

# TURNING A CORNER

Transition in the voluntary sector  
**2012–2013**



## Authorship and acknowledgements

*Turning a corner* was written by Eliza Buckley, Ben Cairns and Richard Jenkins. It is based on an analysis by IVAR staff and associates of the 25 projects carried out in 2012/13. We would like to thank all the organisations we worked with over the last 12 months for a fun and fruitful year of research. Thanks also to Mike Aiken, Leila Baker, Caroline Broadhurst, Carol Candler, David Emerson, Alison Harker, Charlotte Hennessy and Richard Hopgood for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this publication.

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## Transition in the voluntary sector 2012–2013

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# TURNING A CORNER

—01

*Turning a corner* draws on a year of IVAR's research to offer a detailed snapshot of – and our reflections on – life for senior staff and trustees in frontline social welfare voluntary organisations.

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Who should read this?
- 1.3 Overview
- 1.4 Our work

## 1.1 Introduction

In 2012, IVAR's core funders asked us to "act as a critical friend and information resource, interpreting and articulating the experience of voluntary organisations<sup>1</sup> for charitable funders". *Turning a corner* is one of our responses to that invitation, alongside seminars, discussions and individual published reports.

In February 2013, we assessed what we had learned from our year in the field by collectively analysing 25 research reports. In particular, we wanted to shed light on what our findings tell us about the current operating environment for voluntary organisations, including what helps them to survive or thrive, as well as the implications of this for charitable trusts and foundations.

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1. We use the term 'voluntary organisations' throughout this report to describe organisations which collectively belong to a sector variously described as the: voluntary sector; community sector; voluntary and community sector; voluntary, community and social enterprise sector; third sector; non-profit sector; NGO sector; and civil society.

## 1.2 Who should read this?

While our primary audience is charitable trusts and foundations in so far as they act as funders of voluntary organisations, our findings may also be of interest to bodies that support and represent frontline organisations. We also hope that *Turning a corner* will help contribute to the debates and dialogue in which others in the field are already involved.

## 1.3 Overview

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### IN TURNING A CORNER WE LOOK AT:

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- The current operating environment for voluntary organisations – the risk of paralysis, working with others, staying rooted.
- What helps voluntary organisations to thrive – understanding mission and fit with the bigger picture, tailored support and flexible funding.
- Funders and the voluntary organisations they support – strategic approaches and building relationships.

Throughout the publication, our findings are illustrated with case studies drawn from our research.

## 1.4 Our work

During 2012, IVAR led over 25 projects involving more than 750 staff and trustees of over 275 voluntary organisations, 16 charitable funders and 50 senior staff from local authorities and other public agencies. Our research was commissioned by voluntary organisations, umbrella organisations, public bodies and independent funders across the four countries of the UK – from Belfast to Bishop Auckland; Glasgow to Gloucester; Salford to Swansea. Projects included work aimed at changing practice – supporting organisations to develop their strategy, explore collaboration or merge – and changing systems – facilitating ongoing learning for commissioning partnerships and research into the funding approaches of charitable foundations.

The majority of the voluntary organisations we worked with were small to medium in size, with an annual income of between £100,000 and £1 million (most at the lower end of this scale). All operated within the field of social welfare, working with marginalised and disadvantaged people in a range of areas, including: mental health; asylum and immigration; social care; homelessness and housing; community work; and advocacy.

These organisations faced difficult challenges during the 12 months in which we undertook our research. Our reflections make it clear that there are no simple answers, quick fixes or 'one size fits all' solutions. However, our findings and analysis highlight several important themes that provide some clues about how the organisations and funders we worked with might navigate their way through a time of rapid and continued change in order to meet the needs of their beneficiaries.

# UNDERSTANDING THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

—02

The operating environment for voluntary organisations in 2012/13 was fast-changing and unpredictable. Within this context, there was a need for voluntary organisations to embrace transition as a permanent feature in order to thrive. Here we explore the challenges this creates.

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The risk of paralysis
- 2.3 The need to work with others
- 2.4 The importance of institutional memory
- 2.5 Awareness of mortality
- 2.6 Summary

## 2.1 Introduction

Over the course of the 12 months covered by this report, 'austerity' continued to be used as the shorthand for describing the environment in which voluntary organisations were operating and, as we observed in many cases, struggling. The increasing demand on social welfare services and growing inequality affecting service users and beneficiaries, which we witnessed in most of our fieldwork, confirmed the depth of the economic recession.

