity by the local authority, including the auditing of case files for evidence of the child's voice. The Children in Care Council will continue to provide feedback to the local authority.

Risks

Financial: The transfer of the entire local authority placement budget and responsibility for staff pay and pensions to TACT means that the financial risk is predominantly held by the voluntary organisation, though a contingency fund is held by the local authority for extreme circumstances. Regular meetings of finance officers through the mobilisation process oversaw transitional issues, access to information and developing placement models.

Demand: A number of factors might affect demand for placements in Peterborough. Peterborough is in the process of making changes to the way statutory social care is delivered in the community, by introducing the Family Safeguarding model developed in Hertfordshire. The partners monitor flow through the social care system to understand potential demand. Both parties recognised that they had not discussed how they would respond to changes in the wider system for children and families that affect demand.

Regulatory: The local authority retains statutory responsibility for looked after children. Peterborough are mitigating the risk to their reputation through performance monitoring and auditing. The partnership are aware that a poor Ofsted inspection would be challenging for the partnership and have engaged with Ofsted and the Department for Education at an early stage to make them aware of the new ways of working and to prepare for external scrutiny.

Political: Changes in the political composition or leadership of the local authority are a known risk. This risk has been addressed by involving elected members from all parties through scrutiny and the corporate parenting board, providing briefings and early engagement.

Case Study: Wigan Borough Council and Action for Children

The project
Wigan Borough Council has commissioned Action for Children to deliver a range of parenting and family support services, including Intensive Family Support, parenting programmes and multi-systemic therapy. These services are delivered under separate two to three year contracts, commissioned through a traditional procurement process.

Action for Children also provides services and support for families in Wigan outside of the contracts, bringing in additional resources from its wider organisation. These resources are used to contribute to Wigan's objectives in dialogue with the council, for example bringing in additional mental health support services.

Values
Wigan Borough Council have adopted a set of clear organisational values under the "Wigan Deal". The new approach was described as an 'obsession' with core values.

The values include:
> working with community and family assets
> making sure families only have to tell their story once
> providing the right services at the right time.

These values influence what services are commissioned and how they are monitored. The Deal has informed processes for tenders, procurement and expectations on providers. The shift from services that signpost to support towards providing direct support to children and families required a different approach to working with providers, including co-operating on workforce reform to upskill practitioners and establish a consistent response to families.

The Wigan Deal was introduced during the life of the contracts between Wigan and Action for Children and as such Action for Children had to adapt to new expectations, for example the most recent contract includes a requirement for co-production. However, the partners felt that Action for Children's own organisational values were very similar and that their experience in delivering asset-based services, ensuring the sustainability of change in families and working with mentors, volunteers and communities provided helpful expertise as Wigan's vision evolved. A shared commitment to evidence-based programmes as the best route to improving outcomes and achieving value for money provides a shared value base for deciding which services to commission.

The shared value base extends beyond what families can expect of services to ways of working within and across services. Action for Children has a 'behaviours framework' setting out the approaches to working with families, each other and with commissioners that are expected of Action for Children staff across services. It was noted that this mirrored the Wigan Deal approach and was similar in content, showing the aligned values of the council and charity outside of the partnership. The commissioner-provider relationship aims to model the behaviours that are expected of staff working with each other and working with families.

Roles and responsibilities

Action for Children is responsible for service delivery and maintains its independence about operational decisions.

Wigan Borough Council commissions the services and sets the performance framework and financial envelope for delivery. Wigan Borough Council leads on relationships with the wider system of services for children and families, helping the service to engage with other agencies such as schools.

Relationships

Action for Children has been operating in Wigan for a number of years. This long-term relationship has mitigated some of the difficulties of numerous short-term contracts. The pre-existing relationship ensures that communication between commissioner and provider does not start from scratch in each contract.

Strategic relationships had been strengthened through the tough process of budget reductions and the parallel introduction of the Wigan Deal. Commissioners took a transparent approach to sharing news of financial reductions with Action for Children and the partnership had a constructive conversation about how best to use resources. The introduction of the Deal and the inclusion of its principles in contract specifications occurred at the same time as budget reductions, and led to productive and collaborative co-production of what those principles meant in practice and how that could be accommodated within the available resources.

