

Stronger together? Voluntary sector alliances as meta-organisations

HARRIS, Catherine <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9431-2237>> and
MACMILLAN, Rob <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4329-3539>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:
<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37759/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

HARRIS, Catherine and MACMILLAN, Rob (2026). Stronger together? Voluntary sector alliances as meta-organisations. Voluntary Sector Review, 1-18. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Stronger together? Voluntary sector alliances as meta-organizations

Catherine Harris and Rob Macmillan

Abstract:

Collective action between voluntary organisations, in strategic alliances, forums or assemblies, is often overlooked in research on the voluntary sector. This paper explores evidence of alliance building from two studies of local voluntary action in England. The findings demonstrate that voluntary sector assemblies can increase influence with statutory bodies and improve relationships within the local voluntary sector, overcoming fragmentation fuelled by competition for limited funding opportunities. The paper makes both a theoretical and practical contribution. It argues that alliances can be usefully conceptualised as meta-organizations and explores how the findings can be interpreted and applied to improve understanding of the voluntary sector and provide learning to enhance the effectiveness of voluntary sector assemblies.

1. Introduction

Basic mental maps of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector are often predicated on counting distinct organisational entities as relatively bounded and identifiable units aggregated to form a voluntary 'sector' as a whole. We readily talk of the work and impact of individual organisations, the challenges they face and their struggles for survival. The risk with such a starting point is that other important features of the architecture and functioning of voluntary action can be neglected: for example, a relational account of collaborative and competitive interactions within and between VCSE organisations operating in the same place or field. These relationships can arise by default, where organisations in close proximity might compete for funding, human resources or status and reputation, or through deliberate action, where organisations seek to work in collaboration or partnership with others, or engage in networks, coalitions and alliances. There is a wealth of exhortation, practical reflection and guidance encouraging collaboration between VCSE organisations (Pepin, 2005; Cairns et al, 2011), and considerable academic reflection on the nature, possibilities and challenges of inter-organisational and cross-sectoral collaboration in general (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2005). However, there is comparatively little research on broader collective organising in the VCSE sector.

This paper addresses one such collective and relational aspect of the sector: the work of building alliances between VCSE organisations. This work can be observed in multiple contexts, fields and scales, often mirroring policy agendas and parallel institutional arrangements in the public sector. Our interest is in place-based strategic forums and coalitions between VCSE organisations. In a UK context, they are often termed 'assemblies', although other terms such as 'alliance' or 'forum' are also used. Although there is no formally adopted definition, they can be seen as a form of enduring, structured or representative body which aims to bring together and amplify the voices of VCSE organisations in a particular field or geographical context. They can be regarded as part of the VCSE sector's 'infrastructure', the array of mechanisms through which the sector is supported to develop, connect and gain influence (Cullingworth and Macmillan, 2025). However, the landscape of such support within the UK is complex: VCSE assemblies can be separate entities from pre-existing dedicated infrastructure organisations, can operate as distinct projects within them, and are sometimes effectively one and the same thing.

Notwithstanding this complexity, the existence of these VCSE assemblies as collective initiatives poses interesting questions around their purpose, composition, operation and impact: what kinds of phenomenon they are, why they are set up, who comes to be involved, how they work and what difference they make. In this article, we examine the nature and operation of VCSE alliance building, exploring evidence from two studies of local voluntary action in Englandⁱ. We consider how VCSE alliance building can be seen as a form of emergent ‘meta-organization’, an organization composed of other organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005; 2008; Sanioossian et al, 2022). We find that engagement in these alliances across organisational boundaries is painstaking, contingent work and can easily be undone as energy and relevance wanes, support resources are stretched or conflict surfaces. ‘Success’ for assemblies and similar bodies is often a fragile and temporary accomplishment, and they frequently fall into abeyance, but nonetheless are underpinned by the hope of a collective voice across an otherwise fragmented field.

In the next section we examine relevant literature on collective organizing, drawing attention to meta-organization theory. Section 3 describes our research methodology, in terms of sources of data, analysis, and acknowledges limitations in our approach. We present our findings in section 4 through a discussion of two key themes: the aims and achievements of VCSE assemblies; and the challenges they encounter and how these can be addressed. We consider these themes in terms of meta-organization theory in section 5, before concluding by outlining the contribution of this paper to existing understandings of relational dimensions of voluntary action, and discussing the implications of the findings for practice, theory and further research.

2. Understanding alliance building in the voluntary sector

Existing literature offers several possibilities for conceptualising the collective and relational architecture of voluntary action – advocacy coalitions, strategic action fields and network governance - but not all speak well or fully to the work of alliance building in the VCSE sector.

Several studies have been informed by the idea of ‘advocacy coalitions’ formed amongst like-minded actors to pursue specific agendas through a complex policy-making process (Sabatier, 1988). For example, one study highlights the struggles and dilemmas faced by individual nonprofit professionals as advocates in pursuing multiple goals in coalitions (Fyall and McGuire, 2015; see also Wiley, 2022). Coalitions are held together by beliefs and assumptions about the nature of and responsibility for policy problems, and possible policy solutions. The advocacy coalition framework focuses on the policy process, in order to understand long-term policy change. It has some relevance to VCSE assemblies, but they have other key purposes beyond advocacy.

Another study, of inter-organisational advocacy amongst US nonprofits serving older people, shows how policy change led existing nonprofit service providers to form defensive strategies to protect their positions from the threat of new entrants (Chen, 2018). These services are seen as a dynamic ‘strategic action field’, where stability can be secured through co-operative projects between groups, ‘rooted in a combination of shared interests and a common collective identity’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 15). This is reinforced by the work of ‘internal governance units’, field-level arrangements tasked with ‘overseeing compliance with field rules and, in general, facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system’ (ibid: 13-14). Such an approach can speak to the work of VCSE assemblies in building alliances and pursuing a common project, but perhaps less so with prescribing field rules and compliance.

