HIGH STREETS TASK FORCE

Annual research study

Place Partnerships

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1. Executive Summary

Place partnerships have been crucial to the success of regeneration in our places. This research aims to investigate and qualify the impact of place partnerships, what they achieve, how they achieve it, as well as to understand more about how place partnerships form and evolve, and their role in the development and regeneration of their places.

The research focuses on four partnerships which have historically seen success and improvement in their locale. Although there has been research which has tracked the development and impact of partnerships, there has been little which has examined the factors which ensure success in practice. This report aims to highlight the role and impact of successful partnerships to provide help and support to the development of partnerships in the future.

In essence, the research in this study has found that:

1. Partnerships are about **doing** and **action**

2. Partnerships have a clear life span. **Exit strategies and transition plans** are key to ensure continued success.

3. Community, and bottom-up approaches ensure that the public is onside and help to build **trust** between various stakeholders

4. Key individuals at the centre of the partnership, who show both **leadership** and **passion**, are essential

5. Successful Partnerships grow **organically** and function in both formal and informal structures, being **adaptable** and changeable according to needs at the time.

1.2. Key Findings

Figure 1. synthesises the findings found through key informant interviews with individuals in four different place-based partnerships, identifying four key themes which influence the main factors of partnerships: their organic development, the importance of ambassadors, trust, and performance:
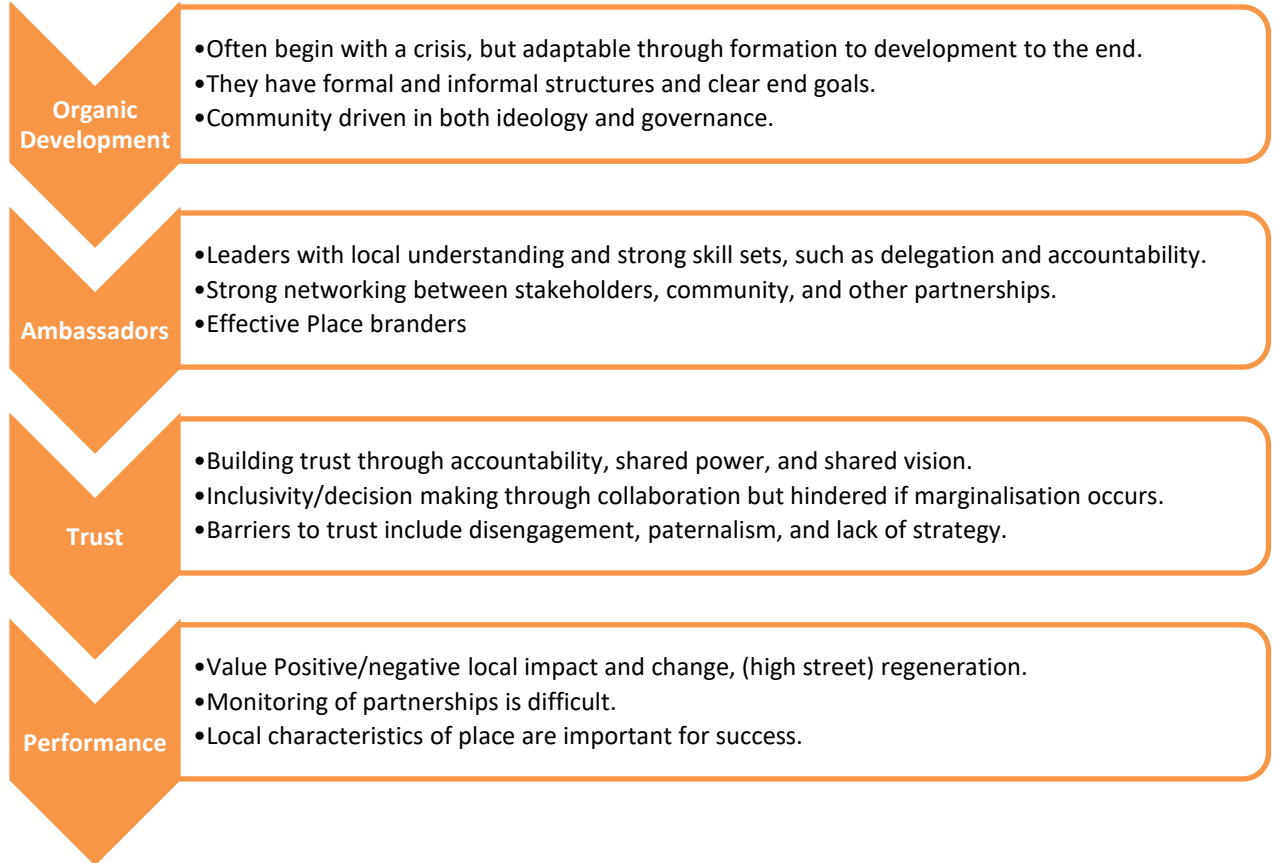
Organic Development
- Often begin with a crisis, but adaptable through formation to development to the end.
- They have formal and informal structures and clear end goals.
- Community driven in both ideology and governance.

Ambassadors
- Leaders with local understanding and strong skill sets, such as delegation and accountability.
- Strong networking between stakeholders, community, and other partnerships.
- Effective Place branders

Trust
- Building trust through accountability, shared power, and shared vision.
- Inclusivity/decision making through collaboration but hindered if marginalisation occurs.
- Barriers to trust include disengagement, paternalism, and lack of strategy.

Performance
- Value Positive/negative local impact and change, (high street) regeneration.
- Monitoring of partnerships is difficult.
- Local characteristics of place are important for success.

Figure 1: Summary of Findings

2.Introduction

A number of reviews of the high street have identified the need for local, cross-sectoral partnerships to lead the activation and transformation of local high streets and town centres. However, in many of the locations the Task Force has worked, effective partnerships between local authorities, businesses and the community simply do not exist. A barrier to this is the lack of understanding of what an effective partnership is, and objective evidence of what it can achieve. Unlike others forms of regeneration such as property development, place partnerships do not have a clear start and end date, do not have a fixed budget (much of the resource is provided as goodwill by partners), may start with one aim that morphs into other objectives (once the initial aim is achieved), and are unlikely to fully monitor and evaluate their performance, due to resource restraints such as time and financial. Whilst these deficits should not detract from the achievements of many partnerships, if place partnerships are to become a more mainstream policy innovation (either locally or nationally), it is time to better assess the impact of these partnerships, as well understand more about how they form and evolve.

In order to achieve this objective, we embark on an analysis of place-based partnerships in the UK context, employing a multiple case study approach. We present findings stemming from four place-based partnerships that are unique in terms of their formation and type, to identify how they function as a successful partnership.

3.Why are partnerships formed in the first place?

Place-based partnerships exist due to the necessity of collaboration across sectors and sharing of various aspects such as risk, resources, leadership, and values (Grossman and Holzer, 2015).