Action for Children works strategically with Wigan to analyse knowledge gaps, map collaboration opportunities and tackle lack of awareness about the services on offer to support parents. As well as conversations about performance, regular meetings provide a forum for sharing information about local activities and opportunities. Wigan representatives helped with the recruitment of team managers for the Action for Children services in order to ensure that the council's values were reflected in the leadership of the services, while Action for Children sits on the steering group developing edge of care and care services for young people in Wigan. However, it was felt by participants that opportunities to have strategic conversations weren't as frequent as they could be, and that more work to develop strategic conversations would help Action for Children to better respond to changing local authority context and challenges.

Operationally, both parties felt that the relationship was shaped by a common sense approach to dialogue, asking for advice and help when needed, while maintaining clear lines of accountability. They felt that timely raising of issues is important, rather than letting a problem fester or trying to hide low performance. Challenging conversations can be had when necessary. Some initial tension between the Action for Children service and other services for families in Wigan, prompted by some misunderstandings about thresholds and the role of the service, were resolved through contract management discussions and communication back to services about expectations.

Developing positive and constructive attitudes about other services is seen as a core behaviour within Wigan and Action for Children. Action for Children promotes collaborative behaviours through supervision and management practices, including encouraging reflection on what worked for the family and what worked for the practitioner, making the value base explicit and providing opportunities for practitioners to learn and challenge each other within the service. Wigan promotes opportunities for practitioners and services to have conversations about the families they are working with. Weekly conference calls in which multiple services discuss cases are felt to have broken down barriers between practitioners working within the different services and increased their understanding of what Multi-Systemic Therapy can and can't do. This has also helped prevent cases being referred or refused. The format of these conference calls has evolved to be short and efficient, recognising the other pressures on practitioners' time. The conference call also provides an opportunity for practitioners to discuss cases where families need additional support from other services (e.g. housing support) or need longer than the contracted time to make changes, but where practitioners feel there is good chance of success. This process has allowed practitioners to see other services acting altruistically, providing a basis for improved relationships based on shared motivation and values. The next step for the partnership is for Action for Children to provide workforce development opportunities and training in working with families to other services in Wigan, which will further embed the shared value based and ways of working across the borough.

Action for Children is part of a larger national organisation and brings resources into Wigan over and above the contract. The mental health practitioner brought in by Action for Children to support families in Wigan was seen as having a huge impact in helping practitioners to identify barriers parents were facing in their capacity to change, and identifying ways of overcoming these barriers. This independent resource gives Action for Children some strategic, as well as operational, independence, access to learning and expertise from outside the borough, and external evaluation resources, thus strengthening their position as a partner who can offer challenge and reflection. Action for Children also brings relationships and links to the wider Greater Manchester system of authorities and services, which has provided additional value. This has allowed Action for Children to provide advice and contributions to conversations about how Wigan responded to its most recent Ofsted inspection, sharing learning from other sites.

The Action for Children delivery team has a reasonably stable staff team on delivery. Nonetheless, the provider noted that the short-term contracts do provide challenges in staff retention and morale, given the uncertainty about how long the contract will be in place. Personnel changes in both the commissioning team and the management level in Action for Children had proved challenging, alongside, an overall lack of capacity in the commissioning team has provided challenges in following up actions after meetings, leading to delay in responding to providers.

The relationship between the commissioner –provider partnership and the elected representatives of the Council is striking. As with other of the case studies, the Head of Service for Wigan reports on the performance of the partnership to the Council's internal governance structure, and Action for Children have attended the Corporate Parenting Board to discuss the service. However, in addition, political support and challenge is offered outside of formal structures as well. Both Scrutiny committee and Cabinet members have visited the service to have conversations about what the service does. Elected members are guided by the principles and values of the Wigan Deal and use this to offer challenge on behalf of the community. This contrasts with other places where Action for Children operates, where

visits to scrutiny can be contentious and stressful. This highlighted the need for voluntary sector organisations to understand the different political climate and culture in different authorities. In Wigan, the stable political environment led to establishing longer term relationships with individual elected representatives for the communities where the charity provides services. However, the partnership recognised the need to maintain clarity of relationship with elected members as decision-makers, and not confuse it with their role as community representatives who might be involved in fundraising for the charity, or the allocation of member-led community grants.

The relationship between Action for Children and the central organisation is one of support and 'no surprises', with information and learning shared across services and between the head office and regional teams.

