HIGH STREETS TASK FORCE

Best Practice Guide:
Place-based Partnership Sustainability

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1. Executive Summary

The Best Practice Guide: Place-based Partnership Sustainability provides a comprehensive framework aimed at enhancing the sustainability of partnerships that serve local communities. Developed by the Institute of Place Management (IPM) and the High Streets Task Force (HSTF), this guide emphasises the importance of both organisational resilience and community impact in fostering effective place-based initiatives.

The document begins with an evidence review that highlights the critical factors influencing partnership sustainability, including strong leadership, grassroots governance structure, financial stability, and a robust management/operational approach to visions implementation. It identifies various types of partnerships, categorised by their organisational and place focuses, such as 'Performative', 'Iterative', 'Survivative', and 'Transformative'. Each type presents unique strengths and challenges, with transformative partnerships being the most effective in balancing organisational stability with long-term place impact (Figure 1).
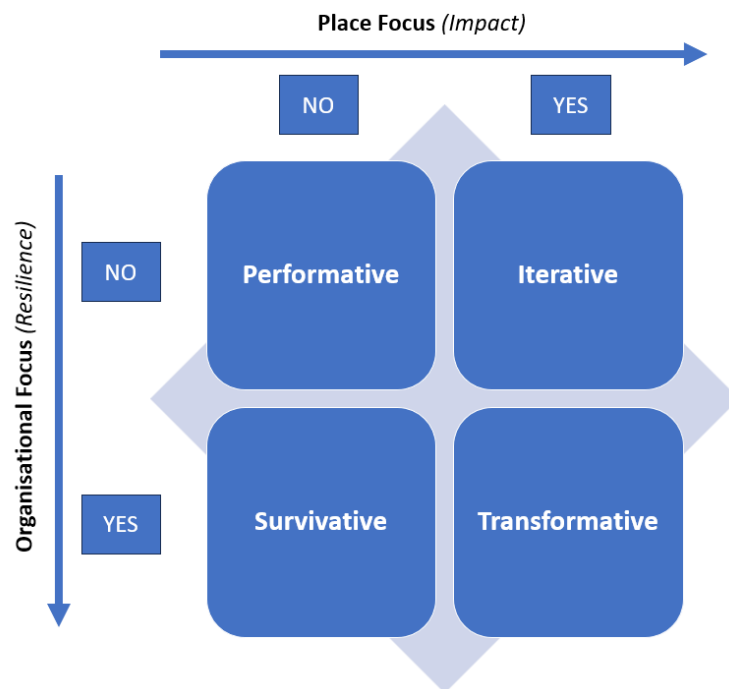
Figure 1. The place-based partnership sustainability framework.

Key recommendations are provided to strengthen both the partnership and the communities they serve. These include strategies to enhance the partnership's focus on long-term community objectives and organisational resilience; and guidance on improving internal processes, investing in staff development, and building strategic alliances. The guide also emphasises the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation, recommending the establishment of key performance indicators (KPIs), and a feedback loop to adapt strategies based on outcomes and stakeholder input.

In summary, this guide serves as a vital resource for place leaders seeking to enhance the sustainability and impact of place-based partnerships, ultimately contributing to the resilience and vitality of the communities they serve.

2. Evidence Review

2.1. Introduction to Place-based Partnerships

Place-based partnerships are collaborative organisational structures that bring together multiple place stakeholders from different sectors to focus on improving local areas (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Sewell et al., 2024). These partnerships are often central to successful regeneration efforts, representing the sustainable and integrated systems of urban governance called for by the United Nations (Baud and Dhanalakshmi, 2007; HSTF, 2024). As collaboration and partnership become more prevalent in practice and policy, the study of place-based partnerships has gained traction (Ryan et al., 2023). Recent research, including the High Streets Task Force Annual Research Study (HSTF, 2024), highlights successful place partnerships that have significantly improved their communities.

