



School Partnerships Alliance
Innovation Hub Project 2

Capturing the full impact of partnership initiatives

Report and recommendations

Introduction

The S.P.A. Innovation Hub is a space to test and refine ideas, build solutions to sustainable practice, and elevate pockets of local good practice to national status. A space to explore, create and inspire, where members come together to exchange ideas and experiences and recommend ways forward.

Each of our projects is underpinned by S.P.A.'s commitment to partnership working that is: strategic, mutually beneficial, sustainable, impactful, and needs-focused, including reaching the disadvantaged.

Evaluating the impact of partnership programmes is a vital component of securing the ongoing commitment of partner schools, and funding, be it from school budgets, sponsors or donors. Whether you are approaching this challenge from the perspective of a school leader, a partnership coordinator or a school partnership lead, we hope you will find this report useful.

Innovation Hub 2 considered impact evaluation through four strands:

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Abstract

Impact evaluation is important for cross-sector partnerships because it provides the evidence, accountability, and learning needed to make collaboration meaningful not just symbolic. This report examines how schools and their partners can embed robust, meaningful evaluation into partnership work by combining clear aims, Theory of Change (ToC) models, and reliable impact measurement. It considers four strands of practice to support schools in evidencing outcomes and demonstrating long-term value.

Strand 1: Capturing Impact – Projects should begin with well-defined aims and age-appropriate evaluation tools that measure progress against those aims, whether through quantitative or qualitative data.

Strand 2: Theory of Change – A ToC provides a structured framework for mapping aims, outcomes, and assumptions, ensuring partnerships are strategic and collaborative. By focusing on outcomes rather than outputs, schools can strengthen evaluation and identify areas for adaptation.

Strand 3: Platforms – Choosing an evaluation platform should be driven by context-specific needs and reporting priorities. Peer consultation is encouraged to learn from existing practice.

Strand 4: Impact Reporting – Strong reports reflect progress against key principles: strategy, mutual benefit, sustainability, impact, and needs-focus. Framing reports around shared aims ensures they resonate with all partner schools, featuring both qualitative and quantitative evaluation of outcomes.

Together, these approaches build a more consistent, reliable, and meaningful framework for capturing the value of school partnerships.

Strand 1: Capturing the impact of projects

Lead: Tony Fahey (Caterham School)

Participants: Jenny Stanley (Dulwich College), Chanel Noel (Highgate), Alex Trosser (King's College Sschoo), Louise Banerjee (Oundle School), Mark Snoswell (King's School Rochester)

The first strand considered how partnerships can capture the impact of activities, events or programmes for students, staff and schools.

The group discussed a wide range of approaches, from emoji Likert Scales to video testimonials. Every tool has its place, but no single method fits all activities. Quantitative data is often considered to be most reliable, and this can be generated by a range of methods, including baseline and post-event questionnaires. Qualitative data gives more of the story behind the impact and can be very engaging. It can add depth and meaning, helping to explain why change happens and capturing outcomes that numbers alone may miss. By gathering reflections, observations and participant voices, qualitative assessment can provide compelling evidence for storytelling and advocacy.

Rather than draw up specific tools, the group recommends that members seeking advice on evaluating a particular project reach out to S.P.A., to be linked up to a member in a similar setting, or undertaking a comparable project.

Contact info@schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk if you are seeking specific advice.



Some interesting links for those undertaking impact evaluation for the first time or wanting to develop their practice:

ISC Toolkit for Impact Evaluation

<https://idpe.org.uk/uk/idpe/uploads/News%20pages/ISC%20Toolkit%20for%20Impact%20Evaluation.pdf>

Measuring impact for cross-sector partnerships (ImpactEd in collaboration with Astin Consulting)
<https://www.impactgroup.uk/research-campaigns-and-resources/partnerships-impact-guide-8b1cf>

5 ways schools can evaluate their impact (CEM) <https://www.cem.org/blog/evaluating-impact>

EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit has an interesting brief video:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit#:~:text=Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Toolkit,EEF>

Strand 2: Theory of change (giving meaningful evaluation)

Lead: Scott Crawford (Magdalen College School, now Head of Lancing College))

Participants: Arabella González (The Haberdashers' Company); Lisa Irwin (Emanuel School); Kathy O'Donnell (Sevenoaks School)

Acknowledgement: John Smith (Royal Grammar School Newcastle)

1. Developing a Theory of Change (ToC) for a partnership

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change is a visual representation of a programme's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and underlying causal mechanisms. It describes the assumptions about how planned activities will lead to intended outcomes, and clarifies how different programme aspects fit together to achieve the final goal.

