

Sustaining Thrive Together

Developing a programme theory
using realist informed evaluation

THRIVE TOGETHER

*Empowering Veterans and Families:
Creating Connections, Building Futures*

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“We’re trying to give more than we take, and then it’s up to people in the space to collaborate and we’re getting really good feedback of people saying, you know, I’ve done loads of collaborations before, and they’ve all been rubbish. And this one’s amazing because it feels like everyone’s really pulling together, so we’re succeeding in that. But I can’t tell you what it is we’re doing.”

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Executive Summary

The Thrive Together Programme (TTP), launched by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, is the second phase of the Veterans People, Places and Pathways Programme (VPPP), running from 2024–2027. Building on the VPPP’s veteran-focused work, the TTP extends targeted support to veteran families, aiming to create sustainable, resilient networks that deliver timely, effective, and tailored assistance.

Ten grants were awarded to portfolio lead organisations across the UK, including one for Northern Ireland, enabling the development of integrated physical and mental health support systems bridging statutory and non-statutory services. TTP promotes collaboration between military charities and other partners to ensure joined-up pathways into and out of services, while fostering long-term sustainability and enduring legacy. Following extensive consultation in 2024, the programme is now in its delivery phase, to be followed by a transition and sustaining phase before March 2027.

Unlike previous initiatives focused mainly on interventions and outcomes, this study examined how partnerships are formed, sustained, and governed, using a realist-informed qualitative approach to identify the contextual and mechanistic factors critical to effective intersectoral collaboration.

The Scottish Context and the Incite Model

In Scotland, TTP builds on a legacy of Armed Forces Covenant-funded initiatives, including *Life Live*, the *Scottish Veterans Wellbeing Alliance*, and the *Fingerprints* dialogue. All intentionally applied the Incite Model (Irvine Fitzpatrick, 2020) to design, develop, and strengthen intersectoral partnerships that improve outcomes for veterans and their families.

The Incite model identified five key mechanisms: safe psychological space, narrative, momentum, identity, and power, operating across four phases: *invite*, *create*, *formulate*, and *enact*. The aim of this study was to develop a retrospective programme theory explaining how TTP partnerships have been effectively formed and maintained, focusing on leadership, negotiation, and relationship-building rather than direct service outputs alone.

Methodology

Led by the Centre for Military Research, Education and Public Engagement at Edinburgh Napier University under Dr Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick, the research involved interviews with ten strategic TTP leads across the UK.

While many veterans transition successfully to civilian life, a significant minority face challenges such as loneliness, poor mental health, substance misuse, and loss of identity. TTP recognises that health and well-being are shaped by complex interactions between social, economic, and environmental determinants, and the range of interventions, initiatives and services offered by TTP address these wider social determinants of health.

A realist-informed, qualitative framework was applied, blending ontological realism with epistemological constructivism and using critical inquiry to challenge assumptions. Analysis used Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configurations, refining the initial Incite Model into **Incite 2**, validated by participants and an Advisory Board.

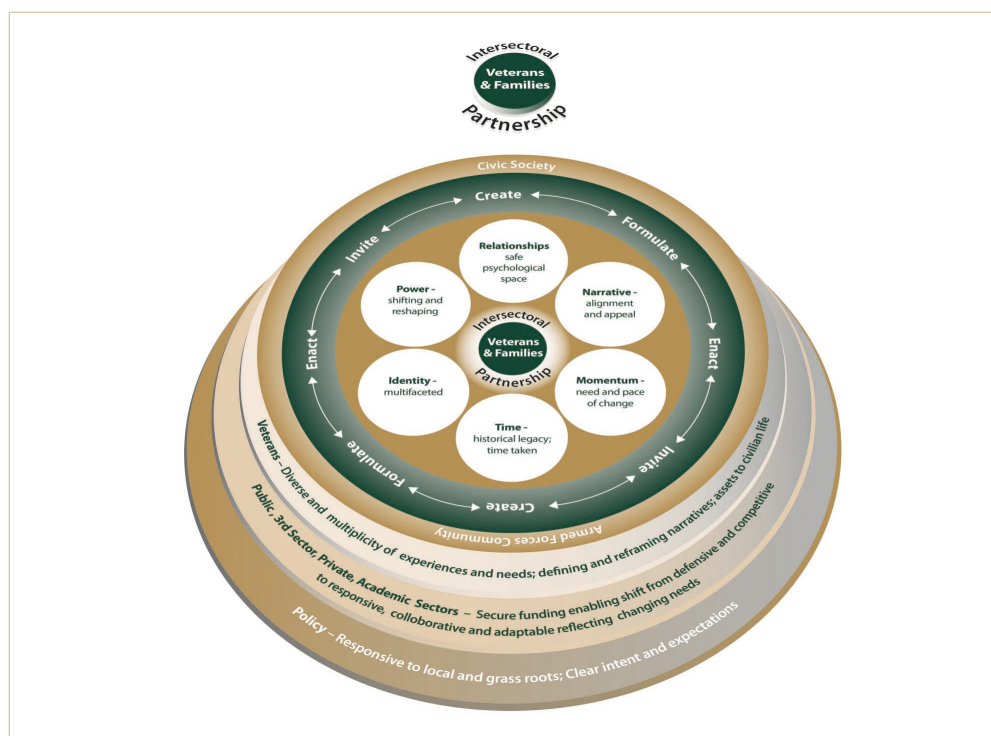
Key Findings – The Incite 2 Model

Six interconnected mechanisms underpin TTP success:

1. **Relationships creating Safe Psychological Space** – Created through trust, relationship-building, and tacit knowledge sharing, enabling open dialogue, peer learning, and relational capital that sustains collaboration.
2. **Narrative** – Co-produced and grounded in lived experience, aligning diverse perspectives, allowing priorities to emerge organically, and remaining adaptive to local and policy contexts.
3. **Momentum** – Maintained through emotional connection, quick wins, and responsiveness to external opportunities; dynamically reinforced by the partnership’s narrative.
4. **Time** – Recognition of the complex ecosystem of veteran support; the enduring legacy of past conflicts and wars that shape identity, community dynamics, and public trust; and the “golden thread” linking the VPP Programme to Thrive Together.
5. **Identity** – Encouraging reflection on personal and professional values, fostering belonging, and enabling the development of new professional roles.
6. **Power** – Managed across public, private, and voluntary sectors; broadening definitions to include social, emotional, and economic capital; actively addressing structural inequalities and “othering.”

Incite 2 deepens the original model by emphasising relational capital and adaptive leadership within “holding environments” that enable constructive engagement with complexity, uncertainty, and competing values.

The Incite 2 Model



Contributions to Knowledge

The study makes three core contributions:

- Advancing realist-informed inquiry into cross-sector partnerships
- Providing a refined programme theory for sustaining intersectoral collaboration
- Offering a foundation for practical tools to improve veteran and family support

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Relationships to Foster a Safe Psychological Space

Cultivate trust, mutual respect, and open dialogue by embedding structured relationship-building activities at the start and throughout the partnership lifecycle. Preserve and transfer tacit knowledge via mentorship schemes, structured reflection sessions, and shared digital repositories. Formalise Communities of Practice to enable ongoing peer learning and emotional support, especially for leaders in high-pressure contexts. Use relational capital metrics to monitor trust, reciprocity, and shared understanding as key indicators of partnership health.

2. Co-produce and Sustain a Cohesive Narrative

Embed lived and living experience into strategic planning to ensure the narrative authentically reflects community needs and realities. Use narrative alignment workshops to integrate diverse perspectives, avoid prescriptive agendas, and preserve adaptability over time. Incorporate social determinants of health and policy considerations into local storytelling to connect grassroots initiatives with broader strategic goals. Foster mutual knowledge exchange across sectors so that both relational and technical expertise shape the evolving partnership story.

3. Foster and Maintain Momentum

Build and sustain forward movement by focusing on emotional connectivity, shared purpose, and quick-win achievements rather than relying solely on chronological milestones. Harness external events and policy shifts as strategic ‘hooks’ to accelerate action and create visible successes. Establish feedback loops to capture and celebrate progress, maintaining enthusiasm during slower phases. Support adaptive pacing that accommodates natural ebbs and flows while keeping the partnership moving forward.

4. Support Identity Development and Alignment

Provide reflective spaces for individuals to explore their values, beliefs, and potential biases in relation to the partnership’s aims. Facilitate dialogue between personal and professional identities to deepen engagement and broaden perspectives. Acknowledge and nurture emergent professional identities that develop through collaboration, strengthening individuals’ sense of belonging within the partnership.

5. Address Power Dynamics Across Sectors

Map power relationships across public, private, and voluntary sectors to identify imbalances and design strategies for equitable participation. Promote dual-role leadership appointments that demonstrate organisational commitment and decision-making authority within the partnership. Broaden the definition of power to include social, emotional, and economic capital, ensuring all forms are recognised and strategically leveraged. Implement cultural competency programmes to challenge stereotypes, dismantle ‘othering,’ and strengthen cross-sectoral understanding.

6. Counteract Historical and Structural Inequalities

Actively address the marginalisation of less powerful groups such as grassroots organisations and underrepresented communities, through equitable resource allocation and meaningful inclusion in decision-making forums. Challenge exclusionary narratives by embedding complexity and nuance into public and policy discourse. Establish boundary-spanning collaboration mechanisms that dismantle divisions between groups and sectors, fostering inclusivity and mutual recognition.

7. Develop manuals to operationalise the theoretical constructs of the Incite model 2 which can serve as a resource for the Armed Forces Community

Develop comprehensive manuals to operationalise the theoretical constructs of the Incite Model 2 by transforming its concepts into clear, actionable procedures, guidelines, and best practices. These manuals should translate abstract theory into step-by-step frameworks for real-world Armed Forces contexts; include practical tools such as checklists, decision trees, case studies, and scenario-based applications; provide clear definitions, explanations, and examples of each theoretical component; be tailored to different segments of the Armed Forces Community, including serving personnel, veterans, families, and support organisations; serve as an accessible reference resource in both digital and print formats for training, operational planning, and decision-making; and incorporate feedback loops for continuous improvement to ensure relevance to emerging needs and evidence-based practices.

8. Undertake a qualitative study which will explore beneficiaries' and frontline staff reaction to the model and their views on their contribution to how the model works

This study should capture the lived experiences, opinions, and emotional responses of beneficiaries who directly engage with the model's interventions, while also gathering insights from frontline staff on how the model operates in practice, including its perceived strengths, challenges, and areas for refinement. It should explore how both groups view their own contributions to the model's success or limitations, highlighting the dynamic relationship between its design and real-world application. A variety of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and narrative accounts should be employed to obtain rich and nuanced data. The findings should then be analysed to identify themes and patterns that can guide adaptations, ensuring the model remains relevant, practical, and impactful across the Armed Forces Community. Based on this analysis, clear recommendations should be provided to enhance the model, drawing directly from the experiences and feedback of those most closely involved in its implementation and outcomes.

Develop international research partnerships, for example, by building on current networks, to initiate the use of the Incite 2 across countries

This initiative should focus on identifying and engaging potential collaborators, including academic institutions, research organisations, Armed Forces support agencies, and relevant NGOs in different regions, to create a robust foundation for global implementation. Partnerships would facilitate cross-cultural testing and adaptation of the model, ensuring its principles and practices remain relevant and effective in diverse national and cultural contexts. They would also enable the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and best practices through joint research projects, conferences, and exchange programmes, while coordinating pilot studies in partner countries to assess the model's effectiveness in varied operational and social environments. A collaborative data-sharing framework would be established to support comparative analysis and global learning, alongside efforts to secure co-funding from international research bodies, defence organisations, and charitable foundations to sustain implementation and scaling. Ultimately, this approach aims to build a sustainable international community of practice that champions the model, fosters innovation, and ensures its continuous refinement, thereby enhancing both its global reach and its credibility and adaptability across different Armed Forces communities worldwide.

Conclusion

The Thrive Together Programme demonstrates that veteran and family support is most effective when intersectoral partnerships are intentionally designed, nurtured, and sustained. By refining the Incite Model into Incite 2, the study offers both a conceptual framework and a practical roadmap for building resilient, inclusive, and adaptive networks that ensure veterans, and their families receive timely, effective, and enduring support.

The research also provides the Armed Forces Covenant Trust, Office of Veterans' Affairs, and UK policy leads with a tested model for achieving collective impact, one that recognises that partnerships, when structured and sustained effectively, can accomplish more than any single organisation could alone.

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

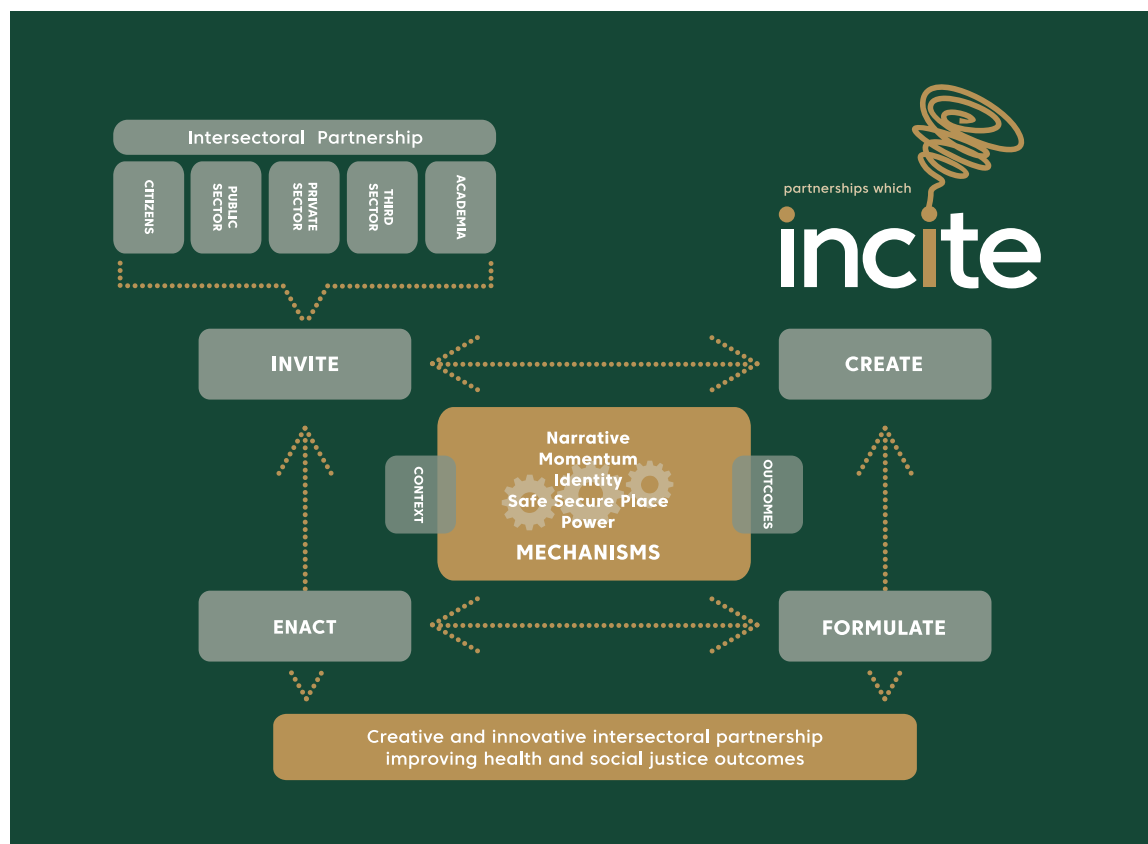
- 1.1 The increasing emphasis on cross-sector collaboration to address complex social challenges has led to the emergence of innovative partnership models, particularly within veteran support initiatives. However, although considerable attention has been devoted to programme interventions and beneficiary outcomes, comparatively little is known about the processes by which these partnerships are formed, sustained, and effectively governed. The Thrive Together Programme was established by the Armed Forces Covenant Trust to intentionally “build sustainable and resilient networks to ensure veterans receive prompt, effective and tailored support.” (Armed Forces Community Covenant, 2024) The programme also includes support to families. This study seeks to address this gap by developing a retrospective programme theory of successful Thrive Together development. Rather than evaluating programme outcomes or specific interventions, the research focuses on understanding the mechanisms through which leadership, negotiation, and relationship-building have contributed to the effective evolution of TT partnerships. By employing a realist-informed qualitative approach, this investigation aims to illuminate the contextual and mechanistic factors that underpin successful collaborative leadership across diverse stakeholder environments.
- 1.2 Thrive Together is the name for the second phase of the Armed Forces Community Covenant Trust fund Veterans People, Places and Pathways Programme (VPPP). Over the three-year period from 2024-2027, Thrive Together seeks to establish sustainable and resilient networks designed to ensure Veterans receive timely, effective and tailored support. While the VPPP was fully focussed on Veterans, this new phase of the programme expands its scope to encompass targeted support for veteran families.
- 1.3 In October 2024 nine grants were awarded to the VPPP portfolio lead organisations, enabling them to realise their plans under the newly named Thrive Together programme, designed to increase support to vulnerable Veterans and their families throughout the UK and enable this support to become self-sustaining. A further award was made in December 2024 for programme delivery in Northern Ireland.
- 1.4 For Veterans and their families, TT is creating an evolving UK wide network of physical and mental health support, with military charities and other organisations working together to ensure there are easy-to-access and joined-up pathways both into and out of services both statutory and non-statutory.
- 1.5 For organisations, the programme fosters a strong focus on collaboration and long-term impact further emphasising sustainability and enduring legacy. By promoting strategic and cooperative endeavours, TT aims to establish more robust and interconnected support systems. This ensures Veterans and their families have consistent, long-lasting and easily accessible joined up pathways to the support services they need to enable them to thrive.