2.2. Understanding Place Regeneration

Place regeneration encompasses various discussions and approaches about partnership work and their demonstrated potential to meet community needs, as well place identity and belonging (Brenton and Slawinski, 2023). While some studies have focused on micro-level urban renewal, others highlighted the potential inequalities that arise from these initiatives (Goodling et al., 2015). Despite the increasing interest (Ryan et al., 2023), literature on sustainable, partnership-led place regeneration remains limited. Notable exceptions include research emphasising the responsibility of local governments in fostering community-level sustainability (O'Toole and Burdess, 2004); showcasing the role of community participation in enhancing sustainability in urban renewal (Bankler, 2019); and demonstrating the feasibility of urban renewal at the neighbourhood scale (Maliene et al., 2022).

This Best Practice Guide aims to fill this gap, while also providing an actionable framework for place-based partnership sustainability, grounded in years of IPM and HSTF research (e.g., HSTF, 2024; Sewell et al., 2024) showing that successful partnerships are typically established with clear objectives and a defined life span, rather than solely with sustainability in mind.

2.3. Defining Place-based Partnership Sustainability

Sustainability in place-based partnerships refers to their resilience – specifically, their persistence, adaptability, and ability to transform in response to evolving place needs (Ryan et al., 2024). Research conducted by IPM indicates that partnerships must embed pathways to vitality and viability (Ntounis et al., 2023), developing visions that address both immediate and future needs of the high street (HSTF, 2024; Sewell et al., 2024).

To achieve this, partnerships need (HSTF, 2024; Sewell et al., 2024):

- **A clear vision**: Essential for guiding efforts and ensuring alignment among stakeholders.
- **Flexible management**: Encouraging adaptability to changing local needs.
- **Community involvement**: Engaging a diverse range of stakeholders to foster ownership and accountability.

In particular, local government support plays a pivotal role in helping place-based partnerships develop a clear vision, flexible management, and successful community involvement, as ongoing backing from local authorities is essential for smaller community groups to navigate challenges and seize opportunities (Boyle et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2015). This support not only provides resources but also lends credibility to community initiatives, fostering a conducive environment for collaboration and the flourishing of grassroots movements (Parker, 2011). Moreover, a strong leadership coming from a member of the

community (and not the local authority – Sewell et al., 2024), with a multi-organisational model of governance has greater resources and understanding to tackle local issues (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Gibney et al., 2009).

Financial stability is another critical facilitator. Place-based partnerships benefit from tailored funding streams that are flexible and responsive to the specific needs of local initiatives (Ntounis et al., 2023; Timpson et al., 2018). Such funding arrangements empower community projects and ensure they can sustain their efforts over the long term, rather than being limited by short-term funding cycles (Maliphant, 2021).

Moreover, establishing a strong backbone structure is also vital for partnership sustainability (HSTF, 2024; Sewell et al., 2024). A robust backbone provides the necessary resources, including leadership and operational support, to manage various functions effectively. This structure ensures that the partnership can maintain focus on its objectives and adapt as circumstances change (Ntounis et al., 2023).

Finally, multi-sector stakeholders engagement is crucial for fostering a sense of place and co-participation in decision-making affecting the whole community in ways that only the community can be fully aware of. Understanding concrete community needs, as well as the attitudes and behaviours of stakeholders towards partnership objectives allows for more effective communication and collaboration (Le Feuvre, 2016). In essence, successful, and sustainable partnerships interlock a three-way dynamic with the local authority, business, and the community. In so doing, the community and business contribute to a local governance process and allow partnerships to adapt and be flexible so that they can be responsive to the needs of the town (Davoudi and Healey, 1994).

