

Independent-state school partnerships deep dive

A detailed look at the **Bristol Education
Partnership (BEP)** and the **York ISSP**

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We would like to thank the staff and pupils we interviewed from both the Bristol Education Partnership (BEP) and York ISSP for welcoming us to their schools and providing us with considered thoughts and reflections about the respective partnerships.

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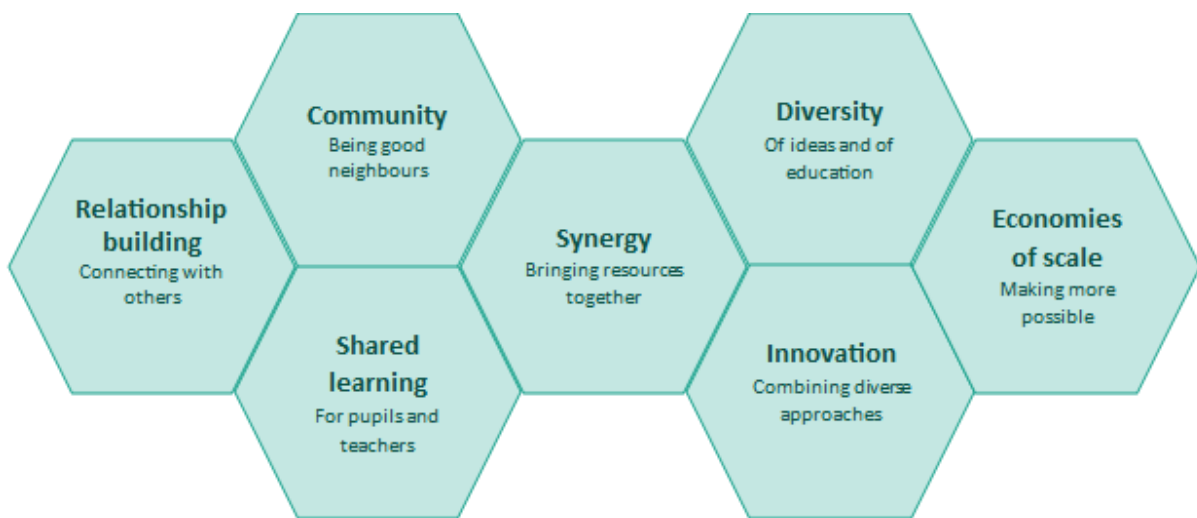
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Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest in and encouragement by government of partnerships between independent and state schools. The aim to increase partnership working between the two sectors has been set out in various government policy papers, including the 2018 response to the ‘Schools that work for everyone’ consultation and the 2018 ‘Joint understanding between DfE and Independent Schools Council’.^{1,2} The latter paper described examples of partnership working as including ‘membership of school governing bodies and MAT boards to curriculum support, teaching support, sharing of expertise through mentoring, minority subject assistance, joint activities and sharing of facilities’. The 2024 Independent Schools Council (ISC) census recorded 9,248 such partnerships, with 1,068 of their member schools (76 per cent) involved in at least one partnership with a state school.³

Partnerships tend to be localised, and each is unique. There is no formal guidance on exactly how a cross-sector partnership should look and, in each instance, they often serve an identified gap which may vary from place to place and from school to school. Partnerships can therefore vary from hyper localised bilateral connections, to much larger multi-school alliances. As a result, the benefits of partnership activities can vary dramatically. Figure 1 outlines seven potential benefits identified by the School Partnerships Alliance.⁴

Figure 1: Potential benefits of school partnerships, adapted from School Partnerships Alliance (2023)



That said, it is difficult to quantify the impact of such partnerships on pupil outcomes (academic and otherwise). Partnership activities are a small part of a pupils’ total educational experience so

¹ Department for Education (2018) ‘[Schools that work for everyone: Government consultation response](#)’

² Department for Education (2018) ‘[Joint understanding between DfE and Independent Schools Council \(ISC\)](#)’

³ ISC (2024) ‘[ISC Census and Annual Report 2024](#)’

⁴ School Partnerships Alliance (2023) ‘[School Partnerships for Impact Guide](#)’

isolating specific effects is difficult and further complicated by wider educational environments that affect both the likelihood of participating in a partnership and intended outcomes. In addition, some of the goals of partnership working do not easily lend themselves to quantification, such as improved confidence or better communication skills. Others are difficult to evidence within realistic time periods, such as the benefits of joint careers provision.

In summer 2024, The Heads' Conference (HMC) commissioned the Education Policy Institute (EPI) to undertake visits to two Independent-State School Partnerships (ISSPs), the Bristol Education Partnership (BEP) and York ISSP, and speak to headteachers, coordinators and pupils from participating independent and state schools. This paper is the result of these two visits. We aim to bring together interviewees' reflections on how the partnership works, how it is funded, the challenges it faces, and some of the perceived benefits to both independent and state school staff and pupils.⁵

Local context

We first describe the local context in which the two partnerships we visited operate, and how they compare nationally. Bristol and York are similar in having a higher percentage of their city's pupils educated in independent schools, when compared to the rest of England. However, York is considerably less deprived than Bristol, it has fewer pupils eligible for free school meals than the national average and is the third least deprived local authority in the country. In comparison, 30 per cent of Bristol pupils are eligible for free school meals, greater than the national average. The disadvantage gap at the end of key stage 4 is also over a month narrower in York compared to Bristol. State-educated pupils in York have higher attainment, on average, than their counterparts in Bristol, and make on average greater progress during their time at secondary school.

