



School
Partnerships
Alliance

S.P.A. Conference 2024

Partnerships in a Changing Landscape

Hosted by Thomas Deacon Academy and Oundle School

Conference Aims:

- Creating a stronger identity for cross-sector partnership
- Proving the national case for partnership
- Understanding State School and MAT priorities and educational vision
- Hearing a variety of perspectives on partnerships
- Networking and sharing best practice

S.P.A. Annual Conference 2024

Conference Report

Foreword:

In the words of one of the conference delegates 'Today's School Partnerships Alliance conference proved how significant this movement is, and how ambitious and impactful it has become. We heard that Partnerships are and should be a vehicle for school improvement. For this to happen more effectively across communities we need to share evidence through better impact evaluation and to create a long term national education vision. The importance of sharing our successes with local and national representatives could not be overemphasized today. Long term Partnerships should be part of government strategy.'

These words provide an insight into the current strategic questions facing partnership work. This year has seen exceptional challenges for all schools, which has limited resources and made planning more difficult, but the response by those responsible for partnerships has been deeply impressive. The messages, as well as the actions, have been overwhelmingly positive and schools have shown both determination and resilience. One of the most important reasons for this, is that partnerships are values-driven and schools remain committed to the impact their work makes in their local communities. This should continue to be celebrated.

In addition to making sure that partnerships can continue in an uncertain future, there has been a very strong call for a stronger national identity for partnerships. Whether this is through more detailed information and celebration of the work that goes on, or a more coordinated approach to enable nationwide impact, is to be decided, but it is important that the debate has begun. The conference was also a fantastic opportunity for the leaders and innovators to get together and share their experiences and thoughts. It provided a forum to raise questions about how partnerships can work together to build a stronger future.

In the opening address, we outlined five areas to focus on over the coming years:

1. We need a national vision for partnerships that connects all of your work with our collective responsibility for all children
2. We need national support for partnerships from the DfE, associations, unions and businesses
3. We need to coordinate and benchmark our work by benchmarking to see the depth and breadth of input and impact
4. We need a national framework for partnerships to help support quality assurance
5. We need to find proof of concept by agreeing nationally relevant metrics while continuing to reflect all that is not easily quantifiable



We also highlighted five areas that partnerships could focus on now:

1. Actively link local partnership work and local impact to national challenges and the national educational landscape
2. Invite politicians, local authorities and other opinion formers to see your partnerships in action
3. Ensure a strong focus on specific outcomes for your beneficiaries in impact evaluations
4. Empower and encourage state school partners and colleagues to share their voices
5. Support the S.P.A. to help us support your partnerships

Finally, thank you to Margaret Hunnaball and Sara Carrett for all their support and to Margaret for designing this conference programme. A huge thanks too, to our Trustees and the Advisory Board who give their time so generously, and, again to Thomas Deacon and Oundle for generously hosting us.

Thank you for your support, and thank you for all the work you are doing, every single week, to bring more opportunities to more children across the country. Long may it continue.

Oliver Blond, CEO, School Partnerships Alliance (2022-24)



S.P.A. Conference Report

Part 1: Overview of the day

Morning session – Thomas Deacon Academy

The 2024 Annual Conference was opened by the host for our morning sessions, Emily Gaunt, principal of Thomas Deacon Academy. Emily talked about the history of the academy, and its ‘clam shell’ architecture. She also emphasised the importance to the school of its partnership work and how this increases opportunities for all pupils in the PE1 area.

“I loved the idea of sharing the conference between two schools”



We then heard from our CEO, Oliver Blond, who emphasised the importance of a national vision for partnerships, and working with the DfE, unions and associations to garner national support. He outlined five areas of focus for school partnerships moving forward (see foreword).

It was uplifting to hear a message from Dr Carl Ward, Chief Executive of the City Learning Trust and Founder and Chair of the Foundation for Education Development (FED). He spoke in support of the work S.P.A. is doing and the benefits to schools of meaningful collaboration.

“The opening speakers seemed to get to the crux of the matters that we are all wrestling with.”

S.P.A. CEO Elect, Joe Spence, spoke of the challenge and opportunity that lies ahead, with cross-sector partnerships having an important part to play in the promotion of the arts, the provision of sporting opportunities, preparation for university, and many more aspects of the student experience.



