youth futures FOUNDATION

Case Study 5: Networking and collaboration

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This case study forms part of the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project carried out by RAND Europe in 2021-22 on behalf of the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF).[2] It explores the ways in which infrastructure organisations (IOs, see Box 1) network and collaborate in their efforts to improve employment outcomes for young people in England (see Box 3 for definitions). It seeks to understand the activities involved and to draw out examples of good practice, as well as the key barriers and facilitators that may play a role. These findings are based on semi-structured interviews with two IOs, the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)

Box 1. What is an infrastructure organisation (IO)?
While there is no standardised definition, for the purpose of this study[1] IOs are understood as third sector organisations whose main purpose is to provide support and services to FOs working directly with young people. IOs may offer support, training, information and advice, act as advocates, promote communication and collaboration between FOs, or seek to influence policy on behalf of them, amongst other activities.

and the Centre for Youth Impact (CFYI), as well as three frontline organisations (FOs): the Transform Lives Company (TLC), Shaw Trust and EN:Able Communities (see Box 2). Interviewees were identified from the organisations funded by the YFF, as well as through a snowballing approach. The interviews were complemented by a targeted review of relevant documentation provided by the interviewees and other IOs (see References).

Box 2. Who's who?		
The **Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)** is the national membership body for services supporting the UK's jobseekers and low earners.[3]	The **Centre for Youth Impact (CFYI)** is a registered charity that works with partners across the UK to develop shared approaches to learning, evaluation and continuous improvement.[4]	
The **Transform Lives Company (TLC)** is a social enterprise seeking to support people (including youth) into quality work.[5]	**Shaw Trust** is a registered charity that supports people with complex needs, including 16 to 24-year-olds, into quality work.[6]	**EN:Able Communities** is a registered charity that supports the regeneration of local communities in northern England through skills, training and employment.[7]

[1] RAND (2022).
[2] RAND (2022).
[3] ERSA (2022).
[4] CFYI (2022a).
[5] TLC (2022).
[6] Shaw Trust (2022a).
[7] Efficiency North (2022).

Box 3. Definitions of key terms	
Networking is an action or process of interacting with other individuals or organisations that share a common interest to exchange information or ideas, and develop professional contacts. It involves activities that tend to be predictable, non-complex and non-urgent.[8] Networks can be virtual and/or asynchronous in nature.[9] Networking can be a precursor to more formal collaboration.[10]	**Collaboration** involves some level of shared accountability and interdependence between individuals or organisations, and clarity about distinct roles and goals.[11] Collaboration is distinct from networking in that it is not just about sharing ideas or information but about doing something together.[12]

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[8] Reeves et al. (2017).
[9] Reeves et al. (2017).
[10] Interviews with one IO and one FO.
[11] Reeves et al. (2017).
[12] Interviews with two IOs and two FOs.

Networking

Supporting networking with and between FOs and local IOs

IOs play an important role in determining the quality and formality of networking opportunities between other third sector bodies.[13]

For membership organisations, networking activities are centred primarily on communicating with and supporting the needs and aspirations of their members.[14] This requires an understanding of their members' current priorities and concerns, from the local to the national level.[15] These may relate to the latest policy developments, young people's experiences, and how FOs are responding to changing circumstances.[16]

For FOs, networking opportunities offer a number of benefits. For example, networking enables FOs to gain an understanding of what other organisations are doing, and to share what their own organisation is doing in return.[17] Benchmarking, knowledge-sharing, identifying opportunities for collaboration and gaining a better understanding of the sector are further motivations for FO networking.[18] Networking spaces facilitated by IOs also present opportunities for organisations that would usually be in competition to pursue common interests and goals (see Box 4 for examples).[19]

Box 4. Forums for facilitating networking between FOs

The ERSA's annual conference was identified by two FOs as a major networking event, providing opportunities to talk with other members and ERSA representatives, share knowledge and experiences, engage in plenaries and workshops as well as more informal networking opportunities. The 2022 Annual Conference, for example, involved plenaries, break-out groups and workshops covering topics such as opportunities for young people, joining up employability and skills provision, self-employment, and the implications of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), levelling up and the cost-of-living crisis for employment. Speakers included representatives from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local and regional government, IOs, FOs, research institutes and universities.[20]

The ERSA also creates new forums in response to specific emerging issues. With the European Social Fund (ESF) supporting employment and social inclusion[21] coming to an end, the UK Government is planning to replace it with a new instrument: the UKSPF.[22] In anticipation of these plans, the ERSA created a forum for their members that relied on the ESF funding to address the future provision. In addition, the ERSA and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)[23] initiated email exchanges between ERSA members to enable them to share insights, ask each other questions, seek clarifications and draw on each other's expertise following the release of the government's UKSPF guidance.

