

Trust, power and collaboration

*Human Learning Systems
approaches in voluntary and
community organisations*

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In partnership:



**Northumbria
University**
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the
Tudortrust



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Introduction

Background

The [Institute for Voluntary Action Research](#) (IVAR) explored the implications and requirements of new and different approaches to commissioning and funding relationships for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. This study was carried out in partnership with the [Tudor Trust](#) and [Newcastle Business School at the University of Northumbria](#), and was part of a wider, national project focused on [Human Learning Systems](#) (HLS). The IVAR study builds on two reports. The first, [A whole new world](#), explains the rationale for taking a 'complexity-informed' approach, while the second, [Exploring the whole new world](#), develops the HLS theory to consider what this approach looks like in practice.

The IVAR study draws on previous work highlighting examples and illustrations about working in complexity. However, rather than focusing on one aspect (e.g. partnership working, being human, or relational approaches), we wanted to use a wider lens and explore in detail the varying experiences of VCS organisations working in, and adapting their practice to, commissioning and funding relationships. Our intention was to capture what is happening, as well as what needs to change to help support and enable a different way of working and share any learning with others.

Our research on commissioning and funding relationships included:

- **Six scoping interviews** with stakeholders (funders, academics, commissioners and VCS organisations) that have varied perspectives on working in complexity. These conversations helped to identify key themes and develop a structure for reviewing IVAR literature as noted in next bullet (see Appendix One)
- **Desk research** on various IVAR projects and reports from the last 15 years, that provide insight on different aspects of this topic (see Appendix One)
- **Two focus groups and six interviews** across three areas, with a total of 43 participants.
- **Sample:** The fieldwork took place in three areas across England which were selected to reflect different local contexts and different stages of complexity-informed practice. See Table One below. (N.B. Where relevant, in this report, we attribute anonymised quotes to specific areas.)

Figure 1: Sample areas

Area	Research methods	Level of engagement in complexity-informed practice	Description of current complexity-informed practice
Plymouth, Devon	Interviews	High	Fully engaged and implementing this way of working purposefully and with a vehicle in place for Drug and Alcohol Treatment (DAT) commissioning and delivery.
Preston, Lancashire	Focus group	Medium	'On the cusp' of engagement – the energy is there, and HLS conversations are happening. Many are already working in this way but there is a need for further impetus to help make the shift.
Scarborough, North Yorkshire	Focus group	Low	A focus on one organisation that is working in this way and that is keen to play a role in supporting others and instigate HLS thinking locally. A VCS sector that is interested and in need of more 'enablers' to make change happen.

The fieldwork was completed in early March 2020 before the UK entered a period of lockdown in response to the Covid-19 emergency. The synthesis and analysis of our findings took place as the impact of the pandemic was unravelling. While our study does not directly address the implications of Covid-19 on funding relationships, much of what we saw and heard resonates with emerging thinking about the need for new ways of working, built around being more human and relational, consistent with the principles captured by much of IVAR's previous work on funding, as well as HLS theory.

Research questions included:

- What does working in an HLS way look like for you? (What are you doing that is different?)
- What has working in an HLS way enabled for you?

- What does it require of you that is different to previous ways of working?
- What have been the challenges for you?
- What has enabled it to happen?

It is important to note that, while the research did include questions relating to commissioning *and* other types of funding relationship with both the public sector and trusts and foundations, the conversations primarily focused on commissioning. The experiences described below relate more specifically to statutory funding and commissioning practices. The findings of this report are, therefore, likely to be most relevant and useful for VCS organisations and commissioners.

We begin by presenting what funding relationships look and feel like now for VCS organisations, before moving on to address our principal research question: what does complexity-informed practice look like when it is happening, or in an ideal world, from a voluntary and community sector perspective? Throughout, we offer practical suggestions for action. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings. In Appendix One, we outline a review of various IVAR projects and reports from the last 15 years that provide insights on different aspects of this topic and which have informed this study. In Appendix Two, we present a set of propositions about what it takes for VCS organisations to work differently. In Appendix Three, we provide a series of talking points for VCS organisations to use in local conversations with each other and funders.

Part One: Headline findings

What do commissioner and funder relationships look and feel like now for VCS organisations?

