

Fairer Futures Partnerships Spotlight Session: Third Sector

Learning Report:
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In partnership with the Scottish Government, the Improvement Service are supporting colleagues delivering Fairer Futures Partnerships (FFPs) with sharing learning, facilitating opportunities for peer support and collaboration around approaches, opportunities and challenges.

Part of this support includes a series of Spotlight Sessions, focused on bringing FFP colleagues together around specific themes identified as priorities by FFPs and partners, to share approaches and learning. The August 2026 session focussed on work happening within the FFP programme to better understand partnership working across the public and third sectors, and the role of the third sector in supporting systems change and delivering whole family support.

The session provided:

- An update on the FFP Third Sector Integration programme led by GCVS and Children in Scotland;
- Learning from strengths assessments undertaken across several FFP areas during 2025-26 and 2026-27;
- A local case study from North Lanarkshire;
- An update on the [Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund](#); and
- An opportunity for discussion and reflection on how this work can be aligned with existing local activity and partnerships.

This work is particularly important as FFPs, Whole Family Support and wider public service reform activity continue to evolve, creating opportunities to strengthen alignment between local partnerships, funding programmes and national priorities.

About the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service (IS) is the go-to organisation for local government improvement in Scotland. Established in 2005, the IS supports councils and their partners to deliver better outcomes for communities, reduce inequalities, and achieve efficiencies.

We do this through leading transformation, building capacity and capability for improvement across the sector, supporting collaboration to tackle shared challenges, providing data and intelligence to inform policy and decision-making, and delivering national shared service applications and technology platforms.

Our expertise covers a wide range of areas including digital public services, performance measurement and benchmarking, transformation and change management, workforce and skills development, planning and place-based approaches, economy and employability, poverty and inequalities, and climate change.

For more information, visit our website: www.improvementservice.org.uk

Key messages

A number of key themes from the work focused on third and public sector relationships within FFPs emerged consistently throughout the session:

- **Trust, relationships and shared purpose** remain the foundation of effective partnership working at operational, strategic and leadership levels, including within frontline delivery teams, governance groups and partnership boards.
- How to ensure the third sector is recognised and supported as a **strategic partner** rather than solely a delivery partner.
- **Strong local partnerships** already exist across many areas and should be built upon rather than duplicated.
- Participants identified opportunities to **strengthen alignment** across FFPs, Whole Family Support, Whole Family Wellbeing Fund activity, Children's Services Planning Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships.
- Participants highlighted concerns regarding the **complexity of the current landscape**, with multiple funding streams, programmes and governance processes operating simultaneously.
- There is a strong appetite for **clearer communication, improved strategic messaging and more opportunities for shared learning** across the various networks and sectors during the transition year and beyond.
- A **place-based approach**, supported through existing local partnership arrangements, is critical to successful implementation.

Speaker Inputs and Slides

1. FFP Third Sector Integration Programme

The session opened with an overview of the Third Sector Integration programme delivered by Children in Scotland and Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS). The programme aims to strengthen the involvement of TSIs and the wider third sector within FFPs and broader local decision-making structures.

Access the [presentation recording](#) and the [slides](#).

Strengths Assessment Approach

The programme has adapted learning from Children in Scotland's existing work supporting third sector involvement in Children's Services Planning Partnerships. Strengths assessments have been undertaken across a number of FFP areas to explore how effectively the third sector is currently embedded within local partnership arrangements.

Assessments focused on:

- Leadership and shared understanding of meaningful involvement.
- Alignment of organisational cultures and ways of working.
- Shared vision and values.
- Representation and participation opportunities.
- Public service reform and systems change.

In 2025/26, this included Glasgow, North Lanarkshire, Dundee, Aberdeen, Clackmannanshire and North Ayrshire. In 2026/27, this includes South Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Edinburgh, West Dunbartonshire, Dumfries & Galloway, Perth & Kinross, Shetland, Fife, West Lothian and Inverclyde.

Key learning

What supports effective collaboration?

The assessment process highlighted positive examples of practice and common factors that support successful partnership working:

- Clear governance and planning arrangements.
- Transparent communication about opportunities for engagement.
- Strong and resilient relationships between partners.
- Shared values and shared leadership.

- Meaningful participation in strategic decision making.
- Recognition of the expertise and insight that third sector organisations bring.
- Alignment between planning, delivery and reporting structures.

Presenters noted that there was strong evidence that partners shared a common commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

However, while examples of strong collaboration were identified, the assessments also highlighted several recurring challenges:

Governance and Systems: Participants frequently reported that governance structures at the local level can be difficult to navigate and are not always clear to external partners. A lack of alignment between planning structures can create uncertainty about where and how the third sector can contribute.

Relationship-Based Engagement: Engagement often depends upon relationships between individuals rather than being embedded within organisational systems and structures. While strong relationships are valuable, reliance on individual connections can create vulnerabilities when staff change roles or organisations.