Source: Interview with an IO and two FOs.

Forums involving larger IOs also help to provide more specialist or local FOs and IOs with broader perspectives on national policy developments and examples of good practice.[24] For examples of these networking opportunities, see Boxes 4 and 5.

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[13] Dayson et al. (2018).
[14] Two interviews with IOs.
[15] Two interviews with IOs.
[16] Two interviews with IOs.
[17] One interview with a FO.
[18] One interview with a FO.
[19] One interview with a FO.
[20] Twitter (2022).
[21] https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en
[22] HM Government (2022b).
[23] NCVO (2022).
[24] One interview with a FO.

Informal networking forums can often support the creation of more formal ones. These, in turn, can help forge further informal networks (see Box 6, for example).[25]

Networking can also provide opportunities for IOs to collect information from FOs to inform their messaging to policymakers (see Box 7).[28] By having a good understanding of their members' needs, IOs can see where commonalities lie and draw out key messages to the government with a collective voice.[29] As the government is not able to speak with all individual providers, the unified voice that IOs provide can be helpful and its messages can often carry more weight.[30] This voice is further strengthened when IOs join together.[31] It is also easier for IOs to challenge policymakers when they are part of a group and are backed by FOs, rather than working independently.[32] This also carries benefits for the FOs. As many FOs are commissioned directly by the government, they can be reluctant to challenge the government for fear it may put their funding at risk.[33] IOs thus present a conduit for these challenges, with one FO observing that they prefer to do their influencing through NCVO.[34]

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[25] One interview with a FO.
[26] Prince's Trust (2022).
[27] Youth Employment UK (2022).
[28] One interview with an IO.
[29] One interview with a FO.
[30] Two interviews with FOs.
[31] One interview with a FO.
[32] One interview with an IO.
[33] One interview with a FO.
[34] One interview with a FO.
[35] Impetus (2022).

> the focus of YEG discussions. While one saw it as more generic and policy focused, the other described it as practical and hands-on, leading some FOs to find the forum more relevant to their own priorities than others.

Source: Interviews with two FOs.

The role IOs play as a liaison point between government and FO networks can also support improved provision. For example, the ERSA's connection with FO networks enables them to better support the development of Youth Hub provision[36] in areas where the ERSA would not have had the necessary resources or expertise.[37] When the DWP notifies the ERSA that there is no Youth Hub in a particular area, the IO is able to contact local FOs they know for support in establishing one.[38]

Networking with other IOs

Two primary objectives were identified for networking with other IOs: to identify opportunities for collaboration and to prevent the duplication of work.[39] In both cases, it is important to have a good understanding of what other organisations are doing across the sector,[40] what their key interests and priorities are, how they relate to the work one's own organisation is doing and, consequently, how one might add value.[41] One IO interviewee explained that these networking activities tend to be more informal with, for example, regular catch-ups with particular key contacts as opposed to the structured forums developed for networking with FOs and local IOs.[42] These informal interactions may also take the form of a call to follow up on a particular issue or comment raised during a formal event, particularly in the (post-)COVID world.[43]

Collaboration

Collective work between smaller FOs is often found to be most effective when undertaken alongside or with the support of a local IO.[44] The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)[45] has argued that it is the responsibility of IOs to collaborate for the benefit of their communities.[46] While in many cases this may be a question of providing local organisations with a strategic voice at the policy-making level, particularly for smaller organisations,[47] NAVCA indicated that service delivery could also at times benefit from such a collaborative approach.[48] For the IOs themselves, collaboration provides the opportunity to reach and share knowledge with other organisations they would not otherwise be able to access.[49] Collaboration can also help organisation to clarify what their own goals should be, as well as what they should be working on together.[50]

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[36] HM Government (2022a).
[37] One interview with an IO.
[38] One interview with an IO.
[39] Two interviews with IOs.
[40] One interview with an IO.
[41] One interview with an IO.
[42] One interview with an IO.
[43] One interview with an IO.
[44] Dayson et al. (2018).
[45] NAVCA (2022).
[46] NAVCA (2015).
[47] One interview with an IO.
[48] NAVCA (2015).
[49] One interview with an IO.
[50] One interview with a FO.