The picture in the three areas was dependent on many things. In particular, local context and structures determined where people are with the conversation on funding relationships. There is both progress and no progress. Where more open conversations are starting to happen, and experiments (e.g. new models or vehicles of working) that put the end user centre stage are taking place, change is occurring. Organisations shared that being 'in it' forces them to see the bigger picture, particularly in relation to difficult decision-making around funding. What really helps is a shared history developed over time, establishing strong rapport, and having trusting relationships with other VCS organisations:

'[Commissioner relationships] were very formal ... it felt like a fox and chicken. You can stand by each other, but you know that at any time they could take a big bite out of you. [Name of commissioner] is not like that but your traditional commissioner and provider relationship was all a bit false. It was like the commissioner came in and asked for all this paperwork and you didn't know why ... Commissioners played the game as much as we played the game. I have seen a change ... we are all in this together, and there is a real willingness now too. What you don't get at the table now is "you have to do it this way because I am the commissioner". Because it is about equal status, shared risk and reward, everyone has a voice and the dynamics have changed.' (Plymouth, Devon)

All parties require a new mindset for change to happen at all – it is not easy. Making things better for the end user through more collaboration comes with new responsibilities and accountability, including making tough decisions together. The context of prolonged austerity can be seen as either an opportunity or a block: it both encourages new ways of doing things, yet also provides an excuse for maintaining the status quo:

'Ask uncomfortable difficult questions – who we are, what do we really do, and who do we work with? And that can be really difficult for organisations. I think organisations need to be honest with themselves – recognise what works well and what doesn't.' (Plymouth, Devon)

Whether and how change happens still feels overly dependent on the person perceived to be 'in charge' and their permissive, or otherwise, approach to making things happen differently. Too often, fearing a loss of

control, it feels like it is easier to do what you have always done than to step out of a comfort zone and look at new opportunities to create a more equal system and improve things for people and communities in the long-term:

‘If there is a real willingness, it can work anywhere – you can achieve this, share information, make sure people don’t get bounced around services. When people say it won’t work, I think it’s about egos and trust issues.’ (Plymouth, Devon)

However, from those who are working in an HLS way, there is a dogged commitment. This is often in spite of what is going on around them; the knowledge that it may cause them to be excluded at times from processes that do not fit, or a lack of belief from others in this way of working. Working in an HLS way requires a very conscious change, with people from different sectors coming on board together. VCS organisations in particular can feel like islands, isolated in their efforts in trying to work more collaboratively and move away from a more outcome and target focused culture. Such organisations are constantly seeking other allies and champions who recognise the value of this way of working to benefit those that use services and access support, and want to see things being done differently: collaboration contributes to feeling less isolated. A challenge is that other allies are not always ‘on the doorstep’, so it can take a bit more time to find, persuade and engage with the wider system; and it takes a high level of commitment and belief: persistence is key.

Conversely, if you are already immersed in an HLS way of working, you are benefitting from a system that supports you, that knows what is happening and why, and that ‘permits’ more experimental approaches. Although these more positive experiences are not without tensions, there is commitment, and a fuller set of enabling ingredients.

What does complexity-informed practice look like when it is happening, or in an ideal world, from a voluntary and community sector perspective?

We asked participants:

- What complexity-informed practice looks and feels like
- What the ideal scenario would be, from a VCS perspective, to work in a complexity-informed way
- What does it really require for VCS organisations to work in this way.

These questions helped identify what is needed to make it happen, from the perspectives of those who are doing it, and/or dipping their toes in the water and starting to try new approaches. Our findings are organised into two subsections – process; and behaviour – which should be viewed as

interdependent ingredients for working differently. After each section, we offer some practical suggestions.

Process

Experience-led design and delivery: A key enabler, particularly when starting to initiate working in this way, is for there to be a shared sense of purpose which brings people together. To encourage a person-centred approach based on need and better understanding between all parties, there should be an iterative and ongoing dialogue between commissioners, VCS organisations and people supported by them. The latter should be involved at each stage: identifying need, contract design, agreeing outcomes and, where appropriate, shared expectations of what can reasonably be achieved, thus making those more meaningful and realistic.