Dr Spence also spoke of his belief in the cross-sector training and professional development of teachers and emphasised that S.P.A. needs to engage more directly with state schools and move beyond, while not abandoning, its role in encouraging impactful and sustainable partnership strategies through the independent sector. He set four provocations picked up on in later sessions:

1. Can a school be outstanding if there are failing schools in its neighbourhood?
2. Can we develop partnerships of equals between state and independent schools?
3. Can we persuade school leaders this is not a time for retrenchment in regard to partnerships?
4. How can so much partnership activity appear to make so little difference to the public perception of independent schools?

Panel Discussion: "The Power of Partnerships to Change Educational Outcomes"

S.P.A. Trustee and former state school head, Nicki Mattin, chaired our first panel session of the day. Panellists Frank Hardee (Master in charge of Partnerships, Holyport College), Dan Clarke (Cheltenham Education Partnership Coordinator), Sally Walmsley (Deputy Head, Sevenoaks) and Joe Spence (CEO Elect, S.P.A.) outlined their thoughts on this topic and expertly fielded questions.



Points raised included:

- the need to recognise that teachers in the maintained sector are overloaded, so it is not surprising that they do not always have time to collaborate;
- put pupils together and they work together, whatever their backgrounds;
- there is no one model for partnership working, it must reflect the needs and capacities of those involved;
- embed partnership activities in school life;
- it is sometimes very hard to reach those most in need.



“Passionate panellists with great expertise.”

“The opening panel discussion helped to create an excellent context for the discussions of the day.”

Breakout Sessions

Five breakout rooms were offered, each one focusing on one of our key themes:



MUTUALITY – Making connections and developing relationships - Iain Holmes (Kettering Buccleuch Academy) & Gordon Montgomery (Oundle)

IMPACT - Raising standards through quality assurance - Margaret Hunnaball (S.P.A.) & Keith Watson (S.P.A. Associate)



SUSTAINABILITY – How to support shortage subjects, focussing partnerships on national needs - Abbie Dean (Norwich), Ben Still (St Paul's) & John Claughton (WoLLoW)

MEETING NEEDS – How to reach some of the most disadvantaged pupils - Tim Dalton and Gitanjali Bhattacharya (Harrow), Bernadette Alexander (Barnet, Brent, Ealing and Harrow Virtual Schools), & Sarah Butterworth (SpringForward)



STRATEGY - How a strategic approach can push partnership - Graeme Lawrie (ACS) & Tom Arbuthnott (Eton)

Each conference attendee visited two breakout rooms. These offered insights into aspects of partnership working, sharing practice and strategic approaches.

“The Strategy and Impact workshops provided useful frameworks to take away and to use at a later date.”

“Mutuality is important and it was nice to hear from a fellow state school perspective.”

“The speakers had great clarity about their work and discussions were very informative.”

“The Sustainability breakout had some fantastic new ideas that we might be able to take up.”

Relocation

After the morning session, we travelled to Oundle School for lunch and our afternoon session.

“It was great to see two settings”

Welcome, Keynote addresses, and Student Panel

Head, Sarah Kerr-Dineen, welcomed the conference to Oundle School for the afternoon session. She outlined how important collaborative working, including the OPEN Learning Partnership, is to the school and encouraged both individuals and organisations to embrace “a readiness to be uncomfortable” as partnerships strive to achieve social change.



Keynote 1: "Education For All"

Lee Barron, MP for Corby and East Northamptonshire

We were delighted to welcome local MP, Lee Barron, to address the conference. He described his wish to change the private-public narrative, saying that “the more they know, the better they’ll see”. All schools are part of the local community, so should do the best they can for each other. He encouraged schools to show people their partnership achievements, and thanked attendees for all they do for their local children.

“Lee’s session showed strong focus on the national picture for partnerships.”

“Really interesting to hear the perspectives of someone in government”



Keynote 2: "The New Partnership Models and the Differences They Make" - Marcus Shepherd (E-ACT)



Marcus emphasised that the state sector is not comprehensive, there is more disparity by schools in the sector than between many independent and state schools. He said that in successful cross-sector partnerships, independent schools want what is best for their partner school's pupils, as exemplified by the work Dulwich College has done with City Heights Academy. He emphasised how important it is for schools not to give up on prospective partners – “if

people don't engage, it's probably because they need you most". Make sure partnerships are in the right place, because education shouldn't be a zero-sum game.