- 1.6 Following a consultation process conducted between April and September 2024, and the subsequent development of strategic plans, the portfolios have now entered the delivery phase of the programme. This phase will be followed by a transition and sustaining phase during the final six to nine months, cumulating in March 2027. **It is therefore essential to understand and capture the key components and underlying mechanisms needed to establish successful intersectoral partnerships.**

Applying Programme Theory: The Incite Model

- 1.7 In Scotland the Covenant funded Life Live partnership, the VPPP funded *Scottish Veterans Wellbeing Alliance*, the *Fingerprints* dialogue and coproduction and the subsequent *Scotland's Veterans Wellbeing Alliance* (SVWA), which is Scotland's TT programme, have intentionally used the Incite model to guide the creation, formulation and enhancement of these successful intersectoral partnerships (TTP) to deliver improved outcomes for veterans and families.
- 1.8 The *Incite* model (Irvine Fitzpatrick, 2020) provides a framework for establishing intersectoral partnerships that generate co-created solutions aimed at enhancing health outcomes and advance social justice. It emphasises the creation of collaborative spaces where partners become "more than the sum of their parts," and it identifies key considerations for effective partnerships. By offering policymakers a structured paradigm for addressing complex societal challenges, the model moves beyond the traditional reliance on statutory and 3rd sector providers acting in isolation, instead fostering integrated approaches to achieve shared policy goals.
- 1.9 The programme theory identifies five key mechanisms: (a) narrative, (b) momentum, (c) identity, (d) safe and secure space, and (e) power. It operates across three main phases: (a) invite, (b) create, and (c) enact. Later, an additional phase, formulation, was added (Irvine Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). This model addresses a previously identified gap: understanding which mechanisms enable TTP to thrive. It currently underpins three of Scotland's funded Armed Forces Covenant programmes and has proven to be a reliable, valuable framework.

Figure 1: Incite Model



Study Aims

- 1.10 Common features of good practice are often obscured by variations in service delivery models, disparate client groups, and the diversity of providers and contributors. It is therefore imperative that we investigate and synthesis the key success features and elements of effective practice to understand from the leads of the Thrive Together programmes what factors were necessary to sustain, grow and replicate this work.
- 1.11 The primary aim of this study was to develop a retrospective programme theory that explains the successful development and maintenance of the Thrive Together partnerships. The focus is not on the services provided or direct outcomes for veterans, but rather on understanding how programme leads have effectively negotiated, established, and sustained multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- 1.12 The study was carried out by the Centre for Military Research, Education and Public Engagement at Edinburgh Napier University, which holds the grant for Scotland's Thrive Together programme. Led by Dr Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick (Principal Investigator), who also directs one of the ten TT programmes, the project built on her previous use of the Incite model to guide collaborative initiatives supporting veterans' wellbeing.
- 1.13 Dr Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick interviewed ten strategic leads from the ten TT programmes. As lead for the Scottish programme, she drew on her extensive practical experience to shape the study's design and analysis.

Focus of Thrive Together Programmes (TTP)

- 1.14 The drive to enhance support for veterans within the Armed Forces community has been informed by a growing body of knowledge on the transition to civilian life. While most veterans navigate this transition successfully, a significant minority experience considerable challenge. For these individuals, the transition can be marked by loneliness, social isolation, poor mental health, and, in some cases, problematic alcohol use. Evidence indicates that some develop mental health conditions, many of which remain unrecognised and undiagnosed (Iversen et al., 2005; Gordon, 2020; Matthews Smith et al., 2021). Furthermore, the loss of both individual and collective professional identity can engender a profound sense of disconnection from the military community and the broader civilian society (Binks & Cambridge, 2018; Hatch et al., 2013).
- 1.15 The expanding body of published evidence has shaped the design and delivery of a range of social prescribing and other clinical and non-clinical interventions. Recognising that health and well-being are shaped by complex interactions between social, economic, and environmental determinants, social prescribing has emerged as a valuable approach. Rather than focusing on deficits, it empowers individuals to build strengths and personal resilience. Within the Thrive Together Partnerships, a variety of social prescribing initiatives are delivered, including gardening, volunteering, arts activities, group learning, befriending, cookery, healthy eating programmes, and diverse sporting opportunities. These initiatives aim to increase confidence, foster resilience, and de-medicalise approaches to health and well-being (National Academy of Social Prescribing, 2015). Importantly, social prescribing processes are tailored to address individuals' holistic needs, enabling greater ownership of personal health and well-being (The King's Fund, 2020). For veterans, access to these opportunities is often facilitated by peer support workers or dedicated link workers, who play a critical role in connecting individuals to appropriate resources.
- 1.16 Within the Thrive Together Partnerships, particular emphasis has been placed on arts and creative practices, which are supported by a growing evidence base for their role in preventing poor health, promoting well-being, and fostering social inclusion. Such approaches can also address health-related stigma and have the potential to engage groups that are otherwise hard to reach (World Health Organization, 2019). Creative interventions contribute to tackling major health and social challenges, including the care and management of ageing populations, the empowerment of individuals living with long-term conditions, and the mitigation of loneliness and social isolation. They are also linked to maintaining well-being, aiding recovery, and supporting both longevity and quality of life (APPG, 2017). Beyond these tangible benefits, creative engagement offers opportunities to restore and nurture imagination, an essential human capacity that trauma often diminishes and which is central to reclaiming a full and meaningful life (van der Kolk, 2014).

- 1.17 Reconnection with others, facilitated through the camaraderie and shared focus of a creative process or an activity personally meaningful to the individual, can foster physical, emotional, and social connectedness. Such engagement not only rebuilds interpersonal trust and a sense of belonging but also supports broader well-being outcomes through the cultivation of shared purpose and mutual support.
- 1.18 Several Thrive Together Partnerships have also invested in the development and expansion of animal-assisted interventions, particularly equine therapy and canine support programmes for veterans. Both approaches are underpinned by a growing evidence base demonstrating their potential to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress, alleviate anxiety and depression, enhance emotional regulation, and improve social functioning. In addition, these interventions often create a safe and non-judgemental context for engagement, enabling participants to rebuild confidence, nurture empathy, and develop adaptive coping strategies.

Chapter 2: Methodological Considerations and Method

Critical Inquiry and Realist Informed Approach

- 2.1 Numerous epistemological positions exist concerning the nature of knowledge claims and the methods by which knowledge is generated in research. This study employed a qualitative, realist-informed methodological framework. Realist methodologies, particularly when integrated with qualitative approaches, have proven valuable in elucidating how and why complex interventions work within specific contexts (Gilmore et al., 2019).
- 2.2 In the present study qualitative and realist methods were employed. Levi-Strauss described such an approach as that of a “bricoleur” or someone who uses whatever tools and materials are available to complete a task. The bricoleur adapts to circumstances, creatively combining resources to develop unique solutions to a problem. This concept was also applied to qualitative research methods by Denzin and Lincoln (2008) and developed more extensively by Kincheloe and Berry (2004) and Kincheloe et al. (2011).
- 2.3 A focus on bricolage brings together two perspectives that are often viewed as philosophically incompatible. The first, ontological realism, asserts that a real world exists independently of our perceptions, and theories. The second, epistemological constructivism, holds that our understanding of this world is inevitably our construction, shaped by our assumptions, prior experiences, and interactions, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and that no such construction can claim absolute truth. This dual perspective is acknowledged both in scientific discourse (Shadish et al. 2002; Norris et al. 2008) and in everyday life, where perceptions and beliefs are mediated by context and experience as well as by external reality. From this standpoint, every theory, model, or conclusion is necessarily a simplified and partial attempt to interpret a complex reality (Maxwell 2012). Drawing on the principles of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism, the present study integrates concepts from critical inquiry and realism to further refine its methodological framework.
- 2.4 Critical inquiry questions currently held values and assumptions and challenges conventional structures (Marrais and Lapan 2004; Gray 2014). It invites researchers and participants to discard “false consciousness” to develop new ways of understanding as a guide to effective action and confronting unjust social systems (Berger and Luckmann 1971; Friere 1973; Bradshaw et al. 2007; Garoian and Gaudelius 2008). The deployer of a critical perspective is not content to interpret the world but also seeks to change it. The assumptions that lie beneath critical inquiry are these (Weiss and Fine 2004; Dodson et al. 2007; Bloom and Sawin 2009; Gray 2014):

- Ideas are mediated by power relations in society.
 - Certain groups in society are privileged over others and exert an oppressive force on subordinate groups.
 - What are presented as facts cannot be disentangled from ideology and the self-interest of dominant groups.
 - Mainstream research practices are implicated, even if unconsciously, in the reproduction of the systems of class, race, and gender oppression.
 - The task of researchers is to call the structures and values of society into question.
- 2.5 Critical inquiry provides an intellectual foundation for the development of ideas in this research, particularly the challenging of commonly held notions, challenging of power, and ensuring that disempowered individuals have a voice (Hancock 2004; Garoian and Gaudelius 2008; Bloom and Sawin 2009; Bloom 2009; Bromage et al 2017).
- 2.6 To support ethical validation, particularly the criterion of usefulness (Angen 2000; Weis and Fine 2004), this study applied an evidence-based framework for conceptualising intersectoral partnerships. The framework, grounded in prior empirical research, provides professionals with a tested model designed to promote inclusive and imaginative practices.

Consistency, clarity, and thoroughness in data collection and analysis

- 2.7 Consistency, clarity, and thoroughness position validity as a continuous quality-control process operating throughout a study. Rigour in data collection and analysis, is demonstrated through methodology consistency, sustained commitment, and comprehensive procedures, and is therefore essential (Kvale 1995; Angen 2000; Yardley 2000; Coben 2013). Triangulation across data sources, theoretical perspectives and participant groups is widely recognised as an important strategy for enhancing validity (Pain et al. 2007; Bloom and Swain 2009). In this study consistency, clarity, and thoroughness were further strengthened by the composition of the research team whose interdisciplinary expertise spans the public, private, and voluntary sector, providing a strong foundation for both the conduct and interpretation of the research.

Reflexivity

- 2.8 The Principal Investigator's (PI) existing professional relationships with study participants, who also serve as strategic leads within the Thrive Together network require a critical and ongoing examination of how personal beliefs, professional judgements, and prior experiences may shape the research process, including data generation, interpretation, and theorising.
- 2.9 Contemporary qualitative scholarship increasingly recognises researcher subjectivity not as a bias to be eliminated, but as an epistemological resource that enriches the research process (Finlay, 2002; Koopman et al 2015). From this constructivist standpoint, the researcher's positionality, informed by their professional background and social identity, is viewed as a valuable asset that contributes to the co-construction of meaning and insight throughout the study. The aim is not to suppress subjectivity, but to engage with it critically and transparently as part of the interpretive process.

- 2.10 The PI maintained a detailed reflexive journal throughout the research process. This included reflections on interpersonal dynamics during interviews, rationale for deviations or adaptations in questioning, and emergent analytical insights generated during data collection and Advisory Board discussions. Working within a multidisciplinary research team further supported collaborative reflexivity, offering multiple perspectives that challenge assumptions and contribute to more robust interpretations (Linabary et al., 2020). This team-based approach created a reflective space for interrogating decisions, interpretations, and potential researcher influence on the co-produced knowledge.

Advisory Board

- 2.11 To enhance reflexive rigour, multiple strategies were integrated into the research design. An Advisory Board comprising key stakeholders from both practice and policy, was established to provide external oversight and facilitate critical dialogue. The Board met on three occasions: first, for introductions and review of the interview schedule alongside the Incite programme theory; second, to examine preliminary findings and the emerging programme theory; and third, to offer critical feedback on the refined programme theory prior to its finalisation. The Principal Investigator (PI) promoted sustained engagement by encouraging and supporting email correspondence between meetings, recognising that members might wish to share reflective insights outside the formal discussions. In addition, member checking was undertaken, enabling participants to review and comment on the refined programme theory, thereby strengthening the credibility and confirmability of findings.

Initial Programme Theory

- 2.12 An initial programme theory is essential for guiding a realist-informed inquiry, serving as a conceptual framework through which empirical data can be interrogated and refined (Pawson, 2006). In this study, the Incite programme theory was employed to inform the interview process and to illuminate the mechanisms underpinning the development of effective, collaborative partnerships aimed at advancing health, social inclusion, and wellbeing outcomes for veterans and their families.