Why is it needed?

A ToC helps to model desired outcomes before deciding on an intervention, ensuring the interventions can achieve those outcomes. It sets out how the intervention should work and the necessary resources, helping to determine if outcomes need review or activities need adaptation based on available resources. It also helps identify evaluation questions and evidence sources.

How to develop a ToC:

- a) Collectively define the situation, outlining the context and the problem the intervention aims to address, or change it aims to effect.
- b) Define the aims, linking them to the overarching strategy and proposed solution. Tightly defining the aims of the cross-sector partnership is a starting point for developing evaluation processes.
- c) Identify outcomes that need to be in place for long-term goals to be achieved.
- d) Define the impact, which is the long-term goal related to the situation and aims, representing the result of the problem's removal, or change's impact.
- e) Outline activities that will bring about the desired change, mobilising inputs to produce outputs.
- f) Determine the outputs, the direct results or deliverables of the intervention that enable the achievement of outcomes.
- g) Identify the inputs, the human, financial, and organisational resources required to deliver activities and achieve desired outcomes.
- h) Consider rationale and assumptions. Rationale explains why one outcome is needed to achieve another. Assumptions explain the contextual underpinnings of the ToC and are conditions necessary for the success of the intervention.

Flexibility: A ToC should guide evaluation and decision-making but should not be restrictive. It can be revisited as partnerships and programmes mature.

If a ToC is being applied to an existing programme, consider how much is already known about how the initiative under evaluation operates and how many of the assumptions you are confident about.

Sharing: Ensure that the Theory of Change is agreed with partner schools to facilitate collaboration and prompt additional partnership opportunities. It may also be worthwhile sharing the Theory of Change with older pupils involved in partnership projects.

A variety of templates are available online and can serve as useful starting points. Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, TASO, has a concise and clear template alongside a variety of exemplar Theory of Change models. These can be accessed here <https://taso.org.uk/libraryitem/core-theory-of-change-templates/>.

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), a thinktank and consultancy service for the impact sector, provides an excellent step by step guide to producing Theory of Change models. This can be found here: [About NPC – New Philanthropy Capital – Social Impact Consultants](#).

The Hg Foundation followed the NPC approach to develop their Theory of Change model which aims to help under-represented groups to access high quality jobs in technology industries by supporting education and employment programmes across the UK, Europe and North America. It has published an Outcomes and Evaluation guide that can assist in the development of school partnership Theory of Change models. This can be found here: [Hg Outcomes and Evaluation Guide](#).

2. Meaningful impact evaluation

Using a ToC can focus impact evaluation and make it more meaningful:

- **Holistic Understanding:** The ToC is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the process of impact evaluation of partnerships.
- **Beyond Numbers:** Impact evaluation extends beyond counting participants; it examines the effect of activities on those involved.
- **Qualitative Insights:** Use focus groups to gain detailed insights into students' experiences for programme development and promotional purposes.
- **Longitudinal Measures:** Employ longitudinal evaluation methods to correlate participation in programmes and longer-term impact measures.
- **Evaluation Question:** Structure impact measurement through a clear evaluation question. This question needs to include something that can be measured. Be specific about which groups of pupils you want to see changes in and over what period of time. Indicate how much time until you expect to see the desired impact. Ensure realistic aims.
- **Data Sharing Agreements:** Ensuring the appropriate data sharing agreements are in place is helpful.
- **Validated Scales:** Use academically validated scales to provide insight into non-cognitive, soft skills.

- **Reliability:** Particular areas to consider when reflecting on the reliability of your results are sample size, implementation, and timeframe.

Examples:

- Instead of measuring the number of pupils attending a session, measure increased confidence and motivation.
- Instead of measuring time spent on a specific programme, measure a stronger relationship with the partner school.
- Instead of measuring projects completed by pupils, measure increased skills or knowledge.

Considerations: Impact should focus on what changes and outcomes are happening as a result of partnership work. This could include attainment, but exploring other skills and competencies can help to uncover the strengths and targeting of interventions.