“Marcus was exceptional, he brought the state perspective that was missing in some other elements.”

“Marcus reinforced how we can best forge cross sector partnerships.”

“Marcus was a powerful speaker who helped to put across the power of partnerships from the perspective of a state school - lots to think about and apply when considering our partnerships and relationships.”

Student Panel: “How working together can change perspectives” introduced by Chair OPEN Learning Partnership - Claire Morrison, Assistant Head Teacher, Oundle CE Primary School



Pupils from the OPEN Learning Partnership spoke passionately about their experiences. They emphasised how their involvement in OPEN activities took them outside their comfort zones and gave them experiences of things they would not otherwise have encountered. As one pupil said, ‘they definitely sparked my curiosity’.

Roundtable Discussions

In this session, six roundtables were offered, once again focusing on our key themes:

STRATEGY: ‘Are partnerships making a real difference or are they just nice to have?’ - Chris Rees (Westminster City School) and Stuart Turner (Emanuel School)

MUTUALITY: ‘We talk about mutuality, but is it really possible?’ - Peter Hatch (KCS) & Emily Barns (Coombe Girls’ School)

IMPACT: ‘What impact are state and independent schools looking for? What kinds of impact would compel more to develop or join partnerships?’ - Joshua Plotkin (Haberdashers) & Rob Southwell-Sander (Abingdon School)

SUSTAINABILITY: ‘This is not the time for retrenchment’ - discuss!’ - Kerry Wilson (Latymer Upper) & Lou Bennett (IDPE)

NEEDS-FOCUSED: ‘Can you be an outstanding school if your neighbouring schools are failing?’ - Jane Glendenning (Academy Trust, Birmingham) & Chanel Noel (Highgate)

IMPACT REPORTING: ‘Do impact reports serve all partners?’ - Andy Marlow (Whitgift) & Scott Crawford (Magdalen College School)

“It was good hearing other people’s experiences and views, learning from others.”

Panel Discussion: ‘Looking to the future: A National Partnership Landscape’

The afternoon panel was chaired by Leon Spence (Public Affairs Officer for HMC). The panel comprised Marcus Shepherd (Secondary Education Director, E-ACT), Jaideep Barot (Head of Bristol Grammar/Chair of HMC), Ali Henderson (Chief Executive of Royal National SpringBoard Foundation) and Melvyn Roffe (Chief Executive of the Clifton College Education Group).



Points raised included:

- Start with ‘why?’ – take collective action (be operationally efficient) – assess impact
- We need to see partnership as strategically more central in our schools
- Sustainability is important, our partnerships must be able to weather storms
- Include third sector organisations in the local community
- Don’t think you have a solution to a problem that isn’t a problem
- Build capacity within the education system through partnership so that we can all cope together
- Measure impact – you need to know what you’re doing, why you’re doing it and to see if it’s working

“I came away from these sessions with a wealth of examples of partnership activities, the strategy behind them and how these activities are being reported.”

“The round tables were great as they gave an opportunity for genuine discussion and debate. I liked the chances for colleagues to bounce ideas around between one another in a more organic manner.”



“Excellent panellists, presenting insight, encouragement and challenge.”

“Input from a state sector leader who is passionate about cross-sector partnerships was inspirational.”

Closing Remarks: ‘Moving Forward Together’ - Oliver Blond, CEO S.P.A. and Tom Arbuthnott, Chair S.P.A.



Tom Arbuthnott, Chair of S.P.A. Trustees, thanked Oliver for all his hard work as CEO, and praised the progress S.P.A. has made under his stewardship.

