

Fairer Futures Partnerships Spotlight Session: Partnership Approaches

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 January 2026 session focused on Partnership Approaches with presentations from Fife and Dundee. The session explored the approaches FFPs are taking to working with local and national partners. This learning report offers you the chance to familiarise yourself with key learning gathered from the session.

You can watch the presentations [here](#) and access the slides in the [resource pack](#).

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 around partnership approaches were identified during the session:

- **The need to break down silos and develop integrated systems.** Participants consistently highlighted the need to collapse parallel reporting, planning and funding systems into single, shared processes.
- **The importance of early co-design.** Whether through locality-based workshops or strategic steering groups, co-design needs to be embedded at the very start of service design and delivery, ensuring that planning, reporting and funding systems move toward single, shared processes.
- **Effective partnerships require cultural change as well as structural change.** Relationships, trust, role clarity and cultural shifts are just as important as structural changes to funding and reporting processes.
- **The national–local partnership alignment is a key enabler of partnership working.** Active partnership support from Scottish Government with FFPs provides a welcome new way of working, as well as providing legitimacy, protection and support to challenge internal systems. National support was further entrenched at the Whole Family Support event in September 2025, where the First Minister reaffirmed his Government’s commitment to reducing child poverty as the number one priority, and emphasised giving permission to empower frontline workers to draw on a wider range of partners and services to support families, ultimately improving families’ access to effective, preventative support.

What are the key learning points, opportunities and challenges FFPs identified with partnership working so far?

Key learning:

- Effective collaboration is a core enabler of progress and key to success.
- Learning partners add value by supporting systems mapping, co-design and shared understanding of complex systems.
- Embedded partnerships strengthen referral pathways and expand families’ access to holistic support.
- Services are more effective where the voices of lived experience are embedded in the design, and partnerships are a critical link to the community.

Challenges:

- Complex funding and policy landscapes can hinder long-term partnership planning.
- Capacity constraints can limit cross-sector collaboration.
- Difficulty aligning shared aims within systems-change narratives can negatively impact consistent messaging across partners.

Understanding and definitions

What do we mean when we talk about partnerships?

A key part of FFP delivery is the development of meaningful, robust and equal partnerships across organisations and communities to test new approaches to tackling child poverty. FFPs bring together a range of partners across the third, public and private sectors.

Depending on local needs and context, FFPs are taking varied approaches to partnership working with different partners, so this looks different for each FFP. An overview of each FFP's approach can be found [here](#).

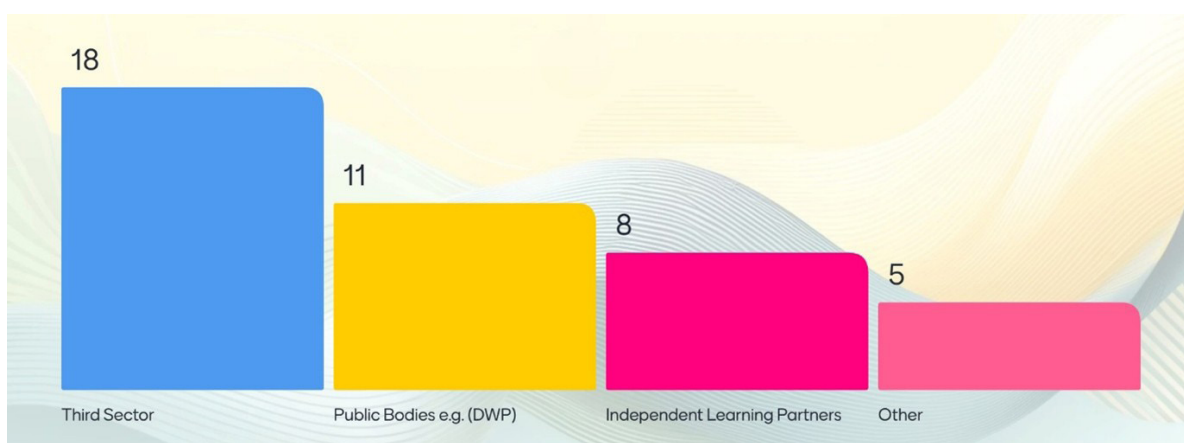
Partners include:

- The Scottish Government;
- Communities, e.g., community groups, families;
- Third sector organisations, e.g., direct family support, money advice providers;
- Public sector partners, e.g., Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), schools, health services; and
- Independent learning partners, e.g., New Local.
- Philanthropic organisations
- Businesses