In summary, these facilitators – i.e., local government support, financial stability, backbone structure, and stakeholder engagement – are essential for promoting the sustainability of partnerships, which is grounded in developing a clear vision, a flexible management approach, and community involvement. By leveraging these elements, partnerships can create a strong foundation for long-term success and positive impact in their communities.
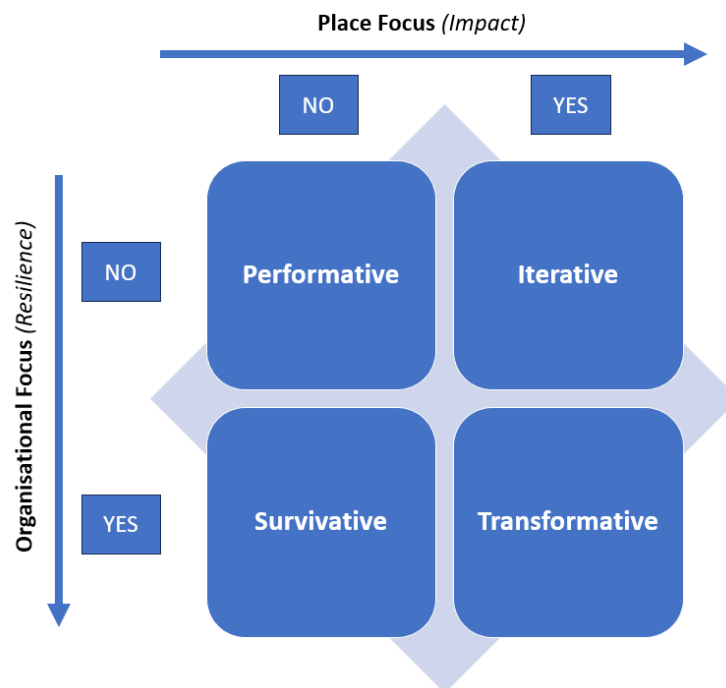
However, achieving sustainable partnerships involves navigating several barriers, such as:

- **Funding Challenges**: Limited funding mechanisms often restrict partnerships to short-term survival. A reliance on external funding can threaten long-term viability (e.g., Cook, 2010)

- **Governance Issues**: Top-down initiatives from local governments can impede sustainable development. A lack of social cohesion and community participation can hinder partnership success (e.g., Ntounis et al., 2023; Sewell et al., 2024).

- **Management and Operational Deficiencies**: Poor leadership can lead to unsustainable practices and myopic or ineffective action plans. A lack of awareness and knowledge among community partners can stall development (e.g., Hodges and Grubnic, 2010).

In the following section, we will present a framework designed as a toolkit for assessing the sustainability of your partnership. This toolkit will help identify strategies and propose guidelines for ongoing improvement and adaptation over time.

3. The Place-based Partnership Sustainability Framework

In the complex ecosystem of place-based partnerships, sustainability often depends on two critical dimensions: organisational focus and place focus. These dimensions reflect a partnership's dual responsibility towards its own resilience and the communities it serves. This paper presents a conceptual framework developed to map partnership sustainability across two key axes, categorising them into four distinct quadrants, each representing a different approach to sustainability (Figure 2). The framework aims to guide partnerships towards achieving both organisational and place sustainability, while also helping them avoid the risks associated with an imbalanced focus.

Place Focus *(Impact)*

NO   YES

Organisational Focus *(Resilience)*

NO

Performative	**Iterative**

YES

Survivative	**Transformative**

Figure 2. The place-based partnership sustainability framework.

This framework serves as a diagnostic and planning tool for place-based partnerships to evaluate and realign their strategies from a sustainability perspective. Sustainability is often a balancing act between organisational resilience and long-term impact on the place or community served. These partnerships often face micro-level challenges within the organisation, such as resource constraints and fluctuating capacity, which affect their resilience. At the meso level, changing community needs and local engagement can influence the sustainability of the place. Macro-level factors, such as economic instability, shifting political landscapes, and policy barriers, also play a critical role in shaping both organisational and place focus. By categorising partnerships into performative, iterative, survivative, and transformative quadrants, this model provides clear descriptors of strengths and weaknesses at each level. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage partnerships to move towards a quadrant that prioritises place sustainability, ensuring long-term impact on the communities they serve despite these multilevel challenges.