Performance and quality monitoring

Conversations about performance centre on data required by the commissioning team on a quarterly basis and the data is complemented by case studies and the views of parents and practitioners. Payment by results was considered for some of these contracts, but was felt to be inappropriate.

Overall, it was felt by both the commissioner and provider that the data was relevant to understanding performance and generated good conversations about potential improvements. The dataset has evolved over time through negotiation between the commissioning team and the provider, as Action for Children had raised concern about the proportionality of the data required.

Financial data is perhaps more problematic. The provider had concerns that conversations about effectiveness and value for money fail to take into account the overheads the provider incurs over and above direct service delivery, particularly when practice changes in response to concern about performance.

Discussions about performance are not one-sided, with the commissioner demanding improvements of the provider, rather there is a dialogue about what the data mean and what needs to be done to secure improvement across the whole system of services for children and families. For example:
> Low numbers of families accessing the service was found to driven by a lack of awareness among Wigan practitioners about the services available, so the team leader now sits with the early help hub weekly to discuss service referrals for parenting.
> The performance conversation highlighted that the service was not managing to reduce school exclusions as much as expected, but discussions revealed that school attitudes to exclusions were a barrier. Better engagement by MST practitioners within schools has helped to address the issue.
> Low take-up of parenting programmes was investigated through qualitative research with practitioners, which identified that referrals were poorly targeted. As a result, new processes of initial interviews and incentives were introduced.

The commissioner and provider felt that conversations about performance are made more stressful because of the short length of the contract, which means that withdrawal of funding is always only a short time period away. However, they also felt that this meant that conversations were very focused on performance and were effective in driving swift improvements. Action for Children welcomed the strong contract monitoring activity undertaken by Wigan, and the prompt and actionable feedback the service receives from the council.

As part of a wider organisation, the operational and strategic leads for the Action for Children service in Wigan have their own reporting requirements, Key Performance Indicators and staff development processes, and receive support from the national organisation in the form of logistical support, evaluation services and shared learning from other sites. An operational risk register is maintained for each service, and risks are monitored and escalated where necessary, including safeguarding issues, employee relations or contract compliance.

Lessons for the sector

Be explicit about values and make them the golden thread of the partnership. Embed them in training and supervision and encourage teams to own those values.

Relationships are key, all the way through the partnership. Strategic leaders should model the relationships and ways of working that they want to see from practitioners, in terms of being values-driven, focused on families and ways of resolving disagreements through constructive challenge.

Contract meetings are there for a purpose – be clear what that purpose is and how much time and capacity is needed to achieve that purpose. How many meetings and for how long, in part depends on the level of trust between partners to raise issues when needed, rather than rely on regular meeting agendas.

Keep in touch, weekly by phone. Regular face to face meetings are also important, the time before and after the meeting to share concerns and issues are important informal communication channels.

Service providers need to be involved in the whole system, not just one provider in its own bubble. Families need a systemic approach and that goes beyond what one service can offer. Link in with the multi-agency meetings, get involved in conversations about what we can all do better for families.

References

ADCS (2016) *Research Report: Safeguarding Pressures Phase 5.* Manchester: Association of Directors of Children's Services

Bertelli A and Smith C (2010) 'Relational Contracting and network management' *J. of Public Administration Research Theory* 2010 (20)

Broadhurst K, Wastell D, White S, Hall C, Peckover S, Thompson K, Pithouse A and Davey D (2009) Performing 'Initial Assessment': Identifying the Latent Conditions for Error at the Front-Door of Local Authority Children's Services. B. J of Social Work. Vol 40 Issue 2. P352 – 370.

Bull D, Bagwell S, Weston A and Joy I (2016) *Untapped potential: Bringing the voluntary sector's strengths to health and care transformation.*

Carson E, Chang D and Day A (2012) 'Distant Relations: limits to relational contracting in domestic violence programmes' *International Journal of Public Sector Management.* 25(2)

Children England (2016) *Commissioning, a better way? The impact of commissioning on the children and families voluntary sector.* London.

Citarella V (2017*) Developing effective commissioner and service provider relationships.* Dartington: Research in Practice for Adults.

Darby S and Stockwood G (2012) *In it together: in practice.* London: Local Government Information Unit.
http://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/In-it-together-in-practice-Childrens-Services-Development-Group.pdf

Davison-Knight A, Lowe T, Brossard M and Wilson J (2017) *A Whole New World, Funding and Commissioning in Complexity.* Collaborate.