Opening reflections

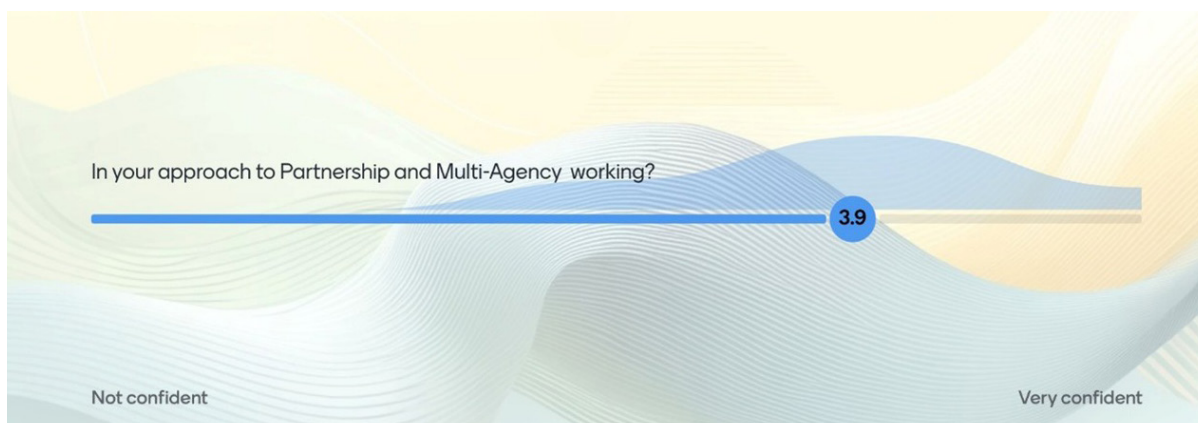
Attendees were asked to answer quick questions on which partners they are currently working with locally, how confident they are in their approach to multi-agency and partnership working, what is working well, and what is challenging.

Which partners are you working with locally?



Note: “Other” answers included businesses and philanthropic organisations.

How confident are you in your FFP’s approach to partnership and multi-agency working?



What is working well for you locally in terms of partnership/multi-agency working?



What is challenging for you locally in terms of partnership/multi-agency working?



Speaker inputs and slides

Fife

Fife's presentation, led by Sinead O'Donnell (Policy & Delivery Manager, Fife Council), outlined a strengths-based No Wrong Door approach in the Cowdenbeath area of Fife. Fife have developed an Integrated Community Team offer, with a strong focus on prevention. This development has been supported by New Local's place-based enablers and is overseen by the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Combined, this allows for a person-centred, whole system approach to be taken in Fife.

Watch Fife's presentation [here](#) and access the slides [here](#).

Dundee

Dundee's presentation, led by Carol Lamont from Scottish Government on behalf of Dundee colleagues, highlighted how flexible partnership working across DWP, Social Security Scotland, Dundee City Council and the Scottish Government has enabled delivery of community-focused support, grounded in trust. The relationship between the Scottish Government and Dundee has contributed to supporting key workers to focus on community support and delivery..

Watch Dundee's presentation [here](#) and access the slides [here](#).

What's been working well?

We heard from Fife and Dundee about their approach to partnerships in their FFP, and what's been working well across other FFP areas.

Participants highlights that, locally, partnership and multi-agency working is being strengthened by a clear shared vision, common objectives and a strong commitment to improving outcomes for families. Well-established relationships, leadership engagement and buy-in at both strategic and local levels are enabling partners to work with confidence and purpose. There is a strong culture of shared learning and knowledge exchange, helping services better understand each other's roles, cultures and processes. This has led to improved alignment of strategic intentions, closer CPP alignment and more integrated ways of working, with partners embedded in projects from the outset rather than brought in later.

Also working well is the practical focus on local issues, informed by good data, local insight and community voice in decision-making and funding allocation. Partnership working with the third sector has supported faster responses and more agile development of new projects, while pooled funding and Elected Member support are helping move activity away from short-term initiatives towards more embedded, sustainable change. Overall, services are increasingly dovetailing their efforts, supported by shared principles, autonomy to deliver locally, and a collective determination to keep going and do better for communities.

Valuing the third sector

The third sector is central to the success of local FFP work.

- In Dundee, the drop-in hub would not exist without third sector partners who host the space, provide reception, triage and offer familiar, trusted faces for residents.
- Third sector partners are well-embedded within community planning in Fife and actively shape strategy through steering group roles and consultation processes. Third and community sector organisations were interviewed as part of the New Local work, with their feedback directly informing the development of the approach, and with formal representation on the steering group, giving them influence over planning, spending priorities and the redesign of mainstream practice. Fife is developing information-sharing agreements with the third sector to strengthen their role within integrated triage and community support, ensuring they are treated as equal partners.
- Local workshops (for example in Perth and Kinross) include third sector colleagues and help map existing infrastructure, group dynamics and community reach, strengthening collaboration and avoiding reinventing the wheel. Ensuring that the third sector are involved in FFP activity such as this allows for relationships to be established, strengthened and a level of trust built.

Cultural shifts

Cultural shifts in partnership working have strengthened relationships and trust.

