



Corporate partnerships and Covid: lessons from the pandemic





Introduction

Corporate partnerships are important for charities at all times but this year more than ever. The pandemic has forced small charities with no experience of corporate support to seek it out, and obliged those with existing partnerships to lean on them more heavily.

This report is based on the thoughts of ten charity recipients of Ecclesiastical's Movement for Good awards, who - in two virtual roundtables chaired by Linda Minnis, chief executive of Charities Trust - shared their experiences with us in December 2020. Movement for Good supports a wide range of charities, and fulfills Ecclesiastical's unique commitment to give its profits to good causes. It also allows us to throw a light on the wider relationship between business and the third sector.

The charities that attended our roundtables ranged widely in size and scope, from a large national health charity to a local community trust. They represented extremes in their experience of corporate engagement, too. Some were looking for their first corporate partnership; for others, corporate largesse was already integral to both their funding and functioning.

Regardless of circumstance, corporate partnerships were high on everyone's agenda. It was widely accepted that business has a key role to play in helping charities ride out the Covid storm, and that some of the worst effects of the pandemic may still be to come. For that reason, organisations with little prior experience of corporate partnerships were anxious for advice on finding and attracting corporate partners. Those with existing relationships wanted deeper, more reliable connections.

And so, inevitably, this report is about the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and charities' very different experiences of corporate

partnerships in a time of unprecedented stress. When the pressure was really on, did business step up, or step back?



What was it like during a global health crisis and economic downturn?

Times of stress challenge assumptions and inspire change. There are lessons here for both charities and business on where the real value of corporate partnerships lie, and what we can do to make them better. The report serves to emphasise the value of long-term partnerships that go beyond the annual cheque or volunteer day, where the benefits of engagement are truly mutual.

These lessons are crucial because Covid-19 is by no means over, and its full economic effects are perhaps yet to be felt. Charities that can better identify, attract and embed good business supporters will be better able to meet the demands of a difficult post-Covid period.

We'd like to thank all our participants for their inspiration and insight. The result of their discussions is this report, which we hope will help prepare charities and their business partners to better support each other in the uncertain days ahead.

**Chris Pitt, Head of Responsible Business,
Ecclesiastical Insurance**



Part 1: The impact of Covid

“Through all the hardships of Covid-19, we’re now in quite an exciting position of being able to reach more people.”

When Covid hit, it hit hard. Charity shops shut, and a summer of corporate fundraising activities was cancelled or postponed. Thalie Martini, CEO of breast cancer prevention charity Breast Cancer UK, said the charity faced a loss of 50% of its funding almost overnight in March and had to furlough staff. Its volunteer-based outreach programme shut down indefinitely.

Jessie Bradley, corporate partnerships manager of youth development charity Power2 (formerly Teens and Toddlers) said that Covid had cost her organisation £600,000 due to school closures and lost fundraising revenue up to that point, though it also received some emergency funding for its frontline work. Jessie admitted that “it’s been touch and go at times, which puts a lot of pressure on staff.”

Many of our charities reported similar experiences. They talked about corporate partners that wanted to help, but simply ran out of fundraising ideas when lockdown was imposed and work became remote. And while emergency funding was available for some, small charities in particular were frustrated by arcane application procedures and money that was badly targeted and inefficiently spent.

There was general agreement that while some large charities with a Covid connection had been flooded with money they could barely spend, smaller organisations and those without a Covid link suffered.

Getting online

For all our charities, the first lockdown was marked by a period of scrambling to get online, or improve an existing online presence. Music therapy charity Thomas’s Fund was one of a number of charities that replaced face-to-face service provision with a virtual equivalent, and with some success. “Because of the nature of what we do, a lot of our services were pulled overnight, so we had to be very flexible,” said lead music therapist Esther Mitchell. “Within one and a half weeks we were working online, reaching out to children who had to shield.”



Greater reach was a recurring theme. Cherie Tyner, social worker/manager of parenting and mental health charity Parents Plus, said the Parents Plus team had worked around the clock to quickly move all professional training and supervision online. By doing so, services and agencies were able to hold parenting and mental health groups virtually and reach families in crisis, and families they had never reached before.

Zoë Macnaughton of eating disorder charity Tastelife UK agreed that the Covid response had created new opportunities. “We’ve gone from



one sign up for our community course a month to one a day online. Through all the hardships of Covid-19, we're now in quite an exciting position of being able to reach more people," she said.