Power Imbalances: Assessments identified ongoing concerns regarding power imbalances between the public and third sectors. In some areas this contributes to perceptions of third sector partners that engagement is occasional or tokenistic rather than fully embedded within decision-making processes.

Capacity and Resources: The scale of the TSI remit in particular, combined with limited staffing and resources, continues to create challenges for sustained involvement across multiple partnerships and policy areas.

Learning from North Lanarkshire

North Lanarkshire shared practical learning from their experience of partnership working within their FFP, and from their strengths assessment work undertaken in 2025/26. North Lanarkshire have built upon their existing tackling poverty work and have used whole family support as a vehicle for change, with a particular focus on additional support needs (ASN) and neurodiversity.

Access the [presentation recording](#) and [the slides](#).

What has worked well for North Lanarkshire?

Several factors were identified as contributing to progress:

Meaningful Third Sector Involvement: Third sector partners are represented across strategic leadership groups, planning structures and delivery arrangements. Opportunities exist for partners to contribute directly to discussion and decision making.

Shared Decision Making: The partnership has deliberately sought to create an environment where third sector partners are involved in shaping decisions and influencing activity, rather than simply being consulted on proposals.

Flexible Service Delivery: Partners highlighted the benefits of trusting organisations that already

know families and understand local needs. This has enabled greater flexibility and responsiveness in delivering support.

Strong Relationships: A recurring theme throughout the presentation was the importance of partnership relationships. Long-standing trust between organisations was described as a key enabler of collaborative working and system change.

Challenges and opportunities for North Lanarkshire

North Lanarkshire also reflected openly on a number of challenges:

- Operational collaboration can be more difficult than strategic collaboration.
- Communicating the purpose and role of FFPs remains challenging.
- Reporting requirements and evaluation activity can overlap.
- Duplication of information gathering can place pressure on partners and families.
- Shared systems and information-sharing arrangements continue to require development.
- The overall local, national and third sector landscape can feel crowded and difficult to navigate.

A key lesson was that challenges can be navigated successfully when **strong relationships, openness** and a **willingness to adapt** are already in place.

2. Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund Update

Scottish Government colleagues provided an overview of the [Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund](#), its purpose and implementation plans.

Access the [presentation recording](#) and [the slides](#).

Purpose of the Fund

The Fund was established in recognition of the interconnected challenges many families face and the role of trusted third sector organisations in providing coordinated support.

The Fund seeks to:

- Support joined-up, holistic family support.
- Strengthen prevention and early intervention.
- Improve coordination between services.
- Build on trusted relationships with families and communities.
- Contribute learning and evidence to future Whole Family Support policy development.

The Scottish Government emphasised that the Fund is intended to complement and strengthen existing local work rather than create parallel structures. The ten organisations who have been awarded the funding can be found below. Several funded organisations are working as collaborative

partnerships involving multiple delivery organisations. This means funding will reach a much wider range of local and community-based third sector organisations than the lead applicant list alone suggests, helping to ensure local knowledge, relationships and place-based expertise are embedded in delivery.

Lead Applicant Organisation	Scottish Government Lead
Big Hearts Community Trust Local Authorities covered: Aberdeen City, City of Edinburgh, East Ayrshire, Falkirk and Inverclyde	Helen McLellan
Borders Community Action Local Authorities covered: Dumfries and Galloway, Midlothian and Scottish Borders	Sean McCartney
Capital City Partnership Local Authorities covered: City of Edinburgh, East Lothian, Fife, Midlothian, Scottish Borders and West Lothian	Katy Burns
CEIS Ayrshire Local Authorities covered: East Ayrshire, North Ayrshire and South Ayrshire	Craig Hewitt
Citizens Advice Scotland Local Authorities covered: Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Angus, Argyll and Bute, City of Edinburgh, City of Glasgow, Clackmannanshire, Dumfries and Galloway, East Lothian, Falkirk, Fife, Highland, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Orkney, Perth and Kinross, Renfrewshire, Stirling, West Lothian	Carol Lamont
Early Years Scotland and Care and Learning Alliance (CALA) Local Authorities covered: City of Glasgow, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland, Moray, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, West Dunbartonshire	Craig Hewitt
Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector Local Authorities covered: City of Glasgow, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire	Gillian Cross
Home Start Caithness Local Authorities covered: Argyll and Bute, Highland, Orkney	Kirsty Whyte
One Parent Families Scotland Local Authorities covered: City of Edinburgh, City of Glasgow, Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire, Falkirk, Fife, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire	Gillian Cross
Salvesen Mindroom Centre Local Authorities covered: City of Glasgow, Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee City, East Lothian, North Lanarkshire, West Lothian	Heather Carbry

Learning and future development

A significant focus of the Fund will be capturing learning from funded partnerships and understanding how successful approaches might inform future developments in whole family support. This includes exploring:

- Models of partnership working.
- Effective approaches to coordination.
- Barriers and enablers of delivery.
- Evidence of impact for children, young people and families.