In this section, we will explain the elements of the framework, including the two axes (sub-sections 3.1 and 3.2), and the quadrants (sub-sections 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6).

3.1. Organisational Focus: The Resilience Axis

This axis measures the partnership's focus on sustaining its operational capacity, resources, and governance structures. A high organisational focus indicates that the partnership is strongly committed to ensuring its long-term survival and adaptability.

3.2. Place Focus: The Impact Axis

This axis measures the extent to which the partnership is focused on making a sustainable impact on the place or community it serves. A high place focus indicates that the partnership is actively engaged in creating long-term, positive change in the community, whether through policy, practice, or other means.

3.3. Performative Partnerships: Low Organisational Focus, Low Place Focus

These partnerships lack a clear, sustained focus on either their own longevity or the long-term sustainability of the place they serve (Figure 3). Often, they engage in short-term, surface-level initiatives that fail to create lasting impact. Examples might include grant-funded initiatives, short-term coalitions, and project-based efforts rather than genuine partnerships.

- **Positive Descriptor**: Quick to act on short-term needs; quick wins.
- **Negative Descriptor**: Prone to dissolving after initial momentum fades; potential neglect of broader issues.
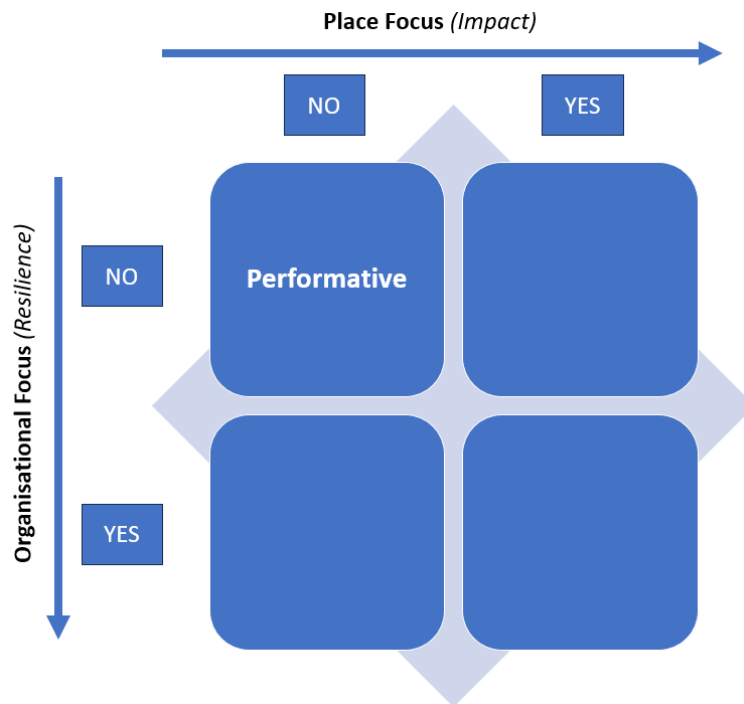
Figure 3. Quadrant 1: Performative partnership.

3.4. Iterative Partnerships: Low Organisational Focus, High Place Focus

Partnerships in this quadrant are highly committed to creating long-term positive change in the place or community, but they often lack the internal structures and resources necessary to ensure their own long-term survival (Figure 4). While driven by a passion for place sustainability, they may be at risk of burnout or dissolution.

- **Positive Descriptor**: Highly community-focused, prioritising local needs.