Oliver thanked attendees for all they are doing, telling them 'education is what you are doing through partnership'. He challenged partnership professionals to change things for the better moving forward:

1. Support S.P.A. even more than you already do – get the schools you work with to sign up
2. National vision – think about national issues
3. Invite people into your schools, get MPs and local councillors in through your partnerships
4. Look at your impact reports through the eyes of others – do they portray the key things?
5. Amplify and include state school voices

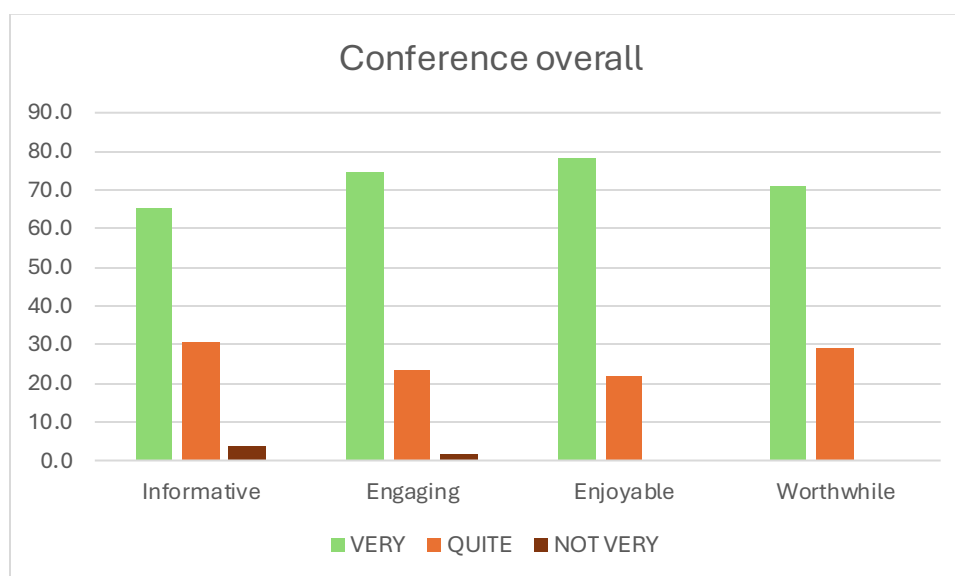
“Thank you to all at the S.P.A. for organising such a great conference. It was the first Partnerships conference I had been to and it surpassed all my expectations. I came away feeling empowered and inspired!”

“As a relative newcomer to sector and also the world of partnerships, I came to understand the headline benefits of partnerships at both a national and local level, plus ideas of strategic planning and specific programmes”