Data Collection

- 2.13 Semi structured interviews were conducted with ten strategic leads from the Thrive Together (TT) programme (n = 10), utilising exploratory questions informed by the Incite programme theory. Owing to time constraints and logistical considerations, interviews were conducted remotely via the Microsoft Teams platform and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Nature of asking questions from realist perspective

- 2.14 The interview process was designed to gather deep and thoughtful accounts of how participants developed and maintained Thrive Together Partnerships. Rather than simply asking questions and recording responses, the researcher and participants worked together to make sense of their experiences. This meant engaging not just in telling stories but also in discussing and interpreting those stories together. The list of interview questions is provided in Appendix Three. This method differs from traditional qualitative interviews because it promotes a more equal conversation, where both researcher and participant are recognised as having valuable expertise, and where open discussion and joint interpretation are encouraged. This approach aligns with the principles of realist-informed interviewing (Pawson, 2006; Pawson et al., 2005).

Analysis

- 2.15 The analytic process employed qualitative methods, drawing specifically on thematic and framework analysis. This involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, development of a thematic framework, systematic coding of the data following this framework, thematic charting, and the subsequent mapping and interpretation of findings (McGhee et al., 2007; Ritchie & Spencer, 2002; Seale, 1999; Stringer, 2007). Each of these phases were adapted to align with the principles of realist evaluation, with a particular emphasis on identifying and interrogating Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations (Gillmore et al., 2019).
- 2.16 The central analytic aim was to identify empirical patterns that illustrate how particular mechanisms may give rise to specific outcomes within varying contextual conditions. To this end, context, mechanism, and outcome served as sensitising concepts during the development of the coding framework, initial analysis, and subsequent coding cycles. Data was coded explicitly using these CMO categories, which also functioned as an organising structure for interpretation and programme theory refinement.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

- 2.17 To ensure analytical rigour and transparency, all interpretative decisions were systematically documented alongside corresponding data excerpts, thereby maintaining a comprehensive audit trail. Acknowledging the potential influence of the Principal Investigator's (PI) "insider" status, reflexivity served as a critical methodological strategy throughout the research process (Palaganas et al., 2017). As interviewer, the PI engaged in continuous reflexive practice, recording thoughts, emotional responses, assumptions, and positional reflections in a dedicated research journal.
- 2.18 In addition to recognising the significance of subjectivity and the co-construction of meaning, the development of rapport between researcher and participant was central to the study's integrity. The PI introduced herself explicitly in the role of researcher, rather than as a programme lead, to reinforce the research context and mitigate role confusion. This intentional positioning drew on introspection and critical reflection (Bloom & Sawin, 2009), facilitating connections between professional knowledge, lived experience, and broader social contexts.

- 2.19 Prior research has demonstrated that such researcher-participant dynamics often foster deeper, more exploratory dialogue, prompting discussion of personal motivations and emotional dimensions that might otherwise remain unexamined (Palaganas et al., 2017). To further enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Forero et al., 2018), key findings, the refined programme theory, and provisional recommendations were presented to study participants for validation. A parallel presentation was delivered to the Advisory Group, ensuring critical feedback from diverse perspectives and contributing to the overall robustness and applicability of the study's conclusions.

Ethics

- 2.20 Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Edinburgh Napier University Research and Integrity Committee, in accordance with both institutional and national guidelines governing research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The consent process ensured that participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the nature, purpose and scope of the research, as well as the methods and intended use of the data. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage, without the need to provide a reason and without any adverse consequences. This approach was intended to safeguard autonomy, promote transparency and uphold the highest ethical standards throughout the research process.

Chapter 3: Results

- 3.1 Participants in this research were the 10 strategic leads involved in the leadership of TTP across the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.
- 3.2 Data were collected through interviews of approximately one hour in duration, structured around the Incite programme theory. This theory was iteratively refined and further developed throughout the data collection process. Qualitative and realist analytical methods were employed to produce a refined, empirically supported programme theory on the development of effective partnership. In line with best practice recommendations (Bryman 2004; Green and Thorogood 2009), an Advisory Board reviewed both interim and final findings, providing critical feedback to strengthen the analysis.

Presentation of results

- 3.3 The results are organised into three main sections:
- 3.4 *Realist Analysis of Context, Mechanism, and Outcome*
This section explores the interplay between Context, Mechanism, and Outcome, arranged thematically across six key themes identified in the analysis, both previously established and newly emerging:
 - Relationships that create a safe and secure space
 - Narrative
 - Momentum
 - Time
 - Identity
 - Power
- 3.5 *Phases of Development of TTP*
This section examines the evolution of TTP over time, from early, nascent ideas, through stages of collaboration, to the establishment of fully developed services or structures delivering tangible outcomes for veterans and their families.
- 3.6 *Organisation and Presentation of Qualitative Data*
Quotations are used throughout to illustrate and support interpretations. Direct quotes are presented in indented italics (an ellipsis indicates a pause). All names and identifying details of people, places, or organisations have been altered to preserve anonymity.

Table 1: Thrive Together Characteristics

Thrive Together Partnership	Lead Organisation	Locale	No of Local Authorities in locale	No of veterans living in locale	No of funded partners (at August 2025)
Thrive Together Wales	Adferiad	Wales	22	115,000*	12
Forces Wellbeing Collective	Armed Forces Community HQ	North West	24	228,740*	12
Thrive Together Northern Ireland	Brook House	Northern Ireland	11	100,000**	5
Thrive Together Midlands	Defence Medical Welfare Service	Midlands, England	24	338,131*	5
Thrive Together North East and Yorkshire	Defence Medical Welfare Service	North East and Yorkshire	34	294,483*	14
Scotland's Veterans Wellbeing Alliance	Edinburgh Napier University	Scotland	32	176,000***	29
Brighter Futures for Veterans	Invictus Games Foundation	South West England	15	264,754*	8
Veterans Voice	The Bridge for Heroes	East of England	11	193,882*	10
London Armed Forces Network	The Poppy Factory	London	33	100,718*	9
Partnership in Mind	Veterans Outreach Support	South East England	19	317,708*	5

* ONS England and Wales Census 2021

** Estimate

*** Source: Scotland's Census 2022

Introduction to the results

- 3.7 To explore how Thrive Together Partnerships (TTP) operate, for whom they are effective, and under what set of circumstances (Pawson and Tilly 1997), it is essential to examine the knowledge and perspectives of diverse stakeholders. This rationale underpinned the adoption of a realist-informed qualitative approach. Participants were drawn from the ten intersectoral partnerships and were selected for their pivotal and strategic role within TTP. Realist methods are particularly valuable for uncovering the underlying reasons or processes referred to as mechanisms that generate observed outcomes. In the context of social programmes, mechanisms are understood as the cognitive or affective responses of participants to the resources provided (Pawson et al. 2005). This makes the realist methodology especially well suited to the TTP, where multiple intervention strategies are implemented across varied community settings and where success depends on the dynamic relationships among all stakeholders (Pawson 2006; Greenhalgh et al. 2009).

Main findings: Realist analysis

- 3.8 The initial programme theory, based on the Incite Model, was used to guide the realist interviews and analytical process with refinements made iteratively throughout the analysis. The core aim was to identify and align evidence demonstrating how mechanisms underlying social or psychological drivers influencing actors (Pawson and Tilly, 1997) generate outcomes, and to determine which aspects of context shape these processes. Context was understood broadly to include norms, regulations, and procedures, as well as relational factors, barriers and facilitators embedded in social structures (Connelly 2004). Outcomes encompassed any effects of interest, intended or unintended, occurring at individual, organisational or community levels. All data were coded in terms of Contexts (C), Mechanisms (M), and Outcomes (O) and the findings are presented as thematic CMO configurations, each illustrating the causal pathways through which specific conditions and processes produce observed results.

Table 2: Summary Themes and CMOs

Theme	Context	Mechanisms	Intermediate Outcomes
Relationships which lead to Safe Secure Spaces	Sector which can be defensive, competitive, and often driven by entitlement or mistrust. Sector shaped by lived experiences and sometimes lack of regulation. Public and voluntary sector under-resourcing affecting delivery and attitudes toward partnership and accountability.	Relationship building necessary to create safe psychological space. Protecting and transferring tacit knowledge.	Safe space for leaders to share frustrations, seek guidance, and co-develop ideas. Community of Practice supporting peer learning and mentoring. Relational capital nurturing safe spaces.
Narrative	Military-connected population needs. Complex, often misunderstood policy frameworks affect expectations and delivery in civilian and military sectors.	Co-production. Lived and living experience. Narrative Alignment and appeal. Shared Values.	Strategic policy engagement. Richer storytelling unlocking systems thinking. Responsive local and grassroots development.
Momentum	Urgency and volatility of emerging geopolitical pressures. Changing population of veterans and need to be responsive.	Need for change in a rapidly shifting and uncertain milieu with additional funding opportunities. Pace of change.	Efficient and increased system responsiveness.
Time	Complex ecosystem of veteran support. Deep legacy of conflicts and wars which shape identity, community dynamics, and public trust.	Network building and participatory engagement. Responsive local leadership. Expectation management.	Potential for scale and systemic impact. Golden thread from VPPP Programme through to Thrive Together.
Identity	Emotional Labour. Identity Tension. Risk of Knowledge Loss.	Redefining professional and personal identity. Using lived experience to drive change.	Resilient Partnership. Clarity of purpose. Cultural Competency.
Power	Leadership in a Fragmented, Competitive Sector. Unrealistic Funding Expectations. Under-resourced Partnerships. Continuation of military rank hierarchies in civilian settings.	Acknowledgement of power ambiguity. Identity dissonance (funder vs. collaborator).	Power sharing. Power shifting.

3.9 CMO configurations: Relationships creating 'safe, secure space'

The following CMO configurations examine how relationships grounded in trust, mutual respect and shared purpose contribute to the creation of a safe secure space within which Thrive Together partners collaborate effectively. These configurations explore the contextual conditions that enable such relationships to develop, the mechanisms through which they foster psychological safety, and the outcomes that emerge from this environment of openness and support. Relationships grounded in trust and camaraderie were regarded as essential for establishing and maintaining a psychologically safe and secure space from which TTP partners could collaborate effectively.

Context (C)

The key contexts were described as a sector which can be defensive, competitive and often driven by entitlement or mistrust and one shaped by lived experiences but sometimes with poor regulation. Public and voluntary sector under resourcing was viewed as adversely affecting affected delivery and attitudes towards working in partnership and accountability. It was interesting to note that the Leads often felt:

"I find it quite a brutal place to work, really. They're quite quick to condemn and slow to forgive, and I was always concerned that V triple P is such a small part of what's available for veterans, and therefore I didn't want to be arrogant about we're going do." Participant 7

The predominantly short-term nature of funding arrangements was widely perceived as fostering a culture of institutional protectionism. This dynamic not only constrained the sharing of resources, expertise, and information but also generated competition between organisations for limited financial opportunities. Such conditions ultimately undermined, and in many cases actively counteracted, the cultivation of sustainable, collaborative relationships. Consequently, the potential for developing genuinely constructive and mutually beneficial partnerships was significantly diminished, as stakeholders often prioritised safeguarding their own operational viability over engaging in long-term cooperative strategies.

"I think the charity sector, even though I've worked in it for a long time now or worked with them, it's a very, very different dynamic from anything else that I've come across and experienced. They want to do really good things, they get in, people get themselves into a very protective state because they must protect what they're trying to deliver. It is very money driven, but they don't have a very clear set of goals of how to make money." Participant 4

Mechanisms (M)

Participants noted that the TTP contributed to a renewed or strengthened recognition of the value placed on relationships, particularly in how these relationships serve as a key source of motivation. The program was perceived to create a reflective space, both for individual contemplation on one's own practice and for engagement with the experiences of others which, in turn, informed and influenced participants' professional practices.

"I think if you if you don't connect with someone, it doesn't matter how good they are at their job or what they say you're not retaining it, you're not taking it in. You know you've got to have trust, and you've got to have that relationship with someone you know." Participant 10

Participants explained that building relationships with their peer group of TTP strategic leads fostered and engendered feelings of mutuality, respect, and trust. This, in turn, enabled them to transfer their learning and experiences into their own geographical partnerships helping to create the conditions for collaboration.

"...there is something about creating, I always say we're creating the conditions for collaboration. We can't make people collaborate. What we're trying to do is create the conditions we're trying to be open. We're trying to be collegiate. What's safe for one person isn't safe for another Just by saying something is a safe space doesn't make it a safe space." Participant 7

"So, my frustration sometimes with some of the partners is going, I just wish you saw this the way that I did, and you were as passionate about this the way that I am and I have a couple of those, but not enough I think." Participant 3

The strategic leads emphasised that psychologically safe spaces did not arise spontaneously but had to be intentionally created and purposefully maintained. They reflected on how the mutual support developed within their peer group enabled and emboldened them to replicate such safe places within their individual partnerships. The formation of a community of practice provided a forum in which leads could engage in open and honest dialogue, secure in the knowledge that their conversations would be heard, not disclosed to others without consent, and free from judgement. This was particularly critical in situations where challenges arose, and a temporary withdrawal or revision of the partnership approach was necessary.

".. creating your own like board of directors like who is your personal board that have their own expertise that you can go to speak to? And I think that's an important part because for the most part, you're either in a small organisation or you are a person in a large organisation. So, it's yeah that that mentoring coaching element is really, really important. And yeah, so as a community of practice or also a space to offload." Participant 3

“There’s everybody’s been saying, stealing ideas, borrowing and implementing, and now I feel that I have some credibility within the group to sort of say what I feel or ask for that extra bit of help.” Participant 2

The trusting relationships experienced by the strategic leads as peers and problem solvers encouraged them to question others motivation and set a moral compass for how and with whom they wanted to collaborate with.

“...one of the surprising things was the gatekeeping element of it all. Ego that sometimes can be involved within some organisations and the bitterness that I’ve come across in one of my first jobs taking this role was having to tell people they were not receiving funding. I didn’t have nothing to do with it, but the bitterness of resentment and the vulgarity of some of the organisations well, you just don’t want to collaborate with them as part of the programme anyway. It was just unbelievable, and I just thought, well, thank God I’m not working with you because if that’s your views.” Participant 2

Participants described a strong sense of camaraderie and mutual support, with each strategic lead feeling that others “had their back”. Relationships were characterised by authenticity enabling individuals to be transparent about challenges and to risk self-disclosure in the knowledge that any critique would be constructive. Participants observed that the TTP had renewed or reinforce the value places on relationships, recognising them as a key source of motivation. The TTP were also perceived as providing space for reflection, both one’s own practice and on the experiences of others, which in turn informed and influenced participants professional approaches.

“...generally, everyone talks about collaboration but like we are absolutely true collaborators. We do it all the time. Like, you know, if, like, if you need anything, there’s certain people you can absolutely rely on, who will get back to you.” Participant 9

This support acted as a protective factor which in turn supported leads to deal with behaviour from partners which in other roles, arenas or settings may not have been tolerated.

“There’s just an absolute, you know, dilemma around compassion fatigue and that that burnout because you can’t really switch off because a lot of people they might have you on your personal socials because you might have served with these people and you’re in these different groups or there’s ways that they can kind of get hold of you that go above and beyond any other service delivery”. Participant 3

Outcomes (O)

The outcomes included the establishment of a community of practice and the creation of a safe space in which leaders could share frustrations, seek guidance and codevelop ideas thereby nurturing valuable peer learning and mentoring. The relational capital built among the strategic leads was subsequently leveraged to develop and sustain safe environments within local TT partnerships enabling these partnerships to flourish.