Historically, partnerships have played a role in town regeneration and development. They have also seen wide sweeping changes due to the context of the period of their existence. Traditionally, partnerships followed an informal structure; Gerard (1983, p. 6) has argued that the idea of community power is more appropriate to the nineteenth century town than to the late twentieth century town. In this period, Gerard and Goldsmith (2011, p. 59) argue, the local economies were, in general, 'self-contained, innovative and capable of generating substantial tax resources; the local press most locally owned, serious minded and copious.' Society was largely localised and that it was the local elite who engaged with the civic environment for the benefit of the urban area. However, local, informal partnerships declined due to a conscious, political decision by successive governments to increase the centralisation of government, leading to a period of Municipal Decline (Gerard and Goldsmith, 2011).

The post-war and post-industrial world saw a need to redevelop and inspire urban renewal which was led by ambitious planners aiming to create modern places (Shaw, 2001). The decline of consensus politics led to different policies by both Labour and the Conservatives (Taylor-Gooby, 1996). The community-driven idea of partnerships driven by Labour were initiated due to the struggle of public services to address efficiently complex local issues, minimise public expenditure and fight disadvantage in a fragmented and dynamic world, taking under consideration the resource dependency and the limited capacity of the localities (Nabarro, 1980; Hastings, 1996; Brand and Gaffikin, 2007; Coaffee and Deas, 2008; Le Feuvre et al., 2016). However, this was soon discarded with the change of government in the 1980s. Yet, urban renewal was still considered important. Influenced by Thatcherite policies which aimed at reducing local government's role and increasing the private sector influence via entrepreneurial Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). These partnerships took over physical and economic regeneration (Parkinson, 1989 and Heatley, 1990). These forms of partnerships continued into the 1990s. Bassett (1996) notes that by the late 1980s, councils throughout the political spectrum began to engage more with these forms of partnership models as they were considered a source of expertise and funds, especially from European sources.

However, change once again occurred with election of the 1997 Labour government, which put the focus of partnerships onto the local community (Carley, 2000; Smith and Beazley, 2000; Taylor, 2000; Hemphill et al., 2006; Mathers et al., 2015). In recent years, there has been a continuation of community driven partnerships, driven by the Conservative government's desire to boost local pride in places (Westwood et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2022). There has also been, in recent years, a drive to form more collaborative partnerships that include both community and private sectors (Ford, 2016; Hospers, 2017; Eitan et al, 2019; Bachin et al, 2023), and which have broadened to include more specific place partnerships such as heritage and conservation partnerships such as the Heritage Action Zones (Macdonald, 2011; Fouseki and Nicolau, 2018; Gill et al, 2022; Abdou, 2023).

4.Literature Overview

Figure 2., below, builds upon work by Broadhurst et al (2021) who demonstrated the importance of understanding history, governance, vision, leadership and resources within place-based partnerships. These factors can be further narrowed down to governance, functions/forms, decision-making and power/representation. Broadhurst also understood that the factors of partnerships are often affected by catalysts from both local and national government and in general, most research has focused on external catalysts. This report expands upon these at both the macro and micro level to understand what makes a partnership successful.
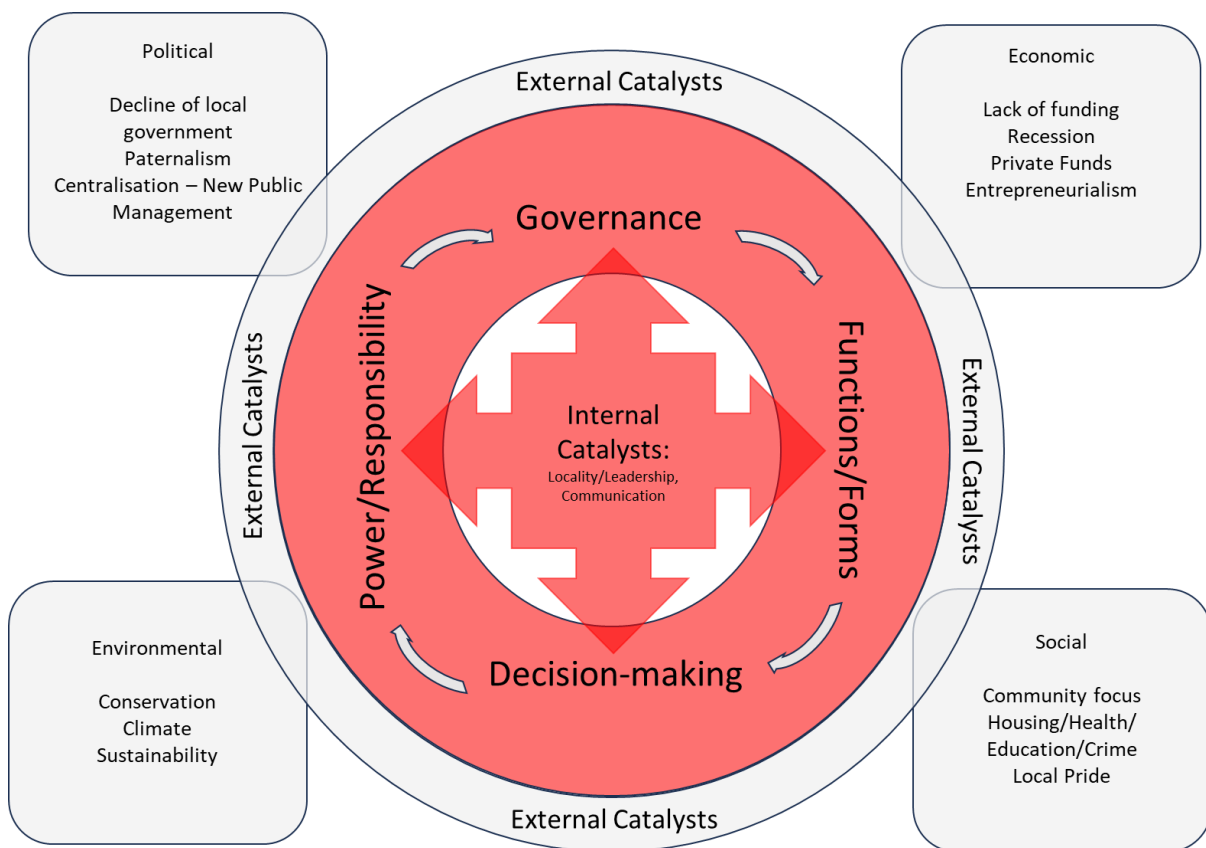

Figure 2. Factors affecting place-based partnerships and catalyst for change.

The literature has shown that traditional top-down governance methods are problematic and more collaborative and participatory approaches that value community engagement, and the growing role of local and non-governmental organisations are now being championed (Le Feuvre et al., 2016;

Cheng, 2019; Wang and Ran, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Studies have examined different modes of governance to explore their impact, effectiveness, inclusivity, and the outcomes of place partnerships in addressing local challenges and promoting sustainable development (Streek and Schitter, 1985; Ouchi, 1991; Thompson et al., 1991; Mayntz, 1993; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). Although research has often highlighted individual aspects of partnerships, the literature shows that the various types, forms and functions of place-based partnerships influence the important issues of engagement in decision making, power, representation and overall success (Jones and Barry, 2011; Bryson et al., 2015; Le Feuvre et al., 2016; Corbin et al., 2018). Groot and Abma (2019, p.33) have shown that 'facilitating shared decision-making processes and ways to discuss sharing and controlling power are key issues' when discussing the importance of place partnerships.