Open and transparent commissioning and access to commissioners:

There is still a feeling of *'them and us'*. Some participants felt that commissioners were *'hidden away'* and found it difficult to contact the right person or to organise meetings. There needs to be a shift to a more accessible process. For example, having an integrated budget and a single local commissioner within an area of subject specialism makes a difference – this was an enabler in an area where HLS approaches are embedded. Related to this, participants in other areas felt that commissioners should be more accessible to the VCS (e.g. by having named contact details) to promote ongoing dialogue and contribute to more equitable and transparent decision-making. Building trusting relationships is important to allow for open two-way conversations that can address unequal power dynamics and build the foundation for meaningful and appropriate outcomes. Having the confidence and opportunity to ask commissioners questions such as, *'What are you funding, and why are you funding that?'* needs to be the norm, likewise conversations about breakthroughs, as well as disappointments. Establishing relationships does not happen overnight, but requires time, resources and *'informal chats over coffee and cake'*. There are huge benefits though, and they should not be seen as *additional* to a day job, rather it *is* the day job and requires people to leave personal or organisational agendas at the door, to *'really engage in honest conversations; for it to be robust you have to be open and honest and air your views without it being personal'*.

Shared understanding of local assets and valuing the distinctiveness of the VCS: Collaborative approaches to service design and funding should make the most of what the collective assets are in an area; understanding how different organisations fit within that local context and what their distinctive contributions might be: *'Where and how are we making the best of what we already have'*. This can enable a quicker and more bespoke response to local issues and helps value the distinctive traits and characteristics of VCS organisations, such as independence of voice, the potential for flexibility and experimentation, and established roots and connections within local communities.

Experimentation and learning: Another distinctive feature of the VCS is its potential and freedom to be flexible, nimble, and adaptable to changes in

need. This means it is important for organisations to not be fixed in how they support people, but rather recognise that *'life can get in the way'*, and to be enabled to become braver and more confident to experiment in what they do, learn from the process, and continuously evolve and adapt services to changing need and context. Not all ideas and experiments will succeed, but the experience can be valuable in helping to build confidence to work in a different way:

'Open your eyes and ears and see what's going on in the broader environment, nationally and internationally, and how to interact with that. You won't always be able to find the answers, but the process can be more useful than accepting what has been done before.'
(Scarborough, North Yorkshire)

Funders and providers sharing accountability: One reason for encouraging VCS organisations to experiment and learn is to give them more autonomy over what they are doing – *'collective bravery'*. A powerful way of understanding the success of a project is to hear the stories of change from the people that receive support, e.g. by visiting organisations and observing services in real time, or attending events sharing these stories. Funders should acknowledge that no one organisation can take full credit for the impact of what is happening to a person, but consider the multiple stakeholders involved and particular characteristics of the location:

'Getting rid of the old contracts and those obligations and some of that monitoring, which pushes you down certain avenues. That means you can now use resources around need ... you don't have to think contractually that you can't change things, but you can do what's necessary. And related to that is sharing risks and outcomes ... if a person is presented to a hostel before, it would sit with the hostel; but now there is a sense that support is shared between providers ... that joining up is really good.' (Plymouth, Devon)

Funders being there along the journey and seeing the impact in real-time (*'walking alongside you'*) helps recognise the need to adapt what was originally proposed if people's needs change: *'If it doesn't work, it doesn't matter – not taking risk for risk sake but let's be open about stuff'*.

Moving away from siloed working to collaboration and a more unified voice: There is a widespread view among VCS organisations *'that if they collaborated rather than worked in silos then real change could happen'*. Working collaboratively can result in sharing responsibility, building more trusting relationships and mitigating risk, therefore: *'No one organisation is left holding the baby. It is not what are you going to do about it but what we are going to do about it collectively'*. It can also help address the, at times, tense, conflictual and competitive dynamics in the VCS sector and contribute to a more unified voice for airing concerns and needs and pushing back on poor commissioning practice:

'Many VCS organisations jealously guard their hard-earned knowledge of fundraising and those relationships. Coming together to share

experiences and even work together needs to be attractive enough, especially for those that feel they have something to lose. Some larger organisations have private sector partnerships and sponsors, as they emphatically turn away from commissions and contracts towards private and business support – so we can see how they might be hesitant to open the door to "competitors" – as in other third sector organisations.' (Preston, Lancashire)

Legitimise, validate and commit to a wider adoption of this way of working: HLS needs to be recognised, legitimised and given status in a local system to give it the best chance of making progress. Champions are needed to support adoption or to test new/different ways of working, so that it moves beyond the aspiration of a few individuals, to actual tangible changes at all levels. It takes time for everyone to come on board, and there needs to be permission and acknowledgement of what this is all about.