“...there are plenty of organisations that we work with really, positively and actually some of the greatest achievements, I think that we’ve had throughout the programme, you know, over the last six months have been working with non-funded partners and they are really engaged and I think it is that difference with people who were maybe involved in the previous iteration in VPPP, who then weren’t successful with funding and that I think for me that that’s the difference.” Participant 1

Within a safe and secure space, authentic relationships among TTP leads fostered honesty and mutual validation of each other’s roles within the TTP. This environment reduced fear of judgment or criticism thereby encouraging participants to take greater risks in their collaborative work. Participants reported a genuine openness to working together, and noted that in valuing the contributions of partners, particularly those from less powerful sector or agencies it served to reinforce the safety of the created places.

“You never know what comes out of a conversation from someone, and where it leads. And I’m just telling everybody, not all things, come to me with them, you know, not everything will work, not everything will happen, but something else might come out of it that we didn’t think initially.” Participant 10

3.10 CMO configurations: Narrative

Participants identified the narrative the foundational story that underpins the TT Partnership as a critical element in its operational framework. This narrative was not only seen as a cohesive articulation of the partnership’s core objectives but also as a pivotal tool for communicating its anticipated benefits. The clarity and coherence of the narrative provided a shared understanding among stakeholders, fostering alignment and enhancing the partnership’s overall effectiveness. By framing the partnership within a clear narrative, participants were able to conceptualise its goals, anticipate outcomes, and build a collective commitment to its success, which in turn facilitated a more cohesive and goal-oriented collaborative environment. Narrative, defined as the foundational story of the TTP encompassing a clear articulation of its objectives and anticipated benefits was identified by participants as a central element in the partnership’s functioning.

Context (C)

The key contextual factors shaping the narrative included an in-depth understanding of the needs of the military connected population and a recognition that the intentions of policy frameworks were often misunderstood. Such misinterpretations influenced both expectations and the delivery of support within civilian life and military service contexts.

“I would say the biggest thing for me first is that not enough people across sectors, understand the armed forces covenant and the principle of disadvantage and the duty of due regard. I regularly hear professionals misunderstanding, misquoting, misrepresenting - unintentionally or maliciously, not maliciously, but because they have their own personal agenda and they believe that that, yes, veterans should get preferential treatment. So, I see that amongst the third sector, more so I think than anything else. So that I think is a big thing, a lack of policy knowledge and understanding.” Participant 3

Participants expressed frustration at not being consulted regarding new funding allocations. They felt that as leaders of a programme demonstrating significant impact and success in the sector they were well placed to be able to offer their knowledge and experience with regard to what works and what does not in their regions. They highlighted how they were willing to share their insights for the good of any new initiatives which are focused on improving lives of veterans, their families and in some cases the wider armed forces community.

“So, speak to us about some of the people that are applying for your funding, because we can tell you some stuff so I just really wish sometimes that the Trust would say right, you’ve had these applications from these organisations, they’re in your area. Do you know them? I’m not saying we’re going to be the authority all the time, but we have input to give.” Participant 3

Participants noted that the term “veteran” did not always resonate with those who had served in the armed forces, many of whom preferred to identify as “ex-forces or “ex-military”. This disconnect in terminology was seen as potentially undermining the effectiveness and reach of services, as individuals might perceive initiatives labelled for “veterans” as “not for me”. Such misalignment was regarded as particularly problematic given that “veteran” is the standard term in all relevant policy documents, creating a risk of exclusion or disengagement for the very population these policies and services are intended to support and therefore, services could be destined to fail as they are seen as “not for me”.

Participants reported that once veterans had engaged with a service issues of perceived ownership sometimes arose, with agencies referring to individuals as “their veterans”. Veterans themselves could also experience feelings of betrayal or disloyalty if they sought support from another organisation. Such dynamics were seen as potentially limiting veterans’ willingness to access the full range of available services and support.

“It is an instinct of many of us, to want to own our contacts, individually and personally and whilst that’s creditworthy, you know that’s admirable. They actually need to have wider ownership. It’s challenging, but people need to understand that there are multiple points of contact and that these should be shared.” Participant 5

“You’ll get emails back from some people going so and so is putting on an event there and you’re like no, well, we would like to come, but we would feel we’d be betraying them, so they don’t go to the event because they feel they have to stay loyal to that other organisation. So, they don’t go even though you know they want to go. And it’s not as if the other organisations are encouraging them to go, either because I think they’re thinking well, I need you for my numbers for my future funding and I think they all everyone just gets caught in that that cycle.” Participant 10

“Because actually you know, there are areas of work where we can’t fix, we can’t fix everything as a partnership. And I think sometimes it’s just defining those sort of areas of work where we can, we can have the best, the best outcome. But because you know there, there are things like I said, there are the political influences.” Participant 1

“But I still think that the push should be that the armed forces community is recognised in mainstream commissioning as a closed Community group or community of interest, so that there is the opportunity to get core funding.” Participant 3

Mechanisms (M)

The mechanisms identified as generating a cohesive and compelling narrative with the TTP included co-production, narrative alignment and appeal, and the development of shared values. Co-production facilitated active collaboration between stakeholders, ensuring that the narrative was grounded in lived experience and jointly shaped by multiple perspectives. Narrative alignment and appeal involved crafting a story that resonated across different sectors and audiences fostering a sense of relevance, legitimacy and shared purpose. The cultivation of shared values provides an ethical and relational foundation, enabling stakeholders to connect the narrative to her own motivations and commitments. Together these mechanisms refine both authenticity and the persuasive power of the TTP narrative, strengthening engagement and collective ownership.

"...and I think doing something like the strategic plan was revolutionary because I mean, and it was hard, you know, don't get me wrong, that was difficult, but it's given us this really solid base. We know why we're doing what we're doing. We know why we're doing it like we're doing it." Participant 7

"Because obviously it's driven by veterans and their needs. So that can change. But the main thing for me is just seeing when you get it right and it clicks, and you can see that buy in and then suddenly other organisations hear about it and you get that word of mouth and you realise you're doing the right thing." Participant 10

The deliberate integration of a co-produced strategy, developed in collaboration with prospective partners and intended beneficiaries was widely regarded as a distinctive strength of the TTP. This approach not only ensured that the programme's design was informed by the insights and priorities of those directly affected but also differentiated it from other funding initiatives that often adopt more top-down or prescriptive models.

"So, I and I think and that's again where it's some of that that magic is because we have designed what we want to see happen. So, unlike most funders we have set out some programme aims." Participant 3

"Yeah, yeah, it shifted from the moment we started Thrive Together and it shifted because it was positioned differently and going out and consulting. And again, I'd love to go back and consult again knowing what I know now, because I would do it differently. Do you know what I mean." Participant 7

The participants recognised that they entered the TTP with pre-existing personal values shaped by their individual experiences and perspectives. However, they also emphasised that for the TTP to operate effectively and achieve its intended objectives, it was essential to cultivate a clearly articulated set of shared values. These collectively negotiated values would need to be not only agreed upon but also embraced and actively upheld by all participants, thereby fostering a sense of collective ownership and commitment to the programme's ethos.

"And this is an environment where it's OK to be honest. We want you to be honest. It's OK to be open. We want you to be honest, but there must be trust." Participant 5

"...there are always core emotive messages that they connect with that may not be the core of the ultimate construction, but it's what piques their interest in the first place. and what resonates with them in the first place and then building on that on that desire or their irritations with the system that they, they communicate, they connect with." Participant 6

The mechanism of establishing shared values involved people being open and transparent about their individual and organisational values, priorities, and agendas. The process required a willingness to articulate underlying motivations and acknowledge potential differences creating the conditions for genuine understanding. By making these positions explicit, partners were better able to identify common ground, negotiate areas of divergence and build a collective foundation to guide decision making and collaborative action.

"We have a common goal, right? Everybody is in agreement. We have a common purpose. We have shared values. Our aim is shared." Participant 4

"That the rules of engagement were this is a working environment. We anticipate and expect behaviours to reflect that, because I have been sitting on advisory groups and I don't know, they just seem to throw the rule book out the window and they go at each other hammer and tongs and you think, no, this is supposed to be like a working environment. You're supposed to be productive. You can disagree but you can't slay each other. It's not allowed, and personal insults are not allowed. So, they've agreed that in their terms of reference." Participant 6

Some participants described it as being problematic to develop shared values as sometimes that challenged people's world views. Others described how the shared values were not tokenistic statements but drove the decision making of the partnership.

"We're not going to chase you. You know, we gave you the opportunity. The door is still open, but there's no way we're going to roll over backwards. Just because you don't like the way we're doing things." Participant 5

Participants emphasised that bringing people together in physical, psychologically safe spaces was a critical factor in building the trust necessary for effective collaboration. Such environments enabled open, honest, and respectful dialogue, allowing participants to share experiences, challenge assumptions, and negotiate differing perspectives without fear of judgement. This process of trust-building not only strengthened interpersonal relationships but also played a pivotal role in shaping and refining the partnership's collective narrative. In this way, the safe physical spaces acted as both a relational and strategic resource, directing and defining the story that underpinned the partnership's shared purpose and goals.

"I think it's difficult to create that sense of shared narrative if you don't physically get people together. I'm sure this comes up with everyone else like that. The importance of these face-to-face relationships because it's wonderful to build it over zoom but you get so much more out of meeting someone in the discussion you have around coffee and you sit around at lunch and you talk about, oh, did you know?" Participant 8

The TTP created opportunities for partners to develop a broader of diverse perspectives through ongoing dialogue and coproduction. Recognising all perspectives as valid did not require agreement with the position expressed; indeed, participants acknowledged that differences in viewpoints sometimes led to conflict. However, such tensions were mitigated by the deliberate cultivation of shared values, which provided a common reference point for collaboration and enabled constructive engagement despite disagreement and differences.

“You know, we do. We do have some. We have laid out ground rules in partnership, agreements with expectations around you know, how we will collaborate and the format and the structure. So yeah, I think that has been quite important in keeping everybody engaged and engaging positively.” Participant 1

Outcomes (O)

The outcomes identified strategic policy engagement; the co-production of strategic plans grounded in responsive local and grassroots development, and the richer, more compelling narratives capable of influencing systems thinking. Participants reported that their deep personal immersion in, and contribution to, the development of the narrative fostered a strong sense of belonging to the TTP itself, but also to transmit the transformative nature of their experience in ways that could shape policy at higher levels influencing wider system thinking and inform practice within their own organisations.

“We weren’t trying to affect the change that we wanted to see without the rest of the organisation kind of leaning in and supporting that activity.” Participant 7

There was understanding on how individual beneficiaries’ stories were continuing to drive change, serving as a loop and a reminder of the co-production which developed the strategic plans. Participants described a desire to move away from counting numbers to developing a deeper more granular understanding of veteran’s needs.

“I think going forward, the quantitative data is going to be more important, and I think it’s got to go beyond demographics. It’s got to go beyond just pure number of people, the kind of the, the rhetoric that’s coming out now, if you can hear and understand it properly is actually we want to know what the presenting needs, what were the outcomes that were achieved and those kinds of measures that I think a lot of organisations are not going to be prepared for.” Participant 3

The need to reframe prevailing perceptions and to embed a more inclusive and accurate narrative within mainstream discourse was strongly emphasised. The TTP were perceived as tangible, lived examples of how such reframing could occur in practice, offering real opportunities to reset assumptions and challenges stereotypes, and present alternative stories that more authentically reflected the experiences and aspirations of the communities involved.

“Well, one thing I think that we need to pay more attention to is the positivity and the good work that veterans do, because if we only focus on support, which is fine because it’s required, but most veterans are fine, and you need to have a positive space and the partnership should be a positive space.” Participant 10

3.11 CMO configurations: Momentum

During the interviews participants frequently identified momentum as a central theme. They reflected on how the constant state of change and uncertainty within their operating environments could serve as a catalyst for momentum, driving innovation and action, but could equally inhibit progress by creating instability or hesitation. Momentum was viewed not only as a process, sustained through ongoing engagement, trust-building, and collaborative effort, but also as an outcome, emerging for effective partnership working. In this sense, momentum was recognised as a critical component of TTP functioning and a necessary condition for achieving the partnerships' strategic objectives.

Context (C)

The principal contextual drivers of momentum were identified as urgency and volatility. Participants highlighted the influence of emerging geopolitical pressures, including the escalation of potential conflicts, the outbreak of actual wars, and the persistent threat of armed confrontation. They also referred to patterns of mobilisation and shifting alliance on the global stage, which created a heightened sense of immediacy. This volatile environment was seen as both compelling action by underscoring the necessity of timely, coordinated responses, and shaping the strategic priorities of the TTP as partnerships sought to remain adaptive and responsive to rapidly changing circumstances.

"..so every Board meeting we have where there's male ex-military, all they want to talk about is when we might go to war. And quite frankly, you know what we're doing in Thrive Together is so far removed from war. Yeah, I think it excites the men more than it does the women." Participant 7

Participants reported experiencing heightened uncertainty in the context of ongoing political turmoil and transformative shifts within the broader civic sphere. These dynamics were perceived to exert a substantial influence on the stability of existing initiatives, constraining opportunities for consolidation and limiting the potential for the development and expansion of collaborative partnerships.

"..the landscape is shifting rapidly now and that's not just in terms of support for armed forces and community support. It's statutory support, everything is shifting every day. So I think it is that constant sort of you know moving forward, moving, moving backwards, a couple of stages every now and again because you know you build relationships with teams in statutory services and then they change or disappear." Participant 1

The potential impact of that changing world stage and theatre of war were discussed and how different recruiting practices and approaches may result in more veterans and their family members needing support.

“What about those that have got that the call up, you know, duty. So what? The six to nine years or if you’re an officer, it’s up to the age of 60, isn’t it? How has that affected your family? Because that’s what we’ve heard from some of the young people in college is they’re worried that even though their parent has left the forces that they’re going to be called up because of what’s in the news right now. So yeah, all having a big impact.” Participant 3

It was acknowledged that veterans do not constitute a single homogeneous group of veterans with uniform experiences and characteristics. Rather they are a diverse and complex group often characterised not just by their specialism, but like civic society by their protected characteristics

“I think and the funding pot will shrink accordingly, and we need to create better ways of people entering into the veteran’s support many of the attempts we’ve made to reach younger veterans. It’s quite clear they don’t want to hang out with a bunch of old guys and girls who fought or served in Northern Ireland and the Falklands, and what have you.” Participant 5

Mechanisms (M)

In a rapidly shifting and uncertain environment, the perceived need for change, combined with the availability of additional funding, was identified as a key driver of momentum. These funding opportunities were viewed simultaneously as enablers, providing resources to act, and as challenges, requiring swift adaptation to new priorities and conditions. The overall pace of change functioned as a central mechanism, influencing both the generation and the sustainability of momentum within the TTP, with additional funding opportunities being perceived as both opportunities and challenges and pace of change were the key mechanisms driving outcomes for momentum.