Table 1: Key educational statistics for Bristol, York and England

	Bristol	York	England
Pupils attending independent schools	9.4%	8.8%	6.5%
FSM eligible pupils	30.0%	17.4%	25.6%
IDACI	52 nd (/151) most deprived LA	149 th (/151) most deprived LA	-
Attainment 8	45.4	49.2	46.4
Progress 8	-0.03	+0.11	-0.03
Disadvantage gap (KS4)	21.5 months	20.2 months	19.2 months

Source: [‘Schools, pupils and their characteristics’](#), [‘Key stage 4 performance’](#), and [‘EPI Annual Report 2024’](#).

⁵ EPI staff visited the BEP on 21st June 2024 and York ISSP on 12th September 2024.

Bristol Education Partnership (BEP)

Administration and decision making

The Bristol Education Partnership (BEP) was set up in 2019 and currently comprises 13 secondary schools (seven independent and six state) and one state sixth form college in Bristol. The partnership also involves University of Bristol, University of West of England, and Bristol City Council.

The BEP was founded through bilateral talks with headteachers in the area. The heads then convened and decided on four key priorities, drawing up a Memorandum of Understanding and then advertising for a central coordinator to manage the partnership. The universities in the city (University of Bristol and University of the West of England) also played an important role both at the outset and continue to do so through providing a 'neutral space' and offer capacity, particularly outside of university terms, to run large activities. Participants also noted the valuable support of the Department for Education through the Regional Schools' Commissioner (now Regional Directors) to initiate the partnership.

There is one central coordinator who is currently employed by Bristol City Council. The role is multi-faceted, with the central coordinator acting as an administrator and project lead, as well as being the face of the partnership. They described having a significant amount of autonomy to shape the partnership around the agreed priorities and felt like they had the trust of the headteachers to implement programmes within the partnership. They noted their prior experience in education was very important for the success of the partnership.

The central coordinator is the only direct employee of BEP, however staff from the schools are also essential in the running of the partnership. The headteacher of each school sits on a management group and each school also has a 'link teacher'. The 'link teacher' is a member of staff not on the senior leadership team whose role is to act as an in-school coordinator and support pupils to attend activities.

In addition, there is also a student board, made up of pupils from the partnership schools. The main role of the student board is to help generate ideas for activities, as well as promote partnership activities amongst their peers. Ideas for new programmes and suggested changes to existing programmes developed by the student board are sent to and approved by the central coordinator to ensure alignment with the stated aims and then agreed by the heads management group. The student board is further split into 'action groups' by activity which meet multiple times a term outside of the time allocated for the work.

The BEP has to date been overseen by Bristol City Council but the partnership will shortly come under the auspices of [Bristol Charities](#), a charity that 'provides opportunities and support for people and communities to improve lives through grants, housing and charitable projects'. In practice this means the employer of the central coordinator will change and it was also noted this will mean there will be 'some degree of political autonomy' and help ensure the long-term stability of the partnership.

Aims and activities

The BEP has four stated aims in their literature:

- overcoming disadvantage;
- raising aspirations;
- broadening education; and
- supporting and inspiring staff.

During our interviews, we discussed these stated aims with staff and pupils across the partnership. They were aware of the stated aims, although different interviewees highlighted different aims as being most important. For instance, one independent school leader summarised the partnership as showing pupils ‘the art of the possible’ and that ‘changing the angle at a moment in time, can change the trajectory’, through raising aspirations. Another focused on the sharing of knowledge amongst staff from both sectors, highlighting that they felt independent school teachers were able to learn a lot from colleagues operating under often challenging situations in the state sector. A state school leader summarised the stated aims as addressing disadvantage and cross-sector working. They felt it was key for any activities to benefit both sets of pupils to be successful.

Throughout our interviews with representatives of the BEP, they discussed the following activities with us:

- **Bristol Youth Talks** – a TEDx style public speaking competition on topics of pupils’ choice.
- **Student partnership board** – giving leadership of elements of the BEP to pupils.
- **Oracy pioneers programme** – delivered by a third party. Training on how to present, speak fluently, structure a talk and hold an audience. Then develop their own workshop to deliver to younger students.
- **STEM day** – a visit to the University of Bristol to see academic research groups and STEM-based companies showcase their work.
- **Careers events** – these have a particular ‘Bristol centric’ approach with a focus on raising awareness about the variety of local career opportunities. The last event focused on the creative sector.
- **BEP Climate Challenge** – included a day of training to develop skills in presenting and building an effective message and campaign.
- **Bristol TeacherFest** – a continuing professional development (CPD) event for teachers both within and outside the partnership. This is held annually and has a different focus each year, supporting staff to build networks and collaborate.

Time and location

Many activities take place inside school time, requiring schools to provide transportation to and from events. BEP pupils noted that the time taken depends on the activity. For those on the student board, the time spent depends more on the motivation of the individual as they choose how much time they spend (on top of meetings).

For staff members, one link teacher reported the time commitment depends on the time of the year and how many activities they are involved in. They estimated a teacher may expect 20-25 contact hours over the course of the academic year for each programme they engage with. In addition, the work of the link teachers to coordinate and arrange activities could be up to an hour a week for each of the programmes. Another link teacher estimated they spent six hours a fortnight over the school year, although it is a seasonal role with some times of year busier than others.

Pupil involvement

The pupils become involved in BEP activities via several routes. Several pupils highlighted that they heard about the activities through word-of-mouth from their peers i.e. their friends told them about previous events they had been involved in and then asked their teachers to participate. Other pupils reported discovering opportunities when they were 'announced in chapel', and other school gatherings e.g. assemblies. For some programmes, pupils have to apply, and they are selected by their schools' link teacher based on this application.

Funding

The core costs of running programmes within the BEP are met via annual contributions from the independent schools, city council and universities. The state schools in the partnership do not directly contribute financially. The financial model was reviewed a few years ago and a small number of state school heads said they wanted to contribute to the core costs. However, most did not, and the existing model was retained. Initially the universities did not contribute financially but after a request from the BEP, they now do.