‘Network governance’ literature suggests that interorganisational networks can either govern

themselves (through shared participant governance or via a lead participant organisation) or be governed through a 'network administrative organisation' (NAO), a central network broker which coordinates and sustains the network (Provan and Kenis, 2008: 236). One US study of interorganisational networks highlights the work involved by NAO leaders in managing two distinct paradoxes: of maintaining collaborative unity amidst diversity of network members on the one hand, and balancing engagement with policy and confrontation on the other (Saz-Corranza and Ospina, 2011). This approach can illuminate collective organising in the VCSE sector, although it speaks more to the coordination of looser networks than to more structured forms of collective organisation.

An alternative line of enquiry may be found in the growing theoretical and empirical work on 'meta-organization', organisational forms whose members are other organisations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005; 2008). Meta-organizations serve to facilitate interactions among members, enable joint action towards their wider environment, support the creation of a collective identity, and undertake collective tasks outsourced by members (Berkowitz, et al, 2022: 4). However, they can be rendered unstable, freighted with conflict over autonomy, decision-making powers, identity and resources (ibid.: 2). Given this, the idea of meta-organizations may provide a helpful theoretical lens in understanding significant decisions, dimensions and processes involved in alliance building in the VCSE sector, as well as illuminating recurring and seemingly intractable challenges.

Meta-organizations are distinguishable from other organised forms of activity in three ways: first, they are 'decided social orders', based on significant decisions such as a name, identity, membership and rules; second, they organise organisations rather than individuals; and third, they are associative, a voluntary association of members who can choose to join or leave (Berkowitz, et al, 2022: 2). To date there have been relatively few analyses of meta-organizing in civil society and voluntary sector studies. One example applied the theory by examining the relationship between women's lobbying organisations at European Union and national level, noting an increase both in 'collective action capacity' and in the potential for conflict in meta-organization structures over identity, autonomy and authority (Karlberg and Jacobsson, 2015). Another paper, based on a case study of a national federation of civil society organisations in the addiction field in France, explored the complex legitimization work of civil society meta-organizations, highlighting how they contribute to the construction and understanding of a field, and gain legitimacy from its delimitation (Laurent et al, 2020). Finally, a study of non-governmental organisations working in the contentious field of migration in the Czech Republic found that meta-organization structures can help save transaction costs and provide a protective 'shield' for individual organisations by 'creating a safe space for collaboration and policymaking' (Čada et al, 2022: 918).

Given the rather limited application of meta-organization theory in voluntary sector studies, we aim to augment the literature – as called for by Berkowitz et al (2022) – by examining alliance building in the VCSE sector. We address the following overarching research question: To what extent can VCSE assemblies be regarded as meta-organisations, and how can this contribute to our understanding of alliance building in the VCSE sector? In doing so, we present our data in Section 4 around two empirical sub-questions:

- What are the aims of VCSE assemblies and what can they achieve?
- What challenges do VCSE assemblies face and how can these be mitigated?

3. Methodology

Our research employed an exploratory sequential design (Fetters, Curry and Cresswell, 2013) encompassing the following consecutive stages: (1) an in-depth case study in one local authority; (2) interviews with individuals involved in similar work in other local authorities; and (3) open-ended questions within a light-touch online survey of local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) across England. Analytically, stage 1 enabled us to gain a detailed qualitative understanding of the experiences of individuals involved in establishing an assembly in real-time (via the case study). Following this, wider interviews were conducted with individuals involved in different types of assemblies across England in order to explore further cases. Specific questions on assemblies within the wider survey of LIOs then provided additional breadth, enabling some triangulation and validation of our findings. Although our work was not focused on evaluating impact per se, our interviews with more established assemblies allowed us to explore what they can achieve in the longer term.

The majority of evidence underpinning this paper (data from stages 1 and 2) comes from a project to establish a new VCSE assembly in a mixed urban and rural county in England. The VCSE assembly was officially launched in November 2020 but was the culmination of several years' work by a group of CEOs of local VCSE organisations. It was supported by a county-wide VCSE infrastructure body and involved supportive individuals from statutory agencies. The assembly's establishment also coincided with reorganisation of local government in the county.

Stage 1, our in-depth case study, involved interviews with all members of the newly established VCSE assembly board, and aimed to explore their visions, hopes and plans for the assembly, and the challenges and dilemmas they expected to face. Stage 2 comprised seven interviews with 10 individuals involved in similar assemblies across different local authority areas in England, to provide learning and insights from equivalent bodies. Participants for this stage were identified through existing knowledge and connections of the research team and project leads, and through internet searches. There is no database of VCSE assemblies or equivalent bodies in England, and thus no population from which to draw a representative sample. However, the aim was to include a diverse range of assemblies in terms of context and approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online in Spring 2021 and Winter 2021-22, recorded with permission and fully transcribed.

Stage 3 involved the collection of data from a wider sample of LIOs across England via an online survey commissioned by the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)ⁱⁱ. The survey included a set of open-ended questions to inform our research about VCSE assemblies or equivalents. The questions explored the presence of an assembly in the area, how it was set up, and its main challenges and achievements. The survey was sent to all 187 NAVCA member organisations, from which 56 usable responses were received.

Figure 1: Participant information and coding

Data source	Data type	Base	Participant code
Case study interviews with all board members in a newly established assembly in England	Qualitative	13 interviewees	A1-A13
Interviews with representatives from assemblies across England	Qualitative	10 interviewees from 7 assemblies	B1-B7

Survey with all 187 NAVCA members	Quantitative and qualitative	56 responses	C1-C56
-----------------------------------	------------------------------	--------------	--------

The qualitative data from each stage was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A coding framework was developed based on reading of the transcripts and survey data, and identification and refinement of emerging themes. Data was then coded according to this framework using NVivo.