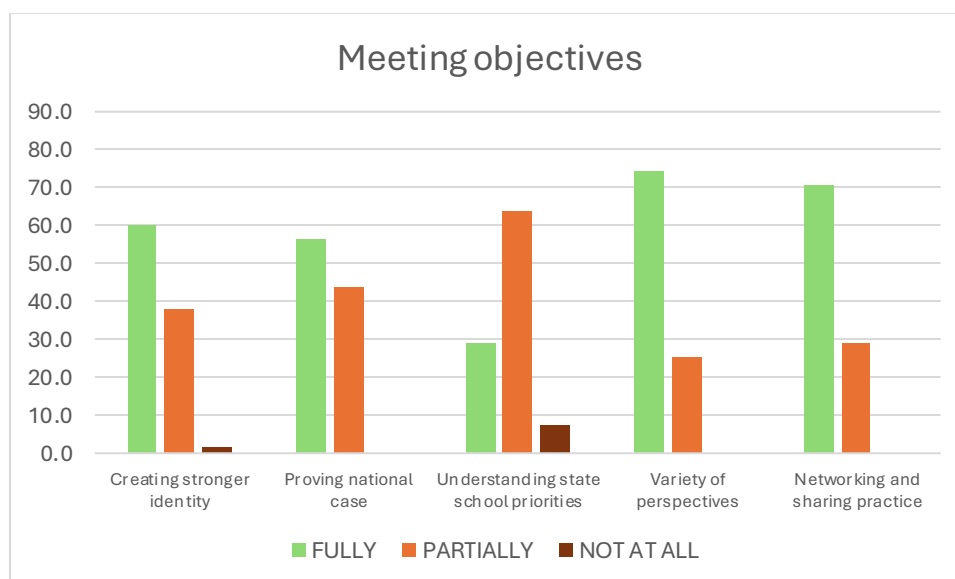
Part 2: Feedback and reflections

Statistical feedback

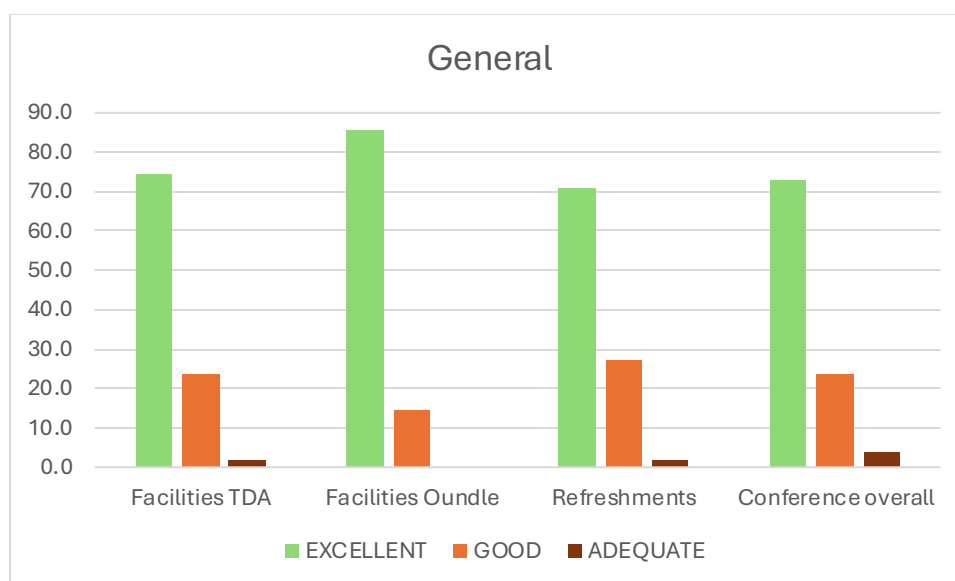
We sought feedback from attendees about the conference overall. This was positive, suggesting that the conference was generally regarded as very informative, engaging, enjoyable and worthwhile.



Feedback clearly shows that we only partially met our aim of understanding state school priorities. We also could have done better in terms of proving the national case for partnership. The other three aims were met more fully.



Finally, we asked for feedback on the facilities, refreshments and people’s overall views of the conference. These were very positive:



Reflections

What were the key features of the best sessions?

Participants found the sessions valuable for their passion, expertise, and diverse perspectives. Presenters brought fresh insights, particularly from state schools, which were described as engaging, honest, and grounding. These viewpoints, often absent in similar discussions, provided critical context for cross-sector partnerships and inspired attendees with practical advice. Presenters’ energy and clarity made the sessions thought-provoking and memorable.

The sessions stood out for their ability to address broad and strategic themes, such as mutuality, sustainability, and impact reporting, while also offering specific frameworks and actionable tools. Many appreciated the practicality of sessions that explored best practices and innovative solutions, particularly in navigating challenges like government pressures and partnership standards. The interactive and informal nature of certain sessions, such as roundtables, enabled participants to share ideas and learn collaboratively, fostering authentic discussions.



For newcomers, the sessions were an opportunity to understand partnership fundamentals, build networks, and gain a deeper appreciation for strategic planning and implementation. Experienced attendees highlighted the value of hearing varied perspectives, including insights from state schools, independent schools, government, and organisations. These discussions broadened their understanding and helped clarify how different sectors can work together effectively.

The balance of inspiration and actionable outcomes made the sessions impactful. Participants left with a renewed sense of purpose and motivation, equipped with examples, frameworks, and strategies to improve their work. Hearing about real-world challenges and successes deepened their appreciation for cross-sector

collaboration. Overall, the blend of passion, practical advice, and diverse voices ensured the sessions were engaging, informative, and thought-provoking.

What made sessions less effective?

Participants felt that some sessions lacked depth, structure, or inclusivity. Breakout and roundtable discussions were often too short, limiting meaningful dialogue. Many participants noted that these sessions leaned towards self-promotion of individual partnerships or programmes rather than offering broader insights or actionable strategies. Some found the content repetitive, with topics revisited multiple times across panels or sessions.

There was feedback that some sessions were overly focused on independent schools aiding state schools, rather than highlighting genuinely mutual and collaborative efforts. Others felt there was insufficient representation or input from state schools, particularly in discussions about challenges like identifying and addressing disadvantage.