However, there are still costs for state schools. Cover is required if partnership activities take staff offsite during school time and some schools make TLR (teaching and learning responsibility) payments to their link teachers. For example, at one state school they make a TLR payment to their link teacher covering one hour a fortnight.

Perceived benefits

Heads, coordinators and pupils were all positive about the BEP and the opportunities and activities it provides for pupils. However, it is well understood that programmes of this nature can struggle to measure impact due to their design and the lack of counterfactuals. Measuring impact is also costly so it can be hard to justify the expense when funding is an existing challenge. On the other hand, one member of staff pointed out that if the partnership is to become autonomous and self-funding, 'we need to be able to demonstrate impact'.

The aims of the partnership are not to improve easily measured outcomes such as exam results or attendance. The central coordinator reported that they had previously tried to do some in-house assessments but felt like they had had limited cut through - '[in the] first two years of the partnership, [I] spent summer holidays writing extensive impact reports but felt heads didn't have the bandwidth to read it'. Some of the agencies and providers that the BEP uses, such as 'Voice

21', have their own ways of generating impact analysis of their programmes.⁶ Additionally the BEP is now, for the first time, working with [ImpactEd](#) to help evaluate its activities.

That said, the participants we spoke to were positive about the partnership. Below, we outline the perceived benefits and impacts according to the staff and pupils taking part in the activities put on by the BEP.

The partnership has helped foster a community of schools in Bristol.

All the schools in the partnership now have a working relationship that they did not have five years ago. This has led to 'a growing collective identity' amongst both staff and pupils. A relatively large fraction of pupils in Bristol attends an independent school and pupils 'know they live in a city where some of their friends [families] pay for their education'. The partnership helps pupils understand these differences and has helped break down barriers. One member of state school staff highlighted that it had also helped them feel more connected with the independent sector, stating that they felt independent staff were 'genuine' and at the 'leadership level, I've never met anyone who didn't believe in [the partnership]'.

BEP activities can give additional opportunities to pupils.

One staff member felt that 'partnerships are not about schooling children, schools do that', the 'partnership has to provide something different or complimentary'. The BEP provides pupils with opportunities that they may not otherwise have access to. For example, the BEP raises the profile and the importance of public speaking through its oracy programme and Youth Talks. The oracy project was highlighted as the most important activity of the partnership by one state school headteacher. They felt many of their pupils lacked 'fundamental skills' and the oracy programme helps pupils to express themselves, improve their vocabulary, debate, and hold their own. It usefully has links to the whole school literacy framework which uses oracy at its centre. The TEDx style Bristol Youth Talks also give pupils the opportunity to receive training in public speaking and apply their new skills. This has been successful; last year the 'standards were incredibly high' and double the number of schools want to participate this year.

The pupils that take part in BEP activities report seeing a benefit.

Pupils reported being more confident after attending several of the BEP events. One reflected that taking part in the Bristol Youth Talks was a new experience and was initially 'daunting speaking to one hundred people' but that they were 'now much more confident'. Another pupil suggested that taking part had helped them to improve their performance in GCSE English. Pupils also reported that the oracy pioneers programme had helped build confidence – it 'helped me to be more assertive [and] make people listen without having to shout at them'.

The pupils on the student partnership board felt their experience had given them a range of helpful life skills and supported the development of leadership qualities through organising

⁶ Voice 21 (2024) '[Impact Report 2022-23](#)'; Smith, J. et al. (2018) '[Voice 21: Pilot report and executive summary](#)', EEF Evaluation Report.

events, chairing meetings, and speaking to a room. One teacher also reflected that it helps develop the leadership skills of the pupils on the board and this in turn has an ‘impact on the whole school’. Other staff members also reported that through evaluation questionnaires pupils ‘always say it was really fun and really nice to talk to other people’.

Staff see benefits from the activities of the partnership as well.

Some activities run by the BEP are specifically for teachers rather than pupils. The BEP allows for formal and informal sharing of staff learning. TeacherFest is an annual continuing professional development (CPD) event for teachers which supports staff to build networks and collaborate. Feedback is positive. One staff member highlighted that ‘subject networks don’t really exist anymore’ and that the BEP had been positive in filling some of the gaps. Another formal training on mental health run by the BEP was described by one staff member as ‘unbelievable’. As part of other BEP activities, teachers gain skills. Through the oracy project are being upskilled to deliver sessions and this was ‘now having [a] huge impact in [the] classroom’.

Finally, the partnership provides a useful network for school leaders. A state school headteacher highlighted that their school was not in a MAT, but that the partnership provided some similar benefits, providing access to other leaders.

Challenges

As the above outlines, participants highlighted many benefits of the BEP and the opportunities and activities it provides for pupils. However, some challenges were identified which the partnership acknowledges and is currently working to overcome. These are laid out below and include previous challenges that have been encountered and resolved, current challenges, and perceived future challenges.

Funding the partnership such that all schools can take full advantage is a challenge.

As described above, the partnership relies predominately on independent school members to fund the activities that take place. Staff noted that the imbalance in financial contributions between sectors can sometimes be challenging, given the possible interpretation of the partnership as a ‘handout’. However, one headteacher underscored the importance of making sure the state schools do not feel like this and felt that involving Bristol City Council and in the future, Bristol Charities, as the ‘home’ of the partnership helps to mitigate this.