In most cases, IOs foster collaboration through informal alliances,[51] usually with other IOs.[52] Collaboration requires asking questions about how two or more organisations work together, how to best use resource and how to share credit for the work delivered together.[53] Respective roles of the organisations in a collaboration are often agreed based on an understanding of the particular strengths or expertise each organisation brings to the table (see Box 8, for example).[54] Whether an organisation would initiate a collaborative arrangement depends on the phase of work they are in, as well as the broader policy and political environment.[55] Collaboration partners would be chosen for similar reasons: due to shared priorities and/or contextual considerations. This is seen, for example, in the ERSA selecting NCVO as a collaborator for work on the UKSPF because they knew NCVO already had a specific working group on European funded work, including work relating to employment, and because they knew the third sector was an area of interest to the DWP.[56]

Box 8. Collaboration on research activities

The CFYI and UK Youth[57] have been collaborating in the delivery of the weekly youth practitioner survey, *Just One Question*,[58] which asks one question of registered youth work practitioners every week in relation to their practices or reflections. The CFYI initially developed the initiative, based on Teacher Tapp,[59] before discovering in conversation with UK Youth that they were in talks with Teacher Tapp about developing a similar initiative. As such, they decided to collaborate instead. The CFYI provide the research expertise for formulating the questions, while UK Youth provide the network for dissemination, and they mutually agree the thematic area for each question. The CFYI also write a short commentary based on the data they receive, which UK Youth then shares with its membership. The CFYI described this collaboration as light-touch, straightforward and mutually useful.

Source: Interview with an IO.

For some organisations, collaborative working can be understood as a commitment to complementing and aligning with existing provision, as opposed to interfering or entering into competition with it.[60] This broader concept is reflected in more recent models for collaboration. These have shifted away from two-organisations partnerships towards multiple organisations (sometimes numbering in the hundreds) working together. These collaborative partnerships are often driven by a smaller core group, as exemplified by the YEG.[61] It is likely that remote working and digital technology have played a key role in this shift.[62]

Examples of IOs collaborating with other IOs to provide support to FOs around improving their offer and provision are outlined in Box 9.

Box 9. Collaborating to support FOs

Following the success of their internal forum on the future of the ESF provision (see Box 4), the ERSA collaborated with NCVO to co-chair a wider forum that drew on the different networks of the two organisations. In addition, the ERSA and NCVO co-wrote a letter on this issue to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, which the IOs later published with an additional 35 signatures.

Similarly, the ERSA is currently collaborating with the Business Services Association (BSA)[63] around supporting their members to demonstrate social value to support their bids for funding to the Cabinet Office and the UK government more broadly. Together they have worked with 20 organisations, from big private providers to specialist local charities, looking at the different ways social value is being

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[57] UK Youth (2022).

measured by commissioners across the UK. The ERSA is now planning to design their own self-assessment toolkit to show commissioners as a model for measuring social value.

Interviewees did not mention many examples of long-term collaboration between FOs and larger IOs. Instead, collaboration between these types of organisations tended to take the form of consultation and knowledge sharing. For example, the ERSA consulted with TLC and other FOs in developing a report on Kickstart,[64] and has asked them to speak at ERSA Kickstart events in order to share knowledge to less experienced organisations in the scheme.[65] Similarly, the Shaw Trust feeds evidence into the briefings the ERSA shares with key politicians around the gap in funding that could arise from the transition to the UKSPF.[66] In return, the ERSA reviews and feeds insights into the Shaw Trust's submissions and consultation responses.[67] Finally, the CFYI collaborates with FOs by providing their expertise in evaluation and impact measurement to scope and shape the data that other organisations are collecting, and how they present and make meaning from this data, as many youth IOs lack expertise in this area.[68]