- **Negative Descriptor**: Lacks organizational longevity; often resource-constrained (e.g., financial instability).
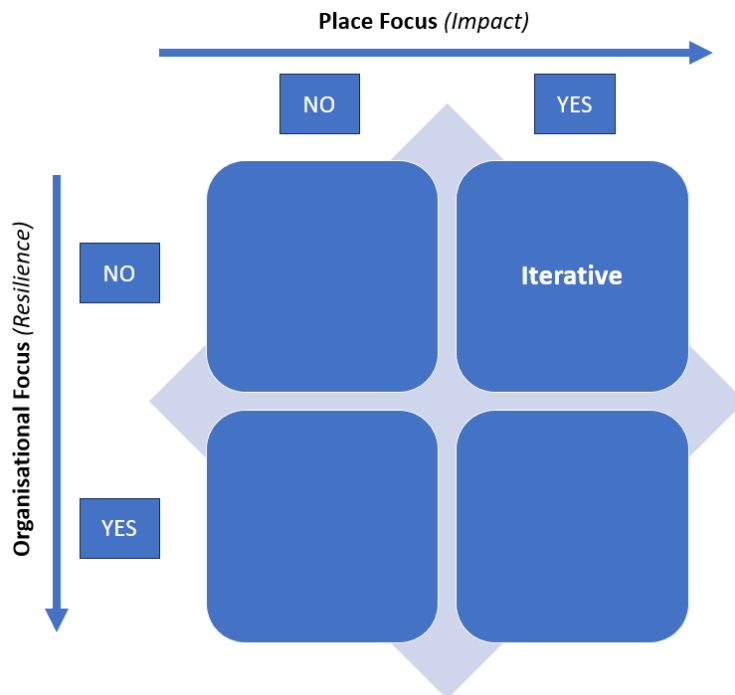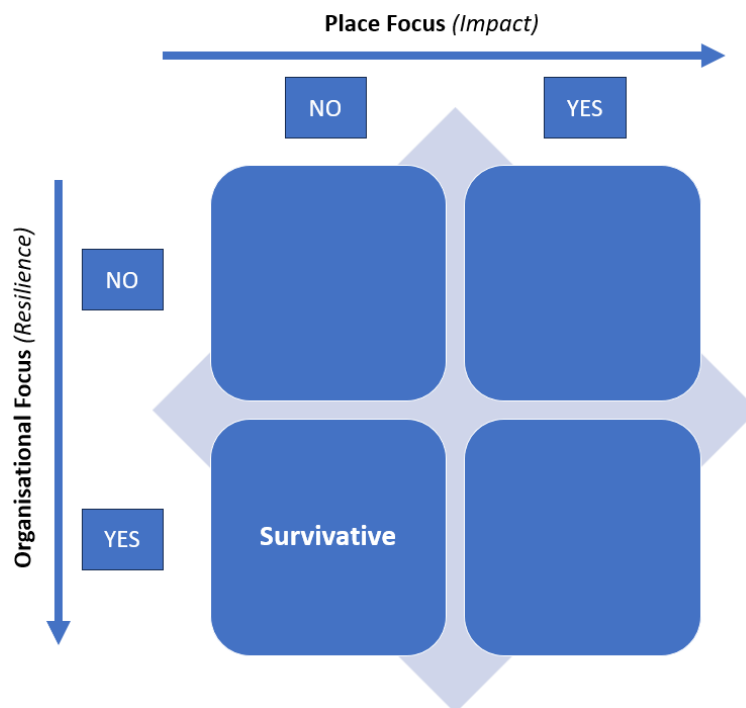

Figure 4. Quadrant 2: Iterative partnership.

3.5. Survivative Partnerships: High Organisational Focus, Low Place Focus

These partnerships are highly resilient in terms of organisational sustainability, with well-established internal structures, funding, and governance (Figure 5). However, they often prioritize their own survival over the sustainability of the place they serve, which could result in a partnership that becomes insular or detached from the evolving needs of the community.

- **Positive Descriptor**: Organisationally stable; highly structured.

- **Negative Descriptor**: Risk of being self-serving; disconnected from community needs.

Figure 5. Quadrant 3: Survivative partnership.

3.6. Transformative Partnerships: High Organisational Focus, High Place Focus

In this quadrant, partnerships balance a strong internal focus on organisational resilience with a clear commitment to creating long-term, sustainable impact on the place they serve (Figure 6). These partnerships are both adaptable and deeply embedded in the community, enabling them to address evolving challenges while ensuring their own long-term viability.