There are some limitations to our methodology. While we have utilised data from a range of assemblies across England, interviewees were selected via convenience sampling and the survey was self-selecting, meaning our sample cannot be considered representative and the findings may not be generalisable. Most of the data we have presented is taken from the smaller scale study of assemblies in eight local authority areas. Nonetheless, in our research with representatives from assemblies across England, we endeavoured to secure a diverse sample in terms of geography, local authority context and assembly features (e.g. age, levels of formality and partnerships, and focus of activity) – see Figure 2 below for a brief summary of these assemblies. We identified many commonalities across our data in terms of the experiences of those who had been involved in VCSE assemblies. Key themes emerging from open responses in the survey mirror the findings from our interviews. This provides confidence in the validity of our data and indicates the likely broader relevance of our findings and applicability across other contexts, particularly in areas with similar circumstances in terms of local government financial pressure and re-organisation.

Figure 2: Characteristics of interviewed assemblies

Assembly	Description
A (case study site)	Recent local government re-organisation from county council to unitary status in a mixed urban and rural area. New assembly established following the work of CEOs of local VCSE organisations with support from the local infrastructure body. Assembly aimed to unify the sector and have better relationships and greater influence with statutory bodies.
B1	County council in a mixed urban and rural area. Well-established assembly (c. 10 years). Recent reinvigoration following funding cuts and service changes. Assembly includes thematic groups and links with wider ICS-based VCS alliance.
B2	Unitary authority in a rural area. Assembly created following set-up of unitary authority, well-established (c.10 years), very informal, high-level (VCS leaders are members) and unfunded.
B3	Unitary authority in an urban area. New assembly (< 1 year) set up in partnership with council. Assembly focused on collaboration and partnership working.
B4	County council in a rural area. Well-established assembly (c. 10 years). Initially set up and funded by council, due to need for independent and representative voice. Focused on representation, partnership and cross-sector working, and showcasing the value of the sector.
B5	Unitary authority in a rural area. Well-established assembly (c.15 years). Set up with grant funding from the council to improve relationships with the VCSE sector.
B6	County council in a mixed urban and rural area. Developing assembly alongside establishment of ICS to facilitate links between the NHS and VCSE sector. Relatively formal with an aim to increase perceptions of professionalism and influence of the VCSE.

B7	Unitary authority in a rural area. Well-established assembly (c.25 years). Seeks to support, positively influence and advocate for the sector. Assembly is a charity with funded strategic and thematic alliances.
----	--

Our data confirms that assemblies have differing levels of formality, often changing over time depending on funding models, existing relationships, capacity, level of perceived need for the assembly, and wider strategic or policy focus. In the early stages of establishing an assembly, groups often met more regularly, becoming less frequent over time, or when issues were less pressing. Assemblies tended to be more formalised in areas where they were better resourced. For example, some received funding from statutory bodies to support operational costs, whilst others were run on a more informal voluntary basis. However, all had some level of structure, including agreed terms of reference or a memorandum of understanding, to ensure clarity of roles, responsibilities and priorities. Nonetheless, interviewees were clear that formal structures should not be hierarchical and should focus on nurturing relationships and building communication. Assemblies tended to be set up in similar ways, with a board overseeing the assembly as a whole, and a range of thematic groups focusing on particular activities or concerns, localities or operational issues.ⁱⁱⁱ

4. Alliance building in practice: the operation of VCSE assemblies

In this section, we present our findings focusing on the aims of VCSE assemblies, what they can achieve, and the challenges they face. We use this analysis to explore the extent to which meta-organizations could provide a helpful theoretical framework for increasing understanding of alliance building in the VCSE sector.

What are the aims of VCSE assemblies and what can they achieve?

Key early decisions in the establishment of VCSE assemblies focus on structure, membership and aims and objectives. As such, in terms of meta-organization theory, they display some characteristics of ‘decided social orders’. Our data shows that assemblies are usually set up to bring VCSE organisations together and enable them to work more effectively, first by improving relationships within the sector itself, and second by improving the sector’s relationships with statutory bodies. A key purpose of meta-organizations is to facilitate interactions among members (Berkowitz, et al, 2022), and our findings demonstrate that VCSE assemblies have this express purpose, promoting cohesion and collaboration within the VCSE sector. In our case study site, there was a consensus that the assembly should provide an opportunity and framework for VCSE organisations to convene, organise themselves, increase understanding of one another and share expertise and good practice. Participants from more established assemblies confirmed that their assemblies had offered a safe and inclusive space for VCSE organisations to come together, build relationships, consider opportunities for collaboration, support each other and share information.

Interviewees reported that relationships within the VCSE sector could often become fragmented due to competition for funding from statutory bodies. There was a sense of unfairness in how the sector was funded, with larger organisations perceived to be in a more advantageous and powerful position due to their existing relationships, reputation for delivery and capacity to engage with funders. In consequence, a (real or perceived) lack of transparency in tendering processes compounded negative relationships and mistrust across the sector. One board member in our case study site described how this led to a *‘very disproportionate situation where you have some voluntary sector organisations growing and basically getting a lot of the pie whilst the rest of the sector gets left behind’* [A10]. Another noted that there was a

'need to establish more trust between us' [A1] as VCSE organisations in the area were isolated from each other even where they have common interests, creating risks for their sustainability, duplication of services and increased competition for funding.