Participants spoke about both their fears and excitement about the recent UK Government funding announcement regarding “Valour”.

“Valour, that could also be a booster for our programme, because what greater way to show how to do it collaboratively across the region than the programme that’s already running across the region.” Participant 2

Participants expressed a strong desire to contribute to the future vision that Valour was beginning to articulate, leveraging their collective experience to exert influence on its development. Across all interviews, there was consistent emphasis on the aspiration for the current TTP to serve as a foundational platform upon which future initiatives could be built.

“Valour could be the next iteration of this. That’s what I would say.” Participant 9

The pace of change was described as inevitable and driven by necessity, often intensified by underlying frustration.

“That makes it harder because you’re pushing against a weight of authority, I suppose. And let’s face it, most uprisings come from the ground, don’t they? So, most change in society comes from the people most affected who go I’ve had enough now” Participant 7

“I do see much greater engagement from local authorities with the programme, you know, and they engage with us and I’m seeing shifts and positive work come out of that in terms of, you know, local authorities that are amending their amending their policies to be inclusive of the armed forces communities and they’re putting measures in, you know, they’re putting measures into place to record.” Participant 1

However, participants spoke about their frustration with the pace of change and how the funding environment itself propagates duplication and replication rather than building on good practice and evidence.

“I’ve spoken to a few organisations over the years about this when they’re looking at funding, they have to sort of reinvent themselves. But they’re like, this is what we do. This is what’s needed. If I’ve got to get this money, why? Why have I got to reinvent myself or think of something to try and get that funding, that’s not how it should be.” Participant 10

“The appetite for change is probably not what I what I want. It’s probably slower than what I want, and I think it’s going to take more time than what it should.” Participant 9

“Surprising now the main issue is that there are so many networks and so many steering groups that people become saturated and exhausted by them. And there’s a danger of replicating what’s in place rather than embracing what’s there.” Participant 5

Outcomes (O)

The outcomes of momentum included greater efficiency, enhances system responsiveness, and more visible leadership and accountability. Participants also expressed a strong ambition and desire to continue the TTP citing the significant investment of time and commitment already made, as well as the increasingly visible impacts of the TTP's work. The ambition and desire to continue the TPP because for the investment of time and commitment and the impacts which were now becoming more visible was described by participants.

"A common goal really and understanding what the end game will mean for everyone and how both the beneficiaries and the delivery agencies benefit from the process that's put in place because their life is easier because they are able to more or better satisfy the needs of their beneficiaries - that they are part of something bigger." Participant 5

"..things like this work when everyone feels they're all learning from each other, benefit from each other and being supported by each other. And one of the great things is that's starting to happen." Participant 6

There was discussion about how the TTP were continuing to grow with more partners coming on board, some without receiving any funding as organisations began to recognise the inherent value in being part of the partnership.

"And hopefully so that this is a great thing and they can join it and also give that to those that are not funded and show them what collaboration between different organisations can mean and what it what it looks like and the benefit that it has for the beneficiary." Participant 8

Participants discussed visible leadership and accountability whilst being keen to emphasise that they often viewed their roles as being about facilitation and adaptive leadership with the ability to be able to response flexibility and creatively to problems encountered.

"And I, I very much see myself as this, rather than sort of a manager, a facilitator, I suppose even in sort of brokering some of the relationships with people was, you know, in a one to one they'll say I'm doing X piece of work and I'll be like, oh, it'd be really great if you could collaborate with this person." Participant 1

"I'm there to help this programme happen, not to be the focal point of this programme, because I won't be here forever. By the time this programme finishes, I'll be gone, and I don't want to hold all the information and knowledge." Participant 5

3.12 CMO configurations: Time

Context (C)

The contextual elements of time included recognition of the complex ecosystem of veteran support; the enduring legacy of past conflicts and wars that shape identity, community dynamics, and public trust; and the “golden thread” linking the VPPP Programme to Thrive Together.

Participants distinguished “Time” from momentum, describing it in multiple ways: as the past, referencing the longstanding existence of support organisations, many of which emerged in response to specific wars or conflicts; and as the future, often characterised by uncertainty regarding needs, resources, and the availability of support systems.

“And everybody has their own different, slightly different take on where they’re coming from and they have different historical narratives around their experiences.” Participant 6

Participants provided detailed insights into the time required to establish and cultivate the TTP. They emphasised that the process of building the program was not immediate but rather entailed a significant investment of time to ensure its successful implementation. Establishing the TTP involved careful planning, relationship-building, and the gradual integration of key elements to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness. Participants highlighted that the developmental phase was crucial in fostering trust, aligning objectives, and creating the conditions necessary for meaningful engagement and long-term impact. This temporal investment, they suggested, was essential for the TTP to evolve into a robust framework that could support the intended outcomes and benefits over time.

“.. it can take up to two years to sort of get this trust built and that’s it sort of demoralised me a little bit when I said two years of just banging on doors and barriers and stuff, but OK, yeah, I’ll stick with it. But yeah, it’s to hopefully fast track that two years by eliminating those barriers.” Participant 2

“When you build a partnership, it’s going to take the best part of five years because the first two years is, you know, you’re trying to get people on board. You’re trying to see how the dynamics are going to work. You know, you’ve got to get the buy in. You’ve got to get your branding; you’ve got to get the word spread. So, it’s not really till year three where you really start seeing the benefits, the delivery of that. And going forward, you see how it grows, and it expands and that’s when you get other organisations because what you want is you want other organisations coming to you to go. How can I be part of this?” Participant 10

Time-related constraints emerged as significant barriers to collaboration. Participants frequently cited a lack of available time, insufficient institutional permission to dedicate time to collaborative endeavours, and restrictive scheduling that limited opportunities for joint work. These factors collectively diminished the feasibility and quality of collaborative engagement, as they curtailed the sustained interaction, shared problem-solving, and iterative dialogue necessary for meaningful professional collaboration.

“And you know, I asked at the last steering group. I asked everybody what is your biggest barrier to collaboration? I’m like, you can scan the QR code. You can tell me anonymously. But I want to know what the barrier is. And overwhelmingly everybody said time which I found quite interesting.” Participant 2

“It’s only going to take my CEO to go. We’ve got to cut our budget by X&Y for me to go. All that lovely collaboration can go. I haven’t got the luxury anymore.” Participant 7

Mechanisms (M) Creating and sustaining time to collaborate

Participants emphasised the deliberate allocation of dedicated time and space to enable meaningful collaboration. This was often achieved through structured meetings designed not only for problem-sharing and problem-solving, but also for building capacity through experiential learning and the exchange of practical insights.

“There is something about creating I always say we’re creating the conditions for collaboration. We can’t make people collaborate. What we’re trying to do is create the conditions we’re trying to be open. We’re trying to be collegiate. We’re trying”. Participant 7

“Because I think people things like this work when everyone feels they’re all learning from each other, benefit from each other and being supported by each other and that is one of the great things that’s starting to happen.” Participant 5

Outcomes (O)

Outcomes in this theme were identified as potential for scale up and systemic impact. The discussion on scaling up engaged participants in a critical examination of potential challenges, particularly those related to leadership succession. Participants articulated concerns about ensuring continuity of vision and strategy during transitions, emphasising that the sustainability of collaborative partnerships depends on effective succession planning. They also identified a set of leadership attributes they regarded as essential for guiding such partnerships, including the capacity to foster trust among diverse stakeholders, navigate complex inter-organisational dynamics, and maintain a shared commitment to long-term objectives.

“I think it’s the most difficult thing to recruit the right person to lead the portfolio. I think that’s the hardest thing. I think you know, if you are scaling this up, it’s not about the thing, it’s about the people and that’s really hard because you’re recruiting. Not just to a skill set, someone can have all the skills in the world to do this job and not be able to do it because it’s about the mindset as well as the skill set.” Participant 7

“We have all the different stakeholder relationships; we have some knowledge and authority here.” Participant 3

Participants noted that while initial changes were visible at the local level, the broader benefits across the whole system emerged more gradually. They reflected that this delay was due to the time required for new processes to embed, for stakeholders to adapt to new ways of working, and for cumulative improvements to build momentum. As a result, the full impact of the initiative was only apparent after sustained effort and ongoing collaboration.

“I do see much greater engagement from local authorities with the programme, you know, and they engage with us and I’m seeing shifts and positive work come out of that in terms of right from, you know, local authorities that are amending their policies to be inclusive of the armed forces communities and they’re putting measures in, you know, they’re putting measures into place to record.” Participant 1

“As I’ve said to them, this is about the programme, not your own aggrandisement and not the building up of your own charity. You will benefit from it. But this is bigger than you being recognised in your region that it’s a wider programme.” Participant 5

Participants discussed how the sustained duration of the programme had created the conditions for ongoing growth and momentum. They observed that the longer timeframe allowed relationships to strengthen, trust to build, and learning to accumulate, enabling initiatives to mature and expand. This continuity was seen as a key factor in maintaining energy, attracting new engagement, and reinforcing the programme’s impact over time.

“.. both these programmes have been about culture change that I see and that if people make that cultural shift and buy into it. They tend to stay in that new place, because they’ve seen benefits from it.” Participant 5

“Learning who’s doing the best practise and again to understand each of the regions is for me absolutely the best part because there’s just some amazing people that you meet along the way and that inspires new ideas and new initiatives and new projects where you can work together.” Participant 3

3.13 CMO configurations: Identity

Participants identified the cultivation of a cohesive partnership identity as a central and defining element of the collaborative process. This identity was shaped by how the various TT groups understood themselves, defined their roles, engaged with the partnership’s structural dynamics, and actively (re)claimed and celebrated their emerging collective identity.

Context (C)

Several constraining contextual factors shaped the dynamics of the partnership and limited its potential effectiveness. First, emotional labour emerged as a significant challenge, as participants were often required to manage interpersonal sensitivities, mediate between conflicting expectations, and maintain professional composure in the face of competing demands. Second, identity tension arose when individuals or groups experienced misalignment between their personal or professional self-concept and the evolving collective identity of the partnership. This tension often manifested in uncertainty about roles, conflicting priorities, or reluctance to fully engage in collaborative processes. Finally, the risk of knowledge loss was identified as a critical vulnerability, particularly when key expertise resided with individuals who might leave the partnership, retire, or disengage, thereby jeopardising the continuity and depth of institutional knowledge. Together, these factors created a context in which sustained collaboration required deliberate strategies to mitigate strain, align identities, and safeguard knowledge resources.

Participants described a significant degree of personal and emotional investment in the TTP, which at times contributed to experiences of personal distress. This sense of commitment was intertwined with the challenges and pressures associated with delivering the programme. The collegial support provided by fellow strategic leads, alongside the guidance and encouragement of the TTP Grant Manager, were identified as critical protective factors. These forms of peer and managerial support were perceived as essential in mitigating the emotional toll and sustaining participants' engagement over time.

"I feel like this sector is quite aggressive and there are groups of individuals who will band together and then rally against you and a lot of the time it's with just incorrect information. They make their own assumptions, so obviously and some of the government headlines don't help either." Participant 3

Participants reported encountering substantial organisational resistance to change, which they attributed to the scale of the underlying paradigm shift required. Specifically, they described a movement away from a prevailing ethos of 'outright competition', perceived as undermining organisations' overarching missions oriented toward the common good towards a new orientation grounded in partnership and collective endeavour. This transition was seen as challenging not only in structural terms but also in requiring a reconfiguration of values, priorities, and inter-organisational relationships.

"So, it's definitely evident in the case studies as well and that shift from, from working in isolation to you know, - I got together with this other partner, and we supported the beneficiary and together we helped the veteran." Participant 1

"You know, it's almost a sort of a fight, a fight for who's going to get the most referrals and then you see those breakdowns, in collaborative working between those two organisations that have been." Participant 6

Mechanisms (M)

Key mechanisms emerging from the identity theme included the redefinition of both professional and personal identities, whereby participants adapted their self-concept to align with the evolving goals and values of the partnership. This process often involved negotiating shifts in authority, expertise, and role boundaries. In addition, the strategic mobilisation of lived experience served as a powerful catalyst for change, enabling individuals to draw on their unique personal histories and practical insights to challenge assumptions, influence decision-making, and foster deeper mutual understanding within the collaborative environment.

People coming into the partnerships accepted that their professional identity could be challenged and they recognised that by entering the TT space they would be subjugating or challenging elements of their professional identity. The challenging of that identity was necessary to become an authentic intersectoral partner. This was often described as a profound experience. For example, stepping out with the military sector and leaving a hierarchical, command-and-control structure to the intersectoral space where fluidity and shifting structures reigned was impactful.

“And I think secondly, we as an organisation have shifted an extraordinary amount through being part of this. We’ve gone from being quite small, unilaterally focused organisation, to just being a charity that’s so confident and so capable and believes in what we’re doing more because we’ve been involved in this programme, we’ve kind of, we’ve learned as we’ve gone along and we’ve grown as a result, you know so and I think our reputation has grown as a result.” Participant 7

“So, it does, but it takes a long time, so I would say in V triple P people were like Oh well, you know, I’m getting a bit of funding from V triple P, But I’m still the (..) whereas now people are talking I’m part of the Thrive Together Partnership.” Participant 7

Participants described how their own professional identity could blinker them to the possibility that other approaches to helping people with some of these problems was not their sole domain; it challenged the ‘default setting’. They described how the TT process and ethos, considering the context of the person’s wider life and lived experiences, and to be needs led presents different solutions for different people. Explanations were given as to how involvement in the TT had enabled some participants to have a clarity of focus on what their role could be and the opportunities that they could take through the TTP to affect people’s lives.

“That’s by far the most rewarding bit is getting to see the impact that your work has directly on someone’s life, albeit in a very small scale. And I would never presume to take the credit for all of the wonderful work that a lot of agencies do to support on individual but it’s nice to know that I’m playing a small part in it.” Participant 8

Strategic leads with lived experience as veterans articulated a strong sense of dual identity, encompassing both their professional role within the programme and their enduring identification as members of the veteran community. They described their personal motivation as being intrinsically bound to this veteran identity, with their service background shaping their values, priorities, and commitment to the programme's objectives. This dual positioning was perceived as a source of authenticity and credibility in their leadership, as well as a driving force behind their sustained engagement and advocacy.

"There is also just a personal drive we all want to help these people because we are these people." Participant 3

And conversely if people had not served this was often perceived as a barrier to engaging with the veteran community as you had not experienced military life and therefore how would you relate to the veteran community.

"So yeah, I don't know of many other sectors though that are so dependent on the shared history and a shared understanding in order for outcomes to be successful." Participant 8

Outcomes (O)

Outcomes associated with the identity theme included the development of more resilient and enduring partnerships, an enhanced clarity of shared purpose among stakeholders, and strengthened cultural competency. Participants suggested that the process of redefining individual and collective identities fostered deeper mutual understanding, trust, and alignment of values. In turn, this identity work was perceived as critical in enabling partnerships to navigate challenges, sustain collaboration over time, and engage effectively across diverse cultural and organisational contexts.

The Thrive Together branding was viewed as a positive outcome from the People, Places, Partnerships (Triple P) Programme which really helped to consolidate and build a clarity of purpose.