Staff felt that the partnership will need to become more self-reliant in future. One independent school headteacher acknowledged that funding in the state sector is becoming increasingly constrained and so the independent schools may have to contribute more financial resources in future to keep BEP going. There were mixed views on whether the government’s policy of charging VAT on school fees will limit independent schools’ ability to do so. That said, one independent headteacher noted that their school has a turnover three times larger than many independent schools and so it will not have an impact on their ability to contribute.

The funding challenge is however wider than the financial contributions schools make. Releasing staff to run and accompany pupils to events can be difficult and costly. This problem is more acute

in state schools. The central coordinator felt often that whilst independent schools always participated in activities, despite all their best efforts, state schools often did not have the resource to release the staff needed. Discussing this, one state school headteacher reflected that 'TeacherFest is great, but we cannot spare the resource - we will be at three of eight sessions, independents will be at all'. Releasing staff for activities means organising cover, which is costly and can cause issues. Pupils can struggle without their familiar teachers, with one staff member reflecting that it can be 'hard to maintain the school ethos and environment for learning'.

Staff release is only one challenge faced by schools due funding constraints. For example, one state school in the partnership no longer has a minibus due to budget cuts. Whilst this places a barrier on state schools being able to fully participate in the partnership, it was noted that independent schools 'have been very helpful in providing transport'.

Throughout our discussions, it was clear that while finances can pose a barrier, members of the partnership were conscious of this and, as far as possible, were working to mitigate it.

Perceptions are important for success, but tricky to manage.

Perceptions are important across all those involved in the partnership (teachers, pupils, parents) as well as those outside. Several staff members pointed towards the involvement of Bristol City Council as very important. This provided a 'Bristol feel' to the project and was a neutral base for the central administrator, preventing the partnership feeling like 'crumbs from the table'. The administration of the BEP is now in the process of moving over to Bristol Charities which serves a similar purpose and should also provide greater visibility and a wider team to lean on.

Staff in the BEP appeared to have largely overcome the challenge of perceptions. One state headteacher reflected that finding common ground across heads has been important in maintaining the partnership. Whilst they operate in a different environment, they felt they had a similar approach and goals.

Perceptions seemed most challenging though amongst the pupils taking part in activities themselves. This was recognised by both state and independent pupils. Pupils reported the cause of division being due to differences in facilities (one independent pupil reported being asked 'why are you at Hogwarts?'), possessions and uniforms. The wearing of uniforms at BEP activities was amongst the most raised topic of pupils from both sectors. One independent pupil reported being asked 'why are your skirts so long?', whilst a state pupil said that they 'arrived in uniform that wasn't fancy...everyone stared at us'. One teacher later reflected that they 'hadn't really considered it before but they do all go to these activities in their uniforms...one thing to consider for next year'.

Whilst pupils from both sectors acknowledged that perceptions of their peers could create challenges, independent pupils were much more positive about how their experiences had changed perspectives. One independent pupil reflected that 'as we met more and more, it was more normalised', another that they had become 'more open-minded [and] mixed with people we wouldn't mix with otherwise'. However, this was not reflected on in the same way by the state

pupils we interviewed. One state pupil reported that ‘the interactions felt quite condescending’, and another reflected that ‘I feel like they think they’re better than us’.

Staff from across the partnership recognised that perceptions amongst pupils can be a challenge and that this is an area to work on moving forwards. In the first instance, from our research, it would be worth considering how school uniforms are currently a barrier and whether allowing pupils to participate in some activities in their home clothes might support greater integration.

Reaching the pupils who would benefit the most is challenging.

As outlined above there are a broad range of sign-up routes. This has both positives and negatives; while it allows for multiple opportunities to discover the activities, it also depends on being in the right place at the right time, perhaps limiting the reach of the activities to those pupils who are already most involved in school life. Pupils noted that it was often the ‘smartest’ or those who are already involved who continue to participate in activities. They suggested making the potential benefits of taking part clearer may help attract more pupils as well as if the advertisement was better - ‘many don’t know where to sign up’.

A teacher we spoke to agreed that ‘the individuals that put their hand up for these sorts of things are already curious’. One pupil countered this, saying that the Student Board does advertise the opportunities multiple times and ultimately, it is up to the pupils to push themselves to sign up. One BEP state school said they send half-termly letters to parents and staff, so they know exactly what activities are happening. It currently appears that the routes to participation are inconsistent across schools so a future step could be to consider how to improve equality of access to activities.

It was acknowledged that the BEP has to work hard to make sure the main benefit is to the state school. ‘The independent schools send a list of kids and sign up straight away’, whereas the state schools find it much harder to participate. This risks undermining the partnership as it needs both sectors to participate to be successful in delivering against its aims. It can also lead to wasted resources. In one case, a climate event that had been planned was cancelled last minute when it transpired that only independent schools were going to attend. However, the staff member who made this decision highlighted how important it was to the aims of the partnership to ensure that pupils from all schools were able to attend, which is why they chose to cancel. This demonstrates that the aims of the partnership are central to its activities. That said, another teacher questioned whether the partnership was truly meeting its’ aim of overcoming disadvantage. Whilst individuals were benefiting from taking part, this was a relatively small number of pupils from each school. In future analysis of impact, it may be useful to define ‘overcoming disadvantage’ to clarify whether this aim is at an individual pupil level or more systemic.

Operational differences such as timetabling and risk assessment approaches can create barriers to accessing activities.

Operationally, independent and state schools work very differently. As a result, there can be challenges around aligning timetables and scheduling activities within the school day or term. In our discussions with staff working in both sectors safeguarding was highlighted as a challenge. Safeguarding approaches differed across schools in regard to risk assessment practices. This has

in turn created differences in how activities are staffed and run, depending on who runs them. For example, one link teacher highlighted stricter rules around pupils being accompanied by teachers, stating that their ‘pupil[s] can’t take a taxi without having two members of staff in it,’ which in turn posed challenges for getting enough staff to attend an activity.