Not everyone was able to take core services online, but everyone exploited virtual services where they could. For Ryan Jackson, co-founder (with wife Amy) of baby loss charity the Lily Mae Foundation, replacing face to face meetings and training sessions with Zoom calls had enabled the charity's one-to-one baby loss support service and support groups for bereaved parents to continue. The charity had to be innovative in their approach to fundraising and started fundraising on Facebook for the first time. "To some extent Covid has been positive as we have been able to use other methods of support," Ryan said.

Sandra Moffat, marketing manager of the Linskill and North Tyneside Community Development Trust, described a communications portal the charity had recently set up for local organisations to share campaigns, materials and advice. "Covid has shown that it's more important than ever for charities and community organisations to work together and maximise their impact," she said.

As our discussions showed, the digital response to lockdown has given many charities wider reach and important new skills, while at the same time reducing costs.

But there were other unexpected Covid bonuses. Ben Hall is the Scottish lead for shared living charity Shared Lives Plus. The shared living model his charity supports gained new exposure as a potential solution to homelessness and loneliness, which was magnified by the pandemic. "We've seen a growth in the

number of people who don't want to live alone, who want that connection, because of the pandemic," he said. "For years we tried to get shared living taken seriously as an answer to loneliness. Now individuals, families, and political leaders are talking about Homeshare as a way to remedy it."

Still, while charities came out fighting, none of our participants wanted to sugarcoat the experience of Covid. As one attendee said, 2020 was about survival rather than strategy. With long-term planning set aside, charities turned to the corporate sector to help them weather Covid's perfect storm.





Part 2: Corporate partnerships and Covid

“It’s so difficult to get anybody to talk to us about anything at the moment.”

Not all charities lost money in 2020. Organisations on the Covid frontline were given significant amounts of emergency funding. In addition, individuals and businesses wanted to be part of the communal fight, and diverted their donations to Covid-related organisations.

That imbalance was a huge source of frustration. Attendees discussed the admirable efforts of Captain Tom and other charity fundraisers, but questioned the wisdom of directing millions of pounds of cash to organisations that simply didn’t have the resources to cope.



For all our charities, Covid made help from the corporate sector even more vital. But some charities found nurturing new corporate partnerships nigh impossible in 2020. Lockdowns meant

informal chats over coffee - often the first step in nudging business people towards your cause - were difficult to arrange. Cold calls rang in empty offices. Emails disappeared into the ether.

Charlie Rigby of youth development charity The Challenger Trust said Covid had ground their relationship-building activities almost to a halt, because “it’s so difficult and slow to get anybody to talk to us about anything at the moment.”

Our charities suspected that a lack of new corporate opportunities was about more than the practical effects of lockdown restrictions. Businesses wanted to be part of the pandemic war effort, and wanted to be seen to be part of it. Ryan Jackson was not the only charity representative to talk about large national charities benefiting at the expense of smaller counterparts who, he added, “are delivering the services on the ground”. Cherie Tyner admitted to “big charity marketing budget envy” because, with a limited marketing and PR budget, Parents Plus found it difficult to cut through the noise made by more prominent organisations with greater marketing spend.

But the challenge of attracting new supporters was not confined to smaller players. Even a well known organisation like Breast Cancer UK suffered in the rush to conquer Covid. “As a research and education charity, we aren’t a frontline service so it isn’t always understood how critical our work is. This was evident when Covid first hit and organisations such as ours weren’t eligible for most of the grants available.”

These were common complaints and they had serious consequences for charities desperate for corporate aid. Shared Lives Plus took on a fundraising lead in April 2020 and approached over 2,000 organisations. “For whatever reason,



we've found it very difficult to get any traction," said Ben Hall.

One reason is perhaps the most obvious. Some potential corporate partners may have been too focused on the PR opportunities offered by the Covid response, but others were fighting fires of their own. "Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can be the first thing to drop off company radars in a time of crisis," said Jessie Bradley.



Our charities also took issue with the hoops some corporate partners insisted on putting them through, for what could sometimes be quite trivial amounts of money. Esther Mitchell admitted that "ridiculously frequent" grant reporting could be a huge barrier to corporate engagement for a small charity, while Zoë Macnaughton talked of corporate partners and grant makers "who are too specific and tick box, and who want far too much in the way of reporting."

These issues are by no means limited to the pandemic era, but excessive tick-box bureaucracy is even more burdensome when charities are having to do more with less. In this, as in other areas, balance was difficult to achieve in 2020.