Practical suggestions

For commissioners and voluntary and community sector organisations

Getting started

- Start from a different place right at the beginning of the process, beginning with people using services in your area.
- Move onto joint working with commissioners, initiating different and regular conversations/service design meetings with VCS organisations about how to tackle an issue. Come together around a problem that matters in your town or city.
- To inform decision-making on design and delivery, reach out to your local communities and regularly communicate with those accessing support (using relevant methods and language) – they are experts.
- Find out what you have that supports change and what are the resisting factors, and ask: "How can we collectively improve the situation?"
- Reflect together on the collective assets in your local area and what can work well, recognising that each place looks different.

For voluntary sector organisations

Experimentation

- Staff and people who access support should be given 'permission' to try something out.
- Acknowledge it is okay if things do not go to plan.
- Take risks with 'experimenting and experiments' with new people and different contexts/fields.
- Learn, share, reflect, and respond to what has happened.

Learning

- Find ways to capture and share learning, with all parts of the system, as you adapt and change your activities.
- Include both breakthroughs and disappointments and reflect and respond to learning in real time.
- If something has worked, amplify and share it, e.g. look for opportunities to publicise via local/national events and publications.
- Invite funders to come and see what is happening in practice.

Do not let go of successes (including short-lived pilots) and celebrate those from the viewpoint of the people using the services, e.g. bring them together to tell their story of change. This will bring people on the journey – changing a mindset – to see the benefits of this way of working.

Behaviour

Alignment of strong value base – shared system wide: The everyday practice of commissioners and VCS organisations should be founded on a shared set of values, *‘based on generosity, respect, compassion, and commitment’*. To encourage the system-wide adoption and application of an HLS way of working, it is essential that these values are not held just by a small number of key individuals but are shared across organisations and sectors.

Acknowledgement of the emotional demand that is required in a complexity-informed way of working: This can be difficult and draining work – people therefore require proper support in order to avoid defaulting to traditional ways of working and old habits (e.g. adopting fixed positions or trying to exercise too much control) when faced with challenging times. Several participants described feeling *‘overwhelmed’* due to the breadth and demand of the tasks involved, which, in turn, created additional feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and pressure.

Devolved power and control: A fundamental element of working in a complexity-informed way is to address power dynamics both within organisations and across sectors: devolving power and control, distributing leadership and responsibilities within and across organisations, and working collaboratively. Leaders (both within the public sector and VCS) should move away from hierarchical structures, allow staff to have autonomy in how they work (building staff confidence, commitment, motivation, and a shared sense of responsibility in how they support people) and acknowledge others – staff, volunteers, or people using the services – are experts, and put *‘trust in others to do what’s best’*:

‘Leaders need to get over themselves; they are not always the experts, often it is the volunteers or people using the service.’ (Scarborough, North Yorkshire)

Leadership buy-in: To see transformational change, there needs to be leadership buy-in at all levels of organisations and sectors. It takes time for

everyone to come on board, and there needs to be permission and acknowledgement of what HLS is all about. This commitment needs to be visibly shared and flow, so that it becomes part of the organisational culture and 'how we do things around here'. While it is important to start small, it is essential to not stop there:

'You need to get your senior leaders around a table to really understand what they want to achieve from it, what they think they will bring to it ... to have that sign up from the top – if something was going horribly wrong, I know I could speak to someone in the Council that would listen and find resources to help me. And it is that level of confidence.'
(Plymouth, Devon)

Accessible language: There was concern about using terms such as 'complexity' and 'systems' with VCS organisations, as they are viewed as unhelpfully ambiguous and inaccessible, and potentially impose a language and framing onto VCS organisations. In turn, this could create an additional power dynamic (those that understand the concept against those that do not) and result in alienation or disengagement. On the other hand, within the public sector, it was seen as important to have academic references to give this way of working legitimacy and kudos.

