



A prosperous partnership: supporting better collaboration between charities and businesses

Charlotte Prothero & Nicole Sykes

October 2024



Pro Bono Economics uses economics to empower the social sector and to increase wellbeing across the UK. We combine project work for individual charities and social enterprises with policy research that can drive systemic change. Working with almost 500 volunteer economists, we have supported over 500 charities since our inception in 2009.

Pro Bono Economics expresses its gratitude to the Benefact Group for their generous financial support and input in developing this report. We also thank FTI Consulting for their writing and expertise, as well as Shoosmiths and Pilotlight for providing their resources and support. All views and errors are the authors' own.

Pro Bono Economics is also grateful to the numerous businesses, intermediary organisations and charities that inputted into this report and shared their expertise during the roundtable sessions.



Contents

Summary	4
What benefits can be had from a prosperous partnership?	6
What are the barriers to prosperous partnerships?	16
Empowering partnerships with practical resources	22
Conclusion	30



Summary

When businesses and charities come together, brilliant things can happen. People out of work can find jobs. Young people can have their eyes opened to opportunities they never expected to be within their grasp, or even knew existed. The nation's natural spaces can become greener, cleaner and safer. People with the least can find themselves with the things that they need the most. Across the country, in towns, cities and villages alike, lives can be changed.

This transformation can happen when business-charity partnerships are at their best. In the best collaborations, businesses find their employees not just inspired, but gaining skills, more engaged at work, more productive, and even less unwell. Firms can benefit from a 'charitable glow', where their purposeful credentials burnish their brand and act as an attractive force to customers and potential talent alike. For charities, the benefits can also be manifold, as the vast resources of the private sector open up skills, spaces, services, goods, networks and funds to put to achieving their missions.

But not all business-charity partnerships are created equal.

When businesses and charities come together poorly, opportunities can be wasted and harm can be done. Charities and businesses alike can squander precious resources meant for good. Power imbalances, short-termism, inadequate funding, poor senior and managerial buy in, badly designed processes, undefined purposes, mismatched expectations and the triumph of PR over purpose can mean that charities end up taken advantage of, and businesses fail to have the impact they were seeking. Ultimately, the people they were both intending to help lose out the most.

The worst offenders of this world are the cookie-cutter partnerships – the off-the-shelf programmes that businesses and charities both put together without a lot of thought or tailoring. These partnerships provide a sugar rush of feel-good activity for businesses, but ultimately aren't good for either party. Short-term Charity of the Year efforts which are highly competitive and burdensome to apply for are an example of these, where charities are picked up and dropped, and serious money is wasted when charities are pitted against each other. Similarly, some charities are still

inventing work for corporate volunteers to do, in order to secure the donations which accompany the activity.

Gold standard business-charity partnerships are built on real, meaningful joint purpose. This can be around a theme: the charity supporting homeless people into hospitality roles is a natural partner for a restaurant, while a chain of beauty and chemist stores has a clear reason to want to tackle hygiene poverty. Joint purpose can also be about place: a Cornish hotel can be just as motivated to clean local beaches as the environmental charity that it supports. And business-charity relationships can also find a stable footing on the deeply personal. A CEO's husband recovering from cancer may kickstart dedicated support from the top, while enabling employees to volunteer and incentivising them to donate to the causes that matter to them can create a myriad of invested relationships, and ultimately lead to the largest businesses helping thousands of charities a year, and smaller firms helping dozens at once.

When businesses and charities are driven by a genuine joint purpose, they are more likely to be undertaking partnerships that are sustainable, adaptable, respectful, long-term and – ultimately – more impactful.

To understand how business-charity partnerships can be placed on this impactful footing, Pro Bono Economics, with support from Benefact Group and in partnership with FTI Consulting, Shoosmiths and Pilotlight, consulted with dozens of charities, businesses and the intermediary organisations that work between them. The conclusions from that consultation were clear. Businesses and charities should base their relationships on real meaning. They should prioritise clear, two-way communication. They should establish structures and a strategy early on. And they should adopt a long-lasting focus, because societal change is rarely swift.

If more partnerships between businesses and charities prioritised these traits from the beginning, they would change more lives for the better.

What benefits can be had from a prosperous partnership?

Across every sector, businesses and charities are coming together to make a tangible difference. These partnerships take many forms, from large-scale fundraising efforts that raise millions, to volunteering initiatives that transform a small charity's digital capacity, or joint campaigns that spark national policy changes. Through our research, we heard from dozens of businesses, intermediary organisations and charities, all brimming with examples of how their collaboration positively impacted communities, individuals, and the wider society¹.

Whether it's providing mentoring to young people, delivering essential meals and hygiene products to those in need, or planting hundreds of thousands of trees and cleaning up rivers and woodlands, these partnerships are making significant contributions. The societal, economic and environmental benefits of such collaborations are difficult to fully quantify, but their impact is undeniable. From simple yet crucial financial donations to deep, system-changing collaborations, these partnerships are varied and often transformative.