- **Positive Descriptor**: Highly sustainable, both organisationally and in terms of place impact; emphasises cross-sectoral collaboration.

- **Negative Descriptor**: Requires significant resources and long-term planning.
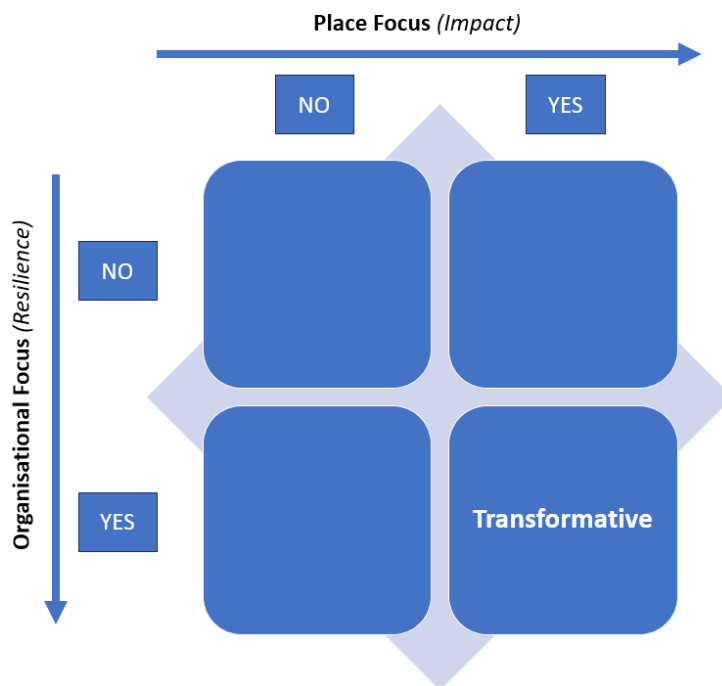
Figure 6. Quadrant 4: Transformative partnership.

4. Recommendations

In this section, we present a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the sustainability of both the partnership and the community it serves. The following guidelines address various aspects of partnership effectiveness, from immediate short-term actions to long-term strategic initiatives. We will explore methods for prioritising these recommendations based on opportunities, urgency, and potential long-term impact, as well as effective resource allocation and stakeholder engagement strategies to support successful implementation, thus strengthening both the organisational and place focuses (i.e., the resilience and impact) of your partnership.

4.1. Strategic Implications

- **Sustainability of Place**: Provide recommendations on how the partnership can further enhance its focus on sustaining its core mission and long-term objectives. Emphasise long-term transformation and ensure impactful contributions to the community.

- **Sustainability of Partnership**: Offer recommendations for strengthening the partnership's organisational resilience, including improving internal processes, investing in staff development, and building strategic partnerships.

- **Short-term Actions**: Recommend immediate actions that the partnership should undertake to address current priorities and challenges.

- **Long-term Actions**: Suggest longer-term initiatives that will contribute to sustained organisational health and effectiveness.

4.2. Implementation Guidance

- **Prioritisation**: Advise on how to prioritise the recommendations based on urgency and quick wins.

- **Resource Allocation**: Provide guidance on effective resource allocation to support the recommended actions, ensuring adequate budgeting for each action (i.e., financial resources); and addressing staff shortages, this ensuring reliable staffing (i.e., human resources).

- **Structured Exit**: Provide a template for outlining an exit strategy that focuses on responsible disengagement from projects or partnerships, ensuring that the legacy of the HSA remains impactful.

- **Stakeholder Engagement**: Recommend approaches for engaging stakeholders to gain support and ensure the successful implementation of the recommendations.

4.3. Follow-up and Review

- **Review and Updating**: Suggest methods for reviewing and updating recommendations based on progress and changing circumstances. Create a system for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of sustainability efforts, including key performance indicators (KPIs) and review periods.

- **Feedback Loop**: Recommend establishing a feedback loop to continually refine strategies and actions based on outcomes and stakeholder input.

5. References

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