

Responsible Business Forum, 14th January 2025, Partnership and Collaboration.

During the January Forum we discussed the importance of collaboration and partnership in building resilient and thriving communities. The focus was on how businesses, community organisations, and strategic partners can come together to create lasting social impact.

Collaboration: The Key to Thriving Communities

The discussion kicked off with a presentation highlighting the critical role collaboration plays in empowering communities. By working together, organisations can co-design solutions, create inclusive opportunities, and foster empowerment. Collaboration not only strengthens local networks but also drives effective, community-driven outcomes.

A key example shared was the VCSE (Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise) City Alliance. This formal agreement between the VCSE sector in Stoke-on-Trent and the City Council aims to create resilient communities. The Alliance's initial priorities include improving commissioning and procurement, enhancing communications, fostering volunteering, and preventing social issues. The Alliance is an open initiative, with opportunities for anyone to get involved by supporting its activities, sharing stories, and participating in workshops.

Encouraging Business Involvement: Ideas for the Future

One of the main points of discussion centered around how to encourage businesses to engage more actively in social responsibility initiatives. Participants discussed the idea of pairing businesses with community organisations to foster long-term partnerships. One proposed solution was to encourage businesses to "loan" their young talent to community groups on a part-time basis. This would not only provide invaluable experience for the employees but also bring fresh skills and perspectives to community organisations.

Another idea was to leverage the Stoke-on-Trent centenary celebrations as a platform to highlight how businesses have contributed to the local community over the years and continue to do so today. Events tied to this celebration could serve as an opportunity for businesses to connect their history with their current efforts, further promoting collaborative efforts within the community.

Additionally, attendees highlighted the need for businesses to spotlight their CSR activities, sharing successful initiatives to inspire others to take part. This could help create a culture where giving back to the community becomes a common practice for all businesses, large and small.

Addressing Financial and Strategic Incentives

The conversation also touched on the financial aspects of CSR. Some attendees raised the question of how businesses could be incentivised to engage with the nonprofit sector more actively. The idea of offering financial rewards or recognition for businesses that engage in volunteering and community service was explored. Furthermore, the possibility of academic research on the business benefits of volunteering was discussed. Local universities could play a key role in conducting studies that demonstrate the financial and strategic advantages of giving back to the community.

Participants also raised concerns about the financial pressures on the nonprofit sector, particularly regarding rising wage costs. Many nonprofits rely on low-paid staff and volunteers, and increases in minimum wage are set to create significant challenges. The

group discussed the need for businesses and the nonprofit sector to work together to address these challenges and to advocate for changes to funding models that could help ease the pressure on nonprofits.

Key Takeaways and Action Points

The meeting concluded with several key takeaways and actionable steps moving forward:

1. **Talent Development and Volunteering:** Develop frameworks that pair businesses with community groups to foster skill-sharing and mutual growth. Businesses can “loan” young talent to nonprofit organisations, providing hands-on experience and strengthening the community.
2. **Leverage Stoke-on-Trent Centenary Celebrations:** Use the centenary celebrations as a platform for promoting collaboration, connecting businesses with the community’s history and shaping future opportunities.
3. **Explore Financial and Strategic Incentives:** Investigate financial models and research that demonstrate the tangible benefits of volunteering for businesses. Universities such as Keele and Staffordshire could play a role in exploring this area further.
4. **Advocate for Policy and Accountability:** Strengthen enforcement of the Social Value Act to ensure businesses follow through on their social value commitments. Collaboration between the Chamber and VAST can help amplify voices advocating for change.
5. **Strategic Focus in Bids and Tendering:** Encourage businesses to adopt a strategic approach to CSR commitments, aligning these initiatives with long-term organisational goals.
6. **Showcase Successful CSR Initiatives:** Highlight businesses that have successfully integrated CSR into their operations to inspire wider participation across the region.
7. **Promote Reciprocal Learning:** Foster a two-way exchange between businesses and the nonprofit sector to share knowledge and best practices.
8. **Engage Young People in Leadership Roles:** Encourage young professionals to join boards and contribute to community organisations, providing valuable leadership experience while driving community development.