The positives

None of this should detract from the enormous contribution that corporate partners made to the sector during the first year of the pandemic. Nurturing new partnerships and accessing new money was undoubtedly difficult, but in challenging circumstances, good corporate partnerships proved their worth.

Businesses provided money, equipment and expertise, and often went above and beyond for charity partners when they needed it most. Sport-based mental health charity Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues has a longstanding relationship with a professional services network, and the business previously helped the charity produce an evaluation-based database to help better measure the effectiveness of its services. When Covid struck, the organisation's expertise meant the charity quickly moved online. Director Joseph Donnelly added that the partner is also helping kit out the charity's offices with secondhand furniture stored in its warehouse.

The Lily Mae Foundation has several monetary and service-led partnerships, all of whom continued to offer help during the pandemic. A local car dealership supports the charity's golf day and fun runs, and allowed the charity to keep donated sponsor money even though the 2020 events were called off.

Jessie said a number of businesses support different Power2 projects, and that partners had been routinely flexible and supportive during Covid. They had helped the charity transfer services online, had hosted virtual meetings and had donated second hand laptops and other equipment. Businesses that would in normal circumstances donate money from staff fundraising activities are discussing extending



their partnerships for another year after events were cancelled due to Covid.

Examples like these were common, and a pattern emerged. Partnerships that only involved the handing over of an annual cheque struggled most during the pandemic, as employees switched to home working and a summer of fundraising events was lost. But deeper partnerships proved more flexible. In these cases corporates swapped cash payments for pro bono services, or simply handed over the money anyway. Some had store rooms full of old laptops or office chairs, and thought immediately of the needs of their charity partners.

All of our charities realised how important corporate relationships are for the future, and had started trying to make themselves more visible and relevant to potential corporate

partners. They became determined to “tell our story better”, as one attendee put it.

This was being done in a number of ways, from the increased use of social media to a paid ambassador scheme. For the small team at the Linskill and North Tyneside Community Development Trust, it meant breaking out of comfort zones. “As a Trust our community businesses are functional as opposed to emotive and fundraising is a real challenge, but we’re having to change to ensure our community is sustainable,” said Sandra. “We had some success with a local bank that chose us as their nominated charity and progressed from there, which has encouraged us to do more. We’ve started to think about how to make our projects appealing to business and emphasising the sense of the community coming together to help itself.”





Part 3: Playing it forward: the lessons of 2020

“A genuine two-way relationship means that when you need to lean on a business partner those conversations are easier.”

The pandemic is far from over and the world we emerge into may be radically different from the one we left behind. Fundraising will run up against the realities of post-pandemic austerity and the tightened belts of cash-strapped consumers, local authorities and businesses. Meanwhile, many organisations intend to stick with remote working in some form after the pandemic ends. Demand for many charity services is likely to remain dizzyingly high.

On the upside, the experience of operating through an unprecedented global health crisis will bring new skills and resilience to the sector. Charities have met the challenge of Covid creatively and stoically. New systems and processes have been put in place, and a new clarity has emerged about the meaning and worth of corporate relationships.

Foster deeper relationships

Nobody will turn down an annual cheque, but Covid showed that charities need to foster deeper corporate relationships too. When the chips were down, committed businesses came through, offering pro bono services and expertise alongside (or instead of) annual cheques and volunteer days.

How do you create deeper partnerships? Make it a true exchange of value. That can mean promotional activity and PR opportunities, but many charities offer more. Tackling Awareness of Mental Health Issues delivers talks and workshops on mental health for employees as part of its partner’s wellbeing at work programme. “A genuine two-way relationship means that when you need to lean on a business those conversations are easier,” said Joseph.

Embed good partners more deeply in your activities. Jessie said corporate employees lead some of the charity’s Young Leaders sessions, giving them a real insight into, and frontline experience of, the charity’s work. When asked what more corporate partners could do, several attendees talked about inviting business leaders onto charity boards. “We need people on boards that have business skills and understand that a charity has to be run like a business,” said Esther.





Think beyond a cheque

Cash may be in short supply, and remote working makes traditional corporate fundraising drives more difficult. It's up to charities to explain to potential partners that other forms of support are at least as valuable. Many of our charities were given help to get online, whether in the form of equipment or expertise. The discussions emphasised that pro bono skills are the corporate contribution many charities value most of all. Charlie mentioned the need for legal, marketing and accountancy skills at The Challenger Trust. Sandra said her Community Development Trust would benefit from specialists who could add value to business activities by reviewing and identifying efficiencies and economies.