The second key purpose for meta-organizations is facilitating joint action of members towards their wider environment (Berkowitz, et al, 2022). For VCSE assemblies, this focuses on improving relationships with statutory bodies and increasing voluntary sector influence. In our case study site, fragmentation within the VCSE sector was seen as partly the result of poor existing relationships with statutory bodies. There was a belief that statutory bodies did not see VCSE organisations as *'professional'* and therefore contracts did not allocate enough money to allow services to be delivered effectively. According to one interviewee, this created a *'divide and conquer'* situation where statutory bodies would *'use the fragmentation to get cheap services'* [A4] and reinforce power imbalances between the statutory and voluntary sector. Similar situations were reported in other local authorities in which assemblies were operating. One observed that a lack of decision-making power and financial control was felt in the VCSE sector as a result of the local authority *'holding the keys, holding the money'*. This led to *'backstabbing and fighting in the trenches'* [B3], damaging relationships between VCSE organisations. It was hoped that building better relationships via the assembly would put the VCSE sector in a better position when engaging with the local authority.

In our case study site, local government reorganisation offered an opportunity to recast historically poor relationships with statutory bodies. There was a sense that it would be valuable to build partnerships and collaboration within the VCSE sector to mitigate the risks of, and capitalise on the opportunities presented by, reorganisation. The formation of the VCSE assembly alongside a new local government structure offered a fresh start in terms of building positive relationships, however, it should be noted that these types of re-organisations often create uncertainty as well as possibility.^{iv} These developments reinforced the need for the VCSE sector to *'get our ducks in a row'* [A8], as one interviewee put it, so that it is ready to engage as new structures bed in. There was felt to be a particular appetite and need for the VCSE assembly at this time of local change. There was a sense that this opportunity for relationship building and partnership working was overdue and would allow the sector to speak up for itself more effectively:

'There's always been this understanding that we would be stronger if we were more cohesive as a sector, so that we work together, collaborate, that we'll do more. And I think that has been a bit of a holy grail. And I think now a substantial number of people feel that there is some possibility that we can achieve that [...] hopefully there's a critical mass of those people.' [A6]

Interviewees reported a desire for the VCSE sector to be treated more fairly by statutory authorities and seen as equals. In practice, the sector would have ongoing dialogue with the statutory sector and would therefore be involved and consulted at earlier stages of strategic planning and development in a more proactive and embedded way. Interviews with representatives from other assemblies provided evidence of success in some cases. Survey respondents reported that their assemblies had *'played a leading role in raising the visibility of the third sector'* [C13] with key decision makers and had enabled the development of respectful and established relationships. Interviewees from more established assemblies reflected that the positive relationships they had built with the statutory sector had enabled them to be meaningfully and proactively involved in setting priorities and co-designing services, with statutory bodies *'consult[ing] with the sector right at the beginning of those ideas being formed'* [B2].

In the longer term, it was hoped that this work would increase trust between the two, with statutory bodies becoming more aware of the value and contribution of the VCSE sector and having confidence in its ability to deliver services. This could ideally lead to more flexible and sustainable funding, with less formal control needed, in contrast to previous top-down approaches based on short-term contracts, navigating layers of bureaucracy and extensive reporting requirements. Lack of access to sustainable funding was highlighted as a significant barrier for VCSE organisations, and the ability to influence policy and practice here was a key focus for some. One interviewee described the challenges of delivering projects in the voluntary sector within short-term funding cycles:

'That is one of the biggest bugbears from voluntary sector organisations [...] it does take time to embed that work and embed the ideas you're trying to do, and to start to generate results and outcomes, and usually what happens is you generate results or outcomes that are far better than you had said you were going to get, but [then the funding] stops.' [A4]

The impact of the work of VCSE assemblies was clear to interviewees working in more established assemblies who reported *'massive'* increases in the number of VCSE organisations involved in local public service delivery, higher investment, and *'significantly better'* relationships between the VCSE and statutory sectors [B5]. One reported that, as a result of the assembly, *'the skills and knowledge and experience of the voluntary sector are valued more than ever today'* [B7]. Similarly, survey respondents reported that their assemblies had led to more equitable economic development.

Having greater power and influence and advocating for the VCSE sector was cited as a key reason for the desire to improve relationships with statutory bodies across our interviews. The need for a stronger, unified voice in enabling effective and strategic communication with the statutory sector was frequently emphasised. In our case study site, it was hoped that this would *'make the job of commissioners or strategic leads or senior officers easier'* [A7] and facilitate more effective and efficient ways of working for all parties. Interviews with representatives from more established assemblies confirmed that giving statutory bodies a *'single point of contact'* (through the assembly) that they know is endorsed by the wider sector had facilitated partnership working. One interviewee reflected that, *'We are recognised as having a mandate from the sector to speak on their behalf, which is why I sit on the partnership board'* [B3].

The level of organisation and collaboration that assemblies promoted reportedly helped to increase their level of influence with statutory bodies. In some cases, connections with key individuals in statutory organisations had facilitated access and the development of deeper, strategic relationships. One interviewee described how a partnership with a strategic representative in the NHS had led to them becoming an *'internal champion'* as they recognised the value of the VCSE sector, meaning that the sector was *'essentially positioned as an equal partner'* [B4]. Formalised through service level agreements or memorandums of understanding, these relationships appeared to elevate the VCSE sector's position with statutory bodies.

The importance of the VCSE sector being represented and involved in relevant strategic level meetings was a common theme, reciprocated by local authority engagement with assembly meetings and the establishment of two-way channels of communication and reporting. The structure and formality that assemblies provided had enabled the VCSE sector to feel more comfortable and in control of discussions with statutory bodies, and to advance issues of concern such as sustainability. In our case study site, the emerging assembly recognised the importance of building these relationships and had engaged senior directors of local authority services to attend board meetings as observers. This was seen as a positive early step in open communication and encouraging buy-in from the statutory sector.