It is evident from the literature that these factors are positively and negatively influenced by catalysts, either from government and other top-down initiatives, or by local circumstances that form the basis of bottom-up initiatives.

External catalysts are evident within government initiatives over time, which have impacted the role, structure and purpose of partnerships (Nabarro, 1980; Parkinson and Wilks, 1983; Taylor-Gooby, 1996). Social issues such as local pride and 'pride in place' also have an impact on the development of partnerships (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2010) as well as the desire to improve social conditions (Ravenscroft, 2000; Agarwal and Brunt, 2006). Economic aspects have also affected the evolution of the partnership model (Hogg et al., 2004); for instance, the development of Local Enterprise Partnerships (Newman and Gilbert, 2022). Environmental catalysts such as air pollution, flood warnings and heat waves, alongside themes of sustainability also impact the development and work of partnerships (Resosudarmo and Napitupulu, 2004).

Internal catalysts such as place leadership, community development and a place's local characteristics are also drivers of partnership development (O'Toole and Burdess, 2004; Mathers et al., 2015; March and Moore, 2020). The interaction between the factors of partnership formation and external and internal catalysts is paramount for instilling a sense of continuity and exigency in the successful implementation of place-based partnerships.

Thus, prior research has shown that successful partnerships need to ensure that positive catalysts promote inclusivity and diversity within the partnership (Carley, 2000; Bovaird and Löffler, 2009), and should follow a joined-up governance approach using plural and network style modes to ensure that they are inclusive of different stakeholders, groups, and businesses (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; LeFeuvre et al., 2016). Partnership functions and forms should promote consensus, collaboration, transparency and accountability. In doing so, they promote a co-decision model where communities are involved in the processes, where power is shared equally and where different parts of the place are represented (Sommerville and Haines, 2008). Partnerships also need to present a consensus in their functionality and focus on a strong synergy in terms of both resources and policy to ensure a higher degree of democratic working throughout the decision-making process (Hastings, 1996). Partnerships that follow these approaches will create and foster an environment that nurtures a co-decision process alongside a power-with approach that represents the community, residents, stakeholders, and local authority.

Research on place management has also focused on the development and evolution of partnerships. This began in the 1980s with Town Centre Management (TCM) partnerships (e.g. Spriddell, 1980; Warnaby et al, 1998), which had an initial emphasis on the enhancement of the quality of shopping in town centres. Since their introduction in 2004, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have arguably become the most popular model of public realm and place management, due to the model's flexibility and modus operandi of partnership working within a delineated spatial remit (Ward, 2007; De Magalhães, 2014; Grail et al., 2020). There are other approaches to TCM and place management which are still in place and relevant to place stakeholders. For example, town teams

were introduced to the UK in late 2011, and were defined as a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team for high streets (Portas, 2011). Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) became popular after 2010 with the new Conservative administration, who 'assumed a distinction between local civic leaders and local business leaders, and the assumption that the balance between them needed to shift in favour of the latter' (Newman and Gilbert, 2022, p. 67). Finally, research has examined Community Improvement Districts (CIDs). The goals and uses of this approach to place management vary, but include fundraising, maintaining pleasing business environments, traffic flow, and infrastructural improvements (Ewoh and Rome, 2014).

This brief literature overview has shown the development and evolution of partnerships, and the different structures, governance and decision-making mechanisms that are central to partnership working and impact. Yet, there are some clear gaps in the literature. Little research has been undertaken in exploring the key themes of successful partnerships, their purpose and evaluation methods, what counts as success or failure, or what happens to partnerships when their original goals are met. Additionally, the functions and forms of partnerships have been extensively theorised, but there is a lack of understanding of how partnerships oscillate between different stages of formality/informality during their lifespan, and how this affects what they do and what they achieve.

Therefore, this report seeks to answer several questions:

1. What do these partnerships do?
2. What are their outcomes?
3. How are they evaluated?
4. Are there succession plans, i.e., what happens after something is done/achieved?

5.Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of this research, we employed a multiple case study approach to investigate the phenomenon of place-based partnerships at several different sites (Stake, 2006; Stewart, 2011). According to Stewart (2011), a multiple case study approach is appropriate when the goal of the research is to understand similar patterns across different locations and organisational boundaries. Whereas we acknowledge that most types of place-based partnerships are inherently different, we adopt a more instrumental approach to our analysis that stems from a desire to understand the similarities and complexities of the partnerships phenomenon in order to generate insights and new information that will assist in the development of new policies and practices (Morrison and Doussinaeu, 2019; Yin, 2013).