Demos (2016*) Commissioning in children's services – what works.* London: Demos.
https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Demos-Commissioning-in-Childrens-Services.pdf

Gibson M (2016) 'Constructing pride, shame, and humiliation as a mechanism of control: A case study of an English local authority child protection service' in *Children and Youth Services Review,* vol 70 p120-128.

Gill C, La Valle I, Brady L, Kane D, Clark J and Bass P (2015) *The ripple effect – the nature and impact of the children and young people's voluntary sector.* National Children's Bureau [NCB]
http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/431274/the_ripple_effect.pdf

Glisson, D. (2015) The Role of Organizational Culture and Climate in Innovation and Effectiveness, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance,* 39:4, 245-250.

Hardy B, Hudson B, Waddington E (2003) *Assessing Strategic Partnerships, The Partnership Assessment Tool.* Office of the Deputy Prime Minster.

Harwich E, Hitchcock A and Fischer E (2017) *Faulty by Design. The state of public-service commissioning.* London: Reform

Institute of Public Care (IPC) (undated) *Market facilitation: guidelines for children and young people's services.* Oxford.

Institute of Public Care (2016) *The Value of a Partnership Model for delivering Family Support Summary Findings from an Evaluation of the Newport / Barnardo's Model*

Jay A (2014) Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997 – 2013. London: TSO.

Kippin H and Billiald S (2015) *Collaborative readiness. London: Clarence Centre for Enterprise and Innovation.* http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/Collaboration-Readiness-Digital.pdf

Leigh J (2017) 'Atmospheres of mistrust and suspicion: Theorising on conflict and affective practice in a child protection social work *agency' Qualitative Social Work.*

Macmillian R (2010) *The third sector delivering public services: an evidence review. Working Paper 20.* Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre

McGhee D, Bennett C and Walker S (2016) 'The combination of 'insider' and 'outsider' strategies in VSO-government partnerships: the relationship between refugee Action and the Home Office in the UK' *Voluntary Sector Review* Vol 7 No 1 pp27-46. Bristol: Policy Press.

McNicoll (2016) 'Directors urge crackdown 'immoral' profiteering from fostering'. Community Care. http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/07/08/directors-urge-crackdown-immoral-profiteering-fostering/

Munro E (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report A child-centred system.* London: Department for Education

The Children's Partnership (NCVO) (2015) *Social value and commissioning toolkit. A guide for charities on social value and commissioning produced for the Children's Partnership.* http://thechildrenspartnership-knowledge.org.uk/media/1089/social-value-and-commissioning-toolkit-final-with-ncb-logos.pdf

OPM (2014) *Interim Report: Action research into more effective strategic commissioning of children's residential care homes.* Local Government Association

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (2016) The collapse of Kids Company: lessons for charity trustees, professional firms, the Charity Commission, and Whitehall Fourth Report of Session 2015–16. TSO. House of Commons

Sancho A and Siciliina M (2013) 'The Transactional and the Relational Approach to Contracting Out for Public Services: How Do They Work?' *J of Finance and Management in Public Services* Vol 11(1).

Sebba J and Luke N, McNeish D and Rees A (2017) *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, Final evaluation report.* London: Department for Education

Sellick C (2014) 'Foster-care commissioning in an age of austerity: the experiences and views of the independent provider sector in one English region' *British J of Social Work.* 44 (7): 1788-1804.

Sellick C (2006) 'Relational Contracting Between Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Providers: Lessons in Conducting Business for Child Welfare Managers' *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 28(2)

Spring Consortium (2016) *Interim learning for the Innovation Programme.*
London: Spring Consortium. http://springconsortium.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/DfE-Innovation-Programme-Interim-Learning-Report.pdf

Tickel L (2016) 'Social Workers in fierce row over children's bill' Manchester: Guardian.
https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/18/social-workers-fierce-row-childrens-bill

Thaddieus W, Nowlin M, Matthew C, Rabovsky T and Ripberger J (2016) 'Cultural theory and managerial values: examining trust as a motivation for collaboration' *Public Administration* Vol 94 (4) Wiley and Sons

Turney (2012) A relationship-based approach to engaging involuntary clients: the contribution of recognition theory. Child and Family Social Work 2012 Vol 17 (2