In fact, all our charities were crying out for corporate expertise, sometimes more than money. "It's not just about a cheque," said Cherie. "At the moment, what we need most is expertise around communications and marketing, and specifically to help us raise our profile, and increase our reach to services, professionals and potential investors. We need help to produce promotional videos and digital brochures and get them out. We're a small core team, most with

clinical and research backgrounds, so we don't have those skills. We definitely would welcome collaborating with businesses who want to share their expertise and change futures for families and young people."

Tell your story

Corporate partners want a story. They want concrete results. They want emotive case studies. As one attendee put it, they want a "bit of bling". Charities need to get better at giving it to them, not by changing what they do, but by changing the way they describe themselves to a business audience.

How do you do that? Case studies were particularly important for many of our charities, with a number asking current or former service users to present to corporate leadership teams or speak to the media. Confident advocates were easier to find for some charities than others, but their importance was highlighted by the Shared Lives Plus ambassador programme, which pays service users to talk about their experiences. Ryan of the Lily Mae Foundation said that promotional videos showing the impact of their service on real families were among the charity's most powerful promotional tools.

Not all charities have service users who want to be identified in publicity material, but even an anonymous personal case study, shared on social media and as part of an introduction pack sent to potential corporate partners, can have an impact.

Set red lines

Charities need to set realistic boundaries which clearly define what they are prepared to do as part of a corporate partnership. Quite simply, don't compromise your reputation in pursuit of a corporate buck.



And this year our charities were especially concerned with setting red lines around grant applications and impact reporting. The pandemic meant they were often doing more with less, so the demands some corporate partners make were even more onerous than usual. As Jessie said, there's only so many hoops you have time to leap through for smaller donations.

Zoë also questioned the worth of applying for corporate money with too many strings attached. "Some grants are just too specific and targeted to be worth applying for, because meeting their requirements would be too much work for a small team," she said.

Be nimble

Many charities didn't consider themselves agile, right up to the point they had to be. Thousands of third sector organisations transferred service provision and back office functions online in a matter of days. Ten years of digitisation was achieved in 10 months. Many of those innovations aren't going anywhere, pandemic or not.

And Thalie said Breast Cancer UK had become more nimble because of Covid, online and off, through quicker decision making. "It was make or break," she added. "We had to remove red tape and source new supporters quickly, something we'll benefit from in the long term."

Charlie agreed, saying that the pandemic had instilled a 'can do' attitude, and forced the charity to be more efficient.

This psychological transformation needs to be maintained. The post-pandemic world will be tough, but agile organisations that act quickly and decisively are more likely to thrive.

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functions online in a matter of days. Ten years of digitisation was achieved in 10 months. Many of those innovations aren't going anywhere, pandemic or not.

Use your corporate contacts

Committed corporate partners want to help spread your message, but may be unsure of how to go about it. The quick answer is that they need to do what they do everyday as a business, and exploit their networks. "Get us introductions to other potential corporate partners," said Ben. "Put us in front of other people so we can tell our story."

In other words, ask corporate partners to invite you to networking events, and to introduce you to suppliers and customers. Can you get space in company publications and be pasted into corporate email signatures? Can you present to staff?



Zoë said partners could help spread a charity's message among their own staff first. "Spreading our message among employees can be really useful," she added. "Our Youth Track is designed for use in schools and youth groups, and employees might have children in school, or partners who are teachers. The more people who hear about you, the better. You never know where it might lead."



Conclusion

2020 was tough, and 2021 might be tougher still. Good corporate partnerships will help charities get through it.

Corporate partnerships and Covid makes clear what a good corporate partnership is. It might involve donations, but is just as likely to involve an exchange of professional services. It's flexible and proportional, bending with the wind but maintaining realistic expectations on both sides.

Good corporate donors have opened their contact books to charity partners during Covid, spread the word among staff, and thought of

new ways to help when old ways weren't possible. Which is great, if you can find good corporate partners in a pandemic. It hasn't been easy, especially with so much focus on the Covid frontline. But charities are learning new storytelling techniques and exploring new channels of communication. When opportunities arise, they're getting better at grasping them quickly.

That can only be positive. Charities will need good corporate partners even more in 2021. The last 12 months have shone a spotlight on what 'good' really means and how to get it.