- Integrated working in Fife across a number of statutory services through the Integrated Community Team No Wrong Door approach is already leading to stronger relationships, improved understanding of roles, and supporting them to take a more holistic approach to support families.
- Fife is creating formal information-sharing agreements with third sector partners to support more coordinated, holistic responses that will enable better multi-agency decision-making, reduce duplication and ensure partners have a shared understanding of people's needs. The aim is to strengthen the No Wrong Door approach by allowing partners to act on consistent information rather than working in isolation.
- Some areas report significant progress in letting go of "institutional ego", stepping back from being the default lead, and embracing more equal partnership models.
- Bringing partners into the design stage early on rather than presenting decisions for feedback improves shared ownership of decisions and better alignment of roles and resources. In Dundee, the DWP, Social Security Scotland and the Council, in collaboration with the Scottish Government, are integrated into the design of processes, roles, and triage models, allowing partners to be involved at the formative stages.

National and multi-agency support

Support from Scottish Government, as a key partner with FFPs, has been a “game changer”.

- Working in partnership with the Scottish Government supports FFPs to challenge internal systems, be bolder, and “disrupt” the system.
- FFPs highlighted that the role of the Scottish Government as partner, rather than solely funder, has been refreshing and supportive, and this has encouraged innovation.
- Dundee FFP’s work is strengthened by newer, more collaborative ways of working between the DWP, Social Security Scotland, the Council and the Scottish Government, which collectively support a more integrated, holistic, and responsive model. Their joint involvement reflects a shift away from siloed roles.

Emerging approaches

Fife FFP is developing an emerging partnership approach through [Pride in Place funding](#).

- Fife has two areas receiving Pride in Place funding from the UK Government. This investment is significant, long-term funding, and its key feature is that residents and community groups lead the strategy, set priorities and influence how the money is spent.
- This shifts traditional practice because instead of local authorities or services designing programmes first, communities are put in charge of the overall direction over a ten-year period. This is accelerating the shift to new community-led governance, with residents influencing strategy, missions and spend, and creates a test-bed for how FFP flexible funding could be shaped by community-led evidence and decision-making.
- Fife is examining how to integrate around £4 million of discretionary local funding from employability, attainment and anti-poverty budgets into a single, flexible, community-informed framework, providing a test-bed for how areas might mainstream and support sustainability of FFP approaches.

What are the challenges?

We heard from Fife and Dundee about some of their lessons learned around partnership working, and some of the challenges and barriers across other FFP areas.

FFP responses highlighted that partnership and multi-agency working locally is challenged by a range of structural and practical issues. Competing priorities set by the Scottish Government, variable risk appetite across partners, and limited understanding of FFP projects across some services and organisations.

Capacity constraints within some organisations, alongside competition within the third sector, further limit meaningful collaboration. Short-term funding and contracts (particularly for key staff) create instability and make it difficult for third sector organisations to sustain work once it has started. Time spent maintaining partnerships can also detract from direct support to families. In addition, duplicated systems across thematic areas, inconsistent data-gathering approaches, and difficulties agreeing shared outcomes across place-based models all hinder effective integrated working.

Funding complexity and duplication

Multiple overlapping funding streams create unnecessary workload and confusion, making it harder for partners to work together efficiently and coordinate activity without duplication.

- Organisations across the third and public sectors report using a lot of capacity to apply to multiple funding streams and having to report against several parallel systems for similar outcomes. They highlight the need for less bureaucracy and more integrated approaches to funding and reporting.
- Some third sector organisations feel they are already delivering on the gaps FFPs aim to fill, which creates sensitivity over roles and perceived duplication.
- There is concern about how to coordinate locally funded projects without undermining existing work. Some community organisations in Aberdeen have expressed some concern around introducing new FFP-funded work that may overlap with existing services, highlighting how imperative it is that new services must enhance rather than duplicate existing work.

Fragmented working

Partnership working requires deliberate integration.

- In some areas, teams are co-located but not co-working, limiting the potential for integrated practice.
- In some instances, teams may be in the same building but are often on different floors, showing that physical proximity does not automatically create partnership working.

Cultural barriers

Rigid professional identities may limit meaningful collaboration; cultural change is essential for partnerships to function with a shared approach.

- Some FFPs reflected that historically, local authorities may hold on too tightly to responsibilities, creating a “parent–child” dynamic rather than an equal partnership.
- Legacy structures and cultures mean that professionals may struggle to relax thematic identities (for example, staying in “their area” like poverty, employability, or policing), which creates siloed working rather than integrated responses.

Opportunity to strengthen private sector involvement

Optimising engagement with a key sector with potential resources and influence would enhance the breadth and depth of partnership working.

- There is a gap in optimising engagement with the Private sector across FFPs locally. In some areas such as Cowdenbeath (Fife), local industrial stakeholders are active in the FFP space. Clackmannanshire also maintain good links with the private sector as well as with philanthropic organisations.

Lack of clear models for working

Without an agreed framework for “doing things differently”, partners may struggle to align their efforts and test new approaches confidently and consistently.

- Fife commissioned support from New Local, an independent think and do tank, advocating for greater community empowerment, a community paradigm shift and the role of public services. New Local supported Fife colleagues to look at all the assets and strengths in Cowdenbeath and consider what a new system for local leadership, planning and commissioning might look like. Moving into the next phase after support from New Local, Fife highlighted they were confronted with the absence of a fully developed model or framework for “doing things differently” in practice to help partners coalesce around.

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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