Our case study site expressed a need to be able to communicate the impact of the VCSE sector more confidently and effectively. This was also a common theme amongst our wider interviews. Building an evidence base was important for some, with one survey respondent highlighting that this had enabled them to win more funding [C7]. An interviewee also described how, in their area, the assembly had collected evidence to outline how the VCSE sector's resilience could be improved through better commissioning processes, highlighting how assemblies can support confident articulation of the value of the sector [B4]. Likewise, in another area, a significant proportion of VCSE sector funding from the local authority was scheduled to be cut due to budget constraints. The assembly was able to marshal evidence to persuade them against this course of action, which was seen as a key indicator of the success of the assembly's collective work across the sector:

'We did a big piece of research across all of the partners [...] an impact assessment that said, "if you do this, this is what will happen to those clients that we're keeping away from your door and you will then end up having to spend more money on care packages, etc". And that was a big piece of evidence to gather, but it worked and the council [...] didn't cut that funding and actually put it out to tender and put in place five-year contracts to continue that work.' [B7]

What challenges do VCSE assemblies face and how can these challenges be mitigated?

Alongside clear benefits of the work of VCSE assemblies, our research suggests they encounter common challenges. These fall under three main themes: relationships and trust, governance and representation, and flexibility and sustainability. Again, meta-organizations provide a helpful theoretical lens here, with literature highlighting similar issues, such as instability, resourcing, and agreement of collective identity (Berkowitz, et al, 2022).

Relationships and trust

A common initial challenge for assemblies highlighted in our data is to overcome reservations individuals and organisations may have about collaboration and sharing across the sector. Assembly membership requires a level of trust and openness that can be hindered by fear or a legacy of negative relationships and experiences. Interviewees described a need for the board to demonstrate collaborative working, to consciously *'leave your organisation at the door'* [B4] and to focus on system change and how to move the sector forward. Building commitment to collective benefit is crucial to the legitimacy and success of the assembly in terms of being able to influence and work effectively with statutory bodies. As one interviewee put it, *'why should the [new council] take us seriously, because we can't agree amongst ourselves'* [A4].

One interviewee from a more established assembly advised that starting with a *'coalition of the willing'* - a small group of VCSE representatives who are keen and committed to engagement - had enabled them to achieve successful and meaningful collaboration:

'I'd just say start small... If you go too big you won't be able to get the depth of engagement, the buy in, the hearts and minds. You need to start with a tribe [that] have your back and really believe in what you're trying to do. So, start small and then over time include others... continue to retell your story and find ways of doing it together and creating that shared experience, don't try and do it all. It has to be truly together, it has got to be truly collaborative.' [B2]

Others agreed, stating that it was important to have an established core group, stable over time, where partnerships and relationships have been developed and there is mutual trust. It was recognised that this took significant time and effort. Funding concerns could be an

unhelpful distraction; as one interviewee put it, *'You can't just magic [relationships] up. And the worst time to do it is when there's money on the table'* [B5]. Genuine established relationships served to mitigate the competition for funding and contracts which could otherwise thwart collaboration.

Governance and representation

A key concern for assemblies is ensuring that they are *'truly independent'* [B5] from control by any single organisation. In this area, an assembly was set up because hitherto an LIO played the role of *'voice'* for the sector as well as being a significant provider of services. It was described as having undue influence with statutory bodies in terms of shaping funding contracts and opportunities, a position of perceived unfair advantage which led to tension in the sector. Similarly, one survey respondent described a situation where *'the relationships between [the assembly] and its members are very fragile'* due to the assembly *'trying to control the sector'* [C32].

In our case study site, it was felt that the LIO was likely the best-placed and only organisation with the ability to establish the assembly. There were acknowledged risks to the assembly's legitimacy in consequence, but members of the board were keen to ensure that the role of the LIO was clear. They stressed that it would not be leading the assembly, and that the assembly would become a democratic body once the board was established. The project team from the LIO understood and echoed the views of the board members:

'I've been really clear that "[we're] not going to tell you what to do with this assembly, you've got to make up your own mind about what you want to do with it". The more we do of that, the more we're open, the more we're not defensive, the more we're not territorial, the more we understand that "when you cross this line you don't talk about your own organisation", it will help' [A10].

Interviewees from more established assemblies emphasised the importance of communication and shared understanding of roles, priorities and purpose. In our case study assembly, although there was a degree of uncertainty about the role of board members, they recognised the need to be a *'true and honest'* voice for the sector, ensuring they listened to and fairly represented the views of thematic groups in order to be an effective and responsible *'vehicle of representation to the funders'* [A3].

Survey respondents reported that they had faced challenges in ensuring that statutory bodies understood the remit of the assembly. They stressed the importance of having a good independent chair to ensure effective communication of roles and purpose within and outside of the assembly and to focus on its ambitions. For example, one survey respondent highlighted that their assembly had struggled when their *'independent chair didn't really understand the sector fully and didn't really get to know all members'* leading to *'apathy from members'* [C10].

Representation proved to be a key consideration for assemblies. There was a need to strike a balance between ensuring that the assembly board and thematic groups were representative and inclusive of the wider VCSE sector (e.g. giving smaller organisations a voice), whilst being careful not to overburden members with less individual and organisational capacity. Our data shows that representation was a challenge, with larger organisations and LIOs sometimes dominating membership, and some voices remaining unheard. One interviewee reflected that the board was to some extent still made up of the *'usual suspects'* [A3]. Nonetheless, it was hoped that thematic sub-groups would enable smaller organisations to engage with issues of greatest relevance to their work.