Staff expressed that all schools have a desire to find solutions to these issues, but the differences in risk assessment approaches continue to be a challenge. One link teacher mentioned that there had been an attempt to streamline the process and have a consistent BEP safeguarding approach across schools, but it was later decided that leaving schools’ individual procedures in place and supporting schools to overcome access issues on a case-by-case basis was a more successful approach.

Success is often dependant on a small number of staff in each school.

The link teacher network is critical to the success of the partnership. They manage things in schools and help coordinate logistics and encourage pupils to take part in activities. The central coordinator suggested to us that working with staff, rather than the pupils directly, has the biggest impact: ‘shifting culture will have knock-on effect for students’.

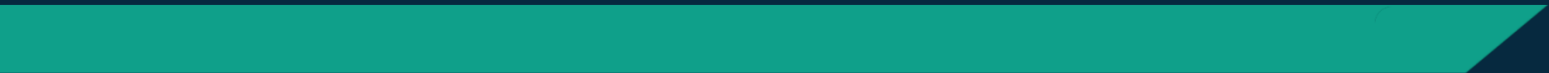
Four of the thirteen link teachers stood down at the end of the last academic year (2023/24). This turnover can be destabilising as it requires building new relationships. There was some concern that the root cause was due to the workload. One link teacher reported spending around six hours a fortnight working on BEP related activities, but their TLR only covered two hours a fortnight to do the work. The headteachers of each partnership school are also key. Whilst they are less involved in the day to day running of the partnership, their buy-in is essential, and they set the tone and overall strategy for the partnership. While all staff involved were very enthusiastic, it may be helpful in future to consider how to lighten or share workloads or compensate staff for their time.

The BEP is limited by the size of the central team.

The central coordinator is employed four days a week, an increase from three days a week when the BEP started. This coordinator plays a pivotal role in the organisation of the partnership, and acts as project lead, administrator and as the ‘face’ of the partnership. They felt like they had a lot of autonomy to shape the partnership, which was deeply valued, and that it would be helpful to have someone to provide admin support alongside their role. However, they acknowledged that to have a bigger central team, they will need to raise more funding. As discussed above this can be a challenge to raise from schools, particularly as cash rather than in-kind support.

Overall, while there are challenges to the partnership in its current form, in sharing them with us, staff acknowledged these challenges and were positive about the opportunities to overcome them in future.

York ISSP



Administration and decision making

York ISSP was set up in 2008 and currently comprises 13 secondary schools (three independent and 10 state). All schools, apart from one, are located in the City of York. The partnership was founded using central government funds, awarded through a scheme to encourage cooperation between the state and independent sector, and has subsequently grown the range of activities it offers and is now self-funded by the schools.

The partnership funds one central coordinator. As York ISSP is not a legal entity, the central coordinator is employed by one of the independent schools. This was noted as a logistical choice as the current post holder is already employed at the school. The central coordinator is funded to carry out the role two days a week alongside their other job. The central coordinator's role involves, among others, organising and promoting the activities and encouraging schools to get their pupils to participate in these.

York ISSP has two steering groups; a headteachers group which focuses on strategy and hold the budget, and a school coordinators group who come up with ideas and help organise the activities. The school coordinator role involves attending these meetings, promoting the events within one's school and encouraging pupils they think would benefit from participating to sign up. This steering group also coordinates the evaluation work. The chair of the headteacher group switches annually between an independent and a state headteacher. Both groups meet half termly.

The central coordinator recently met with the University of York to discuss how they could be further involved in the partnership. They currently provide support for the maths excellence club as well as lecture theatres and other spaces to run activities. Currently the local authority, City of York Council, has no involvement in the York ISSP.

Aims and activities

At the outset, York ISSP was intended to give opportunities to able and interested pupils, and the strapline was 'opportunities for bright students in York'. Initially, this aim was viewed through an academic lens but has since been broadened to encompass a wider understanding of ability. This has resulted in the strapline being scrapped. It was mentioned by several staff that they were not sure the aims of York ISSP are currently formally documented. The partnership is now considering their future branding to better reflect its aims.

Participants also told us how they felt the aims of the partnership have broadened over time. A state school headteacher noted that they felt the partnership now also aimed to provide opportunities pupils otherwise would not have had access to, which applies to both independent and state pupils. One school coordinator highlighted that an important aspect for them was it allows passionate teachers to find an audience.

During our interviews with representatives of the York ISSP, they discussed the following activities with us:

- **Masterclasses** – three Saturday sessions (each session lasts three hours), the subject of each masterclass varies dependent on the interests and skills of the teacher leading the sessions. Previous masterclasses have focused on art, philosophy, criminology, photography and cooking.
- **Summer school** – a four-day course during the summer holidays, various subjects have been taught previously.
- **GCSEs in Latin, Greek and Astronomy** – taught over two years, after school.
- **Business and enterprise project** – run jointly with the Merchant Adventurers of York over six weeks, includes visits to local businesses and culminates in teams pitching business concepts.
- **Year 7 breakthrough events** – afternoon event during school for new year 7s.
- **York Maths Excellence Club** – weekly after school club in collaboration with the University of York.
- **Lecture series** – on various topics.

Time and location

At the York ISSP, all activities take place outside of the school day, aside from the year 7 breakthrough events. The summer schools take place within the state school holidays, so they are accessible for both independent and state pupils. The ISSP has considered running events during the school day, but it is a challenge to secure teacher time.

The time commitment for the coordinators changes depending on the time of year. If they are not involved in the actual facilitation of a given event, one staff member reported spending two to three hours each week. However, if they are more heavily involved, the commitment is much greater and often includes weekend/holiday working e.g., three Saturday afternoons for a masterclass plus the time spent on planning the sessions.