However, despite the large-scale impact, only a small number of organisations in both sectors attempt to measure the impact of their purposeful activity, and an even smaller proportion do so in a robust and credible way. This points to a broader need for better evaluation, but it doesn't detract from the visible and meaningful change these collaborations are producing. While altruism might drive many organisations to partner, collaboration requires significant investment of time, energy, and resources from both sides. For these partnerships to succeed and be sustainable, the benefits must be mutual – delivering clear value to both the businesses and charities involved. This report is a practical guide aimed at business leaders who are looking to develop strong, impactful charity partnerships. Drawing on insights from our series of roundtable discussions, it provides actionable advice on what makes

¹ Pro Bono Economics conducted a series of five roundtables, with representatives from intermediaries, HR professionals, large and small businesses and charities for the consultation period. To discover their insights on the topic of what makes a good business and charity relationship, for further details and the organisations spoken to refer to Annex A.

collaboration work well, offering a 'how-to' for creating meaningful partnerships that can drive change.

For organisations and individuals motivated by altruism, these benefits might be sufficient to drive cross-sector collaboration. However, every business and every charity has constraints on their resources, and collaboration requires investment of those resources even if no actual funds change hands. There must also be direct benefits to both organisations of working together.

“Impactful charitable strategy requires time and patience, and for some, this is too great a luxury in this post-pandemic environment. However, when we have the conditions to get it right, it’s a powerful thing that opens up a wealth of opportunity.”

Chief executive, SME

Benefits for businesses often manifest through their employees

Partnering with charities can offer measurable returns for businesses. Many of these benefits can be most keenly felt at the employee level, which is one of the reasons why between 8 and 16 million employees in the UK are offered access to employee volunteering schemes.²

Volunteering with charities offers employees valuable opportunities to develop essential skills, such as problem-solving, which are critical for driving innovation. Serving as a charity trustee, for instance, is often seen as a positive way to build leadership skills and prepare employees for executive roles. In a world where young professionals increasingly rely on technology and remote work, volunteering is especially beneficial for honing soft skills like communication and teamwork.

“Many of the newest members of our team completed their education during the COVID-19 pandemic and we have noted a dip in confidence and social skills as a result of this. Practical experiences gained through volunteering can help to boost young people’s confidence.”

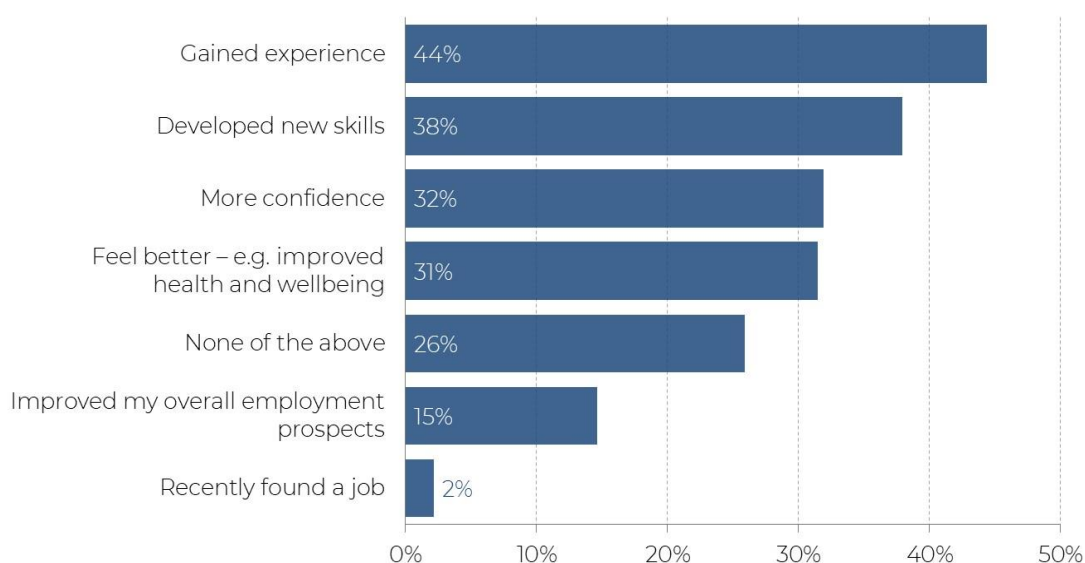
² NCVO, Time well spent: Employer-supported volunteering, June 2019. Range based on 51% of employed individuals surveyed stating that they did not have access to an employer-supported volunteering scheme at the low end and an allocation of the 24% of individuals that they stated they did not know at the top end.

HR professional

In addition to increased skills, employees who volunteer are also more engaged at work, have better self-reported health and a lower risk of depression.³ Recent Royal Voluntary Service research among people who have been unemployed found that almost one in four people (23%) said that they were currently volunteering or had previously volunteered. Of this group, just over one in four (26%) said that they had gained no benefits from the experience in relation to confidence, skills development or general employability.⁴ The remainder all felt that they had taken something positive out of the experience, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The majority of volunteers and former volunteers, who were unemployed, felt that they had gained valuable work-related experience from volunteering.

Benefits gained from volunteering



Notes: N=232. Responses of less than 15% not shown.

Source: Censuswide for Royal Voluntary Service, fieldwork 25.09.23-02.10.23

Links have also been made between workplace volunteering and reductions in sickness absence, with the Evolve Workplace Wellbeing calculator estimating that participation in a workplace volunteering scheme provides an average reduction in absence of around 0.9 days per

³ P Jeffrey, S Singer & M Stepanek, Volunteering improves employee health and organisational outcomes through bonding with coworkers and enhanced identification with employers, *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Volume 64, Issue 5, May 2022, p 370-376.