When evaluating the impact of school partnerships, it is important to recognise that partnerships in their early stages may only be able to produce simple participation metrics - such as the number of students or teachers involved - rather than detailed quantitative analysis. It may not be realistic, or even desirable, to aim for complex data collection too soon. However, impact measurement should be factored into longer-term planning to ensure meaningful insights over time.

As mentioned above, qualitative measures should not be overlooked. Surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and feedback from pupils, participating teachers, and colleagues can provide rich, nuanced insights into the effectiveness of the partnership. These qualitative approaches often reveal aspects of impact that numbers alone cannot capture, such as personal development, engagement levels, and shifts in attitudes.

If the partnership work is donor-funded, it is worth considering which impact measures will resonate most with specific types of donors. Different funders may prioritise different types of evidence - some may prefer clear numerical outcomes, while others may value compelling personal stories and testimonials. Aligning impact evaluation with donor expectations can help secure ongoing support and effectively demonstrate the value of the partnership.

The ISC has published a toolkit to help evaluate independent – state school partnerships that contains links to a variety of freely available metrics that can be adapted to assess outcomes. This is available here: <https://www.isc.co.uk/media/6003/impact-evaluation-toolkit-v5.pdf>. Among these, Angela Duckworth's [Grit Scale](#) is both accessible and widely applicable. Additionally, AI could streamline the [thematic analysis](#) of qualitative data gathered from partnership activities, supporting a more nuanced understanding of effective practices.

3. The role of governors in theory of change and impact evaluation

School governors play a crucial role in providing strategic challenge and scrutiny in school improvement, ensuring that development plans are both rigorous and effective. Drawing on best practice from the charitable sector, governors can strengthen impact evaluation by asking three key questions about the ToC:

1. **Is the plan plausible?** – Governors should critically assess the evidence behind proposed activities, ensuring assumptions about impact are well-founded.
2. **Is the plan feasible?** – They should challenge whether the necessary resources—staff, funding, and time—are available and in place to achieve the intended outcomes.
3. **Is the plan testable?** – Governors must ensure there are clear, measurable key performance indicators (KPIs) to track progress and hold leadership accountable.

Using a Theory of Change approach enables governors to encourage open reflection, enhance strategic clarity, and maintain a long-term focus on school improvement. Schools should actively engage and empower governors to maximise their impact as custodians of school improvement.

For further details see John Smith’s article in SecEd, ‘Three questions to harness the power of your school governors. <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/three-questions-to-harness-the-power-of-your-school-governors/>

Sources:

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NotebookLM, a Google AI tool, was used in the preparation of this material from the sources identified above. Edited and compiled by S R Crawford, Magdalen College School, Oxford.

Strand 3: Impact platforms

Lead: Andy Marlow (Whitgift)

Participants: Ben Jones (Alleyn's School), Dan Clarke (Cheltenham Education Partnership), Andy Saunders (Eton College), Tim Dalton (Harrow School), Naomi Barker (The Haberdashers' Company)

This group considered existing impact evaluation platforms. They focused on two, currently used by at least one member of the group. These are commercial platforms. Many partnerships measure impact through their own tools, not paying for external support. We are not recommending a particular provider, just offering brief observations on each one.

Platform ideals:

- Cheap or free
- Potential of consistency across programmes/sector
- Flexible – user editable
- Benchmarked against national data or research
- Qualitative and quantitative data output
- Longitudinal
- Produces impact data/report in various formats

ImpactEd <https://www.impactgroup.uk/>

Advantages	Disadvantages
Evaluation measures – quantitative data for personal characteristics	Cost (high cost per institution)
Benchmarked against national data	Requires access to devices for surveys
Can include attainment data (if added manually)	Not easy to add bespoke questions independently
ImpactEd can add bespoke questions	

HEAT <https://heat.ac.uk/>

Advantages	Disadvantages
Collates location data for disadvantage	Potentially high cost without parent university partner
Excellent quantitative dashboard	Many features redundant for our purposes
Doubles as an effective events planner	Requires sensitive data
Tracks students for many years	Requires training and upkeep

Other:

Nexus <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdlvYIGTOS4>

Trust Impact – charitable sector [Trust Impact - Understand, Measure & Maximise Social Impact](#)

Strand 4: Impact reporting

Lead: Margaret Hunnaball (S.P.A.)