Some activities take place at third party venues, e.g., University of York, however, the partnership routinely uses the facilities of the independent schools (e.g., Bootham School has an observatory which is used for the teaching of the partnerships' GCSE Astronomy offer) and leverages the fact the schools are open on the weekends, as they offer boarding and teach on Saturday mornings.

Pupil involvement

In York, schools are given a quota by the central coordinator of how many children they can take to each activity. It is then up to individual schools how they decide which children will participate. For the year 7 breakthrough events, schools are asked to target pupils who may not otherwise get involved, including those who are pupil premium and those who don't already have a sibling involved in the ISSP. For other activities, some schools continue to target pupil premium pupils while others target those with the highest academic attainment.

ISSP pupils mentioned a variety of routes to sign up including hearing from their teachers and emails to their parents. Some activities were 'first come, first served' while others involved an

application process. One school coordinator said they use letters to parents and put up posters, but the most successful method is to speak to pupils individually, however 'chasing them around the building' takes up a lot of time. They invite twice as many pupils as there are places in their schools and brief teachers who aren't involved in the ISSP to encourage them to speak to their pupils. They felt that a blanket invite would not work as an approach as they would then have to turn pupils away. It was noted there should also be an element of pupil choice in order to have buy-in and lessen dropouts.

The central coordinator noted that some schools do not fill their quotas, and this tends to be the same schools each time. Some school coordinators do not come to meetings, and this means getting pupils from those schools along to activities becomes a challenge. The central coordinator often goes to these schools to promote the activities and puts up posters to try and widen the reach.

Funding

In the York ISSP, all schools contribute financially to participate. This is a flat rate of £2,000 per annum, though independent schools host most of the activities and so contribute more in kind. A state school headteacher mentioned that although it is not a 'massive amount', the state funding environment is tough so the decision to continue participating was not easy. Different schools in the partnership approach supporting the school coordinator role differently. Some schools assign someone with a light timetable to the role, whereas others pay their coordinators.

Almost all activities are free for the pupils. Historically, they have only had to make a contribution towards the summer school and from this academic year, the ISSP will start charging £10 per week for the masterclasses, which take place on three consecutive Saturdays for three hours each. For both the masterclasses and the summer school, pupil premium pupils automatically get 50% off and there is more funding available if they need it.

The partnership is aiming to be self-funding at some point in the future, potentially through external grants or philanthropy.

Perceived benefits

As with the BEP, heads, coordinators and pupils were all positive about the York ISSP and the opportunities and activities it provides for pupils. However, it is well understood that programmes of this nature struggle to measure impact due to their design and the lack of a counterfactual. York ISSP tracks its reach in terms of pupil numbers (750 last year, 200 at summer school) and asks pupils and parents to complete an online form which routinely reports 90-95% satisfaction with the activities. The partnerships have previously acted on feedback and have axed activities that had poor feedback, e.g., they used to run a human rights event which 'started out brilliantly but went downhill so [we] scrapped it'. Staff are also polled after they run activities, to help ensure that improvements are made, and benefits are maximised.

‘The coordinator plays a big role in determining the impact.’

Coordinators in schools have a big role in getting pupils and teachers to engage with the activities put on by the York ISSP. The best coordinators run with it, generate ideas, and are a source of energy which motivates participation in activities. However, as will be discussed below, it is often a challenge for coordinators to have the capacity to do everything they may want to do.

Pupils are able to study subjects and obtain qualifications that they would not have otherwise had access to.

One of the offerings of the York ISSP is the ability for state-school pupils at schools not offering that subject option to take GCSE Latin and for all pupils to take GCSE Astronomy. These qualifications provide knowledge and learning that pupils would not typically receive through their normal school curriculum. It also allows pupils to formally obtain additional GCSE qualifications. Whilst it is hard to estimate a quantifiable long-term benefit from these additional qualifications, it nonetheless does provide concrete evidence of additional learning. Alongside these formal qualifications, other activities offered by the partnership, such as masterclasses in business, creative writing and criminology, also give pupils exposure to subject matter beyond their everyday school curriculum – ‘very different to what we do at our school’ (pupil at state school).

Pupils gain enjoyment, confidence and friendships from taking part in York ISSP activities.

Pupils clearly enjoy the activities run by York ISSP. This is evident by the conversations we had with pupils as well as the number of repeat customers. Pupils taking part in activities in year 7 are often still involved at the end of school. Pupils often also come back to be student helpers on the summer school programme. One staff member even reported that the Maths Excellence Club may have prompted some pupils to pursue careers as Maths teachers.

Pupils that take part also enjoy the social aspect and being with like-minded peers. For instance, on summer schools, one staff member observed that at the beginning of the week ‘no pupils are talking, but by the end of the week, they’re a big mob’. Pupils agree, with one expressing that they found it to be ‘social [and] everyone there was invested and enthusiastic’. Friendships appear to form through the partnerships activities with pupils reporting having met with children from other schools outside of organised activities. Being in a different learning environment with other likeminded pupils was perceived by staff to breed confidence and help fuel ambition, allowing pupils to express themselves and find their niche.

York ISSP activities can open up opportunities for future study to pupils.

Some York ISSP activities provide qualifications directly to pupils (e.g., GCSE Latin and Astronomy) which one staff member commented was a ‘massive plus that they can put on their record to get to university’. However, another staff member, commenting on the GCSE Latin offer, observed that they had ‘hoped it would transform numbers in [an] A-level ‘niche’ subject...but not seeing it currently’, suggesting that it is not guaranteed that pupils will continue to pursue these subjects beyond the confines of the partnership activities. Another way the York ISSP potentially alters pathways is through exposure to sixth forms. If a pupil’s own school does not have a post-16 offer,

attending a York ISSP event has the potential to demonstrate the plausibility of attending a sixth form in the future.