"So, the fact that she's done that under the Thrive together banner, she could have done it under her own organisation banner, but she's chosen not to because she's chosen that to be part of Thrive Together that is a good thing." Participant 7

"But in Thrive Together, we're definitely seeing a pride in being part of the programme." Participant 1

3.14 CMO configurations: Power

Participants frequently highlighted tensions and complexities relating to both personal and organisational power. These issues were observed in the interplay and dynamics within the partnership itself, as well as in the perceived power status of their role or organisation in relation to actors outside the partnership. Internally, participants reflected on how hierarchies, influence, and decision-making authority shaped interactions and outcomes, while externally, they considered how their organisational standing affected credibility, access to resources, and strategic influence.

Context (C)

The contextual elements of power were expressed as the meaning of leadership in a fragmented, competitive sector. Issues related to the short-termism of funding and expectations form under-resourced partnerships. The continuation of military rank hierarchies in civilian settings was described as a dimension of power dynamics.

“Certainly, power and identity I think are formative kind of key elements of the relationship building because I’ve always felt, as I’m sure you probably do too, that that the power dynamic between me and the organisations I’m funding is quite evident.” Participant 8

“There’s a lot of power, and there’s a lot of power that’s wielded in this space. You know, that’s used in a negative way, and you know, it always worries me, especially with Valour, that the bigger organisations are going to jump on that money and deals will be made.” Participant 7

“Someone of the hierarchy decides to say something, everyone else, even if they disagree with it or will just agree with it.. They’ll not question it, even though it needs to be questioned just because you were an officer doesn’t mean you have the answers now.” Participant 10

Mechanisms (M)

A critical mechanism identified was the acknowledgment of power ambiguity, wherein the boundaries of authority, influence, and decision-making between actors were often fluid and contested. This ambiguity required ongoing negotiation and reflexivity to prevent misunderstandings and ensure equitable participation. Closely related was the experience of identity dissonance, particularly in the tension between occupying the role of a funder versus that of a collaborator. Individuals and organisations were frequently required to navigate the competing demands of resource control and genuine partnership engagement, balancing the exercise of oversight with the cultivation of trust and shared ownership in the collaborative process.

Participants discussed their understanding of power and power sharing from different perspectives, both within the interplay and dynamics of the partnership and the power status they perceived their role or organisation to have external to the partnership.

“To me it’s glaringly obvious and I would also say that you then have the power dynamics between beneficiaries and those kind of delivering the services, and even then, really within like, do you consider families? I think they’re treated in a different way to the beneficiaries because they’re not seen as having served, so it’s like sometimes there’s a power imbalance between them as well. So, I mean to me there is that at every level.” Participant 8

“When you look at the word power, you’ve got the power of the people in the organisation that dictates very much what happens and what support goes where, and you’ve got the power issue where you’ve got people on the ground that are working with veterans and families potentially not. Their voices not being heard and being more like dictated to on what’s happening. So, you’ve got, you’ve got a different power structure and a different communication layer within that own organisation. And when you roll that out across multiple organisations, that’s where you get a lot of fragmented work because when coal face workers and stuff speak to each other. They’re like, oh yeah, do we know this? We do that. But further up the chain when it comes to management, you know, on the management go to the meetings and talk a great game, but it doesn’t filter down for delivery. So, you get that almost looks like a power struggle. In some respects, it may not be an intentional thing.” Participant 10

“You know, you do feel like there is a power dynamic. It doesn’t feel truly collaborative. It feels like you’ve got sort of this one overarching person that’s dictating the work of everything underneath it. And I was sort of, you know, I think to me it’s quite important that we not to have those power dynamics within our partnership. You know, I see myself as a facilitator. You know, I facilitate the partnership. I facilitate the, you know, broker and introductions and relationships between each other.” Participant 1

“I’ve also found the power dynamic to show up in terms of age and experience, which I think I’ve touched on and to an extent, gender as well because I’m keenly aware (...) that I’m space that is heavily older male dominated.” Participant 8

Participants observed that their role in making funding decisions often intensified and brought greater visibility to underlying power dynamics. At times, this function was in tension with the facilitative and adaptive leadership approaches that strategic leads were committed to enacting, creating a challenging interplay between exercising resource control and fostering collaborative, empowering relationships.

“We were unfortunately unable to fund some people the attitude and again some of the responses we got back. I was like if the Trust said that to you, you would never spoken to them in that way, but because you see us just as this organisation that is delivering and I don’t know, you think that we’re getting ideas above our station or something, it’s that kind of mentality that’s out there and it’s it puts you in a difficult position because I think it then threatens the relationships out there. So, it’s a weird power dynamic for sure.” Participant 3

Outcomes (O)

The key outcomes identified were power sharing and power shifting. The explicit recognition of power within the partnership was, in itself, a significant step, as it signalled an openness to, and the potential for, transformative shifts in established power relations.

Discussions on power sharing emphasised the importance of respecting the distinct roles and expertise of all actors. Rather than retaining the inherent authority or positional advantage that some partners initially brought to the TTP, participants advocated for allowing professional competence and contextual knowledge to guide the distribution of influence.

In practice, this often involved promoting individuals with relevant expertise to lead specific areas of work, thereby enabling the TTP to acknowledge and accept the legitimacy of their leadership and the outcomes produced. Importantly, such shifts in power required the explicit recognition that changes in influence were closely linked to the redefinition of roles, processes that unfolded simultaneously and reinforced one another.

“And we had our first inaugural practitioners meeting, which will happen bimonthly and they are brilliant. They’re brilliant because they are so engaged. They really want to participate. They really want to feed their stuff in.” Participant 6

There was recognition from participants that organisations would participate in order to obtain funding. Once funding was granted there was an opening up and willingness to collaborate.

“Oh, 100% and the vast majority. I’m not even going to say the vast majority I’m going to say every single conversation that I had in those three months where we were trying to develop our strategy, do our consultation, run EOI, etcetera. Every single conversation was predicated around the fact that people thought that they were going to get funding.” Participant 8

“They weren’t that bothered with the rest, and the theoretical aspect of it. They were bothered by will we get funding out of this, and then we’ll think about collaboration and then we’ll think about once we secure our funding, we will consider how we can collaborate within our existing kind of remit.” Participant 8

Once partners were funded the relationship could shift to being more reciprocal with power shifting with partners were able to see the benefits of being more than the sum of parts.

“It’s a terrible thing to say, but funding and money goes a long way if people think they’ve got security and some money and funding, they will be more loyal, and they’ll get involved with it.” Participant 10

“A common goal really and understanding what the end game will mean for everyone and how both the beneficiaries and the delivery agencies benefit from the process that’s put in place.” Participant 5

3.15 Phases: Invite, Create, Formulate and Enact

The Incite programme theory identified four sequential yet interconnected phases of development, conceptualised as distinct “spaces” in which partners engaged: the invite space, the create space, the formulate space, and the enactment space. While these categories provided a useful framing for understanding partnership dynamics, they were not entirely novel. Comparable models have been described in the literature (Bourdieu, 1977; Cornwall, 2002; McGhee, 2004; Cornwell & Schatten; Coelho, 2006; Curtis, 2010), each outlining stages or phases of partnership formation and evolution. This resonance with existing theory was also reflected in participants’ accounts, with some explicitly referencing Tuckman’s (1965) well-known framework of ‘forming, storming, norming, and performing’ as a parallel to their own experiences within the programme.

Because there was a clear and funded expectation that production was a prerequisite for organisations to submit a proposal for *Thrive Together* funding, this effectively created the “Invite” and “Create” spaces. Establishing an initial, welcoming space as part of the co-production process allowed those who were curious to engage without immediate commitment. The subsequent time spent in the Create space fostered ongoing dialogues about participation, dialogues that were not constrained by a singular, fixed set of ideas or prescriptive approaches. Instead, these discussions remained fluid and exploratory, sustaining participant engagement, allowing tensions to be surfaced and addressed, and creating fertile ground for innovation (Lefebvre, 1991; Johansson, 2004; Soja, 2009). This process was exemplified by the eventual production of collaboratively developed strategies.

The data from the study indicated that the space to formulate or reformulate is key as it enable revision of assumptions and in which new TTP participants or existing participants can recalibrate with the narrative, power, and identity mechanisms.

The *enactment space* was characterised by a shift from generating ideas and engaging in discussion to actively implementing activities and interventions. A defining feature of this space was its openness to new participation: as initiatives became visible and tangible, they attracted additional actors who could see and identify with the work. The findings indicated that some of these new participants had not been involved in the earlier create space, making it important to maintain awareness of the implications this had for group dynamics and continuity. Previous research has similarly noted that as partnership activities expand or diversify, new or altered power relations can emerge (Cornwall, 2002; Brown & Pickerall, 2009; Best et al., 2010; Best & Williams, 2018).

The understandings and interpretations reached by the research team through this study are reflected in the wider literature relating to the concept of “third space” (Foucault 1991; Lefebvre 1991; Bhabha 1996; Soja 1996; Soja 2009). The spaces within Incite were characterised as this third space. Third space is a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is a constantly “shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings” (Soja 1996, p. 2). whereby spaces function both as places of withdrawal and re-groupment and places for agitational activities directed toward wider publics (Fraser 1990, p. 124), where social actors reject hegemonic spaces (Gramsci 1995) and create spaces for themselves (Soja 1996).

This study adds to the understanding that creating shared places where people can be attentive and open with one another will help encourage mutual responsibility for the quality of ‘our lives together’ (Fielding 2004, p.204) promoting that the partnership activities are informed by and committed to our care for each other as citizens, not solely as providers and beneficiaries (Bromage et al. 2017; Rowe and Davidson, 2017). This is clearly exemplified in the strength that the strategic leaders garnered from their peer group.

“We’re trying to give more than we take, and then it’s up to people in the space to collaborate and we’re getting really good feedback of people saying, you know, I’ve done loads of collaborations before, and they’ve all been rubbish. And this one’s amazing because it feels like everyone’s really pulling together. So, we’re succeeding in that.” Participant 7

Chapter 4: Discussion

- 4.1 The following chapter presents a critical discussion of the study's findings, situating them within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It examines how the results contribute to current understandings of the topic, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence with prior research, and reflecting on their practical and policy implications. Building on this analysis, the chapter identifies key lessons learned and translates these into actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing future practice, informing strategic decision-making, and guiding further research in the field. Together, the discussion and recommendations provide a bridge between the evidence generated by the study and its application in real-world contexts.

4.2 Relationships which lead to safe psychological space

Within the study, the development of relationships that fostered a safe psychological space emerged both as a central theme and as two distinct mechanisms. The first mechanism, relationship building was essential for creating an environment in which trust could grow, enabling open dialogue and mutual respect. The second mechanism, protecting and transferring tacit knowledge, ensured that valuable, experience-based insights were preserved and shared across the partnership. These mechanisms were necessary to trigger three key outcomes: Safe space for leaders, a trusted environment where leaders could openly share frustrations, seek guidance, and co-develop ideas. Community of Practice, a structured yet flexible network supporting peer learning and mentoring. Relational capital, the accumulation of trust, shared understanding, and goodwill that continually nurtured and sustained safe spaces.

- 4.3 Previous authors have described some organisational cultures as punitive and risk averse, which can lead to individuals not feeling safe and manifest through behaviours such as withholding information or silencing debate and discourse (Farrall and Calverley 2006; Gavanta 2006; Gallimore et al. 2008; Gallimore et al. 2009). Evans and Killoran (2010) stated that there was 'a difficult reality in securing integrated action on the ground' (Evans and Killoran 2010, p. 136), with people often ready 'with their bats up ready to fight off criticism' (Evans and Killoran 2010, p. 133). The findings of the current study have suggested that relational capital which enable the creation of a safe psychological space mitigates against fragility and unsettled responses of individuals when confronted with unfamiliar ideas or situations.
- 4.4 This finding was shared by Svasek and Skrbis (2007, p. 372) and Brown and Pickerill (2009), who described the importance of reflecting on movement between 'known and unknown spaces. From the data collected from participants in this study, it became apparent that the creation of safe spaces was closely linked to the developmental phases of TTP. These findings highlighted the proposition that it may not have been possible to progress through the formulate, create, and enact spaces if a safe psychological meeting space did not exist.

- 4.5 Clearly, safe psychological space served to help facilitators and participants manage or eradicate some behaviours which other researchers have highlighted (Glasby and Lester, 2004; Mukumbang et al. 2016) and which have previously led to abandoned programs and fragmented, short-sighted, and reactive policy working. This has been characterised by authors as people choosing sides, and “winning the fight” becoming more important than developing solutions (Cheyne et al. 2013; Woodhead et al. 2017).
- 4.6 Individuals have their own perspectives, histories, ideas, and opinions, all of which contribute to the development of successful relationships. Evans and Killoran (2010) has previously discussed how partnerships created ‘a marketplace for meeting people’ where people could access help with issues within their own organisation or areas from work. The current study supports this notion and adds further detail regarding the nature and consequences of the TTP meeting place which created trust, loyalty, mutual respect, and commitment to the partnership itself. To build partnership synergy, Jagosh et al. (2015) revealed that building trust over the long term produces an increase in synergy, which results in sustainability understood in the context of relationships with others and being made meaningful through discourses, language, and signifiers (Conradson 2003; Castree 2004; Hudson 2004).
- 4.7 Previous researchers have highlighted the significance of relational perspectives, i.e. the impact of relationships and actions of individuals to partnership success (Graham and Healey 1999; Castree 2004; Hudson 2004; Conradson 2005; Massey 2005; Yeung 2005). The current study supports such ideas and provides further detail into why creating a relational space and a safe psychological space needs to be seen in a temporal, dynamic, and fluctuating perspective, as the TPP involved individuals on different trajectories who were evolving in their relationships (Curtiss 2010). The study’s findings accord with Massie’s findings (Massie 2005) that this dynamic was always in the process of ‘being made, it is never finished, it is never closed’ (Massie 2005, p. 9).

4.8 Narrative

Previous scholarship has identified a significant impediment to the development of collaborative programmes: the absence of a shared conceptual framework encompassing ideas, models, and theories of practice, particularly in relation to disadvantaged individuals and communities (Evans & Killoran, 2010; Herens et al., 2017). While partner organisations may formally commit to collaboration, their substantive engagement is often limited by divergences in priorities, organisational structures, operational processes, and institutional cultures (Evans & Killoran, 2010, p. 137). The mechanisms identified as essential for fostering a cohesive and resonant collaborative narrative include the coproduction of knowledge grounded in lived and living experience, the alignment and persuasive articulation of narratives, and the cultivation of shared values.