However, the challenges which we saw many organisations dealing with were more varied and complex than those relating to the availability of funding alone. For example, some saw an increase in client referrals due to changes in service thresholds and welfare provision or as a result of other organisations in the area closing. While 'operating environment' suggests something fixed and capable of being mapped, our observation is that organisations are responding to a set of fluid and continually changing issues. As a research centre that has been working in the voluntary sector for almost 15 years, we know that most of these changes are not new. Yet it seems to us – and to the participants in our recent research – that the scale and uncertainty of change is qualitatively different because of its pace and unpredictability.

In this fluid and dynamic environment, organisations exist in a constantly evolving matrix of interdependent relationships. Changes to any one aspect or part of the environment have many potential consequences. The defining characteristic of this environment is that of continuous 'transition', in which survival means being able to adapt to new and shifting sets of circumstances. Voluntary organisations are not undergoing a period of transition from one reasonably steady state to another – transition has become an essential and permanent feature of what it is for an organisation to survive, thrive and make a difference.

We have observed that economic uncertainty and social upheaval have exerted two kinds of pressure on organisations. First, they are experiencing pressure to define their mission – who they are and why they exist. Second, they are having to renegotiate and renew external relationships – with key interest groups, collaborators and competitors. In thinking about these pressures of transition, we have identified some particular challenges, many of which are interlinked.

## 2.2 The risk of paralysis

Uncertainty and upheaval are prompting new sets of expectations from service users as the needs of individuals, families and neighbourhoods change. One voluntary organisation explained:

“We are seeing people with mental health problems whose benefits have been cut and we do not have the expertise to advise on benefits ... It feels as if people are falling apart around us.”

New processes and expectations from funders and service commissioners, including a focus on ‘impact’ and the promotion of social finance, are also placing a burden on voluntary organisations. In response, we have observed leaders of organisations feeling saturated; having to act simultaneously as managers of operations and staff, interpreters of new funding rules, and policy advocates on behalf of their beneficiaries and service users.

Often leaders had little time to think, and when they did we noticed high levels of anxiety and fear in relation to an uncertain future that felt beyond their ability to influence. Unsurprisingly, in these circumstances, people at times felt defeated or paralysed when turning their minds to thinking about, and planning for, the future (see ‘Caught in the headlights’, page 11).

In our programmes of strategic support to grant holders of the Tudor Trust and members of Locality, this ‘strategic vacuum’ was often at the heart of wider organisational difficulties. However, we also noted that planning is not an answer in and of itself. While some degree of clarity may be required about what level of strategy is helpful within the current climate, there is still a place – and need – for improvisation, opportunism and creativity.

### Caught in the headlights

During a period characterised by complexity and distress, many of the organisations we worked with appeared to have been pushed into a state of paralysis:

hampered by anxiety and faced with daunting challenges – funding crises; sky-high demand for services – that require continuous response and adaptation.

Understandably, for some this is an overwhelming situation. Managing it requires strong leadership that understands the possible responses available, as well as what to prioritise and where to focus energy.

“Thinking ahead during times of uncertainty is so hard to do without jeopardising your existing work.”

Organisations told us about the difficulties they experience finding the time and space to think strategically or plan for the future.

There were fears that taking an eye off the day-to-day in order to look ahead would jeopardise current provision of much-needed services:

“When your food bank has a queue out of the door and around the building, you can’t exactly close for an away day”.

Leaders were frustrated and worried – conscious that this was not a viable long-term situation but uncertain about how to shift gear.

## 2.3 The need to work with others

Collaboration has always been a key theme in our research and this year was no different – from our pilot project supporting cross-sector working with new clinical commissioning groups, to helping two community organisations explore merger. While it remains important to review and renew networks, particularly in the current climate, our research has repeatedly shown how difficult voluntary organisations find working together (see ‘To merge or not to merge?’; page 12). Looking for

some kind of solution to this enduring challenge, we have identified the importance of shared vision and values and closely aligned objectives in collaborative working. In a number of pieces of work this year, we saw that the process of working through the question of whether to collaborate – even when the answer was ‘no’ – often left organisations with greater clarity about their own mission and values.

## To merge or not to merge?

Over the course of the year we facilitated the exploration of six mergers; only one of which concluded with formal merger. Some organisations realised early on in the merger discussions that there was not a sufficient 'fit' between partners or enough appetite to proceed. Others spent months investing time, money and energy in discussions about the architecture of a merged organisation, before also deciding not to continue.

We know from our earlier work that mergers entered into out of strategic choice, rather than being forced by economic circumstance alone, seem most likely to yield benefits to the beneficiaries (e.g. more and better services) and organisations (e.g. greater influence) involved. In these mergers, both partners have seen themselves as embarking on a 'productive exchange', with each organisation providing something that neither could achieve alone. This approach was made possible by the existence of a shared vision – crucial in building consensus and joint buy-in.

**“If you can't afford the time to see beyond the 'technical' aspects of collaboration to the fundamental questions of vision and fit, then that can get in the way of achieving anything together.”**

We've found that working towards a shared vision helps organisations to feel they have something to gain from coming together and, therefore, that some compromises are worth making. The key learning here is that

even if you enter merger explorations on the back foot – preoccupied by survival rather than growth – it is still important to identify and then pursue a positive agenda about change and improvement.

This ideal kind of merger requires time, money and a significant degree of risk-taking. The challenge now is that, when organisations feel anxious and beleaguered, and where the space for thinking

imaginatively and creatively about the future is squeezed, the conditions and resources for constructive mergers are less likely to be in place. This makes the perception of merger as a desirable option for the rationalisation or preservation of parts of the voluntary sector contradictory – our evidence suggests that the current operating environment actually militates against the achievement of successful merger, in its fullest sense.

## 2.4 The importance of institutional memory

If the previous period – before the economic crash – was marked by the further professionalisation of voluntary sector management and delivery, the current trend is to see the number of paid posts reduced. Early signs from our work suggest that organisations with roots and history reaching back to earlier periods may be better placed to deal with uncertainty than those that sprung up or grew significantly in a period of more plentiful government support. Having had to adapt in the past means that many more established organisations have a robust attitude to change and some history of greater self-sufficiency to draw on when negotiating harsher times.

## 2.5 Awareness of mortality

Our reflections on the year's research left us with a question as to whether, given the now ongoing scarcity of financial resources, more organisations might consider the option of closure. For organisations whose aims are no longer appropriate, or for whom sources of public funding on which they were overwhelmingly dependent no longer exist, or who have not been able to make a transition to a new environment or find a sustainable alternative business model, it may be more responsible to close down than to compete with others or struggle on hand-to-mouth. Some organisations thought that accepting closure as an option was quite liberating and facilitated a refocus on beneficiaries:

*“In essence, these organisations live every day like it's their last.”*

## 2.6 Summary

The multiple pressures and demands on voluntary organisations are exposing both strengths and weaknesses in their governance and management. While some have gone into isolation or retreat, others have successfully engaged with uncertainty and grappled with complexity. What can we learn from those organisations which are adapting in order to tackle changing social needs with determination and vision? In the following section, we draw out some of the factors that appear to help voluntary organisations deal with transition.

# WHAT HELPS VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS TO THRIVE?

—03

In spite of the challenges they face, we saw many voluntary organisations delivering fantastic services, carrying out valuable activities and achieving real and lasting benefits to individuals, their families and communities, with the help of committed and engaged staff, trustees and volunteers.

In this section, we look at the elements that seem to help these organisations to thrive.

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Understanding and using mission
- 3.3 Awareness of place in the firmament
- 3.4 Tailored support and a critical friend
- 3.5 Flexible funding
- 3.6 Capacity building
- 3.7 Summary

### 3.1 Introduction

Organisations that were able to thrive did so by drawing on the passion and drive of key individuals who were able to see and seize opportunities. They utilised external funding and networks to help them gain access to expertise, different ways of working and new ideas. It sometimes appeared that organisations more used to relying on their own resources (for example, those not dependent on public funding) had a slightly greater degree of self-sufficiency.

In the following sections we explore what helps voluntary organisations to thrive as well as reflecting on the idea and practice of ‘capacity building’. Finally, we introduce a concept – ‘organisational self-consciousness’<sup>2</sup> – which we feel captures key aspects of the sort of organisational strength necessary to survive well.

### 3.2 Understanding and using mission

This was a defining feature in those organisations that were doing well across a range of projects. Organisations that were able to adapt and develop were those which were able to review and renew their mission in a changing environment. In our research helping a group of charitable foundations to explore the changing needs of voluntary organisations, we found that organisations who were comfortable with the idea of continuous reflection and review saw this attitude as a useful approach to managing change.

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2. Cairns, B. (2009) ‘The independence of the voluntary sector from government in England’, in Smerdon, M. (Ed) *First principles of voluntary action*, London: Barings Foundation

### 3.3 Awareness of place in the firmament

Organisations that seemed to understand their mission best were those that were strongly rooted – with a clear sense of where and how they fitted into the greater scheme of things, including whether it was necessary for them to exist at all. For organisations with a hazy sense of other players in the field, or limited horizons or networks, the adaptation and alliances necessary to prosper were less likely. In a number of projects, we saw the importance of giving organisations the opportunity to ask themselves fundamental questions such as: Who are we? What are we trying to achieve? What do we need to do to get there? Who else is operating in the same space?

### 3.4 Tailored support and a critical friend

During a period of frenetic change and multiple uncertainties, we saw organisations having to juggle their response to challenges, needs and opportunities. In these circumstances, off-the-shelf ‘toolkits’ or online solutions were of only limited use. Instead, organisations benefitted most from flexible, tailored support that they could access when needed. A key component of this support was a ‘critical friend’ – someone to reflect back an independent perspective and provide a facilitated space in which to explore options:

“Long-term support is the ultimate: having a sounding board that you can talk to and who knows you throughout your journey.”

### 3.5 Flexible funding

Given the multiple and complex challenges that organisations are facing, and the internal development needs we have observed that they need to address, our reflection is that funding works best for organisations when it is flexible. If funding agreements are overly prescriptive there is a risk that they will prevent organisations from responding to their changing context in a way that holds beneficiaries at the forefront. Unrestricted funding can at times be appropriate here, allowing organisations the necessary freedom to navigate their way through transition.

### 3.6 Capacity building

In reflecting on our year in the field, we also reflected on capacity building itself.

A predominant approach to capacity building over the last decade or so has been a ‘deficit model’, where something that is perceived as lacking in an organisation is somehow injected by external support providers. During that period – from the launch of ChangeUp in 2004 to the closure of Capacitybuilders in 2011, what might be called a ‘golden age’ of capacity building funding – three voices were dominant: government, Big Lottery Fund and national infrastructure bodies. Each had its own agenda and interest in capacity building. The recipients of capacity building (voluntary organisations) and their beneficiaries were largely marginal or absent from decisions about priorities and resource allocation.

Our experience across a range of projects over the last 12 months has reinforced for us the benefits of organisations receiving more bespoke and rounded support that is tailored to their context, flexible enough to help them respond to changing needs and circumstances, and imaginative enough to consider an organisation in the round. This more integrated, holistic approach seems well-suited to dealing with complexity and uncertainty.

Our work suggests that self-determination is key to organisations’ successful negotiation of challenges; in other words, that support needs to be geared towards the accomplishment of an organisation’s mission rather than conforming to someone else’s agenda. We have seen how the independence of trusts and foundations can give them licence to take a critical stance on capacity building and actively encourage space for alternative, less prescriptive types of learning and reflection.

## 3.7 Summary

When considering what our research findings tell us about what helps voluntary organisations to survive or thrive, the concept of organisational self-consciousness captures for us the ability of an organisation to be self-determining and its ability to seek, engage with and make use of support in order to learn, adapt and improve.

This can be usefully expanded to encompass the ability of an organisation generally to reflect on itself, learn from experience and take and implement decisions. Organisational self-consciousness carries for us the sense and ownership an organisation has of its mission as well as its capacity to embody and enact this. It follows then that, especially in the current climate, neglecting to pay attention to developing this sort of self-consciousness might make an organisation less able to adapt or thrive in terms of delivering its mission, regardless of the support offered.

How then might trusts and foundations themselves adapt in order to make an active and constructive contribution to the health and wellbeing of social welfare voluntary organisations? In the next, final section we offer some thoughts about the challenges and options facing trusts and foundations when they fund and engage with voluntary organisations.

# FUNDERS AND THE ORGANISATIONS THEY SUPPORT: INTERDEPENDENCE AND SYMBIOSIS

—04

In reflecting on our year in the field, we noticed that – unsurprisingly – many charitable trusts and foundations have similar support needs to voluntary organisations. They too are seeking to understand their role in a rapidly changing environment.

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 'Strategic' funding and its limitations
- 4.3 The importance of mutually supportive working relationships
- 4.4 Summary

## 4.1 Introduction

As well as the need for funders to clarify and deliver their missions, they must also negotiate relationships with those who can help to deliver their objectives. Our work has given us the opportunity to reflect on their options for doing that.

## 4.2 'Strategic' funding and its limitations

With increasing calls (from both within and outside the funding community) for trusts and foundations to account for the money they spend, there is a growing movement for them to demonstrate their 'impact'. In addition, funders, as social agents in their own right, also want to be clear about what they are trying to achieve and whether they have been successful.

One response is for funders to fund 'strategically': designing programmes from the outset with a clear 'impact' or measurable outcome in mind, and delivering them by funding interventions or organisations for which there is existing evidence of achievement. This understanding of strategic funding places a burden and priority on the funder to know (or find out) what and how problems ought to be tackled.

Our year in the field suggests that, despite its attractions, such an approach has limitations. The nature of the environment means that not only are organisations evolving, but so are the needs they are trying to address. What might one year look like a sensible 'impact' could – quite soon – not be the case. For many smaller voluntary organisations, difference and value may be more

appropriately assessed in terms of outputs and outcomes, rather than the scale and coverage (for example to communities or issues) implied by 'impact'.

Looking across a range of projects reviewed for this report, investment in voluntary organisations (through grants and other assets, such as brokerage, networking, leverage, etc.) seems more likely to succeed when it takes full account of the knowledge and insight of those who are closest to the ultimate beneficiaries and understand their particular contexts best. Not every grant can be assessed with visits and face-to-face meetings but there is a risk that not understanding needs and context may restrict the potential for a grant to be a mutually beneficial experience. These sorts of considerations underpin the collaborative nature of the Building Health Partnerships programme (see 'Creative commissioning', page 20) where those commissioning and those delivering services are engaged in an open and exploratory process that aims to value the knowhow of people on the ground while recognising the role of commissioners and funders in facilitating collaboration, knowledge exchange and joint service delivery. This cross-sector partnership initiative is a promising approach to the situation in which other charitable funders and organisations find themselves. It suggests that investment in relationships, although a long, slow process, may in time lead to more meaningful change.

## Creative commissioning

The challenges of limited resources and increased demand for both public and voluntary services make it even more important to get better outcomes with the resources available. Commissioners of public services need to think differently about the resources at their disposal and how to deploy these in more effective ways – including working with the voluntary sector.

Our work on four large-scale government-funded programmes supporting the voluntary sector and public sector to work together in England and Scotland has highlighted how hard it is to build successful cross-sector relationships. Differences in organisational culture and structure, as well as mismatched expectations, can all form barriers to establishing productive partnerships.

We worked with Social Enterprise UK to design a collaborative approach to the implementation of health reforms for the Department of

Health. The programme has fuelled innovative practice by focusing on one question: How do we create greater value? This enabled commissioning that takes into account the wider resources that the voluntary sector can contribute to local health economies and yields

better results than traditional market mechanisms, from which voluntary organisations – particularly small, local and specialist ones – are often excluded.

We've learned that eight key ingredients help to build successful cross-sector partnerships:

**“I have never seen commissioners, the VCSE and councillors coming into a room and talking as equals – it's been so wonderfully open.”**

1. Take time to build trust
2. Prioritise the partnership
3. Get the right people in the room
4. Establish shared goals
5. Set a focus
6. Stay flexible – things change
7. Learn together and from each other
8. When you need it – ask for help!

## 4.3 The importance of mutually supportive working relationships

For charitable trusts and foundations funding voluntary organisations, our year in the field highlights the importance of forming mutually supportive working alliances, alongside building evidence of what works to tackle issues, as critical to enhancing the difference they make.

As well as recognising and valuing the skills and expertise of the individuals within the organisations it funds, this kind of funder – reflective, responsible and engaged – can also use its own accumulated knowledge to contribute appropriately to the thinking and strategy of

those organisations. Here, the interaction between funders and voluntary organisations is relational rather than contractual. It places value on the contribution each partner brings: the knowledge of context and needs that the funded organisation possesses and the resources, overview and convening power of the funder. When there is space to foster openness and develop trust, we have observed a virtuous circle in which both organisations are better able to realise their goals. It seems to us that, during a period of such heightened uncertainty, this kind of symbiosis in funding relationships has real value.

## 4.4 Summary

In *Turning a corner* we have reflected on some common themes emerging from our year in the field of voluntary sector research and support. We hope to have provided some insights into the challenges facing social welfare voluntary organisations and, more importantly, the mindset and support that might help them to identify and tackle social problems.

We have noted that ‘transition’ is now a permanent feature of life for most organisations. To avoid stagnation and to access the resources necessary to survival, we suggest that ‘organisational self-consciousness’ seems to be a helpful way of understanding the sort of internal dynamism and openness required by organisations in order to adapt and collaborate in a way which places their mission and the needs of beneficiaries first.

In thinking about charitable foundations, when they come to fund voluntary organisations, we have observed how funders who have an understanding of the dynamic nature of the current climate are more likely to form mutually supportive working alliances with delivery organisations that enhance and support – rather than deplete – their capacity to be self-determining, entrepreneurial and focused on the ultimate needs of beneficiaries. Here, the assets of time and independence can allow foundations to work collaboratively, both to relieve distress

and to create the conditions for change. This more emergent approach, rather than a race for impact, may be well suited to upheaval and transition.

Underlying all of our reflections is the importance of mission – specifically the need for this to be a ‘live’ tool, whereby all members of an organisation have a common and shared understanding of what they are trying to achieve and how they will go about it. This extends to external relationships too. In collaboration we see that the most successful partnerships are those in which the parties involved have identified the point where their interests and objectives intersect. Similarly, with funding relationships, there is the importance of conscious and negotiated alignment of objectives and an understanding that each party brings value to the relationship (in different ways). This suggests a more ‘ambidextrous philanthropy’<sup>3</sup>, balancing focused strategies with responsive and opportunistic approaches.

These reflections are offered not as a last word but with the aim of contributing to and continuing a conversation that is of critical importance to those who are trying to discern and predict the changing pattern of needs in a rapidly changing society and understand how to responsibly address them.

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3. Connelly, P. (2011) ‘The best of the humanistic and technocratic: Why philanthropy requires a balance’, *The Foundation Review*, 3, 121–137

## Further reading

The reports listed below are available at [www.ivar.org.uk](http://www.ivar.org.uk), unless otherwise indicated. Confidential reports produced for work such as merger support or strategic reviews and reports on work in progress are not included in this list.

### 2012

**Charities and social investment study: A research report for the Charity Commission**, produced on behalf of the Charity Commission – available at [www.charity-commission.gov.uk](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk)

**Duty of care? The role of trusts and foundations in supporting voluntary organisations through difficult times**

**Supporting Gypsy and Traveller groups: Findings from the One-2-One Support Project**

**The impact of the public benefit requirement in the Charities Act 2006: Perceptions, knowledge and experience**, co-produced with Sheffield Hallam University on behalf of the Charity Commission – available at [www.charity-commission.gov.uk](http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk)

**The Pilot Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Health Commissioning Improvement Programme: Interim findings report**, co-produced with Social Enterprise UK – available at [www.socialenterprise.org.uk](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk)

**Thinking about ... merger**, 3rd Edition, co-produced with Bates Wells & Braithwaite

### 2013

**The power of partnerships**, co-produced with Social Enterprise UK – available at [www.socialenterprise.org.uk](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk)

**Beneficiary involvement in funding processes at BIG**, produced on behalf of the Big Lottery Fund – available at [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk)



The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) is an independent charity that delivers research and practical support to voluntary and community sector organisations and those who work with them, including trusts and foundations, business partners, local authorities and other public agencies.

Our main interest is voluntary action – activities, services, community development or campaigns that aim to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities. We work collaboratively; we concentrate on problem-solving; and we want our work to be relevant and practically useful to voluntary and community organisations, funders, policymakers and other sectors.

Our research approach is made possible by our team of staff, associates and trustees, all of whom have worked in and around the voluntary and community sector as volunteers, paid staff, leaders, trustees, teachers and researchers.

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