Teachers get to deliver activities which they are passionate about and outside of their usual curriculum.

Teachers also report receiving a benefit from running activities on behalf of the partnership. Due to the nature of the activities the partnership runs, pupils typically want to be at the events and are personally invested in the topic. This provides an environment where staff can design a programme of study that follows their own passions, as well as be met with ‘challenge, debate, and enthusiasm’ from pupils. The rewarding experience York ISSP activities give to teachers mean they ‘keep coming back’ and many staff have been involved for a long time.

The other benefit staff reported from taking part in the York ISSP was the interactions with colleagues from other schools. One member of staff reported that it is the ‘best CPD you’ll get’. The partnership gives staff a wider network and allows them to gain insights into how other neighbouring schools from both sectors operate. Staff felt that York ISSP was a mechanism that provided this in a way that was ‘really useful [compared to] formal networking [which] can be really forced’.

Challenges

As the above demonstrates, the participants we met highlighted many benefits of the York ISSP and the opportunities and activities it provides for pupils. However, they also identified some challenges. These are laid out below and include previous challenges that have been encountered and resolved, current challenges and perceived future challenges.

It can be a challenge to motivate pupils, parents and teachers to take part in activities.

Most York ISSP activities take part outside of normal school hours. This is necessary given timetabling constraints and the desire to not take pupils and teachers away from their usual school lessons, which may disrupt learning and require schools to arrange cover. Whilst this is an understandable and conscious decision, it does pose some challenges.

First, by extension, pupils are expected to make their own way to and from activities. Given the relatively compact nature of York, many pupils find it straightforward to travel to a nearby school in York, either on foot or public transport. However, individual pupils have different challenges in this regard. One member school is a 40-minute bus from the centre of York and its pupils were identified as having particular difficulties attending partnership activities. More broadly, given most activities take place at independent schools, this is often more challenging for state school pupils as they have to do more travel. More generally, getting to activities was highlighted as a bigger issue for after school/evening activities, compared to weekend activities.

Second, pupils suggested that more of their peers would attend if activities took place in school time. The pupils that take part in partnership activities reported that not all their friends would be interested in being involved - ‘on a Saturday, [my friends] would rather stay at home’ and ‘most of my friends have enough of school five days a week’.

Third, as activities take place outside of the normal school day, pupils often require the support of their parents to attend. There was a perception amongst ISSP coordinators that ‘middle class aspirational families’ were more likely to support their children in taking part in the activities, particularly when it requires commitment to weekend activities. This poses a challenge to the aims of the programme which targets bright pupils, regardless of parental background or socio-economic status.

Fourth, this also poses a challenge for teachers. Many of the activities take place on weekends and in school holidays, when teachers are not usually expected to be working. Whilst this can require some ‘arm twisting of colleagues’ to take the classes and courses, they get paid for it, so in the main, staffing activities has not been a major problem. Several staff members, however, highlighted that the covid pandemic has brought about some changes in attitudes, with it becoming harder to get staff (in both sectors) to volunteer. It was suggested that other pressures on staff have increased, and they have also become ‘more mindful of life’, valuing their free time more highly.

Success is often dependant on a small number of staff in each school and pay arrangements for these staff can differ across schools.

To be successful, the partnership requires buy-in and support from heads and the coordinators in each school. Heads in particular set the tone on how important and valued the partnership is, and coordinators are essential in helping to organise and find/encourage both teachers and pupils to take part. Staff turnover in these roles is therefore a challenge. There has recently been lots of staff turnover (including amongst heads) leading to changes in the steering and heads groups. It was acknowledged that there is a ‘need to build up momentum again’.

It was also acknowledged by staff in both sectors that state school staff and heads found it harder to rearrange their days and attend meetings. This has led to some ‘sporadic attendance’ and in one case a school was considering pulling out of the partnership due to a new head not having attended meetings and so not understanding what the partnership was offering. In another case two schools had coordinators who didn’t attend meetings which then required the central coordinator to step in and go into the schools directly. Continuity and attendance are key to ensuring that the partnership functions smoothly and everyone is aware of what it is offering. One headteacher emphasised that heads’ attendance at groups really matters for the success of the partnership as it demonstrates backing of the ISSP and means the coordinators feel they have the support of their school leadership.

Moreover, the arrangements under which members of staff are given the ‘ISSP coordinator’ role and receive time and reward for the additional responsibility differs between schools. This presents a challenge as this often follows independent-state sector line - ISSP coordinators in state schools typically do not typically get paid, whereas coordinators at independent schools typically do. Even when coordinators are paid, one coordinator told us they claim two to three hours of time a month, but in reality, the role requires them to spend additional time on partnership activities.

Participants also felt that the ISSP coordinator roles need to be better defined, as the expectation of what they are expected to do also varies across schools. The central coordinator and chair of the headteacher steering group are currently putting together a proposal to try to secure sponsorship to cover all staff members' time and noted that this variation is a challenge of allowing schools to take their own approach.

Similarly, the pay arrangements for teachers that lead the activities themselves (additional GCSEs, masterclasses etc.) differ across schools, with some given time (through alterations in timetabling), some salary, and others operating entirely on good will. Again, there is often a marked difference between the state and independent sectors. Some of these differences in pay arrangements were uncovered at a recent meeting and led to visible frustration and tension between staff from different schools. Those running the partnership are becoming increasingly aware of the unintended consequences of letting schools make their own arrangements, and believe more work needs to be done to ensure consistency and equality, across all schools.