Key challenges and facilitators for successful networking and collaboration between IOs

In seeking to amplify their impact on FOs and young people through networking and collaboration, IOs face a number of challenges:

- **Lack of trust:** Effective collaboration takes hard work and relies on significant levels of trust between the primary actors.[69] Unfortunately, some smaller FOs (and IOs) are hesitant to collaborate with larger organisations for fear that their knowledge and skills will be appropriated and their volunteer resources exploited to the benefit of the latter.[70] It can also be challenging for FOs to know which organisations to reach out to. Making connections also requires a self-confidence and resilience that smaller organisations may not necessarily

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[52] One interview with an IO.
[53] One interview with an IO.
[54] One interview with an IO.
[55] One interview with a FO.
[56] One interview with an IO.
[57] UK Youth (2022).
[58] CFYI (2022b).
[59] Teacher Tapp (2022).
[60] One interview with an IO.
[61] One interview with a FO.
[62] One interview with a FO.
[63] BSA (2022).
[64] One interview with a FO.
[65] One interview with a FO.
[66] One interview with a FO.
[67] One interview with a FO.
[68] One interview with an IO.
[69] Dayson et al. (2018).
[70] Dayson et al. (2018).

have.[71] Another challenge relates to the reliance FOs tend to have on more policy-focused IOs to bring their messages to decision-makers and establish connections,[72] as this may lead FOs and smaller IOs to feel they do not have a voice or input into the decisions being made.[73] One FO interviewee suggested that more effort needed to be invested in collaboration with FOs at the co-design stage, rather than at delivery, to overcome this issue.[74]

- **Aligning priorities:** Collaborative work brings challenges around aligning the different strategic priorities of each organisation.[75] For example, IOs may feel under pressure to provide unconditional support to FOs in need, when at times it is also part of the role of an IO to challenge and encourage FO development.[76] This can create tensions. Similarly, the relationship can be tested when the collaborative vision fails to take shape as anticipated and there is a need to adapt to the demands of a changing reality,[77] particularly as collaborative working can make it more difficult to be dynamic.[78] On a more personal level, navigating the ambitions and personalities of a range of individuals can be complicated and take a long time.[79]

- **Current funding models:** Interviewees reported that it can be challenging to obtain sufficient funding to develop a successful collaboration, particularly as this can take a long time.[80] Short-term funding cycles can also limit opportunities for collaborative work that require long-term thinking.[81] Similar challenges emerge in relation to networking, as IOs also require funding to run the forums from which FOs benefit.[82]

- **Competition over funding:** Limited funding opportunities bring IOs into competition with both FOs and other IOs,[83] which may result in them struggling to collaborate or to share insights and information.[84] Moreover, the competitive environment that commissioners set up tends not to allow for open discussion and collaboration about the best solution, which one interviewee felt ultimately impaired the quality of the outcome.[85] Fears of missing out on funding opportunities can also encourage organisations to cover a large range of activities, which can make it difficult to form collaborations based on complementary expertise,[86] and encourages duplication and overlap of work.[87] One interviewee noted, however, that they do feel funders are now pushing organisations towards focusing on more designated remits for this purpose.[88]

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[71] One interview with a FO.
[72] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[73] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[74] One interview with a FO.
[75] One interview with an IO.
[76] One interview with an IO.
[77] One interview with an IO.
[78] One interview with a FO.
[79] One interview with a FO.
[80] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[81] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[82] One interview with a FO.
[83] Dayson et al. (2018).
[84] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[85] One interview with an IO.
[86] One interview with an IO.
[87] One interview with a FO.
[88] One interview with an IO.