Technical and logistical issues, such as IT failures and unclear session objectives, occasionally hindered engagement. Some felt that panel formats were inconsistent, with lengthy responses making it harder to extract useful insights. A few noted that the strategy sessions could have been more interactive or diverse in approach.

Lastly, while participants appreciated the inclusion of political perspectives, some found it challenging to reconcile the discourse with broader systemic challenges, such as government policies that widen the gap between state and independent sectors.

Strengths of the Conference

- **Well-Organized Event:** The conference was generally praised for its organisation and execution.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Participants valued the opportunity to network and engage in meaningful conversations.
- **Inspiring Atmosphere:** Many attendees found the event inspiring and thought-provoking.
- **Variety of Sessions:** Participants appreciated the mix of keynote speakers, breakouts, and roundtable discussions.
- **Focus on Partnerships:** The emphasis on partnerships and cross-sector collaboration was acknowledged positively.



Areas for Improvement

1. Balance Between Independent and State Sectors:

- Several attendees felt the conference was still too independent-school focused.
- Suggestions were made to make the agenda more appealing to state sector colleagues and to incentivize their participation.

2. Logistical Challenges:

- The use of two campuses led to excessive travel and room changes, eating into session time.
- A tighter schedule and shorter transitions were suggested to avoid delays.
- Timing overruns, particularly towards the end of the day, made it difficult for participants traveling long distances.

3. Strategic Depth:

- Some participants noted a lack of in-depth discussion on critical tensions in partnerships, such as:
 - National vs. local focus.
 - 'All pupils' vs. 'our pupils' philosophy.
 - Breadth vs. depth of partnership work.
- The need for a clearer strategic direction for S.P.A. was highlighted.

4. Conference Format:

- More time for lunch to facilitate networking was suggested.
- A “speed-dating” style session was proposed to allow for more connections.
- Roundtables and breakout sessions were deemed rushed and could benefit from longer time slots.

5. Inclusivity and Accessibility:

- Some participants felt excluded due to the emphasis on events that occurred the evening prior (OPEN Showcase).
- A recommendation was made to rotate hosting between independent and state schools to reduce travel and logistical strain.

6. Pedagogical Focus:

- Calls were made for more examples of cross-sector partnership work centered on pedagogy and teacher collaboration, rather than just student-focused initiatives.



Suggestions for the Future

- **Enhanced State Sector Involvement:** Include state school representatives in planning and encourage joint attendance with independent schools.
- **Improved Timing:** End conferences earlier to accommodate long-distance travel.
- **Streamlined Schedule:** Reduce unnecessary travel and focus on fewer, more impactful sessions.
- **Collaborative Opportunities:** Provide platforms for teachers to share practices and improve pedagogy collaboratively.
- **Participant Details:** Sharing emails of participants was proposed to foster post-conference communication.

Comparison of Feedback from attendees from different sectors

State School Attendees:

State school attendees appreciated the event’s focus on mutuality, impact, and strategy in school partnerships. They valued sessions like the Mutuality breakout, which emphasized collaboration and student opportunities across sectors. Attendees called for more state school representation to create a more balanced dialogue. The Impact and Strategy

workshops were well-received, providing useful frameworks, and attendees expressed interest in discussing challenges or less successful partnerships. There was a suggestion to highlight well-being initiatives and parental engagement strategies in future sessions. Networking opportunities were praised, though some wanted more interactive elements, such as “speed dating” sessions. The event’s logistics could be improved by ending earlier to reduce travel stress, and attendees recommended increased publicity of successful partnerships, particularly those benefitting disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs.

Independent School Attendees:

Independent school attendees also valued diverse perspectives, particularly from the state sector. They praised Marcus Shepherd’s passionate, engaging delivery, and found his insights into state school challenges and partnerships inspiring. The opening panels and partnership strategy sessions were well-received for offering clear, actionable ideas. Breakout sessions were appreciated for fostering organic debates and sharing practical experiences, though some felt these sessions were rushed or underprepared. A major theme from independent school feedback was the need for more state school voices to enrich discussions on mutuality and partnership challenges. Representation balance was also a concern, as the focus was perceived to lean too heavily on independent school perspectives. Attendees suggested more practical advice and operational training to make partnerships more actionable. Logistically, there were concerns about the dual-site format and tight schedule, which made transitions rushed and reduced engagement in the afternoon.