- 4.9 A central finding of the study was that the co-production process leading to the development of the strategic plans served as a keystone in shaping the overarching narrative of the TPP. This process placed the voices of those with lived and living experience at its core, ensuring that the narrative resonated with, and gained the alignment of, the veteran community. By recognising all perspectives as valid, the process mitigated the risks of prescriptive or externally imposed priorities. Instead, priorities were allowed to emerge organically from within the TPP, creating conditions for the TTP to evolve and for the narrative to remain adaptive. This fluidity enabled the narrative to be informed by local and grassroots development while simultaneously incorporating considerations of social determinants of health and broader policy contexts.
- 4.10 Collaborative working between practitioners is not a passive process of diffusion between individuals working in different locations or care settings. Instead, the process has a relational aspect and a knowing aspect which are mutually reinforcing (Hawe et al. 2009). This knowledge builds on findings by Herens et al. (2017) that learning from other experts, ensuring a shared ambition by bringing together necessary resources and skills, and facilitating sharing of lessons were key mechanisms in building and sustaining the narrative of partnerships.

4.11 Momentum as distinct from time

- 4.12 Participants reported that entrenched organisational cultures contributed significantly to the loss or constraint of momentum in collaborative initiatives. The persistence of siloed working practices (Trickett & Beehler, 2013; Cook, 2015) was identified as a key barrier. Although policy and legislative directives were acknowledged as potential enablers, participants' experiences to date suggested that excessive emphasis on structural arrangements and procedural requirements continued to generate uncertainty and foster competition between organisations. These dynamics were especially salient in participants' accounts of context, particularly in relation to the creation of safe spaces and the distribution and exercise of power.
- 4.13 The TTP in the current research had all developed a certain momentum, that is, a pace of change, which was effective, self-sustaining, and helping to achieve outcomes. Such momentum is a feature of other research; however, it is conceptualised in different ways and is often related simply to time taken.
- 4.14 There was recognition that momentum was not always a steady incremental flow of activity that it could ebb or flow but not cease. Momentum was interrelated with the narratives of the TTP, which focused on quick wins (Kotter 1996) and doing things (Kotter and Rathberger 2006) which would make a difference. Momentum was also influenced by external events which could be useful hooks (Rees et al. 2011; Lambert 2013) to ensure quick wins.

- 4.15 A strong desire for change, coupled with rapid engagement in change processes, was found to foster emotional connection, a transformed worldview, and new interpretations of sustainability. Earlier research has tended to conceptualise sustainability primarily as the integration of activities into the core business of organisations (Dickinson & Glasby, 2010; Petch et al., 2013), positioning this mainstreaming as the principal indicator of partnership success (Sinclair, 2011; Willis & Jeffares, 2012; Kirst et al., 2017). In contrast, the current study adopts a broader lens, offering an expanded conceptualisation of sustainability that moves beyond its traditional association with mainstreaming.
- 4.16 Working alongside partners with differing perspectives, assumptions, and approaches can act as a catalyst for both individual and organisational change. Such collaboration enables stakeholders to view challenges through multiple lenses, encouraging constructive dialogue and the joint creation of solutions that extend beyond any single viewpoint. Participants described moments of realisation and insight during this process, which they associated with shifts in thinking and practice. Central to sustaining these shifts was a sense of emotional connectivity encompassing belonging, mutual trust, and shared purpose, alongside a heightened emotional investment in the work. These emotional dimensions were viewed as vital in maintaining enthusiasm and persistence, even when faced with significant challenges, and were seen as key drivers of TTP overall success.
- 4.17 To maximise the pace of change and generate sustained momentum, it is essential for partnership members to experience a strong sense of emotional connection. This emotional engagement acts as a catalyst for further momentum, which, over time, can transform individual worldviews and, in turn, contribute to reshaping organisational cultures. A novel contribution of the study lies in its identification of the dynamic interplay between TTP's narrative and its momentum. Rather than following a traditional linear structure with a defined beginning, middle, and end, the TTP narrative becomes interwoven with the momentum itself, each reinforcing and shaping the other in an ongoing, evolving process.

4.18 Identity

- 4.19 The current study provided valuable insights into the participants' professional and personal experiences and motivations.
- 4.20 Awareness and critical reflection on one's own values, beliefs, and potential biases emerged in this study as central to ongoing professional development. The findings align with contemporary perspectives in organisational and social identity research, which emphasise that identities are shaped through interactions and relationships within groups, networks, and institutions. The study also points to the significance of dialogue as a mechanism for identity formation where individuals actively position themselves in relation to others and locate themselves within a professional community. Participants described how engagement with the TTP created space to explore the interplay between professional and personal discourses. For some, this opened pathways for new professional identities to emerge; for others, it fostered greater congruence between pre-existing professional and personal identities.

4.21 Power

Power emerged in this study as a central dynamic within professional partnerships. Differences in authority, influence, and perceived legitimacy were found to shape who participates, whose perspectives are valued, and who ultimately influences decision-making. Such imbalances have the potential to limit collaboration and weaken partnership synergy. The study offers new insights into mechanisms for recognising, navigating, and managing power within partnerships, highlighting the importance of creating conditions where all voices can contribute meaningfully to shared goals.

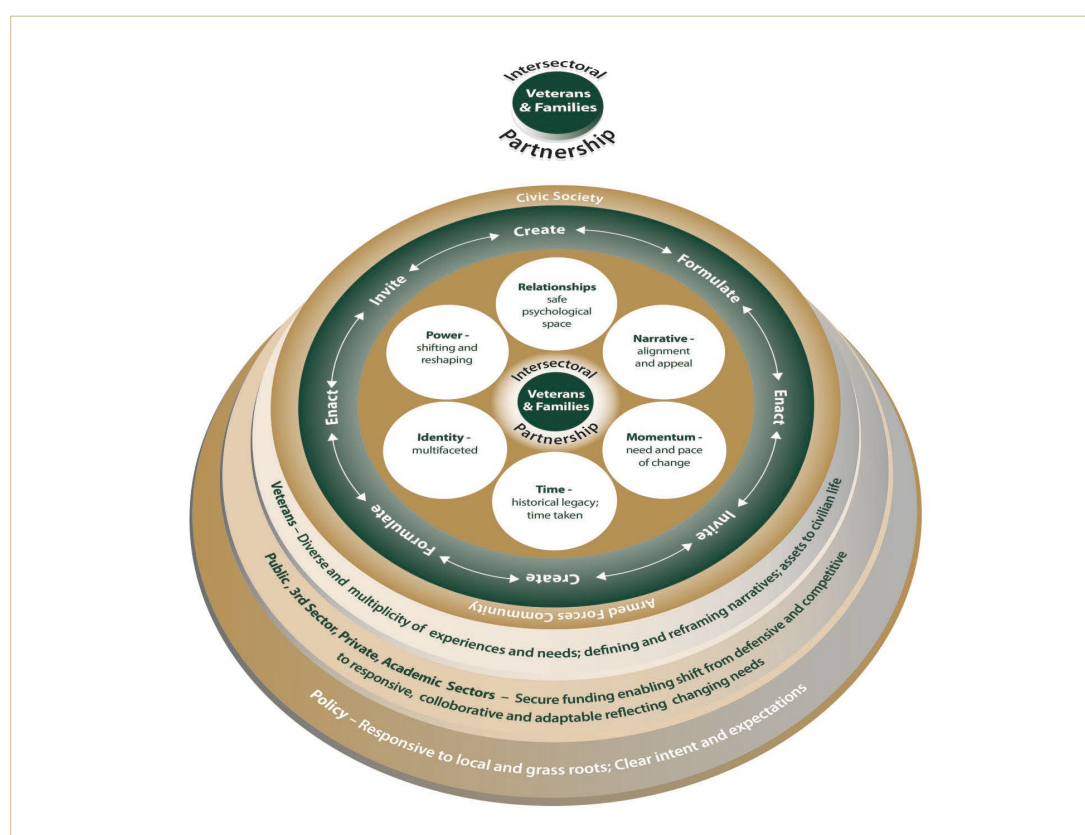
- 4.22 Transformative practice is often framed in terms of shifting power relationships within and between professional groups, yet less attention is given to how such shifts can occur across sectors. A key part of the TTP was the appointment of strategic leaders whom often had dual roles both with their own organisation and for the TTP. This duality signalled both an ability to make decisions on behalf of their organisations and a visible commitment of those organisations to the partnership.
- 4.23 Expanding the concept of power to encompass social, emotional, and economic dimensions can strengthen the explanatory value of the emerging framework. These forms of capital were found to be relevant to all partners, regardless of whether they operated in the private, public, or voluntary sectors. While discussions of power dynamics have often centred on a single partner or on relationships between statutory and voluntary sectors, this study highlights the importance of examining power interplay across all three domains simultaneously.
- 4.24 A recurring dynamic was the drawing of boundaries between groups, creating divisions between the more and less powerful and reinforcing social distance. This process often reduced the 'othered' group to narrow stereotypes, limiting recognition of their complexity and value. In the context of this study, such dynamics were evident in veterans being marginalised by the civilian population, smaller grassroots charities being overshadowed by larger national organisations, and the Covenant itself being sidelined within mainstream policy. Importantly, the research offers insight into how these patterns can be challenged and transformed through identity-focused mechanisms that strengthen cultural competency, sharpen clarity of purpose, and foster more resilient partnerships.

“I’m not going to go to my team and say there is a magic ingredient they’re gonna look at me and they’re gonna laugh. So, if I can put it into words and I can say, look, the reason it works is this. If I can break it down and I can show them and I can say it works because we have shared identity. It works because we acknowledge the power and understand the power of relationships that are involved in the partnership. It works because of safe and secure spaces. It works because we’re shifting organisational culture and ideally, if we were starting a new partnership from scratch, we would go through these stages. That’s a lot more helpful to me than it is saying the magic ingredient is us.”

Revised Programme Theory Incite (2)

- 4.25 The insights garnered through this study have resulted in the refinement of the Incite Model reflecting the past, current and future contextual elements, the mechanisms described by the actors involved and the observed outcomes experienced.
- 4.26 Incite 2 outlines the CMO configurations, enabling recognition of the plurality of interactions and intersections to which coordination must respond (Clarke, 2022). These configurations should be interpreted within the broader context of social relations and community-based understandings (Cornford et al., 2013).
- 4.27 The conceptualisation of safe psychological spaces has been deepened through recognition of the relational capital required for their creation. Such spaces function as a holding environment, within which effective strategic leaders enable individuals and groups to engage with complexity, uncertainty, and competing values and perspectives without prematurely seeking resolution (Heifetz, 2009). The acceptance of adaptive leadership traits and behaviours allows these leaders to tolerate uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence, while managing anxiety by facilitating constructive dialogue and modelling through their actions that change is both possible and achievable.

The Incite 2 Model



- 4.28 This study provides three distinct but interconnected contributions to knowledge:
- Realist-informed inquiry which provides valuable insights into partnerships across sectors.
 - Refined programme theory to underpin the development and sustainment intersectoral partnerships.
 - Foundation for practical partnership solutions for improving the lives and veterans

Implications for practice and policy

- 4.29 Using a qualitative methodology has enabled the achievement of a rich and deep understanding of the experiences and learning from TTP and medium-range programme theory with a granular understanding which details the context, mechanism, and outcome configurations that need to be enacted and sustained to achieve effective Veterans' Partnerships.
- 4.30 The findings provide a strong basis to now operationalise the programme theory - Incite 2 - and develop tools which can be applied in practice (such as manuals, guides, or assessment tools). These tools will help to support the enactment of the Incite 2 model by ensuring fidelity and raising consciousness about the CMO configurations. Further, developing and manualising tools will enable realist evaluation (or other forms of evaluation) of the Partnerships to be undertaken.
- 4.31 Consolidating, strengthening or creating new partnerships using the knowledge gained in the current study will offer staff an opportunity to work with different people from different sectors, enabling them to move out of traditional hierarchical structures, which may be disempowering and stifling.
- 4.32 Opportunities for staff to galvanise around shared issues of concern in safe spaces, in which they can connect and acknowledge and discuss power imbalances, will be key ways in which professional development can be enhanced and achieved. Issues of identity, both personal and professional, and identification with a partnership rather than a singular organisational identity, can contribute to building trust and shared understanding across communities of practice.
- 4.33 In response to research findings which note the effectiveness of multifaceted and active educational approaches such as practical manuals and reminders (Mitton et al. 2011), the research team will develop and make available manualised practical materials which operationalise the findings of the study, embedding user-friendly information on the Incite 2 model. All practitioners entering any collaborative endeavour will be invited to reflect on the questions and statements, for example, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Reflective questions and statements to support implementation of the Incite 2 model

Before you begin	
What is the problem or opportunity you need an intersectoral partnership to address?	
Make your invitation to participate provoking; it should be inclusive and engender curiosity.	
Be aware of the phase you are in	Be aware that the create space is important, as it's in this space that you need to talk about values of the partnership and ask people to sign up to these.
	Don't rush into enactment too quickly, but equally don't get stuck in create space, as it's through actions that the partnership will coalesce and develop.
Know your context	Think about what has happened before that maybe hasn't worked. What learning is there?
	Be mindful. What experiences have people had that might make them not want to work as partners? What has worked well for people previously?
	Consider your policy drivers—who else needs to be involved?
	Wicked issues need wicked solutions—and maybe people you never thought to partner with. Think creatively and laterally.
Frame it	What is your narrative? How are you going to establish shared values, develop appeal, and see all perspectives as valid?
	How are you going to create and maintain a safe psychological space for intersectoral partners and use spaces that already have ascribed meaning, which in turn will help shape the narrative?
	Creating a safe space will enable people to talk about and understand power relationships and dynamics.
	The safe psychological space will allow people to explore their professional identity and redefine that identity both personally and professionally.
	Think momentum. Are we fostering desire for change? What is the pace of change required? Is it too quick, too slow? Be conscious of the need to sometimes recalibrate.
How do you know if your partnership is working well?	Are people more emotionally connected to what they are doing? Has the partnership transformed world views, increased societal awareness, and created a desire for the partnership or the activities delivered to be sustainable?
	Are partners developing authentic relationships that feel psychologically safe and reaching out to more people?
	Through redefining professional personal identity, do partners have different relationships with participants, greater clarity of purpose, and an increase in social capital and social cohesion?
	Through the partnership's co-created narrative, has this resulted in greater authenticity of relationships and decision making, commitment to the partnership, and more fluid relationships?

Chapter 5: Recommendations

1. Strengthen Relationships to Foster a Safe Psychological Space

Cultivate trust, mutual respect, and open dialogue by embedding structured relationship-building activities at the start and throughout the partnership lifecycle. Preserve and transfer tacit knowledge via mentorship schemes, structured reflection sessions, and shared digital repositories. Formalise Communities of Practice to enable ongoing peer learning and emotional support, especially for leaders in high-pressure contexts. Use relational capital metrics to monitor trust, reciprocity, and shared understanding as key indicators of partnership health.

2. Co-produce and Sustain a Cohesive Narrative

Embed lived and living experience into strategic planning to ensure the narrative authentically reflects community needs and realities. Use narrative alignment workshops to integrate diverse perspectives, avoid prescriptive agendas, and preserve adaptability over time. Incorporate social determinants of health and policy considerations into local storytelling to connect grassroots initiatives with broader strategic goals. Foster mutual knowledge exchange across sectors so that both relational and technical expertise shape the evolving partnership story.