⁴ Figure 3, Pro Bono Economics, [A pro bono bonus: The impact of volunteering on wages and productivity](#), March 2024.

year.⁵ Previous research by Pro Bono Economics (PBE) has estimated that rolling out employee volunteering schemes to all employees in the UK could save between 1.4 million and 2.5 million working days of sickness absence.⁶

Ultimately, encouraging and enabling their employees to volunteer can save businesses money through their overall improvement to productivity. Annual productivity gains from people in professional and managerial occupations volunteering are estimated to be in the region of £4,600 per volunteer. This translates to at least £4.6 billion in productivity gains to the English and Welsh economy attributable to volunteering by this group of employees alone.⁷

Whether through volunteering or through working on broader charity partnerships, these opportunities also allow employees to expand their networks and gain access to new contacts. By interacting with professionals from the charity sector, they can gain valuable insights and perspectives that have the potential to lead to future collaborations and business opportunities.

Partnering with charities also benefits businesses and their reputation

Beyond the direct impact on employees, businesses can reap reputational rewards of their partnerships with charities. Again, this can start with staff. When employees feel their company is making a positive social impact, they are two-thirds more likely to speak favourably about their employer. This increased loyalty translates into lower turnover, reduced recruitment costs, and a more engaged workforce.⁸

This 'charitable glow' can wash over other stakeholders too. 88% of the public believes that businesses should play a larger role in tackling social issues,⁹ and wants to see this action from the companies that they shop with. 70% of consumers say they are more likely to buy from companies

⁵ [Evolve Workplace Wellbeing calculator](#), accessed 20 March 2024.

⁶ Pro Bono Economics, [Triple dividend: How workplace volunteering can make us happier, healthier and more productive](#), April 2024.

⁷ Pro Bono Economics, [A pro bono bonus: The impact of volunteering on wages and productivity](#), March 2024.

⁸ C Percy & M Rogers, [The Value of Volunteering 050121 \(educationandemployers.org\)](#), January 2021.

⁹ Zeno Group, [Unveiling The 2020 Zeno Strength of Purpose Study](#), June 2020.

that are committed to making the world a better place.¹⁰ This consumer preference for socially responsible businesses has the potential to give companies a competitive advantage, particularly in markets where trust is a key factor in purchasing decisions.

Critical business objectives can be achieved through partnerships with charities

In the post-pandemic era, where costs are higher and the labour market tighter, charities can support with critical issues like recruitment, which 74% of firms report as a challenge.¹¹ By working with people furthest from the labour market, charities can and do regularly act as a link between employers and potential recruits that traditional methods would simply not reach.

Case study: local partnership – Strand Palace Hotel, London

The Strand Palace Hotel has partnered with the charity Only a Pavement Away, which helps people facing homelessness, prison leavers, and veterans to find jobs within the hospitality industry. This partnership has grown to include fundraising, training, and job placements. The hotel benefits by offering opportunities for its staff to develop skills and engage with their community, it benefits by discovering opportunities to act in partnership with organisations it might normally consider competitors, and it opens up a new talent pool in a sector where the revolving workforce presents a constant challenge. Meanwhile the charity receives valuable resources and support to help people rebuild their lives.

Charities can also help businesses reach new customers. For example, charities in the UN Women's Unstereotype Alliance support businesses in improving representation in their marketing and, therefore, widening firms' appeal.

¹⁰ Harvard Business School, [15 eye-opening corporate social responsibility statistics](#), June 2021.

¹¹ British Chamber of Commerce, [Quarterly Recruitment Outlook: Construction Suffers As Hiring Difficulties Rise](#), July 15, 2024. Accessed October 2024.

Charities can benefit from partnerships by accessing important new resources of varying types

The most obvious additional resource that can flow to charities through their partnerships with business is financial. Charities need long-term, unrestricted funding to remain sustainable and agile. Businesses are positioned to provide both resources and flexible financial support, which allows charities to adapt, innovate, and address urgent needs as they arise. While by no means all financial contributions from businesses to charities meet this definition, some do. Nevertheless, there is clear scope for the business sector to do more.

While businesses contributed some £1.82 billion to charities in 2023, this represented a real-terms year-on-year drop of £164 million. And, while the FTSE 100's combined profits have risen by 49% since 2014, total donations have declined by 13% (or 34% after adjusting for inflation). Best practice suggests businesses should give at least 1% of their pre-tax profits to charity, yet on average, FTSE 100 companies donate 0.9%, with only one in five companies intending to increase their giving next year.¹²

Moving away from money, it's clear that wider collaborations with the private sector can supercharge a charity's impact by providing access to valuable resources like expertise, technology, and infrastructure. Businesses can help charities operate more efficiently, reach wider audiences, and achieve their goals faster. This can mean anything from offering training to donating software or providing pro bono services. For small social sector organisations alone, the combined contribution of goods, resources, spaces, services, volunteering and funds has been estimated to be worth around £2.4 billion in 2019.¹³

For small charities in particular, the contribution of volunteers from businesses can be transformative. That is particularly the case when it operates through skills-based volunteering, where business professionals share their knowledge to build charity capacity. By creating opportunities that align with volunteers' expertise and interests, these partnerships can lead to meaningful, two-way learning. As one Head of Partnerships noted:

¹² Charities Aid Foundation, [Donations from FTSE 100 companies to charities have not kept pace with profits over the past decade](#), September 2024.