It can be a challenge for schools and parents to fund the activities, but this is fairly managed.

The York ISSP is intentionally set up as an equal partnership, for example each school makes the same direct annual financial contribution to the partnership, and it is also funded by contributions from families for some activities.

The charges to families vary by activity. A week-long summer school is currently charged at £150. A tight financial situation has meant the partnership is now also charging for its masterclasses (three x three-hour Saturday session) at £30. Whilst we did not speak to any parents directly, staff perceived these price points as 'good value', particularly compared to other paid childcare options. Additionally, York ISSP ensures there are no financial barriers for children taking part provided they are able and motivated. 50% discounts are offered to pupil premium pupils taking part in summer schools, and fully funded places are available if needed. One staff member did highlight there is some concern that ISSP activity fees may be VAT-able in the future, increasing the cost to families of their children taking part.

The £2,000 annual sum each school pays into the partnership was viewed as a good mechanism, meaning all schools have an equal stake in the partnership. Some independent school staff suggested that the government's plan to introduce VAT on school fees may make funding a challenge. However, one independent staff member highlighted that in financial terms buying into the partnership was a small fraction of budget and it was a matter of 'time, not treasure'. They felt that state schools funding offers a more acute challenge than the VAT policy in terms of impact on the partnership.

Overall, although staff were aware that funding can be a challenge, it was clear the partnership had put significant consideration into how this can be managed fairly for all schools and pupils.

The York ISSP has a small central team and is not its own legal entity.

The York ISSP relies on one central coordinator who is funded two days a week to support the running of the partnership. It was acknowledged by the central coordinator themselves and others involved in the partnership that they work more than the two days a week they are funded for

currently. They are also employed by St Peter's School and so in effect some subsidisation is occurring. This does though raise some questions about conflict of interest and the future sustainability of the current model. The challenge is whether without more funded central resource, the partnership will be able to continue delivering and developing the range of programmes it does currently.

The partnership itself is also not a legal entity meaning employing the central coordinator, holding funds and finances, securing insurance, DBS checks and other administrative tasks all have to be handled by one of the schools. Whilst schools were willing to take on these different responsibilities at present, this may pose a challenge in the future under different leadership. There appears to be an appetite for making the ISSP a legal entity in its own right, and for employing a full-time central coordinator, to ensure continued success of the partnership.

Conclusions



The BEP and York ISSP are both examples of partnerships between state and independent schools. In each case the partnerships are city wide and involve multiple schools from each sector. Whilst this means some of the challenges they face and benefits they confer are similar, the partnerships are distinctly different in their practices and aims, and many of our observations are context specific.

Heads, coordinators and pupils were all broadly positive about the opportunities and activities both partnerships provide. They offer opportunities for pupils to engage in activities beyond their core curriculum, in some instances attaining additional qualifications, but often simply allowing pupils to gain other important skills such as collaboration with others and building confidence. Teachers also benefit from the cross-sector working, both through shared CPD and, in some cases, positive impact on staff motivation.

We do not seek to determine which of the two partnerships we visited is more effective. Instead, we conclude by summarising the key differences and commonalities between the two partnerships, in the form of some suggested thinking points for the hundreds of partnerships around the country to consider.

1. When partnership activities take place

York ISSP activities almost exclusively operate outside of school time. This can result in pupils finding it difficult to attend and it can be hard to persuade teachers to work outside their core hours. At the same time, pupils do not then attend most activities in their school uniforms, which helps with pupil integration. In contrast the BEP operates many of its activities in school time, but this poses a different set of challenges, including the transportation of pupils and arranging cover for teachers.

2. Who benefits from the partnership

Both partnerships work hard to advertise their activities to all eligible pupils but can sometimes struggle to reach those that might benefit the most. Whilst both partnerships appear to broadly meet their current aims, more could be done to ensure the stated aims of the partnerships align well with the benefits available and include outreach to pupils and parents who are initially less motivated to participate.

3. The resilience of leadership structures

The partnerships both rely very heavily on one central coordinator to organise and drive it. In both cases it was reported that the central coordinator was overstretched and often spending more time working on the partnership than they were paid to. Aside from the central coordinator, the partnerships lean on a small number of teachers/coordinators, as well as direct support from headteachers. In all cases, in the event of staff turnover, the potential to destabilise the partnership (either in entirety or for a given school) is very real. Communication with wider school staff and soliciting their input on the partnership models and aims may help to develop partnership sustainability.

4. The partnership as an entity

In both cases we studied the partnership is not its own entity. This often means finances and other operational activities flow through a given school, which can pose challenges. The BEP benefits from the central team sitting in a third-party organisation (Bristol Charities).

5. The funding model

The (direct) funding model between the two partnerships is very different. The BEP relies on contributions from the independent sector, whereas York ISSP relies on equal contributions from all schools, regardless of sector. York ISSP is also part funded through contributions from parents. These pose different challenges around perceptions. While the BEP model risks appearing unequal between sectors, at the same time it also means those with greater resources contribute more.

6. Partnership with universities and other organisations

Both partnerships have relationships with their local universities. The BEP also involves the local council and York ISSP has links with other local organisations such as the Merchant Ventures. These relationships are highly beneficial. They provide third party, neutral, spaces for events, alongside expert contributions to certain activities.

7. Measuring impact

Both partnerships highlighted a desire to better measure and understand their impacts on staff and pupils. The partnerships run a package of different activities, each with a unique aim and benefit. The relatively small-scale nature of each activity does not lend itself to the easy quantification of impacts. The partnerships therefore have to rely heavily on the feedback of teachers, pupils, and their families to understand which activities are working well and as intended. As the partnerships grow and develop, this may offer opportunities to scale measurement of engagement and impact.