Collective decision-making and bravery: Key individuals – acting as catalysts – are essential in starting and promoting this way of working and providing momentum. However, a collective response is required for HLS practice to become truly embedded. Part of this is about VCS organisations having a seat at the table alongside commissioners, 'to hold a position to influence decision-making'. It also means VCS organisations taking on increasing responsibility and being braver about making tough decisions. Some participants talked about the reluctance to make decisions in their local areas even though spaces had been created for collective decision-making:

'There is a reluctance to make a decision; we have only made one ... there is something about people not being able to relinquish their organisational remit – they are still representing their organisation. Leaving the organisation at the door is really, really hard.' (Plymouth, Devon)

This demonstrates that having a process for collective decision-making is not always enough. It is also essential to address the behaviour and practice within these spaces. For example, learning to listen to a diverse range of views, and ensuring all stakeholders have full commitment to this way of working.

Practical suggestions

For commissioners and voluntary sector organisations

Relationships and Conversations

- Consider the ways to change the culture of competitive funding so that organisations become more equal partners.
- This involves getting to know each other better, e.g. visiting each other's organisations. Find opportunities to gather people together from all parts of the system in your local area, to bring everyone along on this journey and help them feel excited, passionate and motivated by what they are doing.
- Be prepared to have challenging and uncomfortable conversations on difficult issues, e.g. implementing cutbacks.

Language and bureaucracy

- Develop language between commissioners and the VCS that makes sense to you all.
- Strip away burdensome bureaucracy from funding and commissioning processes to enable VCS organisations to respond quickly and imaginatively to local need.

Being human

- See being human, kind, honest and trusting as part of your job: *'It is about being human, being kind to yourself, being kind to your peers and being kind to the people that you're working with. If you adopt that principle you are going to get it right most of the time'.*

For voluntary sector organisations

Relationships and Conversations

- Have a forum where all partners can be honest with each other. Start a conversation and then be relentless by keeping it going regularly, perhaps even the same day every week.
- Be open and listen to a diverse range of perspectives and encourage honest and challenging conversations to ensure it is not the 'loudest' voice that takes control over decision-making.

Being human

- Communicate shared values across and then beyond your team to help develop shared goals: *'How you get transformational change in a system – services are delivered around some key principles and what was best for those using the services'.*
- Being human promotes a willingness to share responsibilities and creates a shift in attitudes with people saying "This is not my job, but how can I help?": *'The "revelation" of this way of working is the shift in the commissioner approach, moving away from the traditional way of working*

to a systems approach to commissioning ... creating culture change by gaining senior leadership buy-in within the Council'.

- Be brave and take risks to demonstrate that these values and principles are embedded in everyday practice within and across organisations.

Champions

- Find HLS champions. Look for them in places you might not normally, initiate a conversation about a topic on your mind and organise a gathering around it, making open invitations and meeting in a neutral space.

Encouragement and support

- Encourage leaders to show commitment, support and trust to staff and volunteers.
- Ask for external support, whether this is for leaders or everyone in an organisation/system. It can be training or facilitated spaces for reflective practice. Find ways to learn something together. Use all the forums that are available, invite guest speakers – use every opportunity to make links and develop partnerships.
- Allow time and space to acknowledge, reflect and respond to the emotional demands from this way of working.

Part Two: Summary

Our study focused on three local areas in England and highlighted numerous positive and real advantages of working in a complexity-informed way. One location, working collaboratively within and across sectors to provide temporary accommodation for homeless people, demonstrated not only significantly lower costs for the local authority, but also improved the overall experience for people that accessed this support by *'making sure people don't get bounced around services'*. Therefore, when re-designing services, it is essential to start with the end user as being centre stage to ensure better lives for people accessing services. Other advantages have resulted from staff and volunteers having more autonomy over the way they work, which, in turn, has increased their individual confidence, sense of responsibility, and built collective morale and commitment.

This way of working is beneficial to people using the services. However, at times, it can feel overwhelming for leaders and staff as a result of the breadth and demand of the tasks involved – anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness are common emotions experienced by the small number of people trying to work differently. This highlights the importance of allocating time and resources to learn, share, reflect and respond. As well as managing the wellbeing of individuals and minimising the risk of burnout, this careful and considerate approach can also help to ensure that organisations do not default to traditional ways of working when faced with challenges and obstacles.