- **Organisational capacity:** Organisational resource in terms of both time and expertise can be a limiting factor in their engagement with opportunities to collaborate.[89] NAVCA has argued, however, that collaboration can enable IOs to share resources more (cost) effectively.[90]
- **Drawbacks of remote working:** While certain benefits were seen to have stemmed from remote working (see below), some interviewees felt that new remote working arrangements made it more challenging to engage in informal networking opportunities.[91] Where previously these could emerge over a coffee at an event, they now require a follow-up call which demands time, planning and scheduling in busy diaries, which can see motivation fade.[92] As a result, these kinds of informal interactions are now more infrequent.[93] Judging whether a certain event or interaction should be remote or in-person also adds further challenge to formal networking activities.[94] In addition, online forums bring new technical challenges such as: managing online meetings with a large number of participants and adding new participants to existing chats.[95] Juggling multiple remote meetings can also pose challenges for event attendance.[96]

At the same time, a number of factors may facilitate successful networking and collaboration activities for IOs:

- **Complementing not competing:** It is possible for large and small organisations to see each other as complementary, rather than competing.[97] For example, the larger organisation may provide expertise, funding and capacity to engage with local authority, while the smaller organisation may provide local contacts and buy-in.[98] One FO interviewee noted that, despite the concerns about trust raised above, there broadly tends to be a common interest in ensuring that the government is listening and putting the right processes and systems in place, resulting in most organisations being open, honest and willing to share information – as exemplified in Box 10.[99]

Box 10. Overcoming competition to embrace collaboration
Despite ostensibly being competitors, both the ERSA and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)[100] have a productive collaboration. Together, along with Shaw Trust, they are engaging with members of both organisations to carry out a research project on better joining up employment and skills provision,[101] including policy recommendations endorsed by both the ERSA and the AELP. This collaboration emerged from conversations between the ERSA and AELP, and the opportunity created by the plans for the UKSPF and the government's interest in better joining up provision. AELP is leading the project following a joint decision based on respective resource. In addition, representatives from both organisations are speaking at each other's conferences, and AELP's Mental Health Offer provides support for both AELP and ERSA members. Our interviewee

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[89] One interview with an IO.
[90] NAVCA (2015).
[91] One interview with an IO and another with a FO.
[92] One interview with an IO.
[93] One interview with an IO.
[94] One interview with a FO.
[95] One interview with an IO.
[96] One interview with an IO.
[97] Dayson et al. (2018).
[98] Dayson et al. (2018).
[99] One interview with a FO.
[100] AELP (2022).
[101] Shaw Trust (2022b).

Source: Interviews with an IO and an FO.

- **Existing relationships:** Long-term, trust-based relationships between individuals and organisations are an important enabler for formal and informal networking and collaboration opportunities.[102] They also support the development of effective and sustainable collaborative approaches.[103]

- **Benefits of remote working:** While the shift to remote or hybrid working models has presented certain challenges (see above), it was also identified as a facilitator of collaborative working in some cases. Remote working has enabled and normalised online forums, which have greatly increased attendance at these kinds of events as the cost and time of travel no longer need to be considered.[104] In some contexts, online forums can better facilitate connections and follow-up discussions than in-person events.[105] Online forums can also enable a wider diversity of voices and organisations to be involved in the conversation, where in-person events tend to be less inclusive.[106]

  In addition to these benefits associated with remote working, the pandemic had encouraged organisations to build new relationships and had resulted in stronger connections being developed during the time spent together online.[107]

- **Understanding what the target audience wants:** For IOs networking with FOs, it is important they understand the motivation of FOs to attend these events. One FO noted that the ERSA's knowledge of their members enables them to bring these organisations together in the most effective way.[108] They also noted the ERSA's strength in knowing when to contact members and when they needed space, adapting the nature of their engagement according to the pressures and demands of the external environment.[109] The CFYI reported that they found FOs and local IOs more likely to engage with networking opportunities if these provided real-life, concrete examples of the issues or approaches being discussed.[110] The presence of national IOs at local or regional networking forums appeared to encourage engagement as the participants felt they were being heard at the national level and kept up to date from a national perspective.[111]

- **Communication:** Honest communication was seen as key facilitator for effective collaboration, particularly in situations where events may not be panning out as anticipated.[112] It is also important that IOs actively seek out communication with FOs to gain their input and learn from their experience.[113]

- **Giving the collaboration time:** Time needs to be dedicated to developing the collaboration itself, not just to the activities the collaboration intends to