Existing evidence from FFPs and Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) activity, alongside learning generated through the Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund, will contribute to the wider evidence base for future Whole Family Support development. During discussion, participants highlighted the importance of ensuring this learning is accessible and shared across partnerships.

View [findings from the Year 2 WFWF Programme evaluation](#). Evaluation is currently underway for activities delivered during 2024-26.

Questions and reflections from participants

Participants sought clarification on:

- How third sector organisations are involved in strengths assessments.
- Whether engagement extends beyond TSIs.
- How wider third sector voices are captured.
- How learning networks operate and who participates.

Discussion reinforced the importance of engaging directly with a broad range of organisations and ensuring TSIs are not the sole route through which third sector perspectives are gathered.

Alignment Across Programmes

The strongest and most sustained discussion focused on how different programmes, funding streams and governance arrangements connect across FFPs, WFWF and the Third Sector Delivery Fund.

Participants highlighted concerns about:

- Multiple initiatives operating simultaneously.
- Different reporting requirements.
- Information arriving through different channels.
- Challenges maintaining a clear strategic overview of what's happening locally and nationally.
- Risks of duplication or fragmentation.

There was strong support for more coordinated approaches that recognise and build upon existing local structures, relationships and activity.

Place-Based Approaches and Local Coordination

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of place-based working and local decision making.

Discussion focused on:

- The role of Community Planning Partnerships in coordinating activity.
- The need to connect funded organisations with FFPs as early as possible.
- Strengthening connections with TSIs.
- Ensuring awareness of existing local activity and priorities before new national programmes, funding and initiatives are introduced.
- Making best use of existing local relationships and infrastructure.

The following questions were raised during the session and provide useful considerations for ongoing delivery and future discussions as we collectively consider how best to deliver Whole Family Support across Scotland.

Strategic Alignment

- How can stronger alignment be achieved between FFPs, Whole Family Support, WFWF activity, Children's Services Planning and Community Planning?
- How can strategic messages be communicated more effectively to CPP Boards and senior leaders?
- How do locally developed approaches connect with national programmes and funding streams?

Partnership Working

- What support is available to help newly funded organisations through the Third Sector Delivery Fund connect with local partnerships?
- How can TSIs be supported to connect funded providers into local networks and planning

structures?

- How do we avoid creating additional layers of complexity within already busy systems?

Questions were also raised about whether there is a shared understanding across sectors of what meaningful engagement looks like. Presenters suggested there is broad agreement on the principles of effective collaboration, with most challenges relating to systems, structures and capacity.

Communication and Coordination

- How can communication be improved so that partners understand how different initiatives fit together?
- Would strategic briefings for CPP Boards be helpful?
- Would regular updates from funded partnerships support learning and awareness?

Learning and Evaluation

- Is evaluation evidence available from existing WFWF activity?
- How can learning be shared on both a thematic and place basis?
- How can reporting and evaluation be streamlined?
- What mechanisms can be used to bring different sources of evidence together?

Funding and Commissioning

- How does the Third Sector Delivery Fund work align with wider Fairer Funding discussions?
- How can local partnerships influence or connect with nationally commissioned activity through the Third Sector Delivery Fund?
- How can commissioning continue to evolve towards more flexible and collaborative approaches?

Looking ahead

Participants welcomed the opportunity to hear about ongoing FFP third sector integration work and the Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund. Discussion reflected a strong commitment to partnership working and a shared ambition to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

The session highlighted the importance of:

- Building on existing partnership infrastructure.
- Strengthening links between local and national activity.
- Continuing to invest in relationships and trust.
- Supporting meaningful third sector involvement.
- Improving communication and strategic alignment.
- Sharing learning in accessible and practical ways.

Participants expressed a desire for continued updates, regular opportunities for shared learning and clearer communication about how different strands of work connect across Scotland's whole family support landscape.

IS offer of support to FFPs

What could our support look like for your FFP?

The IS can provide support to your FFP with developing and sharing your story of change. This could include.

- **Supporting your FFP to work through any identified barriers/challenges** around this part of the work.
- **Supporting your FFP to identify what existing reporting mechanisms and data already exist** locally/nationally to help you understand and articulate your FFP's progress and impact.
- **Supporting your FFP to develop outputs** that capture learning, stories and evidence. Outputs could include: storytelling, case studies, infographics, short thematic reports, blogs, etc.

For full details of the support offer, please see the “Learning Approach” section of the [Fairer Future Partnerships: Learning, Engagement and Resources Space](#)

Please get in touch!

Contact us

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