Participants: Christina Astin (Astin Consulting, S.P.A. Associate), Josh Plotkin (The Haberdashers' Elstree Schools), Dan Clarke (Cheltenham Education Partnership)

This strand, led by our Director of Programmes and Research, analysed a range of impact reports and considered evidence metrics for the sector to report on, drawing up questions to be considered in reporting impact.

The team reviewed a number of impact reports. Some were well structured, with clear evidence of impact that was easily accessible. Others painted a picture of a school sharing its wonders with those less privileged.

S.P.A. is committed to partnership working that is: strategic, mutually beneficial, sustainable, impactful, and needs-focused, including reaching the disadvantaged. To this end, these features were considered in the impact reports, shown here through a series of key questions.

Is evaluation linked to aims?

In best practice, the impact report was closely linked to both school and partnership aims. In most, though, this was implicit but not stated.

Including the aims that the partnership is setting out to meet provides important context for the partnership working.

Does the report include meaningful quantitative data?

A key consideration here is what is meant by meaningful data. Several reports include outputs, such as number of students attending events, but not outcomes – what they gained from them. This outcome data would be a more compelling way of evidencing that projects are impactful.

One report used statistics sparingly, but overall this made them more impactful.

Some reports evidenced a high level of data collection, while others included little quantitative data.

Data relating to staff typically involved staff hours devoted to partnership working.

Some reports include data from ImpactEd (see strand 3). This quantitative data included cross-references to national averages for qualities such as self-efficacy and growth mindset. They also measured improvement across longitudinal projects – comparing final scores with those at the start of the project.

Is there evidence of working with disadvantaged pupils?

There was little evidence of this from the reports reviewed, beyond references to Springforward and Lumina. Some of the images included in reports showed disabled students, but there was no accompanying explanation or testimony.

It could be that schools are reluctant to make claims about working with disadvantaged students. This could be helped by sharing a working definition of what disadvantaged means (see S.P.A. Study into partnership activities to reach disadvantaged pupils, 2024).

Is there evidence of mutuality?

There was clear evidence of mutual benefit in some of the reports, from students working together as equals, to joint CPD for staff. One report also included evidence of reciprocal governance.

In some reports mutuality was implied but not evidenced. It would be easy to address this.

Is there evidence of strategy?

A few reports showed that partnership working was strategically planned and delivered.

In others, a strategic approach was clear from activities and testimonies, but not explicit.

Other reports reflected a lack of strategy, across a range of projects.

Is there evidence of sustainability?

In one report, sustainability was clear through strategy and future plans. Furthermore, it evidenced financial investment targeted to make this a success.

Another report included clear evidence of longevity, while in some others it was implicit, but not stated.

Is there evidence of impact?

In some cases, impact was evidenced through quantitative data (see above).

Most reports included extensive qualitative data. The most impactful included testimonials from students and partner staff (especially state sector colleagues).

While most reports included high quality testimonials, some were far heavier on narrative than impact, making them less compelling.

Is there evidence of focus on need?

Good practice in meeting needs came from projects that were co-designed to meet needs of all partner schools.

Some included evidence of needs being identified by student committees, met by projects the students designed together.

Another example of meeting mutual needs came from CPD sessions for staff.

In many cases, it was not clear if a project was designed to meet needs, or just because it is part of a long established programme, or something the host school likes to offer.

Considering local needs, both in schools and the community, would help increase the impact of partnership projects.

Do the highlights stand out?

Highlights in these reports include student voice initiatives, joint CPD and impactful projects with mutual benefit.

Where projects were linked to school or partnership aims, it was much easier to judge impact, to identify highlights.

Concerns

Looking at these reports as objectively as possible, they can appear showy – shiny documents saying ‘look at us’. Some projects are also run to increase applications to the independent sector, ‘come to us’. It is important to reflect on this, to portray partnership working as the school wants it to be portrayed (acknowledging that this can vary depending on audience).

Look at us: There is a danger that impact reports fall into virtue-signalling – schools sharing their wonderful resources with those less fortunate.

Come to us: A few partnership projects were aimed at increasing applications for independent school places. This could put off some potential state school partners, who might question the schools’ motives.

In some reports there is an extraneous level of detail, others include unqualified statements without evidence. These concerns are easily addressed through careful planning and checking of reports.