Our research design was focused on an indicative representation of existing place-based partnerships which were spearheaded by different actors. For this, we adopted a purposeful selection of cases and participants based on their type, form, functions, and the place's local characteristics. In order to unpack the multiple perspectives and interpretations of what constitutes successful place-based partnerships in different forms and social contexts, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with key place stakeholders (see Table 2.). Interviews were conducted between September to November 2023 in both face-to-face and online settings. Data were analysed following the tenets of template analysis, which follows an iterative approach to coding and discovery of main themes, while adopting a constructivist position that allowed us to underlie the social contexts and underpinning place characteristics that necessitate place-based partnership working (King, 2012; Brooks et al, 2015). Table 2. provides a short summary of the four partnerships alongside information about the interviewees. The main findings of successful place-based partnerships are presented next.
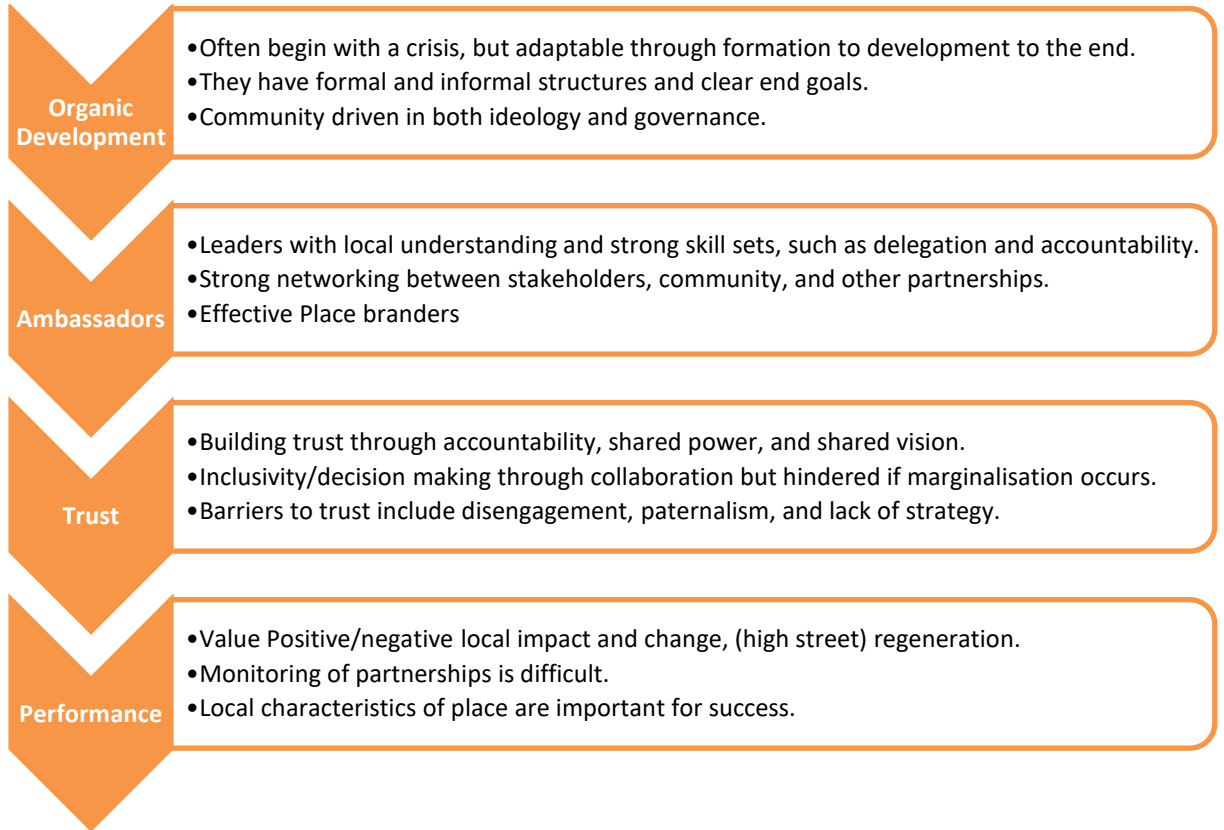
Partnership Interviewees	Partnership Name	Type of Partnership	Interviewees' Affiliation with the Partnership	Key Points
Wavertree	Love Wavertree	Community Interest Company focusing on the regeneration of Wavertree High Street	Love Wavertree Director, Civic Society (Partner) Representative, MP office Representative, University lecturer	Community focused activities include charity shop, food hub, markets, car free days among others. Informal structure but initiatives towards formal-new directors-so to engage with physical infrastructure challenges.
Norwich	Norwich BID	A not-for-profit organisation (Business Improvement District) that represent the needs of local businesses within the BID remit in collaboration with other local organisations	Norwich BID Branding Manager, Civic Society (Partner) Representative, Retailer (Partner)	Business focused and to bring economic development in the area, destination branding initiatives. Formal structure but some informal relations with retailers/partners.

Wakefield	Makey Wakey	Community Interest Company focusing on reinvigorating empty spaces within the shopping centre environment	Partnership Patron, Shopping Centre/Marketing Manager, Art House CEO, Project Coordinator	Community initiative led by the Art House alongside the Ridings Shopping Centre. Formal and Informal structures lead to flexibility of offer. Expanding initiative to other centres.
Altrincham	Altrincham Forward/Altrincham BID	Local Authority-led partnership that contributed to the development of the Altrincham BID	BID Manager, Council Officer, Partnership Member/Local Business Owner, Civic Society member, Chamber of Commerce member	Aim to improve Altrincham for residents and visitors by reducing vacancy rates, crime and improving the image and appearance. Led to active collaboration between various stakeholders. Informal and formal structures evident throughout partnership.

Table 2. Participating Partnerships.

6.Analysis

This analysis has found four key themes that impact the governance, form and function, decision-making and power, and responsibility factors to ensure successful and impactful partnerships. Figure 1 highlights that these themes were identified as internal catalysts, which were then defined as Organic Development, Ambassadors, Trust and Performance.

Organic Development
- Often begin with a crisis, but adaptable through formation to development to the end.
- They have formal and informal structures and clear end goals.
- Community driven in both ideology and governance.

Ambassadors
- Leaders with local understanding and strong skill sets, such as delegation and accountability.
- Strong networking between stakeholders, community, and other partnerships.
- Effective Place branders

Trust
- Building trust through accountability, shared power, and shared vision.
- Inclusivity/decision making through collaboration but hindered if marginalisation occurs.
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Performance
- Value Positive/negative local impact and change, (high street) regeneration.
- Monitoring of partnerships is difficult.
- Local characteristics of place are important for success.

In summary, these themes demonstrate that partnerships are inherently about active engagement and implementation. They are guided by a defined lifespan, emphasising the importance of well-thought-out exit strategies and transition plans to sustain ongoing success. Embracing community-driven and bottom-up approaches is pivotal in securing public support and fostering trust among diverse stakeholders. At the heart of successful partnerships lie key individuals who embody both leadership skills and unwavering passion, playing an indispensable role in driving collaborative efforts. These partnerships thrive through organic growth, navigating within adaptable frameworks that seamlessly blend formal and informal structures, adapting as per the evolving needs of the moment.

6. 1. Organic Development

"There was always a vision of how this organically grown partnership would on this journey end up (and) where it would go".

Altrincham: Council Officer

The research has demonstrated that partnerships grow and develop organically in a creative and bottom-up governance process. They have a form and function which is both adaptable and flexible and have a decision-making model which is centred on engagement. An interviewee stated,

> "...it is a very grassroot organisation that was set up by the community themselves; it was advertised as a community meeting and the body wasn't formally constituted. We were just a collection of individuals who lived in the area and talked about what they felt the community needed or what it was missing."

A grassroots approach to the formation of the partnership and to the decision-making provides fluid dialogue and open reflection which allows the partnership to address diverse community needs. Discussing the BID formation in Norwich a participant stated *"I think that I'm not quite sure where the bid initiative came from and I'm assuming it was a government thing. And then effectively I think a part of the Council kind of hived itself off to become the bid"*. These partnerships are inherently defined by their structure, clear and achievable end goals alongside a well-defined lifespan.

6.1.1 Crisis

Remarkably, a successful partnership's genesis frequently stems from a pivotal moment, a crisis acting as the catalyst that propels them into existence. For example, Altrincham was shamed nationally for being a ghost town, with high vacancy rates, and strong negative perceptions. Similarly, Love Wavertree was the locals' reaction to a negative article for Wavertree. According to a respondent,

> "an article came out about Wavertree and it was a bit of a smear piece[...]. It was a bit of a hit piece… and I think that galvanised a lot […]. You know it's a vibrant community and we realise that, in that meeting, when people got together and we said look, the article doesn't represent us and it doesn't represent the Wavertree that we know."

These catalysts led to action and the formation of these local partnerships with the aim of tackling the issues mentioned in the news reports. This crisis ensured that the local communities were engaged in the governance structure of the partnership and ensured that they were at the centre of the decision-making process.