For this way of working to become truly embedded it requires real depth – both horizontally and vertically – for it to become a reality. While starting small is essential, there needs to be a commitment to wider adoption of this culture and behaviour within and across sectors. Working differently should not be viewed as the preserve of individual projects, but rather should underpin the approach an organisation adopts when delivering a range of service provision. To do this, there must be space to legitimise and give status to the work, moving it beyond the aspiration of a few to the goal and purpose of a whole system. Critical to this is finding champions to support adoption and commit to testing and promoting alternative approaches. For VCS organisations, this will require a concerted effort to overcome and move beyond the barrier of a worryingly widespread competitive culture, in order to utilise and share their assets: a strong social purpose, being nimble to a changing context, less bureaucratic, and flexible in responding to need.

This research contributes to a gap in the evidence base by illustrating the range of enduring challenges and barriers for VCS organisations attempting to develop complexity-informed approaches to their funding relationships. It also illuminates the personal/individual experiences of adopting these approaches, what is required at an individual level (such

as skills, leadership and confidence), as well as what it feels like for those involved (including the emotional toll).

The Human Learning Systems theory is founded on acknowledging that organisations and individuals are operating in complexity and uncertainty. While our study was conducted prior to the unravelling effects of Covid-19, this new context is both exacerbating feelings of complexity and uncertainty¹, as well as creating conditions that have accelerated the potential for working in different ways². Examples from IVAR's emergency response work³ have found trusts and foundations are increasingly shifting power and control to VCS organisations; by simplifying processes, cutting bureaucracy and reporting, and giving organisations 'permission' to respond rapidly to local need. There has also been a coming together – across organisations and sectors – to focus on a shared purpose of supporting the most vulnerable people within society. These shifts in ways of working have both recognised and drawn strength from the advantageous features of VCS organisations, such as being embedded within communities and having local knowledge and connections. Understanding this process in more detail – capturing the learning about enablers, practical approaches, pitfalls – offers an opportunity to learn about how this way of working could be nurtured and maintained beyond the immediate crisis, into recovery and renewal.

Finally, while our focus has primarily been the experiences of VCS organisations within commissioning relationships with statutory funders, the study findings do raise questions for trusts and foundations as they begin to revisit their role and contribution in the context of Covid-19⁴. While some aspects of HLS practice might be beyond their remit (e.g. direct involvement in the design of local services), there is much about this different approach that resonates, including the premium placed on trust, collaboration and learning. This raises interesting questions for further exploration on the commonalities and differences between trusts and foundations and statutory commissioners adopting an HLS way of working, and whether there are key messages and learning that might be shared across sectors.

¹ <https://www.nextstageradicals.net/blog/a-whole-new-world-public-service-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

² <https://www.ivar.org.uk/briefing-paper/barriers-are-coming-down/>;
<https://www.nextstageradicals.net/blog/a-whole-new-world-public-service-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

³ <https://www.ivar.org.uk/covid-19-briefings/>

⁴ <https://www.ivar.org.uk/covid-19-briefings/>

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Appendix One:

Headline findings from scoping interviews and IVAR literature review

Over the last 15 years, IVAR has collected a wealth of evidence exploring the implications and requirements of new and different approaches to commissioning and funding relationships for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations, in particular, through our experience of facilitating the national [Building Health Partnerships \(BHP\) programme](#) over the last ten years. There, we very purposely create spaces that bring sectors together to have honest, place-based conversations about what they have in common and the benefits and opportunities for cross-sector working. Much of the learning shared in this report, in particular the practice examples, has been inspired by participants in this programme.

To help develop a structure for reviewing this literature, we undertook six scoping interviews with a variety of stakeholders (funders, academics, commissioners and VCS organisations) who held differing perspectives on complexity-informed practice. The following section outlines the key findings that emerged from the interviews and literature review which, in turn, provided the foundations for the propositions set out in Appendix Two, and the design of the fieldwork.

The case for doing it differently

Joined-up working across organisations, fields and sectors **creates better quality experiences for the users and beneficiaries of services.**

By funders giving more autonomy to frontline workers to use their experience and skills to inform decision-making, *'it will free them up to have an enjoyable job'*, and, at the same time, adopt a more relational approach with beneficiaries. This will **improve the experience for frontline staff**, which is important in a time of increased demand and shrinking resources.