Overall, some reports leave too much for the reader to deduce; points are implied, not made explicit. This could be addressed through answering the core questions above when drawing up the report.

Recommendations

Strand 1: Capturing the impact of projects

Start every project with clear aims and then draw up impact evaluation tools that measure progress made against them. Choose tools that are age appropriate and decide if you want your impact data to be quantitative or qualitative. If in doubt, draw on the S.P.A. community for advice.

Strand 2: Theory of change (giving meaningful evaluation)

An effective theory of change begins with clear aims and objectives; know what outcomes you are hoping to achieve before you start your project. Measure outcomes not outputs whenever you can.

Drawing up a theory of change helps ensure that you approach your partnership working strategically, involving all partners in its design. There are many useful templates available, do your research and design one that is right for your context.

Strand 3: Impact platforms

When considering a platform for impact evaluation and reporting, decide what you want evaluated and key features of your report. Use this to inform your choice – engage the platform best suited to what you want, don't be pushed into a product that does not meet your needs.

Talk to other S.P.A. members to find out how they conduct their evaluation and reporting. Many use their own systems that they are very happy to talk about.

Strand 4: Impact reporting

Do all you can to make your partnership working strategic, mutually beneficial, sustainable, impactful, and needs-focused, including reaching the disadvantaged. If you do this, make sure your impact report reflects the progress you make against each key aspect. To this end, we recommend using the questions below when setting aims for a partnership programme, and then revisiting them when drawing up and checking an impact report. Finally, check that the impact report sits as comfortably in your partner schools as it does in your own.



IH2 Strand 4 – Impact Report Reflections

When drawing up an impact report, schools and partnerships are encouraged to reflect upon these questions to ensure that the report addresses key partnership themes.

Question	Reflection
Is evaluation linked to <u>aims</u> ?	
Have you included meaningful <u>quantitative</u> data?	
Is there evidence of working with <u>disadvantaged</u> pupils?	
Is there evidence of <u>mutuality</u> ?	
Is there evidence of <u>strategy</u> ?	
Is there evidence of <u>sustainability</u> ?	
Is there evidence of <u>impact</u> ?	
Is there evidence of <u>focus on need</u> ?	
What are the key highlights?	

Afterword

Thank you to all those S.P.A. colleagues, supporters and friends who have contributed to this research project on that most important of issues: impact reporting on maintained-independent school partnerships.

This work goes right to the heart of the S.P.A.'s mission, in that our goal is to offer a national framework for reporting on partnership work and its impact.

We should all be grateful to the Independent Schools Council for the administration of the *Schools Together* website over recent years. It is the most comprehensive repository of information on partnership projects. However, S.P.A. is keen to take over this responsibility and establish a cross-sector engine for the collation and measurement of partnership engagement. That is, we hope to turn *Schools Together* into **The School Partnerships Index**, a register which will carry within it an impact evaluation tool.

We will need the support of all schools and organizations committed to collaborative enterprise in education to help S.P.A.:

- To find a way to report on partnerships and their impact which enables us to see where to put greatest time and resource.
- To continue to act as the honest broker bringing providers of services encouraging social amelioration, social mobility, the life chances of children and the enhancement of the teaching profession to the attention of all schools across the maintained and independent sectors.
- To encourage all schools to work more collaboratively to the benefit of all pupils, families, schools and communities.

Put another way: we must work to overcome the Darwinian approach to educational institutions in this country. There is so much to be proud of in the maintained and independent sectors - the rest of the world knows that and wants something of what we're having. Of course there'll be competition between schools in particular settings, but enlightened self-interest says that, in the long run, we will benefit every child and teacher if we work together. It's the "Bolton 19k" model: the need for all the school leaders in a region to act on the principle that all the children of their community are their joint responsibility.

Dr Joseph Spence
Chief Executive Officer

Finally

This project was made possible through the hard work of those involved. Sincere thanks to the strand leads, and their teams of contributors.

If you are a senior leader reading this report, we hope it helps you to evaluate the impact of the cross-sector working that is so important for your school.

If you are a governor reading this report, ask questions of your senior leadership team to investigate the breadth, depth and impact of partnership working in your school.

If you are part of the S.P.A. community, thank you for your continued dedication to improving the education of every young person in this country.

Please share this with anyone you think would find it of interest. If you have any ideas or observations to add, please let us know at info@schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk



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