6.1.2. Informal/Formal Structure

The structural makeup of a partnership is crucial to its success. An informal structure might gauge practical challenges in the first stages; for example, a respondent stated that until the partnership was formally constituted, they did not have a bank account, which hindered their activities' implementation. Another noted that their partnership *"...was more of an informal, but there was a structure put around it because we recognised quite quickly that you can't just have everyone going up doing anything".* Yet, a respondent notes that the informal structure of Love Wavertree has positively influenced their engagement with local challenges,

> "The people that are in the organisation, you know they are experienced, talented, educated and they have good links anyway within the community and with businesses as well. So yeah, I think because of that and the informal way that they engage with the community, I think it's positive."

Successful place-based partnerships demonstrate both formal and informal structures. One participant noted that their partnership was slightly formal, but also quite flexible stating that the partnership has "a skeleton of a format" that can be adapted to local needs. On average, participants agreed that in the development phase, partnerships seem to have both formal and informal relationships with their various stakeholders, regardless of the formality of its structure. Concerning a more formally structured partnership, a respondent stated, that while the partnership has a very formal structure, when it comes to them, their relationship is informal, as they have been working together for many years. A BID respondent stated,

> "I think it's a really fine balance actually between being too corporate and being too grassroots for a lack of a better word, I think it really depends on the audience you're trying to attract. For example, [...] the partnerships we have with arts groups are very informal, very loosely structured. However, when you contrast that to something like the work in the Norwich campaign, it has to be a lot more corporate, and we address people in a more formal way. But I think what we do is we mix, we kind of cross that gap quite nicely in that."

When it comes to physical infrastructure and high street regeneration initiatives, where the intervention of the government or the local authority is needed, the respondent states *"we need to sort of go down and perhaps formalise it a bit more."* There is certainly the need to create a balance between formal and informal structures within partnerships.

6.1.3. Flexibility/Adaptability

This balanced structure ensures adaptability in the partnership's governance and form and function which allows partnerships to have an intricate balance between flexibility and breadth of scope. The organic structure allows the partnership to meet different needs in a changing contemporary political, social, and economic climate. Their versatility allows them to swiftly adapt to changing circumstances and address immediate community needs. Remarkably, they often maintain a non-political stance, prioritising community needs over the involvement or alignment with specific political parties or ideologies. In the context of place-based partnerships being non-political, it implies that their focus is on community needs and actions rather than being driven by or associated with any particular political party or agenda.

> "We are hesitant about engaging with the local politicians perhaps because of the tendency that we've seen of them to use the work of Love Wavertree for their own political ends".

6.1.4. Life Span

This flexible, adaptable and organic structure ensures that these organic partnerships have a well-defined life span. One interviewee stated,

> "There was always that vision of how this organically grown partnership would on this journey end up (and) where it would go".

Within this life cycle, these collaborations celebrate short-term successes, leveraging each milestone as a stepping stone towards their overarching objectives. As one participant noted,

> "If there isn't a succession plan from it, you're just spending your time patting yourself on the back of how good [you are]. You're not thinking of evolution".

People will move on, and new individuals or structures need to be put in place to help with the new direction of the partnership.

> "My interest was done. I'd done my job. I didn't want to do that. New people have been brought in, absolutely committed to the town, and the bid is running very, very well".

If the partnership does not end, then it has to redefine its goals and visions; one interviewee stated that although the partnership in their place had changed and shifted, they were still committed to it, but understood,

> "so we're just having to slightly rethink that as well. So, it is organic, and I think it always will be".

This pattern of organic, adaptable, crisis-driven initiation, coupled with a predetermined life span and a focus on short-term wins, shapes the unique character of place-based partnerships. They begin as a reaction to something, they adapt to meet the need and they fade out when the crisis has been averted, or morph into something new as new issues arise, or new people take over. This ensures that these partnerships are sustainable.

6.1.5. Volunteers/Ideology/Governance

Successful place-based partnerships rely significantly on volunteers, whose involvement forms the bedrock of their operations. Embracing an ideology and governance model deeply rooted in community-driven initiatives, these partnerships are fundamentally people-driven, guided by the collective will to effect positive change. The governance structure they espouse is inherently collaborative, fostering an inclusive environment that encourages diverse perspectives and participation from all stakeholders. This emphasis on inclusivity ensures that the decision-making process is broad-based and representative, reflecting the diverse voices within the community. It can often lead to a development of networks within a place. One interviewee came to the realisation that,

> "They were basically creating a network out of all of these organisations, you know, we were putting them together".

People brought in others with different skill sets and knowledge which only strengthened the power of the partnership. This kind of structure allows it to expand and contract when certain issues happen or other needs have to be met. This often means that partnerships are also non-political, for example one participant noted how it did not matter what party someone was from,

> "It didn't matter that Matt [Leader of Trafford Council] was of a conservative ilk. Everyone had to admire what was done and so much so there's now a Labour stewardship of Trafford Council. They are adopting Matt's process for Urmston, Stretford, and Sale".

In essence, these partnerships put place before political differences. Community driven approaches to governance ensures that power is shared throughout, and that decision-making is more inclusive. It is important to note that there was a strong feeling among some of the interviewees that partnerships cannot be forced upon communities. They cannot be run through a top-down approach but need to be developed using a bottom-up community driven model. In essence, community groups should be empowered, and not forced into partnerships. In doing so, these partnerships rely upon ambassadors, leaders, and communities to take action. This will not only create and build trust but will also lead to a more successful partnership in place.

6.2. Ambassadorship

> ### "So, once I started to lead, then other people started to join me"
>
> *Altrincham: Local Business Owner*

The study underscores the indispensable role of ambassadors within place-based partnerships, acting as pivotal figures in fostering collaboration and unity. These include both communities or individuals who play a pivotal role in orchestrating collective efforts and enhancing cohesion among diverse stakeholders. In doing so, they shape the governance, form and function and foster strong co-decision models, share power and responsibility.

6.2.1. Leadership

Key individuals who lead and are transparent are crucial for successful partnerships as they foster a co-decision model and impact the form and function of the partnership. They provide clear communication and accountability, which is often needed to avoid political barriers and intimidation. This leadership embodies a unique blend of skills finely attuned to the local context, encompassing a multifaceted expertise tailored to address the local challenges. Beyond their localised expertise, ambassadors often display proficient delegation skills, ensuring accountability while effectively distributing responsibilities among team members. For example, one noted that,

> "So then I was getting the real brains and the academics. I have to tell the public I'm a chef, I'm CCEs. I'm not A Level. I'm not…I'm

a simple person. Yeah, as long as you tell the public this, they are on your side. Yeah. Don't try and be something you're not".

Their leadership extends beyond steering the partnership; it includes cultivating extensive networks and fostering connectivity. This involves establishing robust bonds with various stakeholders, notably engaging with the community and closely collaborating with other local organisations.