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[102] Two interviews with FOs.
[103] Dayson et al. (2018).
[104] Two interviews with IOs and another two with FOs.
[105] One interview with a FO.
[106] One interview with a FO.
[107] Two interviews with IOs and another one with a FO.
[108] One interview with a FO.
[109] One interview with a FO.
[110] One interview with an IO.
[111] One interview with an IO.
[112] One interview with an IO.
[113] One interview with a FO.

achieve.[114] This developmental process can involve exploring the values that each organisation might bring to the collaboration, establishing a vision and strategy of how collaborative work meets the objectives of each organisation and ensuring a mutual understanding in these areas ahead of any issues arising.[115]

- **Financial support:** One FO interviewee noted the importance of financial support to enable FOs access to IO membership.[116] EN:Able Communities, for example, was awarded ERSA membership through a YFF grant.[117] Seed funding or early investment was also seen as an important facilitator allowing FOs to engage with networking and collaboration opportunities,[118] as were free networking groups such as the YEG.[119] Funding provided to IOs to run forums with FOs was also seen as an important facilitator for networking opportunities.[120]

Amplifying impact on FOs and young people

Networking and collaboration activities can impact FOs and young people by amplifying influencing activities, which can lead to changes in programmes and policies relating to youth employment. For example, the collective impact of the ERSA's Kickstart forum on government initiative was stronger than if the same messaging had come from a single organisation alone.[121] In response to the forum, the DWP made concrete changes relating to the processes, required documentation, involvement of gateway organisations in Jobcentre Plus, and the advertisement of vacancies – including having them appear on the 'Find a Job' page.[122] The ERSA was also able to feed the evidence they collated through these forums into the YEG's call for a Kickstart extension.[123] One interviewee reported that according to the DWP, the Kickstart forum informed the implementation and troubleshooting of the programme.[124]

Participation in the Kickstart forum also benefitted FOs directly, by giving them access to up-to-date answers and information from the DWP,[125] as well as examples of good practice shared by other organisations facing the same challenges.[126] For example, one FO interviewee reported that they found out through the forum about an administrative platform that one of the other gateway organisations had developed.[127] The interviewee reported that using this gateway had subsequently saved them significant resource, bolstered their reputation, and increased the

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[114] One interview with an IO.
[115] One interview with an IO.
[116] One interview with a FO.
[117] One interview with a FO.
[118] One interview with a FO.
[119] One interview with a FO.
[120] One interview with a FO.
[121] One interview with an IO.
[122] One interview with a FO; see also HM Government (2022c).
[123] One interview with an IO; see also YEG (2021).
[124] One interview with an IO.
[125] Two interviews with FOs.
[126] One interview with a FO.
[127] One interview with a FO.

number of job opportunities they could handle from 40-80 to 300.[128] This in turn impacts on young people by increasing the number of opportunities available to them.

Similarly, the formal networking and collaborative work that the CFYI carries out with FOs provides them with the tools and resources to better understand the experiences young people are having. This enables them to improve service provision and offer better support to young people as a result.[129] Similarly, one FO interviewee reported that ERSA and YEG forums provided them with the information and speakers that they would then use in their own FO networks and support groups.[130]

Lessons for enhancing networking and collaboration opportunities between IOs and FOs to improve employment outcomes for young people

1. Larger IOs need to ensure that **FOs and smaller IOs feel that their voice and message is being heard** when IOs represent other organisations to government and funders.
2. Successful collaboration takes time and effort to get to know each other and agree ways of working together. It is important that **funders build in provision for developing collaborations**, as well as seed funding to smaller organisations, to build capacity for these kinds of interactive work.
3. **Limited funding opportunities places smaller IOs and FOs in competition.** Larger IOs, however, can play a role in enabling knowledge sharing and networking by facilitating convivial spaces for exchange centred on shared interests and objectives.
4. While the shift to remote working has created challenges for traditional approaches to informal networking, larger IOs should continue to **take advantage of remote forums to encourage accessibility and diversity** of voices present.
5. Collaboration is about drawing on as great a diversity of voices and experience as possible. **Government and funders need to support the existence of forums and groups that enable input from a wide range of bodies.**

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[128] One interview with a FO
[129] One interview with an IO.
[130] One interview with a FO.

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