Representation was also a challenge in relation to the focus of the assembly's thematic groups. In our case study site, there was initially no thematic group with a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) focus. However, further discussions amongst the board and wider consultation with representatives from BAME-focused organisations revealed a desire and need for a specific thematic group, which was then created. There was concern that the legitimacy of the assembly could be undermined if issues related to representation (which also included geographical and organisational representation across a diverse county and VCSE sector) were not satisfactorily resolved at this stage.

Flexibility and sustainability

Whilst it was generally agreed that assemblies required some level of structure in order to be successful, equally important was the ability to respond and adapt to the ever-changing conditions and external context in which they operate. Assemblies needed to be flexible to ensure continuing relevance and usefulness for the sector. Our case study assembly reported high interest and sign-up to each of the thematic groups, confirming their relevance. But they were also ready to adapt should the need arise, following learning from other assemblies who reported that sub-groups changed over time as the need for activity on certain themes evolved.

Interviewees and survey respondents noted that the sustainability of assemblies was a key area of risk. In our case study area, the assembly was seen as a good opportunity to build greater capacity, especially for smaller organisations, through sharing resources such as 'back office' administration costs. This was felt to be particularly important given the uncertainty around funding from local authorities in financial difficulty but was clearly dependent on funding and infrastructure support. Some board members who had been part of a previous assembly in the area observed that, although positive steps forward were made, the assembly was unable to continue when funding for administrative support was withdrawn. Some of the work carried on, but over time *'relationships have become more and more attenuated'* in the face of challenging external contexts, and *'competition and survival have been much more of a feature of the last ten years'* [A6]. Consequently, interviewees reflected that the new assembly needed to ensure they were *'engaging with those who hold the purse strings at the [new council]'* [A4].

5. VCSE assemblies as meta-organizations

This section explores the implications of our findings in terms of extending the evidence base on alliance building and collective action in the VCSE sector, informed by literature on meta-organizations. We also outline how our research augments the literature on meta-organization theory, responding to calls from Berkowitz et al (2022) for application of the theory in voluntary sector studies, which has, so far, been limited.

Our findings highlight chronic challenges experienced within the VCSE sector linked, for example, to competition for funding and fragmentation. We show that collective organising via VCSE assemblies can help to encourage collaboration, build trust and increase the wider visibility and influence of the sector. Nonetheless, barriers and challenges remain in terms of developing and maintaining relationships, effective governance and representation, and sustainability concerns.

Our starting point was the suggestion that meta-organization theory may provide a useful but under-utilised lens for understanding the processes involved in alliance building in the VCSE sector. Accordingly, our overarching research question concerns the extent to which VCSE assemblies can be usefully regarded as meta-organizations, bearing in mind the clear distinction between meta-organizations as formal entities and looser configurations, such as networks and clusters (Berkowitz et al, 2022: 2). To recap, meta-organizations are 'decided

social orders', with organisations as members, who can choose to join or leave. From our analysis, VCSE assemblies align closely with the latter two of these defining characteristics, but less so with the first. VCSE assemblies can be seen as decided in that they invariably have a name, structure and guiding purpose, identifying the scope and limits of membership and how decisions are to be made. However, they vary considerably in their formality and structure and seek a less rule- and sanction-bound mode of operation. The independence of individual VCSE organisations in a heterogeneous sector is often fiercely guarded, and assemblies navigate this through careful attention to consensus. Assemblies should perhaps then be regarded as 'partial organizations' (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011: 86-88), because key elements of 'complete' organizations are absent, such as the obligation of members to follow rules, be subject to monitoring and face sanctions for non-compliance. They are somewhat in between networks and meta-organizations: more than networks but typically less than complete meta-organizations. VCSE assemblies should be seen not as firmly established and fully functioning accomplishments, but as dynamic and emergent works in progress, as 'meta-organizations in the making' (Saniossian et al, 2022). In the creation of VCSE assemblies, this framing is helpful in that it emphasises the catalytic role played by 'leading organisations' (frequently LIOs in our research) and a 'first group' of actively involved organisations (such as an assembly steering group) (ibid: 37-38).

According to Berkowitz et al (2022: 4-5), meta-organizations pursue four sets of purposes and activities, and it is here that VCSE assemblies come closer to a useful characterisation as meta-organizations. First, they seek to facilitate interactions between members. Assemblies see this as a primary purpose, aiming to overcome the fragmentation of the sector by encouraging communication and collaboration between otherwise easily isolated individual VCSE organisations. Second, they enable joint action towards their environment. Again, this is a primary reason for the establishment of assemblies, to facilitate VCSE organisations to work together to advance a sector interest collectively in a field of other agencies, policies and resource flows. Third, meta-organizations enable the creation of a high-status collective identity and/or status ordering among members. The former applies in the case of VCSE assemblies, where an explicit aim is to boost the profile of the VCSE sector and its contribution. Finally, some common services or tasks can be undertaken more efficiently and effectively by meta-organizations, rather than by individual organisations. VCSE assemblies are often tasked with collective activities, such as sharing information through newsletters and bulletins, organising networking sessions, representing the VCSE sector and providing training to build the capacity of members. Some of these activities can be regarded as within the remit of individual VCSE infrastructure bodies, opening up the possibility of tension and 'turf war' between the two. Examples from our analysis demonstrate this, where an emergent assembly seeks to contain the remit of an LIO, or supersedes it.