6.2.2. Local Understanding/Delegation

These individuals are extremely knowledgeable about their local area and responses from participants noted how that gave them passion and understanding of their place. This local expertise may include resources and local stakeholder networks that are pivotal both in the development and the success of the partnership. This helps build co-decision-making and helps to share power and responsibility across the partnership. According to an interviewee;

> "The people that run Love Wavertree used their initiative and networking. They've gone out through links through their own employment and that, you know, personal relationships that also run these businesses. They also have insight into the history of the place and the assets that are available to them and the community".

These people tend to be happy to be involved because they live in the area and are affected by the town's situation. For example, when Altrincham was labelled as the second worst town in the United Kingdom, a respondent reminisced that,

> "The Chamber of Commerce couldn't believe that no one in Trafford that September morning was available to defend Altrincham and we were absolutely furious".

They wanted their place to be defended and championed. These individuals also have expertise in networking, which significantly amplifies the partnership's visibility and credibility, fostering trust among stakeholders. These connections not only bolster the partnership's brand but also solidify the place's overall brand, establishing ambassadors as indispensable catalysts for cohesive collaboration and sustained progress within place-based partnerships.

6.2.3. Community Organisations

However, it is not just about individuals. Ambassadors can also be communities and organisations such as the council who act as enablers, and facilitators rather than barriers. One participant stated,

> "We put in as a Council, we put in the capacity, which is always what you need to support administratively, the growth of something like this. There was a lot of will from, you know, goodwill from the Council that gave support to make sure that this partnership was going to be a success".

Partner organisations are important when discussing ambassadors, considering that they might complement each other to successfully implement different activities. For example, a respondent-member of the Wavertree Society, when discussing Love Wavertree stated,

> "[...] I suspect that we (the Wavertree Society) have got experience in certain attributes, [...] but we are probably not

good at organising the car- free days and the stuff that Love Wavertree does, […] So, we're part of that network".

A community-led, networked approach therefore utilises local expertise to improve local challenges. These ambassadors are often inspired by initiatives elsewhere; in some places, interviewees stated that they were taken to projects in other places, locally, nationally and internationally to see the development of the public realm,

"Okay, so there's some templates which had come over from Holland. You know, I think points, you know, something like that, watching the road system and things like that. So, we went out and spent our time and viewed these places".

Organisations or communities who act as facilitators help share power and responsibility and help ensure a more bottom-up governance structure.

6.2.4. Accountability

These ambassadors are usually identifiable within the partnership. Each respondent could name the key individual in their place, whether they were the face, or actively involved in bringing people together. One respondent said,

"When Ian [Love Wavertree volunteer] first started Love Wavertree, he was just inspirational, he was inspiring to get other people to [the partnership] [...] when you see him in action, he's fantastic and it's really good". Another noted, "I think because people come and go, you know, Stefan [Norwich BID Executive Director] […] is the face of Norwich BID and everyone else is serving that face to an extent".

These ambassadors throughout all the partnerships are recognised as being instrumental in bringing people together and fostering collaboration within the wider network. In doing so, they are instrumental in building trust and achieving action in the place. This accountability helps to share power and helps to ensure that governance is held to account locally.

6.2.5. Place Branders

In addition, partnership branding was also identified as an ambassador, considering that, it helps to build connections with the community and the local area. According to a Norwich BID member:

"We want to reflect the local built environment and therefore that's kind of how we've aligned our brand and our understanding or morals, and actually it just makes it easier for everyone".

It is pivotal partnerships to be able to communicate the aims of the group. One interviewee stated,

"...the Makey Wakey model… speaks to the heart of community. It's a way to really (say) you know Wakey. It is the nickname for Wakefield or anyone who lives here [...]. It's (also) called shakey. [...]. And so Makey Wakey was a play on all of that. And then

also this idea…that there were a lot of makers in these spaces as well".

Another interviewee stated that branding gave them high visibility among the community. They took one of the vacant units and from there, the name and the branding worked to show to residents that work was being done to improve the place. Regarding the branding of Love Wavertree, a director comments,

"Our name is Love Wavertree; it's very generic in a way, but also very specific in terms of what does that mean. How do you love Wavertree? […] it is (the) Wavertree that we love. It is our place. I'm using place in the widest sense of that as the community places, the buildings, the people."

Ambassadors within partnerships are crucial in getting people together, forming collaboration and developing communication between different groups, for example one participant noted,

"...he (Matt) was the one, not the chamber who responded to an individual restaurateur. To gather people together to do something about this…A massive meeting took place. Very crowded. Total lack of order. But Matt listened".

In doing so, these ambassadors are essential to the development of trust within a partnership and within the wider community.

6.3. Trust

"We have to build trust because obviously there's been a lot of critical people around the Council not doing things or as they perceived".

Altrincham: Council Officer

The research has also identified that the development of trust is crucial for partnership success. It shows how organic development alongside ambassadors are crucial in creating greater trust between groups, and the research shows that there are many barriers which are in place which create distrust. However, it was clear from the responses that building trust was essential to the success of partnerships. One respondent stated that,

"You've got the community on board. Yeah, and if you haven't, you've got to win them over in some way. You've got to do something for nothing, or you'll do quite a few things for nothing. Yeah, you won't get paid for (it) but it's the end vision (that) is your goal. So, you need to get the public to love you, take you into the heart and build trust".

Evidently, building trust is labour intensive and develops over time, but small wins and gains provide building blocks for this to grow. For example, one participant noted that councils are often wary of partnerships when they first form, but as their partnership saw successes, it became evident that other partnerships and the council were more willing to collaborate as trust grew. For example, one interviewee from Wakefield stated that,

> "The (Wakefield) BID loves the scheme. The local authority loves the scheme".

6.3.1. Shared Vision

Many of the interviewees stated that there was a clear shared vision in the partnership, to see town improvement or to provide support to local community groups. One participant noted that the project's core mission of doing something good often helps to prevent disagreements and maintain positive relationships. Another noted that their partnership had clear and distinct goals with which they all agreed, such as an aim to improve the town centre, transport links, and conservation areas. As one interviewee responded,

> "I think there's a common thing to make it work, and I think if you've got everybody wanting that, it's a little bit easier".

Having a shared vision builds trust within the place partnership which is crucial for its success. This helps shape the form and function of the partnership which helps to develop responsibility and power within.

6.3.2. Accountability

Accountability was also identified as a key part of building trust with the community, where people felt they could approach individuals involved in the partnership and ask them what was happening. In Altrincham, one participant stated that,

> "They could not walk down the street […] I'm kind of getting approached quickly. You know, I'm on my back foot because I like to know what I'm going to say to people who pick up on what's going on, what's important to me".

Evidently, people felt as though they could ask and ensure that projects were ongoing. This accountability with the community builds up trust with residents and fosters a stronger sense of responsibility.

Trust must also be built with the wider community, and this requires active engagement with the various communities in places. One interviewee stated,

> "If you're in a city centre or a town, just embrace the community. I think that they will do it…the community wants to stay with us and have always loved us. You've just got to give them a reason to, and I think community groups are a really good way of doing it".

