

Why work together?

In a time of crisis we all want to pull together and to help each other not just as individuals but as groups and organisations.

There are some very good reasons:

- To make sure that everyone knows who is helping and how.
- To make sure no one is wasting resources by duplicating effort unnecessarily.
- To make sure that any skills, knowledge, experience and learning are shared and we are not all having to learn the same lessons – at the moment we are all on a steep learning curve and helping others so they can avoid making the same mistakes will really help.
- To create a net that people won't slip through but will make sure the most vulnerable in particular can access the help they need.

Bristol City Council are working with the NHS and Voscur to help co-ordinate voluntary action groups in the COVID-19 crisis. They are working with GPs and social prescribing services to reach whoever needs support. Coordinating people and resources in this way is new and evolving to be most effective. You can find up to date information on this on the Voscur website www.voscur.org

A. Steps for starting to work together

STEP 1 Look for similar or complementary groups and organisations

You can look online through social media and websites. The Council and Voscur hold information about local organisations and services. The Council has a map you can search too: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/my-neighbourhood-search>

Similar groups can help to share learning and expertise and also avoid duplication – you may be able to share resources to get the job done better

Think about what you do and search for others using key words e.g. community, volunteer, postcode, COVID-19.

Complementary Groups can help you to join up local provision e.g. if you are organising local support for vulnerable people you might want to find organisations who can give further support on specific issues such as employment rights, advice, shopping etc. Again search online on social media and websites for organisations you can signpost people to.

STEP 2 – make contact and share information about your work

It is important to make sure that people don't fall through the net that you know about other groups and they know about you and what you do so you can signpost people effectively. Also this will help you identify where there may be overlap and gaps in services.

STEP 3 – share skills, knowledge, experience and learning

Connect with other relevant organisations and groups on social media or email to make sure you can share information, avoid making the same mistakes and build helpful relationships. Include keeping Voscur and the Council up to date with your work as they can pass this on to other relevant groups.

STEP 4 – identify potential collaboration

Through the information you have gathered you might find that you have ideas of how provision could be improved either to avoid duplication, to roll out a good idea to wider audiences or to develop new offers where there are gaps in provision. Contact other organisations and make suggestions of how you might work together.

STEP 5 - Keep updating all the information and sharing

It will save time and resources in the long run to spend some energy on collaboration and working together so make sure you set aside time to keep up this work.

B. Forming Positive Relationships

Particularly at the moment, there are times when we feel desperate, powerless and overwhelmed. This can lead to miscommunication and conflict even where it is not intended.

To form and maintain positive relationships bear the following in mind:

We don't all have access to the same information – for various reasons we have a different experience of the crisis and also varying degrees of knowledge and experience – be patient but not patronising – clarify what people are trying to communicate and take time to understand their feelings.

We don't all speak the same language – different groups and organisations use different language to describe what they are doing and why it is important. Take time to put what you are saying into basic terms and avoid any slang or acronyms. Encourage others to do the same. Check everyone has the same understanding during conversations.

We are all good people trying to do our best – even when you are feeling frustrated about the pace and capacity for things to happen bear in mind that no-one is intentionally making things difficult. Trust that everyone has the same good intentions as you but just might approach things from a different perspective. Take the time to reassure yourself and others that we are all working towards the same goals.

We sometimes get stuck in our communication and need help to express what we need – very often we find that we are repeating the same request when someone doesn't understand. Bear in mind that someone's idea, suggestion or request will make more sense if you understand why they think it's important and what they really need from you. Try to open up the conversation to get to these basics. Sometimes going away and calming down and thinking it through again is enough to restart more effective communication.

We all need support – encourage yourself and others to recognise that we all need support and that is what relationships are about, whether between individuals or groups and organisations. We cannot survive alone and need to depend on others. This is not a weakness but if you can talk about it, it's a strength that you bring to a relationship. Putting effort into relationships reassures everyone that you think they are worthwhile.

There is always a resolution – if you disagree or find out you have different priorities there will always be a way forward – it might be to go back a step and work together to reach a different conclusion, it might be to find another way forward, it might be to agree to go in different directions from each other. Approaching disagreement looking for the solution that means that you can maintain the relationship you have.

C. Successful collaborations need common foundations

Clarity of Shared Purpose:

Good communication – in initiating, exploring and negotiating what you can do together but also in dealing with any change of plans, new challenges, unexpected events and conflicts.

Building an authentic relationship – this means paying attention not only to the project you are working on together but getting to know your peers, understanding their whole business, being flexible to accommodate any issues that arise and valuing the relationship beyond the specific roles. The partnership between **organisations** should mean that there are contacts between all levels and commitment from managers and trustees.

Appropriate funding: neither partner should have the grounds to feel that they are subsidising the partnership or contributing inequitably.

Collaboration and Co-operation: even if it is specific to a project, all parties need to foster a spirit of learning, collaboration and co-operation.

Ability to deal with difference: successful partnerships find ways to deal with differences between them in capacity, expertise, experience, resources, ways of working, internal processes and so on.

Partnership processes: decision making, evaluation, payments and conflict resolution should have realistic and accountable processes agreed in advance.

Voscur is here to support VCSE organisations. For support, advice and guidance, please contact us: info@voscur.org or 0117 909 9949