Generating greater collective influence of the VCSE sector and mitigating the pressures of fragmentation and competition, animates much of the work of assemblies. Our findings demonstrate that the challenges in doing so are considerable and the gains uncertain. It is slow, prolonged and painstaking work, with fragility arising from limited capacity and waning energy, divided loyalty in committing to work beyond the mission-centred day job of individual organisations, and the ever-present possibility of rivalries and surfaced tensions. These vulnerabilities are integral to the work of meta-organizations, operating through contrasting logics between meta-organizations and their members: of providing services, representing members or coordination action (Garaudel, 2025). As a result, VCSE assemblies may be subject to conflict, inertia or dormancy (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2005; Konig et al, 2012; Michel and Defiebre-Muller, 2025). Despite this, alliance building in the VCSE sector, as seen through our evidence, offers a widespread and enduring hope for collaborative work to create better

circumstances in which VCSE organisations can operate.

Berkowitz et al (2022) call for further research into the application of meta-organization theory across different sectors, highlighting the opportunity for ‘rich insights into the diversity of meta-organizations, and the ways in which this diversity affects meta-organizing dynamics and processes.’ (ibid, 6). In addressing that call, this paper has provided new evidence and understanding of the ways in which meta-organization theory may be relevant for and applied in the VCSE sector. We offer key insight into the motivations and benefits of the establishment of meta-organizations to advance a collective interest, in this case of the local VCSE sector as a whole. However, the strong commitment to respect the independence of individual VCSE organisations circumscribes the role and approach of the meta-organization, leading to our conclusion that VCSE assemblies may be best characterised as examples of ‘partial organization’. Further comparative research might extend this insight by productively examining meta-organizing efforts across a variety of fields characterised by different values and commitments, operating assumptions and power asymmetries.

Additionally, the ongoing design and operation of effective VCSE assemblies may be enhanced by applying key elements and mechanisms central to successful meta-organizations. For example, meta-organization theory may enable better understanding of common challenges faced by VCSE assemblies, such as those relating to governance and representation. Informed by meta-organization theory, such conflicts could be regarded as structural rather than interpersonal and may provide a helpful framing to avoid or navigate these issues. However, assessing the performance of meta-organisations is recognised as an inherent challenge (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018) and therefore further research may be required to evaluate the success of these approaches.

6. Conclusion

Our study provides new evidence for the voluntary sector, its partners and policymakers on how inter-organisational alliances operate in the VCSE sector. We address an identified gap in knowledge and understanding and add to the growing body of evidence on meta-organizational theory and its applicability in different contexts and sectors. We offer new understanding of how assemblies can enhance the effectiveness and collective influence of the VCSE sector, highlighting the impact that VCSE assemblies can have, provided that they are truly collaborative, sufficiently resourced, independently governed, representative, and adaptable to changing contexts. Effective assemblies can facilitate meaningful collaboration, increase the visibility and voice of the sector, enable the development of respectful relationships with statutory bodies, and elevate the position and influence of the VCSE sector. Considering ongoing challenges facing local authorities and the VCSE sector, assemblies have clear potential to support sustainability and effective collaboration and partnerships with statutory bodies. The findings are particularly pertinent given the context, at the time of writing, of local government re-organisation in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024), offering insight into some of the pathways taken by VCSE organisations to organise collectively and shape local statutory policies and practices at a time of significant upheaval.

Our research indicates that there are several key features which appear to characterise effective assemblies. Although local authority contexts vary considerably and different areas have different needs, we suggest the following four key considerations for the establishment, maintenance and effectiveness of VCSE assemblies:

- First, the purpose of the assembly should be clear and agreed. Assemblies can serve different purposes and have a range of functions; some are more operational whilst others are more strategic. Some have a broad focus whilst others have specific areas of interest (e.g. activity, theme or place-based). Our research highlights that clear communication of the overall purpose of the assembly is important to maintain the focus and engagement of its members.
- Second, whilst the overarching purpose of the assembly should be clear, there is a need for flexibility to maintain its relevance and sustain its momentum over time, enhancing its legitimacy amongst members and those with whom it seeks to work. Our research indicates that areas of priority and interest evolve over time and are heavily impacted by changing external contexts. Hence, there is a need for ongoing evaluation of needs and interests over time to maintain the relevance and impact of the assembly.
- Third, the assembly should strive to be representative and beyond the control of individual organisations. Avoiding over-representation of the 'usual suspects' (i.e. larger VCSE organisations) and ensuring meaningful representation is important in the development of positive and trusting relationships and overcoming tensions and competition. Representation and independent governance are also key in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the assembly externally and being an effective and impactful voice for the sector.
- Finally, the assembly should be adequately resourced to enable the development of meaningful partnerships, ensure long-term sustainability, and be a consistent and respected voice for the sector. Many of our participants cited examples of how challenging financial contexts limited the ability of VCSE assemblies to continue their work, leading to weakened relationships and potential for impact. This highlights the need for ongoing funding and infrastructure support to maintain assemblies.

Further research into VCSE assemblies or other strategic alliances could attempt to map and characterise a broader range of contexts and approaches, as well as chart the longer-term dynamics and impacts of this and other forms of meta-organizing in the VCSE sector. There is a need to further examine the processes and capabilities involved in organising organisations in the sector, and particularly the circumstances in which relationships can deepen or fall apart. It is important to acknowledge that building and sustaining meta-organizations is challenging. This is particularly evident in the VCSE sector, where the pressure to resource and deliver front line services to meet growing social needs is so great. In such a context, the meta-organizing work of VCSE assemblies, and other forms of infrastructure, can seem like a luxury. The work of alliance building, of convening VCSE organisations to pursue a broader collective purpose, requires considerable investment of time, patience, energy and leadership, and that in itself is worthy of further academic attention.

References

- Ahrne, G. and Brunsson, N. (2005) 'Organizations and meta-organizations', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 21(4): 429–449.
- Ahrne, G. and Brunsson, N. (2008) *Meta-organizations* (Edward Elgar Publishing).
- Ahrne, G. and Brunsson, N. (2011) 'Organization outside organizations: the significance of partial organization', *Organization*, 18(1): 83–104.