¹³ Law Family Commission on Civil Society, [Purpose: On Parallel Tracks](#), August 2021.

“Some of the most successful initiatives have a menu of opportunities and volunteers have a choice about how to give their time based on what they are interested in and what they are looking for. Volunteers in these circumstances can learn as much from the charity as vice versa.”

Head of Partnerships, intermediary organisation

This reciprocal exchange of knowledge not only strengthens the charity's operations but also enriches the volunteer's experience, fostering deeper engagement and more impactful relationships. With 65% of small charities struggling to recruit volunteers this year, and volunteering numbers listing consistently this year as small charities' leading concern, the role that businesses can play in encouraging their employees to donate their time, can be vital.¹⁴

Businesses may also be critical vehicles through which charities achieve their purposes. Charitable organisations established to eliminate modern slavery must influence the way businesses undertake employment practices for example. Likewise, businesses are essential partners for charities set up to tackle social mobility, to tackle low pay, or to increase opportunities for minoritised groups. Many charities seeking to protect the planet target their efforts towards the biggest industrial polluters, be they transportation firms, the oil and gas industry or fast fashion outlets.

In seeking to secure change within the business sector, some charities campaign from the outside; but many also work hand-in-hand with firms that see the benefits of them achieving their goals and share them.

Maximising the benefits flowing to both charities and businesses leads to truly prosperous partnerships

For both businesses and charities, the partnerships which have the greatest potential impact are those which are built around a shared purpose. When both organisations are united around a cause that they are genuinely motivated to achieve, the benefits can be manifold, and the gold standard of business-charity partnerships can be built.

¹⁴ Pro Bono Economics, [Adapting for success: Flexibility could hold the key to volunteer recruitment and retention](#). Accessed October 2024.

These deep, meaningful, purpose-embedded partnerships may be between businesses and charities that unite around a theme. For example, in its role as a supplier of hygiene products, Boots UK is passionate about everyone being able to access good hygiene. Part of the organisation's origin story is that its founder believed everyone should have access to soap and a sponge, but more than 150 years after Boots' founding this is still not the case. Boots therefore has a long-standing partnership with the Hygiene Bank, where it encourages customers to donate goods, part-matches the donations and then redistributes the products to people who need them.

Similarly, the Octopus Group attempts to set itself apart from the rest of its sector via its focus on sustainability, and it has established a multi-year partnership with an environmental organisation to that end.

Case study: corporate-charity partnership – Octopus Group and Thames21

Octopus Giving, the charitable foundation of Octopus Group, collaborated with Thames21 for three years to enhance the health of London's rivers. Octopus employees volunteered over 5,600 hours, assisting with river clean-ups and other activities. This partnership also helped to contribute towards catalysing a significant policy change: a government ban on plastic wet wipes. For Octopus, this partnership reinforced its commitment to sustainability, while Thames21 received financial support and volunteer assistance, enabling them to achieve greater results in their work.

Businesses and charities may also find their joint purpose in their passion for a certain place. The Headland Hotel in Cornwall, for example, is deeply embedded in its community, and in making the local area a brilliant place to live and visit. It has a clear business motivation to ensure that local beaches are clean, for example, providing a clear alignment with the ambitions of the environmental charities that it supports and which it encourages staff to volunteer with.

Business-charity relationships can also find a stable footing on the deeply personal. One bank's foundation found that the experience of a senior leader with a family member with cancer led to a substantial surge in internal interest in the organisation's charitable work. This personal interest can be bottom-up as well as top-down. Firms which enable employees to volunteer and incentivise them to donate to the causes that matter to them can create a myriad of invested relationships.

Whether by match funding sky dives, encouraging volunteer days, or hosting Macmillan coffee mornings, businesses can enable employees to make a difference to the causes they're passionate about.

Case study: colleague-driven support – Derian House Children's Hospice

One example of these principles in action is the colleague-driven support for Derian House Children's Hospice through Benefact Group's MyGiving programme. Employees are empowered to support causes they care deeply about. Through this partnership, some staff raised over £90,000 for the hospice. This partnership embodies a well-designed funding approach, with continuous financial and volunteer support that ensures the charity can provide critical services to children with life-limiting conditions. Regular involvement from employees strengthens the connection, reflecting the shared values and purpose agreed upon at the start, and allows for ongoing reflection and improvement in the partnership.

When businesses and charities start with purpose, other positive traits follow. The organisations consulted for this report were clear that when businesses and charities see that real shared value, they often seek to continue those relationships and make them long-term, sustainable partnerships. While one-time projects have their place, more real value usually comes from ongoing collaboration where both parties are committed to a shared vision.

The more effective partnerships discussed during the roundtable focused on the benefits of building relationships over time. As these partnerships grow, synergies multiply, new parts of both organisations start to get

involved and inspired, and trust and collaboration deepen. Ultimately, there is clear consensus that this is the route for businesses and charities to have the greatest impact. They are the foundations for the most prosperous partnerships for both sides. And, on the other side of this coin, the damage that can be created when real, meaningful purpose isn't at the heart of partnerships also emerged clearly.

What are the barriers to prosperous partnerships?

When businesses and charities come together, two very different worlds collide. Particularly when the business is very large and the charity much smaller, there can be big differences in language, culture, approach, resources, and processes. These differences can lead to the creation of very shallow partnerships, which don't follow the "The four pillars of a successful charity partnership".¹⁵

The businesses, intermediary organisations and charities consulted for this report identified five core barriers to this advancement.

1. Undefined purpose and values

As noted above, a strong partnership requires a clear purpose and shared values from the beginning. When these are not properly defined and agreed, the potential impact often remains unfulfilled. Without clearly defined goals, both sides can find they are not on the same page and the partnership often ends up imbalanced and unfair, with partners pulling in different directions.

Businesses are under significant pressure to demonstrate social value alongside financial results. However, if the purpose is unclear, partnerships lack direction and momentum. Ultimately, they will be unsuccessful and disappointing,

2. Misaligned ambition

Even when partners share values and have a clear purpose, they may struggle if their ambitions differ.

Levels of ambition can also shift and change throughout the life of a partnership. During the pandemic, for example, while some businesses scaled their existing charity partnerships, many firms found their corporate priorities shifting into survival mode. That made it harder to sustain meaningful collaboration. Some businesses withdrew attention from their charity partnerships, while charities found they needed those relationships

¹⁵ Giving Force, [The four pillars of a successful charity partnership](#), July 2019.

more than ever, but their own capacity constraints made them even harder to maintain.

There were suggestions from those organisations consulted for this work that this may have worsened the perception of volunteering, moving it backwards from a core part of business-charity interactions to a more temporary, team-bonding activity. Small charities have a clear need for volunteer support.¹⁶ Many need long-term, dedicated volunteers, but there's also a role for shorter term skills-based volunteering. However, despite the evident need for additional support from charities, individuals within businesses did not always share the ambition to meet those needs. As one HR leader shared:

"With hybrid working, employees are now associating volunteering with team-bonding and see it as a 'once and done' opportunity rather than an additive, ongoing commitment. This has had a fundamental impact on the way both charities and businesses view and value volunteering and can impact the goals of any business-charity partnership."

HR leader, large organisation

Misaligned ambitions can express themselves in other ways, such as on the scale of impact either side wishes to achieve and expectations of commitment. In the worst-case scenarios, they can see partnerships falling by the wayside for both parties.

3. Shifting ESG priorities

Businesses are transitioning from traditional Corporate Social Responsibility to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks, and there was some suggestion in our roundtables that this has heightened the transactional nature of business-charity partnerships.

Where firms might once have regarded working with charities as a pillar in future-proofing their business, there were examples of how this had become a mere checkbox exercise, particularly as companies feel pressured to reduce costs.

"The current business climate has become increasingly challenging, with companies of all sizes being required to eliminate all non-essential costs,

¹⁶ Pro Bono Economics, [Treatment for the charity sector's unhealthy status quo](#), August 2024.

often including engagement with charities. Unfortunately, partnerships with charities are not always seen as strategically beneficial for businesses."

Head of Partnerships, UK charity

Once hailed as the best mechanism for enhancing reputation, and creating higher value,¹⁷ ESG has recently shifted from being a top-level business and strategic consideration to being perceived as "everything and nothing".¹⁸

Even during the period of consultation for this research, perceptions of ESG's value have, in some circles, continued to decline – further diminishing the focus that some firms have put on their partnerships with charities.

4. Uneven buy-in

Strong partnerships require strong leadership. Executive buy-in is crucial, yet many companies entrust partnership management solely to passionate but less empowered employees. This can hinder progress, because those at the grassroots level lack the authority to make decisions. Where leaders do not actively support and nurture business-charity partnerships, instead simply delegating them, they often are not valued properly and their true potential not unlocked.

"Time to organise and undertake, time to track and record, time to maintain and upkeep and liaise add up over and above the responsibilities of the day-to-day role. It is too much for one person and the work to maintain these relationships – by both businesses and charities – needs to be recognised by the organisation as a viable value-add."

HR professional

5. Resource constraints

Managing partnerships takes time and resource. Yet employees' management efforts are often voluntary and frequently go unrecognised within their companies, making it difficult for them to sustain meaningful

¹⁷ McKinsey, [Five ways that ESG creates value](#), 2019.

¹⁸ BBC, [How 'ESG' came to mean everything and nothing](#), November 2023.

collaboration. Charities face similar challenges, with partnerships sometimes becoming an administrative burden if not managed efficiently.

"Every time you ask a charity to report to a different stakeholder, you add to their workload. I think we need to find a level of impact reporting that works for everyone."

UK charity leader

Without both businesses and charities allocating resources specifically for partnership management, they will not fulfil their potential. A lack of clear communication about time, effort, and financial costs from the start can create frustration and burnout.

The subsequent fizzling out of relationships can have adverse effects on other business objectives. McKinsey research shows that women often take on these additional responsibilities in organisations, particularly in driving wellbeing, diversity, and inclusion initiatives.¹⁹ This unpaid and underappreciated work can lead to burnout, with 42% of women reporting frequent burnout compared to 25% of men. Without proper resource allocation, charity-business partnerships can quickly become a lower priority.

These barriers to better partnership have material consequences for all parties

When businesses and charities struggle to overcome these barriers, not only is the potential to make a difference squandered, but time and resource which could have been better spent on business growth and charity impact is wasted.

One of the most common forms of business-charity interaction is the annual charity partnership model, often structured around a 'charity of the year' award. This approach is inherently short-term and has several drawbacks, including the rejection of many more charities than those selected, leading to wasteful application processes.

Concerns about the charity of the year model were very high among the charities and intermediaries consulted for this report, with an emphasis on

¹⁹ McKinsey, [Women in the Workplace](#), 2023.

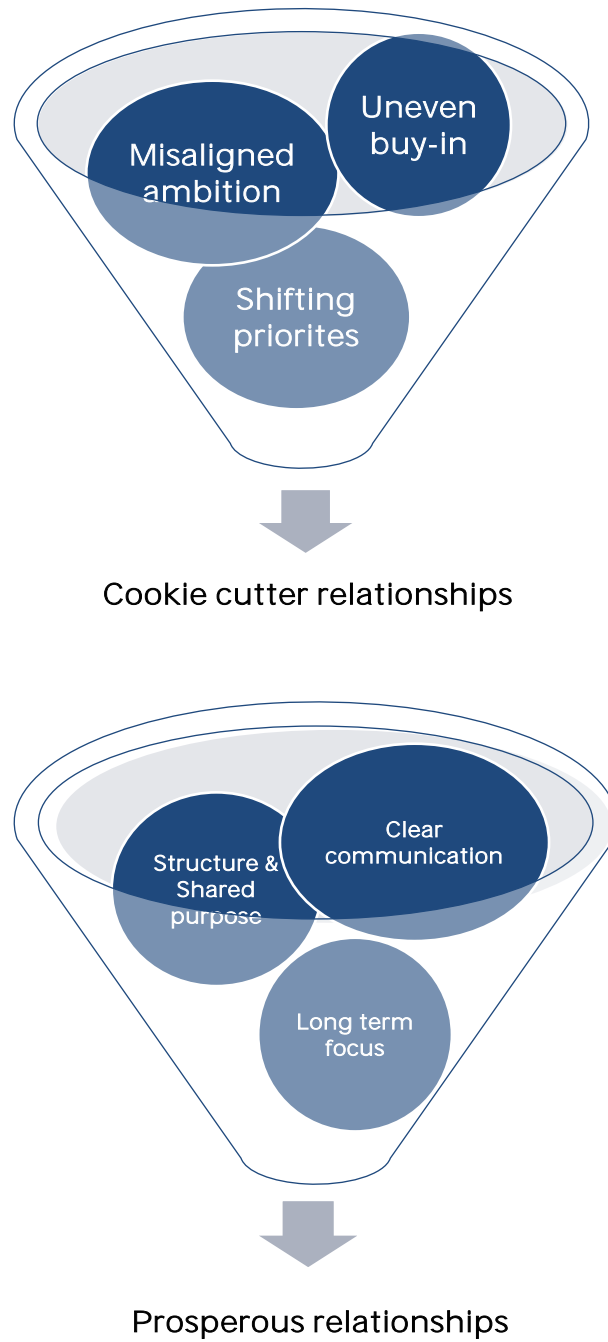
the long and burdensome applications and on how the partnerships do not continue long enough to generate real impact. These costs must be considered in the context of the £900 million that charities are estimated to spend on application processes for grants each year.²⁰

Often, at the heart of the failure to overcome these barriers is a cookie-cutter approach to partnership. Instead of truly considering the reason for making them, investing in the right ingredients, tailoring them to what both organisations need, giving them long enough to bake, businesses and charities reach for what they've made before and churn out a new batch of identical, unsatisfying partnerships. While these might cause a sugar rush of excitement when the partnerships are being announced, or while volunteers are engaged in something that feels briefly meaningful, they're not what either side ordered, and neither are they good for them.

Fortunately, there are a number of clear steps that businesses and charities can take to ensure their partnerships reach their potential, as explored in the next section.

²⁰ Commission on Civil Society, [Giving pains: The cost of grant-making](#), July 2022.

Figure 2: Summary of the different business and charity partnerships.



Empowering partnerships with practical resources

To move beyond cookie-cutter business-charity partnerships and overcome the barriers of undefined purpose and values, misaligned ambitions, shifting priorities, uneven buy-in and resource constraints, four areas of focus emerged as key in our consultations.



Establishing a shared purpose

Time and again, entrenching a genuine purpose emerged as the most important initial step both businesses and charities can take to make their relationships impactful. The shared motivation could be thematic – based around an issue of importance to both organisations. It may instead be personal to the employees or to the leadership of the firm. Or it could flow from concern for a shared place.

"It's important for a charity in a partnership to work on its narrative and be confident about the value it can bring. While businesses may recognise the charity's value, unresolved power imbalances can undermine the

relationship. Genuine, long-term, and impactful partnerships must be built on balance and trust."

UK intermediary organisation

Both businesses and charities play unique roles in defining the purpose and reason for a successful partnership, and they must actively own their space within it.

Case study: thematic charity partnership – Gloucestershire Deaf Association²¹

One such example is Benefact Group's thematic charity partnership with the Gloucestershire Deaf Association which focuses on supporting the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. Through this partnership, the Group helps raise awareness within the business by delivering training sessions on deafness and hearing loss. It is a collaboration that aligns with the Group's commitment to inclusivity and education.

The charity benefits from consistent support that helps fund vital work, including creating environments where deaf children can build friendships and identity while their families connect and support each other.

Case study: thematic charity partnership – Henry Boot

Henry Boot focuses on specific themes such as environmental conservation and homelessness, allowing it to form strong partnerships with charities in these areas. This focus helps target efforts where they can make the most difference. Employees have a significant say over the causes that Henry Boot prioritises, while the community-focused team works to identify the organisations which can make the biggest impact on those issues.

²¹ Benefact Group, [Gloucester Deaf Association](#), August 2024.

For the company, this means its work is aligned with values that matter to it. For the charities, it means having a reliable partner that provides consistent funding and support, helping them plan and deliver better outcomes.

The partnership that Benefact Group has created with Gloucestershire Deaf Association, and those which are featured throughout this report, are clear illustrations of how a clear reason for working together can create meaning for the long-term.

For charities, it is critical within this process of discovery of shared meaning and purpose that they are clear about their value proposition. Equally, it is important that they have the confidence to say no to partnerships that are not mutually valuable. This is easier said than done, and unstable finances, power imbalances and sunk cost fallacies can make holding firm challenging. But it is essential to make the most of both sides' limited resources.

1. Prioritising clear communication from the beginning

Clear and straightforward communication is essential for ensuring that all parties understand each other, establish common goals, and use resources efficiently. It helps avoid a misalignment of ambitions and ensures that collaborations can adapt to changing priorities rather than simply being abandoned.

Case Study: Clear Communication Partnership – Marks & Spencer and Oxfam²²

A great example of clear communication driving success is the "Another Life" scheme established by Marks & Spencer (M&S) and Oxfam. Launched in 2008, this partnership focuses on sustainability and poverty reduction. It encourages customers to donate unwanted clothing to Oxfam shops or M&S stores. To date, over 35 million garments have been donated, raising an estimated £23 million for Oxfam.

²² Oxfam GB, [Marks and Spencer and Oxfam's Another Life scheme](#). Accessed October 2024.

The purpose of the partnership is clear: M&S aims to reduce clothing waste and support sustainability, offering customers vouchers as incentives for donations. Oxfam benefits by reselling, recycling, or reprocessing the clothes, generating essential funding for their poverty-reduction programs.

Clear communication and shared goals have ensured that this partnership remains adaptable and mutually beneficial. Both M&S and Oxfam can effectively deliver on their environmental and social objectives because their relationship is built on transparency and aligned priorities. This demonstrates how structured partnerships with clear communication can simultaneously drive sustainability goals and meaningful social impact.

The importance of clear communication came up again and again in roundtable discussion, with a particular emphasis on the need to set clear expectations at the very outset of establishing a partnership. Defining goals and responsibilities early on helps avoid misunderstandings and ensures that both sides are working towards the same vision.

2. Developing clear structures and strategies

To create more effective and impactful partnerships, businesses and charities should invest in the structures and strategies that underpin activity. This means celebrating shared missions, addressing challenges at pace and taking advantage of opportunities for improvement.

While details will vary from case to case, four key considerations stand out.

- **Agreeing a partnership structure:** Create a setup that works for both sides, considering each partner's needs, interests, skills, and resources. Regularly check in to adjust if necessary.
- **Adopting a long-term funding approach:** Build a funding plan that supports the partnership's long-term goals. It works best when both partners share responsibility and contribute to the success.
- **Ensuring clarity in the partnership set up:** Make the process of beginning a partnership simple and clear. Early on, agree on the partnership's purpose, shared values, and goals.

- **Sticking to a communication and review schedule:** Set up regular check-ins to review how the partnership is going. This allows both sides to reflect, share feedback, and make improvements when needed.

By establishing a clear structure and strategy from the beginning, both sides of the partnership can explore how to overcome the barriers to senior buy-in and constrained resource. Alongside the purpose established at the beginning, a process of developing a clear structure and strategy can also support businesses to refine how the partnership aligns to their wider ESG and social value strategies, and how teams more closely involved can demonstrate the partnership's interest to the rest of the business.

A commitment to simplicity can and should emerge from this process, helping to enhance the effectiveness of these partnerships. Businesses and charities can use the same forms and digital tools to collect information and agree on what information is important to track for example. Instead of detailed reports, they can send brief updates, allowing them to focus more on their goals and less on paperwork.

Figure 3 outlines a practical framework developed by GivingForce that is designed to help businesses navigate charity partnerships more effectively. It details four “pillars” of a successful partnership – ranging from choosing the right cause to setting clear goals and maintaining strong communication – that closely match the ideas generated in our discussion roundtables.

Figure 3: The four “pillars” of a successful business-charity partnership

Pillar 1: Pick a cause, then pick your partner

- **Example action:**

A corporation should align with causes that resonate with its mission and values. For example, a tech company dedicated to education may partner with an organisation focused on improving digital literacy among underprivileged youth, creating a more effective collaboration.

Pillar 2: Do your homework

- **Example action:**

Before partnering with a nonprofit, thoroughly research their mission, past performance, financial transparency, and governance. For example, a tech company reviews annual reports and seeks third-party evaluations for alignment and trustworthiness.

Pillar 3: Clearer goals, better outcomes

- **Example action:**

Once a partnership is established, both parties should collaboratively define clear objectives. Open communication about expectations, responsibilities, and success metrics is crucial to achieving these goals, and regular updates help keep all stakeholders informed and engaged.

Pillar 4: Monitoring and feedback: two fundamental ingredients

- **Example action:**

Establish a monitoring framework to evaluate the partnership's effectiveness. This could include quarterly reviews to assess progress, discuss challenges, and gather feedback from participants. For example, survey students after each workshop to gather insights and identify areas for improvement.