This engagement involved communication with different parts of the community, from low-key stakeholders to local businesses, strategic people, and residents to ensure that the partnership met the needs of these people. This communication with the community also needs to be honest and real, as one participant stated that you should not promise unrealistic targets or goals,

> "Don't paint it up. It's not going to happen. If you want ten pence an hour in the car park it's not going to happen".

Partnerships that build trust are those which are collaborative and honest in nature, ensuring the sharing of power and decision-making.

6.3.3. Inclusivity

It was also noted that communication needs to be constant to ensure inclusivity, that everyone knows what is happening, which helps for projects to run smoothly. Participants also have emphasised that inclusivity and equal say in decision-making processes has been crucial in building trust and ensuring success. However, interviewees have highlighted that partnerships which have a more formal structure, need to ensure that boards are inclusive, to ensure that stakeholders have a meaningful voice and feel their voice matters. This means that different parts of the community can vote on decisions, for example, working groups which represent different sectors feel as though their ideas can influence and impact the board. One interviewee stated,

> "We were always made to feel that we were a key player, and I'm sure every other member of the group were made to feel exactly the same".

The respondents also stretched the importance of including more actors, such as members and volunteers in the success and the sustainability of place-based partnerships. According to a director of Love Wavertree,

> "With one eye on sustainability and future proofing the organisation because as you know if a handful of people are doing most of the work, as soon as one of them leaves, it's a big hole that needs to be filled. So, it's a failure risk. So, by getting more people in, more people involved, you're less than that chance of, you know, having a sort of critical failure because one person leaves".

6.3.4. Power

The sharing of power and responsibility was also identified as a key part of building trust within the partnership. For example, one participant noted that,

> "For a lot of them, they've never had a space before and it's quite empowering to be trusted with such a big resource… They have quite a lot of agency about what's going on and how the project forms and moves, which is really nice".

The sharing of power builds the relationship between different stakeholders and ensures that their voice is heard. This in turn builds trust and effectiveness of the partnership. Another comment stated,

> "It is about asking that community on the ground what they actually need and then empowering them to do it".

Sharing of power, rather than paternalistic or centralised power ensures that more voices are heard and ensures that the needs of the community are met, it allows local ownership which in turn develops trust. Hence, plural leadership is a new way to think about power. According to an interviewee,

> "I think the Norwich BID… can only really help you if you help them [...] So it's kind of symbiotic, really, I think. I think we both work together really well because we have that (agreement). You know, it sounds like a cliche we have that can do attitude. We will say yes".

The sharing of power also relates to the governance structure of the partnership and the way they prioritise activities. For example, a respondent in Wavertree stated,

> "Identifying opportunities and taking those opportunities and running with them, it's difficult because it is quite organic. So, it might just be that there's one particular volunteer or particular director or somebody who goes, do you know what, I've got this idea I'd like to do this. They're given the freedom or the facility to do it. And it hasn't failed yet".

Another relevant comment, regarding the Norwich BID stated that,

> "[...] Instead of it being a traditional clientele-consumer relationship, it's very much more equitable. And I think that goes through everything that we do. We try to establish equitable relationships with our stakeholders because if they feel involved from the beginning, it's a lot easier to achieve what we want to do".

In addition to that, this respondent stated that an equitable and well sustained relationship with the local businesses is pivotal, as it increases their trust and engagement.

6.3.5. Barriers to Trust

However, there are often many barriers that stop trust from developing. This often develops from the governance and function of the partnership which impact the decision-making processes. For example, in one study, there was uncertainty and continuous change in leadership which hampered progress at the beginning. One interviewee stated that they felt there was a clear reluctance to work with the wider community in order to improve their place, which only increased the distrust within the town. Therefore, councils are often standoffish and distant from partnerships, but if they and other local partners back partnerships from earlier in their development it will help break down barriers and gain wider support. Other respondents noted that they felt that, before the partnership began, the relations with organisations like the police were challenging. Others stated that the Council was too paternalistic and just needed to let go and support community-based partnerships. It is important to note that these relationships need to be healed and improved before a partnership can be successful.

Trust is a key issue as it helps partnerships achieve projects in their community. One participant noted that,

> "I think you know when we go to speak to businesses, people recognise that this is the (Norwich) BID and this is what they have done for us in the past and you know we're a trusted voice

for doing stuff. That really helps when you're trying to get new projects off the ground."

6.4. Performance

> "I think we are the Best Practice, yeah. I think this model is the gold standard of empty shops rates mitigation. I think this, and I say that like not to be arrogant at all. I say that because, it is, you know, it is just, it makes so much sense. It's practical, it's cost effective. It harnesses the best of the community. It's inspirational and it works."
>
> *Makey-Wakey: CEO*

Partnerships which build trust, have ambassadors and have organic development have a positive impact on the community. One participant from Makey Wakey stated that the project had injected life back into the local shopping centre that was previously not thriving and has created opportunity and benefit for diverse groups of people. The shopping centre had been looking to sell for a while, and interviewees agreed that the partnership had made it more of an attractive proposition for potential owners. For other places, the winning of awards demonstrated the success of the partnership.

6.4.1. Positive Impact

These partnerships showed inclusivity, diversity in their decision-making, power sharing and responsibility models. These factors led to, for the interviewees, clear social impact that supported the local community. One clear success that was stated in Makey Wakey was the support given to various arts organisations, social enterprises, local creative entrepreneurs to help them occupy vacant units and help them develop so they can take over and rent vacant units on their own. For Altrincham it was the filling up of vacant units, the diverse offer and the improved image provided to residents that was considered their success. For Norwich, success is related to footfall, boosting of the local economy, and a focus on visitor experience, which is shaped by several cultural events and initiatives that take place. Finally, for Love Wavertree, success equals community and local businesses support that is achieved through a variety of activities. It is evident that every partnership has different goals and aims, but the key shared factor was the desire to improve the place where they operate. A respondent said,

> "They've (Norwich BID) done lots of good stuff as a partner. I definitely feel they work well in partnership…But generally speaking they know (what) they do, they do really work in partnership with us to deliver stuff".

In these case studies, participants believed that their partnership had a great impact on the wider regeneration of the area, by improving local pride, reducing vacancy, increasing footfall and supporting community businesses.

Successful partnerships understand the emotional connection people have to their places and ensure that they are at the heart of the structure. As one participant in Wakefield stated,

> "[…] so my big thing usually is, let's look at the assets that you have in your community already and let's look at, you know, what asset, what role that asset plays in the culture of your community, what it has played in the history of your community, all of that stuff".

The success builds from an understanding of place, of its history and how it can be used in the future. Innovative partnerships that create impact allow creative experimentation and growth for businesses, individuals, and the community. There is room for risk and failure. One respondent from Makey-Wakey said,

> "[…] we test something, if it works, we keep it. If it doesn't, we get it out of there quickly. You know, it's the fail-fast thing."

This has allowed them to test various methods, events, and ideas to explore what makes an impact. Similarly, another respondent stated,

> "I think probably one of the problems, well maybe it's not a problem, but one of the barriers is that we're learning as we go really, and we've got some lessons learned from that already about how you organise things and how you've placed them out and that sort of stuff. I think one of the key things is just keep trying things and seeing what works".