Berkowitz, H. and Bor, S. (2018) Why Meta-Organizations Matter: A Response to Lawton et al. and Spillman, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 27(2): 204-211.

Berkowitz, H., Brunsson, N., Grothe-Hammer, M., Sundberg, M. and Valiorgue, B. (2022) 'Meta-Organizations: A Clarification and a Way Forward', *M@n@gement*, 25(2): 1-9.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101.

Čada, K., Numerato, D. and Hoření, K. (2022) 'Those Who Pay the Piper Calls the Tune: Meta-Organisation and Capacities of the Third Sector in Migration Policies', *Voluntas*, 33(5): 910-920.

Cairns, B., Harris, M. and Hutchison, R. (2011) *Thinking about... collaboration: A 10-year research synthesis* (London, Institute for Voluntary Action Research).

Chen, K.K. (2018) 'Interorganizational Advocacy Among Nonprofit Organizations in Strategic Action Fields: Exogenous Shocks and Local Responses', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 47(4 Supplement): 97S-118S.

Cole, A. (2023) *Snowballs and Eels: A rapid review of national funding for cross-sector partnership building in health and care in England from 2019 to 2022* (Sheffield, NAVCA).

Craig, G. and Manthorpe, J. (1999) 'Unequal Partners? Local Government Reorganization and the Voluntary Sector', *Social Policy & Administration*, 33(1), 55-72.

Cullingworth, J. and Macmillan, R. (2025) 'Infrastructure Organizations in the Nonprofit Sector', in List, R.A., Anheier, H.K. and Toepler, S. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society* (Springer, Cham.), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99675-2_9700-1.

Fetters, M., Curry, L. and Creswell, J. (2013) 'Achieving Integration in Mixed Methods Designs—Principles and Practices', *Health Services Research*, 48(6 Pt 2): 2134-2156.

Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D. (2012) *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Fyall, R. and McGuire, M. (2015) 'Advocating for Policy Change in Nonprofit Coalitions', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 44(6): 1274-1291.

Garaudel, P. (2025) 'Membership in meta-organizations between organizational membership and inter-organizational relationship. A three-logics model to assess the heterogeneity of meta-organizations and variations among them', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 41(1), Article 101394.

His Majesty's Government (2025) *Fit for the Future: The 10 Year Health Plan for England* CP 1350 (London, Department for Health and Social Care/NHS).

Huxham, C. and Vangen, S. (2005) *Managing to Collaborate: The theory and practice of collaborative advantage* (London, Routledge).

- Karlberg, E. and Jacobsson, K. (2015) 'A Meta-organizational Perspective on the Europeanization of Civil Society: The Case of the Swedish Women's Lobby', *Voluntas*, 26(4):1438–1459.
- Konig, M., Schultze, M. and Enders, A. (2012) 'Inertia in response to non-paradigmatic change: The case of meta-organizations', *Research Practice*, 41(8): 1325-1343.
- Laurent, A., Garaudel, P., Schmidt, G., and Eynaud, P. (2020) 'Civil society meta-organizations and legitimating processes: The case of the addiction field in France', *Voluntas*, 31(1): 19–38.
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). *English Devolution White Paper. Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, CP 1218 (London: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government).
- Michel, S. and Defiebre-Muller, R. (2025) 'When meta-organizations fall asleep: The dormancy process', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 41(1), Article 101391.
- Pepin, J. (2005) *Sharing Without Merging: A Review of Collaborative Working and Sharing Back Office Support in the Voluntary and Community Sector* (London, bassac).
- Provan, K.G. and Kenis, P. (2008) 'Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(2): 229–252.
- Sabatier, P.A. (1988) 'An Advocacy Coalition Framework of Policy Change and the Role of Policy Oriented Learning Therein', *Policy Sciences*, 21: 129–168.
- Saniossian, J., Lecocq, X. and Beaucourt, C. (2022) 'Meta-Organizations in the Making. A Multiple Case Study of Multi-Stakeholder Meta-Organizations for Social Innovation', *M@n@gement*, 25(2): 27–44.
- Saz-Carranza, A. and Ospina, S.M. (2011) 'The Behavioral Dimension of Governing Interorganizational Goal-Directed Networks—Managing the Unity-Diversity Tension', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21(2): 327–365.
- Sullivan, H. and Skelcher, C. (2002) *Working Across Boundaries: Collaboration in Public Services* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Wiley, K.K. (2022) 'Leveraging Political Resources: Applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence', *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, 13(1): 1–30.

Funding details

This paper draws on data from two contract research studies, commissioned by separate VCSE organisations to the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University.

For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version of this paper arising from this submission.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Contributor statement

CH and RM wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript. RM was the principal investigator for both of the studies and provided the conceptual basis for the studies. RM and CH collected data in the first study (interviews). RM collected data in the second study (survey). CH conducted data analysis and interpretation, with contributions from RM.

Research ethics statement

The studies were subject to ethical review and approved by Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Committee.

Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. The data is not available to other researchers as per the contracts with the commissioners of the research and informed consent agreements with research participants regarding interview transcripts.

ⁱ Both research projects were commissioned to the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research.

ⁱⁱ Research commissioned in 2021. Survey launched on 1st March 2022 and closed on 3rd May 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ These groups and the assembly as a whole are referred to in different ways across different assemblies. For the purposes of clarity, we will use the terminology utilised in our main case study – 'board' and 'thematic groups'.

^{iv} However, it is important to note that local government reorganisation, coupled with a parallel emphasis on engaging with the VCSE sector in health and social care integration, through alliances, creates both uncertainty and possibility (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999; Cole, 2023). See also, to compound the uncertainty and possibility, further proposals to reshape local government and NHS institutions (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024; His Majesty's Government, 2025).