3. Adopting a long-term focus

To maintain strong partnerships that can endure, businesses and charities need to commit for the long term. This ambition should be made clear from the outset, and both sides should plan on measuring impact and drawing on their unique strengths. Partnerships are also more likely to be sustained when the participating business embeds its approach as part of its social purpose strategy.

Long-term partnership plan: Both businesses and charities should create plans that show how they will keep supporting each other's goals over time.

Measuring Impact: Use tools to track the long-term effects of partnership activities. These measurements can show the value of the collaboration to people inside and outside the organisation, ensuring continued support.

Using strengths: Deal with any challenges as they come up. For instance, businesses can offer things like office space or technology, while charities can provide insights into community needs.

Social purpose strategy: Businesses should create a strategy that explains their purpose, values, and approach to charitable partnerships, fundraising, and volunteering.

Adapting a long-term focus can create the environment in which what might begin as more transactional interactions can grow into the deeper, more mutually beneficial partnerships.

As the relationship endures, so activity will accumulate and lessons about what works will emerge. Importantly, it may be necessary to grow the inputs too: partnerships must have the necessary resources for success. Businesses and charities can accomplish this by agreeing on funding arrangements, sharing technology and skills, and regularly evaluating the partnership to ensure optimal resource utilisation. Planning together can also help sustain the partnership and facilitate necessary adjustments as time goes on.

Dedicated organisations have a critical role to play in supporting businesses and charities to build more purposeful partnerships

Businesses and charities committing to improve their partnerships in the ways set out in this report do not need to do so alone. In the UK, there are myriad intermediary organisations which can assist. They are often under-utilised but can be powerful sources of insight for firms and charities wanting to move beyond cookie-cutter partnerships and deliver real benefits for society, the economy and the environment, as well as their own organisations.

While such support already exists, it's clear that businesses would benefit from greater awareness of where to turn for help – and of the principles that underpin the best partnerships. This is where trade bodies, membership organisations and umbrella groups can make a difference. Such organisations have significant interaction with businesses, but only rarely do they share information on the best ways to work with charities.

Businesses which are already committed to the most prosperous and meaningful partnerships with charities can also play a leadership role – both by serving as direct beacons of best practice and by challenging the organisations that they are members of to do more.

With intermediary organisations and trade bodies on board, there is real potential to drive societal, environmental and economic change through deeper, and more meaningful charity-business partnerships.

Conclusion

The potential for transformative partnerships between businesses and charities is vast, but achieving meaningful outcomes requires thoughtful collaboration, a shared purpose, and a long-term vision. By focusing on four key areas – developing and maintaining a shared purpose, prioritising clear communication, establishing structure and strategy, and adopting a long-term focus – organisations can move beyond cookie-cutter collaborations and foster impactful relationships that benefit both sectors and society more broadly.

Ultimately, businesses that integrate charitable partnerships into their core strategy – rather than treating them as an afterthought – will not only enhance their reputation and employee engagement but also contribute to societal and environmental progress. There are tried and tested components necessary to foster these impactful relationships, such as empowering partnerships with practical resources and structures, like purpose statements and regular reviews.

Now is the time for businesses and charities to deepen their collaborations, prioritise purpose-driven partnerships, and make lasting, systemic change. By committing the time and resources to nurture these partnerships, both sectors can unlock new opportunities, enhance societal wellbeing, and achieve mutual success.

Annex A – Consultation process

Pro Bono Economics hosted five roundtables in March and April, bringing together representatives from intermediaries, HR professionals, large and small businesses and charities. These sessions gathered insights on what makes a successful business-charity partnership, identifying key barriers and potential solutions. The qualitative data from these discussions informed the conclusions and recommendations of this report. Attendees from Pro Bono Economics, FTI Consulting, Benefact, Shoosmiths, and Pilotlight participated in most roundtables, either as chairs, supporters or attendees. Below is a list of organisations that had representatives at each roundtable:

Roundtable 1: Intermediary Organisations, 5th March

Business in the Community	Get Synergised	Reach
Charterpath	LandAid	Scottish Tech Army
Cranfield Trust	LawWorks	Three Hands
DataKind UK	Media Trust	
	Passion Partnership	

Roundtable 2: HR professionals from businesses, 19th March

Auto Trader	FTI Consulting	Unum
Capgemini	N Brown Group plc	Warburtons
CIPD	The Restaurant Group	WTWC

Roundtable 3: Professionals specialising in social purpose, CSR and/or ESG (large businesses), 26th March

AVON	Henry Boot PLC	Smiths Group plc
BNP Paribas	HIT Training	Sodexo
Boots	HSBC	Strand Palace Hotel
CPRE	Kate Consulting	

Roundtable 4: CEOs from small to medium businesses, 8th April

Boon Impact Limited	Headland Hotel	Shropshire Chamber -
Castlefield	Neighbourly	The Great Outdoor
CEO, Toast91	Network Space	Gym Company
Forster	Redcliffe & Temple	
Communications	BID, BID Team	

Roundtable 5: Charities, 16th April

Age UK	Blue Cross	DSM Foundation
Aleto Foundation	Chapter One	Greener & Cleaner

iSingPOP
Jewish Volunteering
Network
Just a drop

Kids Charity
Mitzvah Day
St John Ambulance
Stop the Traffik

The Talent Tap
UK Yout

BUFT01



@ProBonoEcon



www.probonoeconomics.com



020 3632 2668