6.4.2. Place Assets

These positive improvements often come from an understanding of the local assets in and around the place, and there is often a catalyst which sparks wider change within a place. In Altrincham this was the Market which had been a driver for change, footfall, and success. One respondent stated that the reactivation of the site encouraged some of the empty units which were near the market to be brought back into use. The identification of local assets and knowledge of what could be repurposed to improve the local offer was crucial in the eventual success of the Altrincham partnership. In Wakefield, this happened with the reactivation of the shopping centre which the Art House had identified as a key local asset.

6.4.3. Negative Impact

However, this does not mean that there were not problems. Some interviewees did highlight the potential negative impact of complacency in partnerships; that there needs to be constant attention given to new issues that will arise in the town. There is a danger that if there are no proper succession plans, the successes that were achieved will fade over time and be replaced by more negativity. Therefore, there can be an issue when partnerships come to the end of their life cycle; One participant from Altrincham noted that,

"a lot of time was wasted in those early days and continues to (be) from certain individuals".

This can happen because some people are unable to transition or let go of things and want to hold on to a perception of power. In general, there were difficult transitions for partnerships that aimed to change. For example, a transition to a business improvement district from a community led partnership was highlighted as being challenging, especially regarding community involvement, conflicting responsibilities, and communication issues. An interviewee from Wavertree stated that,

"[...] there's a lot of maybe siloed working [...] as a community organisation, we've got a lot of skills and abilities and desire and engagement that isn't being utilised and I'd like to see more of that partnership working […] community led, but supported by the authorities, what have you to deliver on the ground sort of stuff".

On similar ground, another respondent stated that,

"I think Norwich as well as a lot of other cities are very prone to silo thinking, thinking independently, not with other businesses. But I think the last couple of years have shown that actually coming together and doing something collectively can have a much more tangible impact on the kind of goal we are trying to achieve".

Other issues such as long hours and dedication were also highlighted as needed to ensure a partnership's success. One participant noted how the long-term aspect of the partnership was detrimental to their own businesses in the place. Love Wavertree for example is a more community focused organisation, whose activities aim to support the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. While this is vital for the local community and might lead to greater wellbeing, a sense of belonging and engagement of locals, it does not act as an immediate catalyst for change or visitor attraction, that for example would be provided by physical regeneration interventions. According to a director of Love Wavertree,

"[Regeneration] is something we really want to get involved with. It's something we'd like to do and be heavily involved with. But from our location of where we are at the moment, I don't think we've got that connection with the local authority and their support […] Now there's no point putting in all this work and effort if it's not going to be, you know, successful and supported".

6.4.4. Monitoring Success

There are difficulties with measuring the successes of some partnerships, especially if their goals are to help community groups and residents. This was particularly true in the case of Makey Wakey where their work involves different types of activities, such as running classes for children with learning disabilities and saving baby clothes from landfill. Similarly, a respondent for Love Wavertree said,

"We did have a sort of dashboard set up which had numbers of sort of, you know how much money the shops made this month,

how much money we've given out in various grants to organisations in the area, number of engagements on social media and all this sort of stuff".

Although they had no definitive data, many respondents noted that they saw success through visual experience of their place and through conversation with residents and communities who said that there had been an uplift in footfall and feeling.

7.Conclusion

Partnerships are important for success in town development and regeneration. However, as the Annual Report from the High Streets Task Force (2023) has shown, over 40% of places lack any form of partnership working, and where there are partnerships, many appear to be ineffective as the importance of collaboration is not widely understood by local authorities. Nonetheless, this report demonstrates that these partnerships cannot be forced, and there needs to be an understanding of best practice within place-based partnerships.

Evidently, this analysis of the partnerships has shown themes of best practice that help create a successful partnership. Although they had their own individual goals, and varied in their form and structure, they all demonstrated that bottom-up approaches, which are flexible and adaptable, are essential for success. Although governance was not often discussed by participants, and this may require further research, it does suggest that good governance happens in the background through means of community, inclusion and sharing of power. The research has also demonstrated that key individuals and groups need to be at the centre of the partnership and each partnership has shown that trust is an essential element to have success. These partnerships have understood the challenges of their local places, its culture, its history and have made a variety of successful measures which have had visual and social impacts. In essence, these partnerships were purposeful engines of change, who harnessed local assets and resources. They are local task forces who have a clear aim and vision, but also have a distinct life span.

Each of the four themes that have been identified in the interviews are all vital to the success of the factors identified in the literature review, governance, form, function, structure, decision-making, power, and representation.

> Partnerships which are organic and follow the needs and priorities of residents are crucial for success.

There needs to be a move away from paternalistic and top-down focused partnerships, as the HSTF report (2023) noted, many councils simply do not have the capacity for place management. Rather, partnerships should be organically driven. Local people need to be at the centre of development, and responses have highlighted that having long-term, but flexible funding will enable partnerships to respond to the priorities of local people.

Partnerships need to have place ambassadors to promote, celebrate the place, and to bring people together to make change happen.

The HSTF annual report (2023) has indicated that there is a lack of effective local place leadership within councils. However, this study has highlighted that place ambassadors can come from different sectors. These ambassadors need to be empowered to bring together community leaders, businesspeople, and local bodies, to reshape and develop their town's future together. These findings corroborate previous evidence.

Trust needs to be built up and this is achieved by sharing responsibility and power among the community and ensuring people are held to account.

Partnerships need to be made up of different stakeholders from across the community, whether they be community groups, local businesses or social enterprise, heritage organisations, public services, or local authorities. Currently it appears that many places and partnerships do not have good and effective visions (HSTF, 2023). The lack of effective vision creates barriers to trust, as effective and shared visions ensure that different voices are heard, and that collaboration and discussion happen.

Partnerships deliver real and positive change to town centres, and although there can be some negative consequences, they help boost local pride in a centre.

The HSTF report (2023) has noted that there is often little real engagement by local communities and businesses in local government plans and approaches, which often lead to their failure. Places should understand the importance of place partnerships in delivering change to their localities. It is evident that the joining of forces of governmental aid, local visions and place ambassadors will help deliver success to town centres.

7.1. Key Recommendations

Therefore, this report offers a series of recommendations for places and governments.

- Partnerships need to understand the importance of external and internal catalysts that affect their formation and development.

- Partnerships need clear trajectories with defined goals, reasoning, and life spans.

- Partnerships cannot be "forced" but must be nurtured and initiated by place ambassadors.

- Partnerships flourish when there is a detailed understanding of place infrastructure, resources, and skill sets.

- Successful partnerships are inclusive, diverse and emerge from a trusting environment.

This report has identified key factors which help ensure the success of a place-based partnership. However, this list is not exhaustive and other themes may emerge through further research. Future research needs to focus on effective performance measurement that highlights shifts in local experience and pride of place. This will increase our understanding of the impact that partnerships have on place.

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