Although some VCS organisations are already working in a complexity-informed way, many continue to behave in an *'old school way'*. The competitive commissioning environment and *'austerity has a lot to answer for'*, by accentuating feelings of anxiety, fear and territorial behaviour:

‘High levels of anxiety and fear in relation to an uncertain future that felt beyond their ability to influence.’⁵

‘Participants described problems related to fear of openness, resistance to change and the degree of genuine, personal commitment to working in this way, as contrasted to a ‘tick-box’ mentality in which partnership working is merely seen as a way to fulfil certain obligations.’ ([Getting things done together, 2009](#))

For some organisations, it can be difficult to unlearn these habits and behaviours, as they are often based on institutionalised norms and cultures:

‘This is about changing the way we think.’ (BHP Lancashire & South Cumbria 2019)

If funding relationships can place more emphasis on VCS organisations having ownership and responsibility, this will empower them to feel more confident and braver, and to be more provocative:

‘Shifting from an old way of working – there is an opportunity here and it would be a shame to let it go. Let’s not get too bogged down in all the problems and challenges – all it takes is a few organisations who are willing to get on with trying out some of these ideas to see how they work.’ ([The possible, not the perfect, 2018](#))

What it requires and involves

Building strong and trusting relationships between organisations and commissioners is a key part of working in a complexity-informed way. It involves: ‘behaving properly’; investing the appropriate time and resources; shared recognition of the value of working together; funders ‘being there during the process’; testing your assumptions; being honest; and upskilling others to be able to sustain the work. Both funders and VCS organisations should not see this as additional to their workload but as ‘part of their day job’:

‘The interaction between funders and voluntary organisations is relational rather than contractual. It places value on the contribution each partner brings: the knowledge of context and needs that the funded organisation possesses and the resources, overview and convening power of the funder. When there is space to foster openness and develop trust, we have observed a virtuous circle in which both organisations are better able to realise their goals. It seems to us that, during a period of such heightened uncertainty, this kind of symbiosis in funding relationships has real value.’ ([Turning a corner, 2013](#))

⁵ <https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/the-possible-not-the-perfect-learning-from-funder-responses-to-emergencies/>

‘How do we value what we know is happening and make the rest of the system work like that?’ (BHP Lancashire & South Cumbria 2019)

Shifting the power dynamic – to work with beneficiaries rather than for them – allows people to own solutions and achieve more meaningful change:

‘Engaging with community organisations and their beneficiaries is essential – where the aim is to be more effective in relation to these groups, they must be the judge of what will deliver value and to whom. Their voice and experience need to be at the forefront of thinking, to inform and have a stake in any change.’ ([The possible, not the perfect, 2018](#))

Positive and balanced relationships can be hindered by a history of mistrust, as well as an ongoing perception of power imbalance and inequality between the sectors. This can be exacerbated by a lack of recognition of the distinctive contributions brought by each sector, especially the VCS, and difficulties with ceding power within partnerships on the part of public agencies:

‘One of the main problems is that individuals are using complex language and jargon that excludes people.’ (BHP Lancashire & South Cumbria 2019)

‘For some participants, working in cross-sector partnerships had exploded previously held beliefs about other sectors; for example, local authority participants had been surprised to learn that VCOs could also operate in a bureaucratic way, while VCS participants had learned that innovation was not the exclusive preserve of VCOs. This debunking of myths was seen as one of the ways in which partnership working had fostered goodwill between local authorities and the VCS. In several of the pilot areas, participants from both sectors were able to share their previous fears about working in cross-sector partnerships, and to acknowledge that their perceptions had now changed.’ ([Making it real, 2006](#))

Working collectively to tackle a social problem can **mediate risk and manage uncertainty**:

‘Acknowledging when mistakes have been made or things have gone wrong and saying sorry’. Everyone is operating outside what is normal for them: ‘No-one knows how to do this: the only shield is to be genuinely doing the best we can – and constantly listening and learning so we can do better.’ ([The possible, not the perfect, 2018](#))

Understanding your local context – including where you fit, the connections and the opportunities – also enables quicker responses to local issues:

‘Variables influenced the specific ways in which problems manifested themselves, affected how successfully and effectively local authorities and VCOs were able to work in partnership together and shaped the options available for improvement. They are a reminder, again, of the critical importance of local solutions to the challenges of cross-sector partnership working. Blanket demands to ‘work better together’ ignore the subtle differences of each locality – its history, its politics and its people.’ ([Making it real, 2006](#))

At the same time, recognising the diversity of experiences and perspectives across the VCS sector is also critical:

‘Amongst most local authority participants, there was an expectation that the VCS should be ‘represented’; in some areas, officers made clear their preference for local VCOs to ‘speak with one voice’. VCS participants, on the other hand, had difficulty with the notion of ‘representing’ a sector that is extremely diverse.’ ([Making it real, 2006](#))

For trust and respect to develop, there needs to be shared and public recognition of the value of VCS organisations, and **space for collaborative reflection, experimentation and commitment to continuous learning:**

‘Our experience of Building Health Partnerships is that it breaks the usual mould and enables a new and fresh dialogue between statutory organisations/services and the voluntary and community sector.’ (VCS organisation, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire 2017)

‘Organisations that were able to adapt and develop were those which were able to review and renew their mission in a changing environment. In our research helping a group of charitable foundations to explore the changing needs of voluntary organisations, we found that organisations who were comfortable with the idea of continuous reflection and review saw this attitude as a useful approach to managing change.’ ([Turning a corner, 2013](#))

The review of IVAR literature further highlighted a range of conditions and processes that enable this way of working, such as co-production, horizon scanning, having space and permission to think and behave differently and organisational self-consciousness:

‘If the only thing we achieve is greater understanding and more dialogue ... that’s ok ... as long we carry on with something afterwards.’ (BHP, 2017)

‘The concept of organisational self-consciousness captures for us the ability of an organisation to be self-determining and its ability to seek, engage with and make use of support in order to learn, adapt and improve.’ ([Turning a corner, 2013](#))

Finally, **leadership buy-in** is a positive lever to promote this way of working, and to ensure that a shared vision for working differently is widely distributed and signed up to:

‘Some participants described a ‘disconnect’ between senior level staff who were committed to this way of working and getting things done together and operational staff who often attended partnership meetings, but did not have the authority or power to take the necessary decisions, resulting in ineffectual partnerships. This problem appears most acute in local authorities, with some participants highlighting a lack of corporate third sector awareness.’ ([Getting things done together, 2009](#))

*‘Leaders that are absolutely willing to change the way we do things.’
(BHP, 2018)*

Appendix Two: Propositions

A. The case for doing it differently

1. Joined up working across organisations, fields and sectors creates better quality experiences for the users and beneficiaries of services.
2. Working collectively to tackle a social problem can mediate risk and manage uncertainty.
3. Investment in relationships, although a long, slow process, may, in time, lead to more meaningful change.

B. What it requires and involves

1. Understanding your local context – including where you fit, the connections and the opportunities – enables you to respond to local issues quickly.
2. Trust and respect in funding relationships increases VCS sector confidence, stability and impact.
3. For trust and respect to develop, there needs to be shared and public recognition of its value, and space for collaborative reflection, experimentation and learning.
4. Shifting the power dynamic – to work with beneficiaries rather than for them – allows people to own solutions and achieve more meaningful change.

Appendix Three:

Talking points

Talking Points for VCS organisations wanting to work in an HLS way

1. What do we value most about this place?
2. How would you describe the relationships here between statutory and VCS sectors, and others? How are decisions about local priorities made?
3. In your view and experience, what are the characteristics that make up a good relationship in this context?
4. Are we speaking the same language? In local meetings and events, is the language used during discussions accessible? Is there better practice? Can you provide an example? (Using complex language and jargon can exclude people and hinders partnership working).
5. What is in and out of our control here? Explore local structures and partnerships and where control sits. Is it where you think it is? What can you affect/not affect (or influence)?
6. Is the VCS sector always at/invited to the table when important decisions are being made? How regularly?
7. What are our successes that we can learn from? What can we scale and replicate about what has worked already? How can we make that happen?
 - a. What helps us?
 - b. What hinders us?
8. Draw a picture of the local 'system'. What would a change in the 'system' look and feel like? (What would be happening? Not happening?)
9. When it is different, how will we know? What will be happening in a new picture? How will we know if the change is working?
10. What does the VCS sector already do that is intrinsically HLS? What still needs to be learnt?
11. What is our dependency structure? How are we funded? How does that affect our behaviour?

12. The difference we make – doing what's expected vs doing what matters – what is it? What drives it?
13. How are we using our voice – are we responding or leading? What do we need to say? Have to say?
14. What have we missed here?
15. What are our parameters? What can we be clear on about what we will/will not do and join together?
16. What do we most fear? How can we mitigate against that?