Feedback from others:

Feedback from participants not in state or independent schools mirrored the call for more state school representation to achieve a balanced dialogue and deeper mutual understanding. Attendees valued Marcus Shepherd’s insights and Lee Barron’s keynote for providing a national context for partnerships. However, they found some breakout sessions to be self-promotional, lacking inclusive discussions or concrete examples of mutuality. There were calls for more case studies and data to demonstrate the tangible impact of partnerships. Interactive elements, such as audience-led discussions, were suggested to improve engagement, alongside inviting external contributors like businesses and parliamentarians to broaden the perspectives. Logistically, participants recommended reducing session movement and ensuring the agenda better appealed to state school colleagues. Ultimately, attendees emphasized the need for cross-sector partnerships to focus on measurable impact, community ties, and public recognition.

Finally, we asked attendees to make the case for cross-sector partnerships:

Why do cross-sector partnerships matter?

Cross-sector partnerships are essential for creating equal opportunities and optimising educational experiences for all students, regardless of their background. By breaking down barriers and uniting diverse schools, organisations, and communities, these partnerships foster collaboration, innovation, and mutual understanding, which ultimately lead to enhanced outcomes for young people.

At their core, partnerships address systemic challenges such as educational inequality and lack of access to resources. They prioritize tackling disadvantage, supporting the most vulnerable students and schools, and ensuring all children have access to opportunities beyond their immediate environments. By pooling expertise and resources from different sectors, partnerships provide richer learning experiences and promote both academic and personal growth.

The power of cross-sector partnerships lies in their ability to unite diverse perspectives and strengths for mutual benefit. Whether it's sharing best practices, reducing workload for teachers, or enabling impactful learning beyond the classroom, partnerships amplify collective efforts. They also allow schools to connect with local hubs, universities, and other institutions, building a coherent education system that places students' experiences at the centre.

These partnerships are vital for addressing systemic inequities, fostering cultural capital, and enabling social cohesion. By facilitating dialogue and collaboration across different sectors, they help dismantle stereotypes and bridge divides between communities, creating a fairer and more equitable society. This collaborative approach is fundamental to preparing students for the future, equipping them with the skills and resilience they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Ultimately, cross-sector partnerships benefit everyone involved in education. They empower teachers with innovative tools and support, enhance student learning, and encourage the sharing of ideas and resources. They also inspire a sense of collective responsibility among educators, affirming that every child, regardless of their school or background, deserves the best opportunities possible.

By promoting equity, collaboration, and innovation, cross-sector partnerships have the potential to transform not only schools but also the communities in which they operate. They build stronger relationships, unlock potential, and drive systemic change, ensuring that education becomes a shared priority for all. As Helen Keller famously said, "Alone we can do little, together we can do so much"—and that ethos perfectly captures the importance of these partnerships in shaping the future of education.

A Message from Our Trustees

As Chair of the School Partnerships Alliance, it was a pleasure to welcome you to our second conference. It has been a year of great progress - our community is aligning ever more strongly behind impactful partnerships which are of meaningful importance to national-level educationalists and policymakers. Our conference was a day of cohering with outstanding friends and colleagues.

We believe that schools can achieve more by working together, and the S.P.A. is here to encourage and celebrate collaboration that widens educational opportunities and helps all children to flourish and progress. The Trustees of S.P.A. are very proud of the commitment and dedication so evident at the conference which represents partnerships in so many schools across the country, and provides opportunities for many thousands of children.

Tom Arbuthnott
Chair of the School Partnerships Alliance

S.P.A. AIMS TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS IN DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS THAT ARE STRATEGIC, IMPACTFUL, MUTUAL, SUSTAINABLE AND NEEDS-FOCUSSED



Conference 2024
Thomas Deacon Academy & Oundle School

CONFERENCE REPORT

Partnerships in a Changing Landscape

If you would like to contact us to follow-up on any of the points raised in this report, to support our work, or just to enter into dialogue, please contact us at:

info@schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk

www.schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk