**Webinar: Exploring Collaboration Models in Arts & Culture**

TRANSCRIPT

SEVA PHILLIPS: Okay. So welcome, everyone. I'm delighted to see so many of you joining us today from across the sector. Whether you're here because you're actively exploring collaboration opportunities or simply curious about your options, you're in exactly the right place.

My name is Seva Phillips. I lead on innovation and new projects at Figurative, which is a new, independent, not‑for‑profit supporting impact, investment and innovation in the creative and cultural sector.

More information on Figurative and our open impact investment fund can be found on our website, which is [figurative.org.uk](https://figurative.org.uk/).

Some housekeeping before we begin the session. Closed captions are available from our captioner, Kimberly. I'm just going to share the link in the chat where you can access those captions now. Just bear with me for a moment.

There we go. That link should be in the chat now.

And I also wanted to let you know that this webinar is going to be recorded and made available for viewing later, on our website.

Attendee: Sorry. Can you check the chat section as well. I cannot use the chat at the moment.

Thanks, Seva.

SEVA PHILLIPS: So I will come back to you on how to access that in a second. Let me just get to the end of this section.

So we're going to begin with a presentation from Cara Evans from Eastside People on the different collaboration models possible. That will be followed by me asking questions to Becky, Rob, and Natalie, the other speakers, who have all been on different collaboration journeys in their respective organisations.

In the second half of the session, we'll be discussing the questions from the audience in the Q&A. Please use the Q&A feature in Teams. Hopefully, you will see that in the Teams interface.

Now, the idea from this webinar came from a conversation organised by colleagues in the sector around the pros and cons of charitable services, the lack of information available regarding mergers, and the interest in exploring the risks and opportunities of different kinds of collaboration.

As I'm sure we'll hear later, there is not a one‑size‑fits‑all approach, and nor is it always a route to either cost savings or greater impact.

So, we thought a broader sector-facing conversation would be useful, followed by a toolkit expanding on themes and ideas within this webinar, which Arts Council England have generously agreed to support.

It's a toolkit that we're about to start work on and should be available by May. So please sign up to our newsletter on our website to find out more about that.

So before I hand over to our first speaker, Cara, we wanted to understand what your starting point is on this topic. So, there's going to be some audience participation now. We've prepared a few questions via the Mentimeter app, which I would really appreciate you answering.

So I'm just going to share my screen to that, to the poll. Bear with me.

Okay. Great! So, hopefully, everybody should see that.

You can join this poll at menti.com using the code 76861284.

This is our first of three questions.

So: when you hear the word "collaboration," what is the first thing that comes to mind?

We'll give you about 20 seconds to answer that. And you can access this, by the way, on your laptops or phones.

Great.

Sorry. Just finishing this word cloud. So, we're seeing partnership, shared knowledge, working together, time commitment. Great. Actually, we'll share the results of these polls after the webinar is complete. We'll do a little write‑up and maybe email you with some of these results.

Great. Thank you for that.

Next one is: What understanding do you have of partnerships and mergers?

So we wanted to understand everyone's sort of base level of understanding here.

Thank you.

Okay. Great. Some understanding, good understanding, little understanding. Great. Thank you for that. That's helpful. Feels like people are somewhat familiar with this area.

Last question. What information would be useful for you if you were thinking about collaboration?

If anyone has just joined, you can answer the poll by going to menti.com on your laptop or phone and using the code 76861284.

Great.

Okay. Great. Thank you. That's going to be really helpful for us in gauging our understanding and thinking about the toolkit I mentioned earlier and what information would be useful to see in that. So, yes, quite a lot of appetite for some kind of checklist and the different models you will hear about shortly, and case studies as well.

Thanks, everybody, for that. I will stop sharing the Mentimeter screen now.

I will hand over to Cara for the main introduction to all of this.

Let me just get the presentation going. Great.

Thanks, everyone. I'm going to hand it over to Cara Evans now from Eastside People.

CARA EVANS: Thank you. It's so lovely to see so many people here. I ran a webinar and couldn't see any faces. It's so much nicer to have this. Thank you for that.

Thank you very much for answering those questions as well. I think that I glanced at the word cloud there, and there were some very, very positive words, but there were also some words about struggling as well. So, hopefully, some of the information that I can give you today might be helpful.

Also, thank you so much for asking the last question because we all do love a checklist. That's going to be really, really helpful.

A little bit about myself and Eastside People.

As you know, my name is Cara Evans. I’m Head of Partnerships and Mergers at Eastside People. I have worked in the charity sector my whole life, a lot of different roles, but I'm a huge fan of the amazing things we can do.

I've been at Eastside People for two years. We're a charity consultancy that helps with any nonprofits around strategy, AI, recruitment, all the usual things, and, obviously, my area is partnerships and mergers.

So what I'm going to cover today is just a little bit of detail but also just some specific examples as well about the collaboration spectrum and the different types of partnerships and mergers, and also signpost you to some resources.

So if you could go to the next slide, thank you very much.

Very quickly, I wanted to flag something that might be useful. This was the webinar I was running yesterday. We launched our 11th Good Merger Index which is an annual report into charities in the ‑‑ sorry ‑‑ mergers in the charity sector. It's a very interesting report. For the first time in two years, we have reported an increase of 30%. The last two years, we’ve seen a decrease, so specifically a real breakaway from what we've seen. We've seen 63 mergers involving 131 organisations. If you want to learn more about what's happening in some very detailed case studies, please download the report.

What I will say is when I was going back in this year and the last few years of the reports, there are not many examples of specific mergers in your sector. We have seen some. We're going to talk about some of those examples today, but, yeah, that's what we're going to have a little bit more of a conversation about that.

So if we go to the next slide, we are looking, really, at why ‑‑ are you okay to go to the next slide?

A lot of people make the assumption, when thinking about mergers and partnerships, that they do that in a state of distress. That’s sometimes a lever but not necessarily the case. Over the last decade at Eastside People, we've come up with these strategic reasons why people think about it and some of the benefits. I'm not going to go through all of these because you can have a look. But there's a couple I want to highlight, specifically around economies of scale and back‑office savings. It was referred to earlier. It's quite an interesting one. In most examples, you will ultimately see some savings, but they don't come through straight away. And, as we all know, there's time and effort and costs in going down these roads. I think it's important to flag that.

I also wanted to say ‑‑ sometimes it's a geographic reach or scale, sometimes it's service innovations. A lot of time, I say to people when you're thinking about partnerships and mergers, you have to think about the strategic reasons, what you ultimately want to achieve.

The other one I wanted to flag is the service improvements for beneficiaries. If you're going to be able to provide a higher quality service more efficiently and effectively in the long term, why wouldn't you consider it? There's a lot of reasons, and I would like to address that on the next slide.

I think it requires a lot of time and money. I'm not going to pretend that it doesn't. For a lot of organisations, there's a lot of identity and mission. Sometimes you don't know where to start, and that's part of the discussion today. Sometimes it's hard to find people to really have those conversations.

And last but not least, it's difficult because the person making the decision to talk about this and think about this, it can actually impact on your personally. So, of course, that makes it very hard.

But, ultimately, it's to say there are some really positive reasons that we talked about.

If I could go to the next slide, I would like to look at some of the different models.

One of the reasons people don't think about partnerships is because they don't know what it looks like and what it can be. I think it's important to talk about the different types of partnerships you can have. Many of you have already got informal alliances, and that might be more than enough for you and it might be working really, really well.

I think it's important even in an informal alliance to make sure you're monitoring it in some way because, yes, it's just an agreement. It's informal. One partner is doing one thing and the other partner is doing another, and it may be working well, but what does that well look like.

And then you can have a contract-based alliance where you secure funding, and then you need to make sure there's a contract that outlines exactly what it is.

Or you could go a step further, which is the joint venture. Then it's actually about making a legal entity. That might be a step too far, but you may want that security and that due diligence in there.

It could be a group structure where you have subsidiaries, and a lot of times that works for people because they get to retain their identity, but they're part of a bigger group.

And then you can go the final stage on that spectrum, which is merger. I think it's important to talk about the language. A lot of people use the word "merger" when, actually, technically, it might be a takeover.

We found that people are much more comfortable with that language, and it might be quite big and scary, but, actually, when you look at it in more detail, it's not as scary as you think. I'm going to talk a little bit about those models in the next slides.

If I can go to the next slide, I wanted to find some specific examples for you so you can see this happening in your particular sector.

And so where I found different organisations that are actually using these models, the presentation will be shared with you. I saw that question in the chat, and there's much more information in the notes section about either of those.

But, as you can see, there are examples in your sector that specifically relate to those particular ones. I do have a few more examples of mergers.

We have some people coming, speakers, later to talk about their experiences as well, but just to give you a taste of what's happening.

So if I move to the next slide, I think, again, you probably already know this. I think it bears repeating because whenever you go into those discussions with people, there are key elements that will really give you much more chance of success.

Whatever I say to any of our clients I speak to is you need to have a clear vision about what you want to achieve. You want to have your reasons to believe. What ultimately is it, going back to the slides of benefits. Is it about geographical reach? Is it about more service innovation? What is it you ultimately want to achieve, and what is going to bring you together under that umbrella?

Any partnership/relationship is based on trust and doing what you say you're going to do and the transparent communication.

I say this for every partnership, the communication needs to be clear and regular in managing those expectations.

If you go down more of the legal structures, you do need to make sure you do the due diligence, which is absolutely imperative. You need to be clear about what you're sharing and what does that look like in reality.

As I said earlier, monitoring is critical. You want to make sure you're achieving the objectives you set out. If not, what do you need to do to change. I think that's really important as well.

What I want to do next on the next slide is just, as I said, spend a little bit of time talking about the different types of mergers. Again, this is just about information and knowledge. We all know about those organisations that have been ‑‑ two or more organisations that come together to create a new organisation. So that is technically a merger.

A takeover is one organisation transferring their assets into another one. I know a lot of takeovers that actually feel like a merger because the partners have worked together to make sure the organisation that's been taken over doesn't actually feel like they've been taken over, but they're being looked after.

Subsidiary model is one where one organisation becomes the wholly owned subsidiary of another.

And the group structure is one we talked about already. The benefit of a group structure is you could have this overarching group, but you can keep the subsidiaries and branding. That's really important.

And the other that we've seen quite a lot of recently is swapping of services. So an organisation that's given their programme of work to another organisation because they think they can run it better.

I have two clients that have recently found another home for their retail arms.

One thing I would say about these types of mergers is, again, going back to the point of why you're doing this. It's much more important to know why and then get the model to fit what you want to achieve.

The reason I show this slide is to let people know there are options both in the collaboration spectrum and in the types of merger. Whatever you do, make sure you understand the ultimate strategic objective and make sure the models fit what you want to achieve.

This is all about sharing information. I found information that I thought might be useful for you at the beginning of your partnership journey. We have produced something called the Good Merger Guide. It was produced a while ago, but the information is still very, very valid. I personally used it as a CEO when I had to get another organisation taken over otherwise it would have disappeared. It still exists, and I'm very pleased about that.

The NCVO collaboration information is really helpful as a starter for 10.

Then the IVAR information is also very useful. I did find this information, which is sharing resources, which I thought was brilliant; 65 organisations sharing how they use digital tools, as we are very much in a digital age, I thought that was useful information.

There's more, but this is to get you started.

So that's all from me. I just wanted to say thank you on the last slide.

I'm here if you have any questions. Just want to have a quick chat. I'm really wanting to support organisations that want to think about this.

So that is all I have to say. I will cross back to you. Thank you.

SEVA PHILLIPS:

Thank you, Cara. That was really helpful. I'm sure it's sparked some ideas in people's minds.

We're now going to move on to our In‑Conversation session with some people from organisations that have gone through different types of collaboration.

We have Becky Chapman joining us from Extraordinary Bodies and Diverse City and Rob and Natalie from Apples and Snakes which merged with an organization called Poet in the City.

I want to encourage the audience to ask questions using the Q&A function within Teams.

Great. Let's start with, say, Becky. If you could tell us a bit about your organisation and what it does and the information that's relevant to our conversation today.

BECKY CHAPMAN: Diverse City is a charity. We're a performing arts charity. We advocate and model equal representation in the arts. Our purpose is to get more diverse people into the arts and get people on in the arts and get people seen and heard in the performing arts. That's sort of our overarching purpose.

We have been going for about 20 years. We've been a charity since 2017. We're an NPO and have been since 2018.

So our collaboration has been in existence for over 10 years. It's a collaboration with a professional commercial circus company. Together, we have named our collaboration Extraordinary Bodies. The purpose is to create circus for everybody. Very much through the lens of the social model of disability. So it's all about equal representation in circus but also innovation in circus through exploring what different bodies can do and what kinds of equipment innovation, what kinds of practice, what kinds of processes can really innovate in circus.

So it's really interesting talking after what you said, Cara. Really, it was a very organic beginning, and it started from an artistic collaboration between the founder of Cirque Bijou and the founder of our company. So it was a very human beginning that has evolved over those 10 years into a more structured situation. So it really started as an informal alliance but very much between two people.

We moved, actually, when we became an NPO, into a contract‑based alliance. But the early years, from about 2012, which is when the two companies first came together when we did some work together for the opening of the Olympics in Weymouth. From that moment, that was really driven by those two individuals. Their artistic desires, visions and ambitions really came together, and that's where it started.

So, in the beginning, there wasn't a strategic conversation. There was not a conversation about values and purpose. There wasn't a conversation about longevity. There were not those conversations. It was about what do we want to make together? So it was about those two artistic directors' drive.

I think it's important to say that that's also a thing. Sometimes that organic process ‑‑ well, it's carried us for over 10 years and has allowed us to move into a more contractual agreement. It's underpinned the whole thing. It's about us, as people, talking about our shared vision of the world.

So, in summary that's what we do.

SEVA PHILLIPS: So, on one hand, we conceptualised, in these five boxes, the different types of collaborations. But we shouldn't forget we're talking about the relationships of the different people involved.

BECKY CHAPMAN: For sure. For sure. I mean, you know, it was said earlier that maybe could this be a joint venture? Could this be a separate entity? We're also currently coming back, actually, towards the informal alliance. So we've moved between the two. I mean, the contractual alliance came about when we became an NPO because part of our NPO grant was granted on to our partner. So that's why the contractual engagement came about.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thank you, Becky. That's really helpful.

Rob and Natalie, if I could ask you the same question. If you could tell us about your organisation and what it does and tell us about the story of your collaboration, which I believe is a merger.

NATALIE FIAWOO: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We're going to tag team a little bit because there are two of us. I will take the first part of the question, and I will let Rob take the second.

First of all, thank you, everyone who has come here to listen to us ramble on about collaboration and the different models.

And thank you very much for the invite.

I am a programme director at Apples and Snakes. We're the UK's leading, largest spoken word and performance poetry organisation. We started in 1982. So we've been going for a really, really long time. We have gone through various different iterations of what that looks like.

We are very artist‑centred. So all of what we do is focused on development and live shows. We move between quite big work and smaller development workshops. We have a few development programmes going that move between support for performance poets and then support for producers. I don't know what else I should say. If I have missed anything, Rob will add it.

Also, in the years post pandemic and also post ‑‑ I call it Black Square Day because most people know what that means. We did quite a lot of work around our offering towards DEI, I suppose, if you want to call it that. Now we have quite a strong focus on how we, as an organisation, and how the sector deal with anti‑Black discrimination within our industry.

ROB LYNDEN: Thank you, Natalie.

So like Natalie said, thanks for inviting us along. It's good to be here.

Let me just talk about the merger process. I guess, listening to what has been said already, this was more like a takeover, really, one born by necessity.

It's a bit of an unusual model.

The approach was made from Poet in the City. They're a company with a 25‑year history, and they shared a lot of the values and programme style, that Apples & Snakes did.

They approached us with a broad approach. It was from necessity, and they wanted to safeguard their mission and legacy, but were unable to do so because of financial constraints and the situation with funding, et cetera, that you probably all know very well.

So we took this approach. It was discussed between our artistic director and CEO and our chair, and with the Arts Council. The Arts Council were helpful in helping us draw up the legal documentation that was required. I think that there was a desire on Arts Council's behalf for the grant money that Poet in the City had was not lost from the literary sector. It was brought over to Apples and Snakes.

The approach from them to us was something that we knew we had time and ‑‑ I guess the fortunate position to be able to consider that, it's not something that we necessarily sought, but because of the synergy between the two organisations and the fact that we shared a lot of the same artists, we had the same values, et cetera, it was something that we wanted to pursue.

Yeah.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Can I follow up? Were there any other organisations in the running that could have been a suitable partner? How did you decide on this partner for the merger?

ROB LYNDEN: Were there other companies who approached us?

SEVA PHILLIPS: Yeah.

ROB LYNDEN: No, I don't think so. I think it was that sense ‑‑ you know, that shared values, the shared artists, the shared programming, there was mutual respect between the two organisations as well. Obviously, we had to be interested and respectful of their programme, their history, et cetera, in order for us to take it forward.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Thanks.

And a question for all of you, I suppose.

What were some of the challenges you encountered on your collaboration journeys, as it were? And how did you work to overcome them? I know that's a generic question, but everyone is interested in challenges and how they've been overcome. So if you have any reflections on that?

ROB LYNDEN: I'm happy ‑‑

BECKY CHAPMAN: Yeah? Go, Rob.

ROB LYNDEN: I'm happy to just continue on that. That's where I was going next. Just to rattle through the list here. Everything takes longer than expected. The process of winding down a company, it's a lengthy process. It's taken us almost a year from the point of having the initial conversations to get to this point. It was six months to get all the paperwork together. We had to bring the activities that we knew that we could take over from Poet in the City -- so some were closed but some were still open. We had to bring them in to make sure they were incorporated into our paperwork, activity plans, and transfer of grants agreements, et cetera. It was months before we got anything delivered. We made it clear that this was a transition period in the first year. We made sure everyone understood that and managing expectations of what we could do and not do during that period.

It's an ongoing process as we start delivering activity. Being aware and sensitive to the situation; the fact that we’re very different organisations, both with their separate brands and keeping those brands alive and understanding how we represent a new brand. We made an announcement on our website; we had to be very clear that we were not able to fundraise specifically for activities that Poet in the City used to do. It would bring that fundraising activity into our fundraising activity.

One of the key things we brought over were very expert Poet in the City Trustees into the Apples and Snakes board.

One last thing I wanted to say is Apples and Snakes is based in the Albany. We buy services, like financial support, we buy those in from the Albany staff. So it's about sharing those resources between us as a company who are residents and recognising that that sort of expertise can be located in different places, but you can bring it all together without it necessarily being a new staff member or ‑‑ that's something else I need say, which is quite helpful.

There was not staff to bring over into the Apples and Snakes team. I think that was also one of the things that made this process somewhat easier.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Thanks, Rob.

Becky, can I ask you about the challenges you encountered in your relationship?

BECKY CHAPMAN: Oh, gosh, yes. It's certainly not a linear journey. That's for sure. I feel like it's really quite a lot of going back on yourself and then going forward. There's a lot of review. There's a lot of reflection and learning, and then you try to take it forward through the journey. Ten years is certainly quite a long period.

I think one of the really big challenges is, as I said, we're a charity. We're partnering with a commercial circus company very used to responsive work and essentially not working in a particularly strategic way; so clients ask for events to be mounted and that's what they respond to. That's how the business model is about earning fees whereas ours is about Arts Council funding, trusts and foundations, working as a charity.

Ultimately, that's been quite a challenge because it's such a different culture. The notion of strategy is actually slightly outside the comfort zone of our partner. The more, I would say, in bed with the Arts Council we have become as a charity ‑‑ for example, we’ve been really successful with project grants and with our NPO and also with trusts and foundations, but the more we got into bed with sort of those strategic funders, the trickier it became because the demands of a strategic funder are really outside the scope of the partner that we're working with at Cirque Bijou.

Their strength was productions, large‑scale productions, really high‑risk, high‑profile. Then we were really busy with evaluation and community engagement and all the agenda of Let's Create.

I think it drove a bit of a wedge between us for a period, which is partly why we're slightly rowing back to a less strategic approach, so that it is more in the model of our partner, and we're testing that out again because that's sort of where we started. Having learned what we've learned over the years, it's going back to that. That's a challenge. I think time is definitely a challenge, time to decide what you're doing, why you're doing it, is it the right thing, how are we going to do it, who is going to do it. All of that.

When you're working with two organisations in a partnership, the conversation has to be organisational‑wide.

So it can take much more time.

I think the other thing that I'm really aware of is power. Although we're both relatively small organisations and sort of on paper we look fairly similar in terms of our influence, perhaps, and the power dynamic, but, ultimately, again, the power tends to lie with whoever is holding the money.

Again, because we're a charity, it's actually been easier for us to secure the subsidy that has supported and underpinned this venture.

Therefore, I think it's been about sort of holding, trying to let go of that power and share it but ultimately we've been holding the majority of the risk, and somehow that has shifted the balance.

So I think those are the key things. There are definitely things around brand that I can talk about as well, but, really, those are the key things.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Thanks, Becky. That's really helpful.

I just wanted to take a question from the audience.

Please feel free to post your questions in the Q&A box.

A question: What were the main decision factors that led to Apples and Snakes agreeing to the merger?

NATALIE FIAWOO: I can answer that. Rob touched on it when he spoke about the process in the last question. I think it would have been several things. Obviously, an aligned, shared vision. You know, the obvious one is that we both have a focus on poetry in the UK. I think, as we all know, in the current funding client, it's difficult, right? And there are things we've been developing at Apples and Snakes that we wanted to do that aligned with the programmes we've been able to bring over from Poet in the City. I guess it was that little boost to be able to do the work that we had kind of been doing but wanted to do in a bit more depth, I suppose.

So we just finished an iteration of one of the programmes that Poet in the City had been running for a little while, which is a young producer's programme. It was a really important part of a lot of conversation at Apples, and we were able to do it with the existing relationships and partnerships we had already.

Not to act as if we're the benevolent parent or something, but the idea that Poet in the City would just disappear was quite sad. So the strand of work, it's called the Poet in the City at Apples and Snakes. We're holding on to that legacy. We have a spoken word archive, so we'll include Poet in the City’s in that archive as well.

It's sad that organisations that have been running for a long, long time are now in a position where they're struggling so badly where they're ending or having to make these kinds of decision. I feel like those are some of the main factors.

I see Rob nod. So I hope I've answered it correctly.

I hope that answers your question.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Yeah. It strikes me that there's so much value and legacy of the brands and the impact that's been achieved by so many organisations. It's really important to hold on to that, right, not just the brand but also the lessons and the institutional knowledge that comes with the people.

So I wonder how other organisations would navigate that, and they're partnering with an organisation and ensuring that all of value is stored and carried on.

Cara, I don't want to forget about you and your experiences. Please feel free, if you have anything you want to add there.

Okay. If you had to give some advice to our audience about partnerships and different collaboration opportunities, based on things that you may have done differently, is there anything that you guys would say, Becky?

BECKY CHAPMAN: Well, it's been talked about a little bit before, but, really, it's absolutely, in our experience, not about efficiency. Although we have absolutely shared resources and tangible and intangible kinds of resource, it is not efficient. (Chuckling). I mean, it's very deep work, and it needs to have time and space around it.

I think that that is really key.

And, obviously, trust. Be prepared that it's not linear. As I said earlier, it's really a process where you grow, and there's a feeling of moving forward but quite often being prepared to feel that you have to take steps back too. That's okay.

I also think it's really good to keep questioning how you're doing things. You know, not necessarily hang on to your organisation's way of doing stuff because, actually, you might need to adapt and flex because you're working with another organisational culture. So I think that flexibility is really important.

I think the idea that you're absolutely aligned, in terms of values, you know, artistically, creatively, and also in terms of broad purpose, but also to sort of not devalue the things that are different about you. I think when I first started kind of analysing the partnership or the collaboration, I kind of thought, Oh, great. We can really align. Like, we can almost be like one company.

That was so misguided because, actually, there are huge strengths in the differences between us. Actually, we're now leaning much more strongly into the differences and capitalising on those, which I think has been real learning for me, embracing difference.

I think the last thing I would say ‑‑ and I don't know how possible this is, but we're lucky, I think, particularly in light of what's happened in the last five years, the pandemic, the economic uncertainty and the ebbs and flows of the performing arts industry, we're in partnership with an organisation with a really different business model. So we have different areas of financial resilience. I think that's why we've sustained for ten years. We're working in such different ways, in terms of our financial model, and that really helped us weather the pandemic.

So I would say really understand the business model of your partner. You know, you have to do due diligence, but, actually, get it all on the table so you understand what risks they're taking, and they understand the risks that you're holding.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thanks, Becky.

We got a good question, actually, in the chat.

CARA EVANS: Do you mind if I add something? Becky is right. I think it's really important to see the value of the partnership, not necessarily around the financial stuff. But I think for some organisations, you will automatically be able to see where there are cost savings and some you won't because they might not be there.

So what is the purpose you want to achieve? When you start to look at that feasibility is when you look at where there might be cost savings. There's a whole option of looking at shared services. Now, shared services will only work for some organisations. This is why we have such a range of options. Again, it's about what is good for you. I know charities that share a fundraising function, who share an IT function, who share an office. There are definitely tangible cost savings there, but that might not be an option for you.

Again, it's just thinking about: Is there an organisation that we're already partnering with? If we go a step further, what would that look like both in terms of the strategic alignment and the values but also the whole capacity and the whole financial benefit?

So it's looking at the bigger picture.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thanks, Cara.

Yes, just to pick up this interesting question in the chat. Was there a part of the process where people in the organisations had to grieve for the way that things used to be? Did you plan for that or make it tacit somehow?

I had a question I wanted to follow up around the human aspects of the collaboration, so addressing the concerns from the staff, board members, other stakeholders while maintaining the organizational culture and the vision. So the grief of how things used to be falls within that.

Maybe I will bring it back to Rob and Natalie. Do you have any views on the human element there?

ROB LYNDEN: That's an interesting question. I'm not speaking necessarily as a grieving partner, but as I said early on, I think we have to be very sensitive to the fact that ‑‑ and Natalie said about this ‑‑ it would have been a great loss to the community overall to have experience and expertise disappear and the opportunity it provides.

We have… the report back to us from the chairman ‑‑ sorry ‑‑ the CEO of Poet in the City, was they thanked us for being so open to suggestion and to consider everything that was brought to the table, as it were.

So we didn't come with a preconceived idea: ‘it has to be this and this’. Always be mindful about what you can and cannot do and look at the whole picture to see whether it's going to work for you. We tried to be as open and as sensitive to that process that the other company was going through.

It was easier just because of the fact that there was very much a synergy between the two organisations. I was reading back over the document that we drew up. It was very clear about recognising those values and that we didn't want that to be a loss for the community sector overall.

And bringing the trustees in, that 25‑year history is still part of our organisation.

I'm not sure if that answers the question at all, but ‑‑

SEVA PHILLIPS: It gives us a flavor of the feelings involved.

Just to get to questions in the Q&A.

This one is from Daniel. With a glooming funding outlook for the arts, what advice would you give financially stable organisations to develop partnerships and joint ventures that could save on costs? So for example possibly using AI to save on backend office costs?

Does anyone have views on that question?

(Overlapping speakers)

(No discernible speaker)

CARA EVANS: What we're experiencing with our clients is we do have a lot of larger organisations that are thinking about partnerships and mergers as sort of a diversification, potential growth strategy.

What I say to those organisations is I need you to put yourselves in the shoes of the other organisations because it needs to be handled very, very sensitively. No organisation wants to be approached to be taken over without any need.

I think it's a very sensitive issue. I think larger organisations who are financially stable, I think they have an obligation to consider it but they need to do it very carefully and in partnership, and for all the right reasons.

One of the things I want to add to that. In all the different partnerships I've been involved in, there are so many jigsaw pieces that need to align.

It's about people. It's about trust. It's about relationships. If the reasons are not sound, it is unlikely that those will succeed. I think it needs to be more the right reasons and handled sensitively.

BECKY CHAPMAN: I think I would describe it as a buddying system ‑‑ with our partnership, it's changing now because there's been a change of personnel. For quite a few years, we were buddied across different strands of each other’s companies, and that allowed us to understand each other's strengths. So we were able to do some sharing of back office. We had a lot of strengths in fundraising, so we were able to raise money that benefited our partner.

They had enormous strengths in terms of pitching and budgeting and producing large‑scale work, particularly for outdoors. They've got massive networks. That was shared with us.

It was really about identifying the strengths.

Ultimately, like I said earlier, we were quite small organisations: neither of us, although we were stable, had spare capacity to offer the other. I think as a publicly funded organisation, you know, our duty, our responsibility is to make sure the money that we receive is used to reach as many people as possible.

If our partnership can assist us in doing that, that felt really important to share that investment to make that happen. Again, it always goes back to what's the purpose, what's the purpose?

We can take our NPO grant and keep it tight and hold it here, but if it doesn't help us reach the people we need to reach or employ the artists we want to employ and develop, you know, the diverse sector we're searching for, then why are we holding it?

So I think that sense of responsibility and purpose is really key, really key.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Thanks, Becky.

Go ahead, Rob.

ROB LYNDEN: One of the things Apples and Snakes has done over the last 12 months is change the office, reduce the space.

(Audio is cutting in and out)

ROB LYNDEN: Post-COVID, working patterns have changed hugely. We realised that people were not coming to the office on a regular basis like they used to. We couldn't really justify spending the amount of money we were spending on the office. So we managed to make a cost saving of around 50%. The important thing is the money should go towards the sector. It goes to supporting the artists rather than just the office space.

So looking at those overheads and seeing where you're able to make cost reductions is a valuable exercise. You know, we're looking now at how we might use AI in the workplace to just cut down on administrative tasks. That may take more exploring, but the no‑brainer for us was the office space.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thanks, Rob.

And we're almost at time.

If the panellists have time and anyone else on the call, too, I would like to continue asking the questions. For those of you that have to jump off now, I just wanted to remind you that we will be producing a toolkit that expands on the ideas here, which we intend to publish in the next couple of months. You can sign up to the newsletter on the website to get updates to that, at figurative.org.uk.

If you do need to sign off now, thank you very much for joining. It was a pleasure to have you. These are really great questions.

If you would like to continue and stay on to take part of the conversation and hear the answers to the remaining questions, then please do so.

Thank you.

The next question is: how has the governance of both examples evolved over the merger and collaborations?

BECKY CHAPMAN: Shall I say a little bit ‑‑ there's probably more significant changes at Apples and Snakes and Poet in the City.

We've had quite a lot of turnover in our charity trustees during the course of this partnership.

In the beginning, we were blessed with a really experienced group of trustees that had actually been with the organisation and then kind of transferred to being part of the charity board. They'd been directors and then became charity trustees. The governance was really brilliant and fully, fully embraced by the governance of the partnership, I should say. It was really embraced by the trustees and they were very excited by it.

I think in subsequent years, we realised how much we need to keep educating trustees on the nature of the partnership. Whether it continues for another 10 years, I don't know, but it is quite a fixed part of our thinking and programming and artistic ambitions still.

You know, going back to the brand thing, it's like, well, what is Extraordinary Bodies? Are you Extraordinary Bodies? Who is Extraordinary Bodies? It's about exploring and explaining the nature of the partnership with our governance.

In terms of our partner, they are not a charity, so they have a management committee which is made up of people from within the company. So it's a very different beast. But what we do have is kind of a shared group, which is drawn from the senior leadership team of both organisations, and we meet for decision‑making and planning and timelining and all of that.

So, really, our charity trustees have been incredibly supportive and given a lot of space to understanding what we do.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thank you, Becky.

ROB LYNDEN: From our perspective, I mean, it's always good to remind ourselves that the role of trustee is a voluntary role. There's great demands placed on trustees, to oversee everything the company does, especially around finances and the legal side of company operations.

So people come and go, and we found that we had a number of people leave the Apples and Snakes' board, for personal reasons mainly. It had a major impact on our Finance and Audit Committee, which is a sub-committee group. Bringing the Poet in the City trustees into our organisation not only has brought a great deal of expertise, experience, contacts but has meant that everything has been refreshed. Things are looked at anew. People are coming in and bringing a different perspective through just the questioning because that is their role, to look at things and get to an understanding of how Apples and Snakes work.

They are looking at things totally afresh and will ask those questions that need to be asked of us, as an organisation. So that's been a very positive thing, to have that process of being refreshed, new voices around the table, other perspectives, other experience, value.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Great. Thank you.

Another question. What have been your positive outcomes, economies to scale, and service improvements as a result of your collaborations?

NATALIE FIAWOO: So I think one of the main things is the ability for us to do more work, to give more opportunities to artists. You know, there are three main programmes that we have brought over that we've been able to continue that we hope to continue and continue. That has been one of the bigger benefits, that we've had the opportunity.

And then I spend a lot of time looking through old documents. I like understanding their methodology and their way of working. There are definitely some things that we just generally have not done that they have built a community around. So we don't generally have a volunteer process, and they have quite a strong volunteer army, if you would call it anything else.

I think we've always looked at it as asking people to do things for free, but they've been able to create a family of people that just love to do something that supports the arts. So it's looking at things like that.

Then, while we didn't have any additional staff to bring over, when we're talking about the trustees that have come over, then we have fresh perspectives, a different knowledge, different contacts, all of that stuff.

So I think those have been some ‑‑ you know, a lot of what we do at Apples is just artist‑focused.

Most of our programmes ‑‑ I don't know ‑‑ I think all of our programmes are free, or we offer bursaries. We do mostly free workshops. Our events are generally very low priced. That always operates at a loss for us, for lack of a better term. Like, any work that we're able to do or any income we're able to derive is funding-wise. We don't have a model that gives us income from the work that we do in that way. So it just offers us the opportunity to stretch what we're doing, give more work to artists. Yeah.

SEVA PHILLIPS: How many of those benefits were known prior to the merger taking place? You know, there are always these unknown‑unknowns, I guess some good and some bad, but it's interesting, the volunteer army you mentioned – was that a factor?

NATALIE FIAWOO: That was definitely an unknown. Definitely an unknown. We haven't stepped into that process yet, but it's a thing that we're thinking about and considering. I think in the course of the conversations, there were a lot of things that Poet in the City had wanted to do that we just weren't able to do. I think the ones that we brought over were really important and exciting pieces of work. And so I think that would have definitely ‑‑ I was fortunately/unfortunately on sabbatical when those conversations happened. That’s why Rob is answering the big merger questions. I get to do the fun part of doing the work.

But I think those things would have played a big part. Fortunately, we're one of those financially stable organisations. So anything else is just a bonus. We didn't have to make a decision based on what we can’t do. It was based on what we would like to do.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thank you, Natalie.

Last question I can see in the Q&A. This is from Michelle.

What are your recommendations on partnerships between two organisations from different backgrounds on a shared goal for a specific delivery?

Say, for example, a culture organisation teams up with a climate organisation leveraging more funding opportunities to build a culture across the climate community for the next COP.

We're living in an increasingly multidisciplinary world that's more collaborative. I think it's relatively easier than it ever has been to collaborate across geographies and teams. There's more methods of communication.

Any specific thoughts on how you go about doing this from very different places and very different cultures?

Becky?

BECKY CHAPMAN: Our experience is definitely about we're working across two very different cultures. I mean, we're a social change organisation with a circus company, an international cirque company.

I guess the key thing is, like some of the things I've said earlier. You really start to notice -- I suppose we knew, from the outset of our partnership ‑‑ because the partnership happened on Weymouth Beach, and that's where it was born, and we were performing in front of 11,000 people. We would have never reached those people without the partnership.

I guess if you're talk about completely outside your sector or our sector, it's really about who do you want to be speaking to? I guess that's the thing that's driven -- that we kept coming back to. Who do we want to be reaching?

How else can we employ, particularly disabled, artists sustainably?

It's about the employment picture, I guess. It’s all about keeping that in mind. If the partner you're looking at can offer a different way to reach people, whether they're artists or whether they are audiences, you know, I think that's really good to name. I guess name it. That's why you're doing it.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Thanks.

Cara?

CARA EVANS: I think it does come down to -- that sounds like an amazing idea. I think what really drives this conversation is the people behind them. They've got a belief that it's something that would work and they want to make it work, and they're passionate about it, and they find somebody else that wants to join them, then the likelihood of that is possible. You still need to think about the things we talked about building up that trust and having a clarity of purpose. But it is the passion that's going to make it happen at the end of the day, but make sure you keep to the things that will ensure the success that we talked through already today.

But I think that sounds brilliant.

ROB LYNDEN: Just to add to that, just be very clear about what it is you want to achieve together. What's your outcome? Where you cross over in terms of values, principles, agenda and things like that. If you can be clear and articulate your goal, then it's a good starting place.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm just thinking about my own experience here. We've recently ‑‑ our team ‑‑ merged with another project to form Figurative. I think there's a question of cultures and really understanding the places and priorities for the different teams involved. Right? And different ways of working as well.

So the project that we've incorporated, New Philanthropy for Arts & Culture, is mostly freelancer‑led whereas Arts & Culture Finance, which does the impact investing work at Figurative, previously worked under Nesta, a massive innovation charity. So understandably there are different approaches to processes and pursuing opportunities. One is perhaps more proactive. Another is perhaps more procedural. So, you know, it's things like that that need to be considered, that's quite interesting.

I think there was one more question in the chat. Do you have a plan for the end of your collaborations? Did you build a conscious uncoupling into the discussion to merge? What conditions or factors for ending the partnership will there be?

BECKY CHAPMAN: That's a great question. The honest answer, from our point of view, is we don't have a plan. We started in an organic way. An ending, if it came, would probably be organic. Again, it would probably be determined by the specific individuals who are kind of at the core of the original idea.

But I don't know. Again, we sort of teetered on the brink of a lot of things over the years. I think there have been moments where we thought, you know, I think we're done. Maybe we should be looking and moving out of circus and looking at opera, but, actually, we always tend to come back. I think that's about the art form. It's about all sorts of things, but it's about the people who are still genuinely fired up and passionate about the idea.

I think it's something that we probably need to come to at some point, but we haven't yet.

SEVA PHILLIPS: Natalie, Rob, do you have anything?

ROB LYNDEN: Natalie, did you want to say something about the fact that we have a funding agreement which is running ‑‑

(Overlapping speakers)

NATALIE FIAWOO: Ours is a little bit different. In this moment, we have absorbed ‑‑ kind of absorbed ‑‑ the Poet in the City's NPO funding.

(Coughing)

NATALIE FIAWOO: Sorry. Fine until the end!

We know that there's a definite stream of work that will last until the end of this round. When we put in for our new NPO, hopefully we'll have proven the validity of that work and why we should be doing that work, and, hopefully, that will translate into an uplift for ACE, and then we'll have established some relationships with different partner organisations that are a part of the process of delivering some of those programmes.

So, yeah, there's not an opportunity for uncoupling because of the nature of our merger. So, it's no longer two separate entities in that sense but now a strand of work within our wider work, that's kind of named in remembrance of Poet in the City, if that makes sense.

SEVA PHILLIPS: That's great. Thank you, Natalie.

I think it's probably time to draw this to a close. It's been really fascinating.

Thank you to all the panellists for joining and taking part and being informative.

Really, thank you to everyone who has given up their lunch break or are maybe having lunch at the same time. I hope you enjoyed your lunch during this webinar.

Stay tuned for more on this strand of work. I mentioned the toolkit. Yes, there's more coming from Figurative and Eastside People and these great organisations that shared their experiences with you.

Yeah, we'll make a recording of this available probably early next week.

Yeah, once again, thanks and goodbye.