3. Foster and Maintain Momentum

Build and sustain forward movement by focusing on emotional connectivity, shared purpose, and quick-win achievements rather than relying solely on chronological milestones. Harness external events and policy shifts as strategic 'hooks' to accelerate action and create visible successes. Establish feedback loops to capture and celebrate progress, maintaining enthusiasm during slower phases. Support adaptive pacing that accommodates natural ebbs and flows while keeping the partnership moving forward.

4. Support Identity Development and Alignment

Provide reflective spaces for individuals to explore their values, beliefs, and potential biases in relation to the partnership's aims. Facilitate dialogue between personal and professional identities to deepen engagement and broaden perspectives. Acknowledge and nurture emergent professional identities that develop through collaboration, strengthening individuals' sense of belonging within the partnership.

5. Address Power Dynamics Across Sectors

Map power relationships across public, private, and voluntary sectors to identify imbalances and design strategies for equitable participation. Promote dual-role leadership appointments that demonstrate organisational commitment and decision-making authority within the partnership. Broaden the definition of power to include social, emotional, and economic capital, ensuring all forms are recognised and strategically leveraged. Implement cultural competency programmes to challenge stereotypes, dismantle 'othering,' and strengthen cross-sectoral understanding.

6. Counteract Historical and Structural Inequalities

Actively address the marginalisation of less powerful groups such as grassroots organisations and underrepresented communities, through equitable resource allocation and meaningful inclusion in decision-making forums. Challenge exclusionary narratives by embedding complexity and nuance into public and policy discourse. Establish boundary-spanning collaboration mechanisms that dismantle divisions between groups and sectors, fostering inclusivity and mutual recognition.

7. Develop manuals to operationalise the theoretical constructs of the Incite model 2 which can serve as a resource for the Armed Forces Community

Develop comprehensive manuals to operationalise the theoretical constructs of the Incite Model 2 by transforming its concepts into clear, actionable procedures, guidelines, and best practices. These manuals should translate abstract theory into step-by-step frameworks for real-world Armed Forces contexts; include practical tools such as checklists, decision trees, case studies, and scenario-based applications; provide clear definitions, explanations, and examples of each theoretical component; be tailored to different segments of the Armed Forces Community, including serving personnel, veterans, families, and support organisations; serve as an accessible reference resource in both digital and print formats for training, operational planning, and decision-making; and incorporate feedback loops for continuous improvement to ensure relevance to emerging needs and evidence-based practices.

8. Undertake a qualitative study which will explore beneficiaries' and frontline staff reaction to the model and their views on their contribution to how the model works

This study should capture the lived experiences, opinions, and emotional responses of beneficiaries who directly engage with the model's interventions, while also gathering insights from frontline staff on how the model operates in practice, including its perceived strengths, challenges, and areas for refinement. It should explore how both groups view their own contributions to the model's success or limitations, highlighting the dynamic relationship between its design and real-world application. A variety of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and narrative accounts should be employed to obtain rich and nuanced data. The findings should then be analysed to identify themes and patterns that can guide adaptations, ensuring the model remains relevant, practical, and impactful across the Armed Forces Community. Based on this analysis, clear recommendations should be provided to enhance the model, drawing directly from the experiences and feedback of those most closely involved in its implementation and outcomes.

9. Develop international research partnerships, for example, by building on current networks, to initiate the use of the Incite 2 across countries

This initiative should focus on identifying and engaging potential collaborators, including academic institutions, research organisations, Armed Forces support agencies, and relevant NGOs in different regions, to create a robust foundation for global implementation. Partnerships would facilitate cross-cultural testing and adaptation of the model, ensuring its principles and practices remain relevant and effective in diverse national and cultural contexts. They would also enable the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and best practices through joint research projects, conferences, and exchange programmes, while coordinating pilot studies in partner countries to assess the model's effectiveness in varied operational and social environments. A collaborative data-sharing framework would be established to support comparative analysis and global learning, alongside efforts to secure co-funding from international research bodies, defence organisations, and charitable foundations to sustain implementation and scaling. Ultimately, this approach aims to build a sustainable international community of practice that champions the model, fosters innovation, and ensures its continuous refinement, thereby enhancing both its global reach and its credibility and adaptability across different Armed Forces communities worldwide.

Limitations of the study

The work reported in this study was a realist-informed investigation of complex multi-agency intersectoral partnership working. While there are many strengths to the work, there are also several limitations.

This study comprised 10 interviews and is therefore specific to these people and the TTP with which they were engaged. What was discussed in the interviews was only a small part of the whole of the interactions and processes associated with TTP some of which had grown from the VPP. However, efforts were made to reflect this historical development in the interviews, and the researcher did have previous experience and knowledge of VPP and TTP development, which helped to locate the discussions in a broader context.

The study was carried out over a six-week period. This impacted on the capacity to carry out an updated literature review on realist informed evaluation.

The researcher's insider perspective may have influenced what the participants chose to share. This could be a key strength of the study, as individuals do behave differently when presented with an insider versus a completely naïve researcher. A key aspect of managing this was the process of reflection and reflexivity which the researcher maintained throughout the research process. Regular reflective notes and supervision sessions aided this process. Following the analysis and discussion of results, the researcher shared with the participants a summary of the analysis and discussion, the revised programme theory articulated through the Incite model.

It was the intention to interview the named strategic leads who meet as a group and with the grantholder manager individually as they were able to give a rounded analysis of the development of the TTP. It is possible that if more junior or on-the-ground staff had been selected as participants, the outcomes may have been different. This may have created bias in favour of participants most involved and enthusiastic about TPP. Findings cannot be extrapolated to those people who worked previously on TPP.

Inclusion of people with lived experience may also have enhanced this research. However, such inclusion is cautioned against by realist methodologists. Key authors have stated that patients are less proficient at identifying mechanism and contexts in a programme, as they only have their own idiosyncratic experiences to draw from (Pawson and Tilly 1997). Beneficiaries may comment on the mechanisms and context that were operating for them, and whether these worked for them or not. Scholars have asserted that professionals, on the other hand, have had the experience of working with a range of people, and they will be able to provide an account of mechanisms and context "in the round". The researcher would recommend that it would be appropriate for future research to examine the Incite 2 model from the perspectives of TPP partner organisation staff and beneficiaries.

Concluding statements

The study

- Represents a realist-informed inquiry which provides valuable insights into partnerships across sectors.
- Presents a refined programme theory (the Incite 2 model) to underpin the development of intersectoral partnerships.
- Recommends practical partnership tools for the enhancement and sustainment of partnerships
- The findings have resonance for the Armed Forces Covenant Trust, the Office of Veterans Affairs and UK Wide Policy

In summary, this study addressed a clear gap in understanding what enables a successful collaborative intersectoral process to generate novel solutions that give partnerships a strategic advantage over single agencies in designing and delivering interventions to improve services, health, and wellbeing for veterans and their families.

To meet this gap this study was undertaken to provide a novel theoretical contribution through the creation of an updated programme theory - the Incite (2) model. The Incite (2) model combined the enactment of CMOs, focused on; Relationships leading to Safe and Secure Space, Narrative, Momentum, Time, Identity, and Power within four distinct but interrelated and non linier phases – Invite, Create, Formulate and Enact.

Sustaining Thrive Together provides a contribution to gap in the literature of how to identify the key mechanisms that enable partnerships to accomplish more than organisations acting on their own can. By conceptualising these CMOs within the six themes, the model offers both detailed and overarching explanations of how partnerships achieve more collectively than individual organisations can alone. This approach explicitly recognises the importance of creating spaces where partners become “more than the sum of their parts” and captures the dynamic, fluid nature of CMO configurations, providing both a practical and theoretical framework for sustaining collaborative success.

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List of Appendices

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Appendix One:

Information Sheet and Consent Form for Participants



*Empowering Veterans and Families:
Creating Connections, Building Futures*

Information Sheet

Study title: Sustaining Thrive Together - Developing a programme theory using realist informed evaluation

Dear Sir / Madam,

I would like to invite you to take part in a study which is being completed by Edinburgh Napier University commissioned by the Armed Forces Community Covenant Trust Fund,

Before you decide I would like you to understand why the study is being done and what it would involve for you.

The attached information sheet tells you the purpose of this study and what will happen to you if you take part. It gives you detailed information about the conduct of the study. Please do contact me if there is anything that is not clear.

Please take time to decide whether you wish to take part. Should you wish to take part I will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have before we begin the interview. The interview will be scheduled at a date, time and place that suit you. It should be no longer than one hour.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Researcher

Dr Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick
Edinburgh Napier University
l.irvinefitzpatrick@napier.ac.uk

Title of the study

Sustaining Thrive Together – Developing a programme theory using realist informed evaluation.

What is the purpose of the study?

Common features of good practice can be obscured by differing models for provision, apparently dissimilar client groups, and a diversity of providers and contributors. It is therefore imperative that we investigate and synthesis the key success features and elements of effective practice to understand from the leads of the Thriving Together programmes what factors were necessary to sustain, grow and replicate this work.

The primary aim of this study is to develop a retrospective programme theory that explains the successful development and maintenance of the Thriving Together partnerships. The focus is not on the services provided or direct outcomes for veterans, but rather on understanding how programme leads have effectively negotiated, established, and sustained multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Why have I been considered to take part in this study?

As you have experience of leading a Thrive Together programme you are deemed and recognised as having key experience in how the partnership has are shaped or provided services.

Do I have to agree to participate?

No. It is up to you to decide whether you want to join the study or not. I will go through this information sheet with you. If you agree to take part, I will then ask you to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to participate in an interview. You will be asked to talk about your experiences of working as part of the Thrive Together Programme

Time and date of the interview will be arranged with you in advance.

The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes. With your permission, the session will be recorded. The session will be conducted by the researcher (Linda Irvine Fitzpatrick). I will ask you to provide me with some basic information about yourself (e.g. your gender, your previous work experience, your current post).

All information provided by you will be kept strictly confidential.

In the interview, for any reason, you do not have to answer questions if you do not want to, and do not have to give an explanation for this.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I do not think there will be any negative consequences to taking part. The session will be guided by an experienced researcher and carried out in a professional manner. The interview will be conducted in a way which will allow you to discuss your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, and you will be free to withdraw from the project at any time. If there are questions you do not want to answer, that is fine. Please tell me and we will move to the next question. You do not have to give a reason.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to be gained from taking part. However, the information I get will help to inform policy and shape the development of the Thrive Together programme and other initiatives supporting veterans.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the research project?

You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a complaint about the way you have been dealt with during the study or if something happens during or following the interview that you wish to complain about, please contact Professor Gerri Matthews-Smith, Director, Centre for Military Education, Research and Public Engagement.

What will happen if I am harmed during the project?

It is unlikely that something will go wrong during the interview but if you are harmed Edinburgh Napier University has insurance against risk of claims against the University and its staff relating to projects it designs and undertakes.

Will my participation be confidential?

Information will be collected through recording and observation during the interview. All information that is collected about you during the research project will be confidentially stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected desktop computer. Only the researcher directly involved in the study will have access to material that has any identifying information (names, addresses etc.). Information about you will be stored anonymously, with names, addresses and any other potentially identifying features removed. We may use this material for further research, post graduate study or educational purposes. All persons will have a duty of confidentiality to you as a research participant and we will do our best to meet this duty. You will not be identified in any report/publication. Confidential material will be physically destroyed when it is no longer required.

If, during the research, you disclose an adult at risk protection issue or information about actual or potential harm occurring, we will adhere to the adults at risk protection procedures of the Scottish Government.

What will happen to the results of the study?

Results will be used to complete detailed report to the Armed Forces Community Covenant Trust. The results of the study may be used to inform policy and developments of current and new services. Some things we find out might be published in journals or presented at conferences and seminars. You will not be named in any report/publication.

Who is organising and funding the study?

This study is being completed as part of a commissioned programme funded by the Armed Forces Community Covenant Trust Fund.

Many thanks for reading this sheet.

Appendix Two:

Initial Programme Theory

Realist-informed interviews require the researcher to be well versed in the programmes at hand, and to have constructed an initial programme theory which is then tested within the interview (Pawson and Tilly 1997).

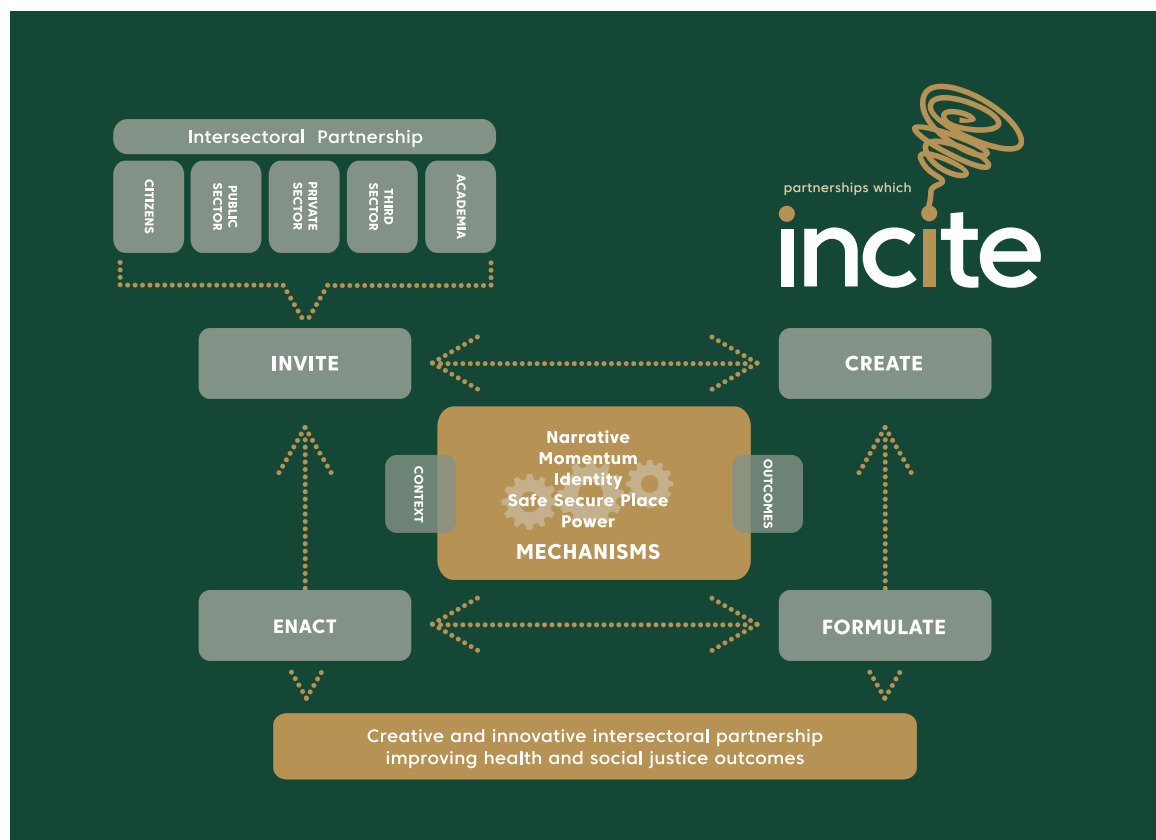
The participants are ‘key informants with the power of their knowledge about how the programme is really operating’

A programme theory is a way to move beyond the minutiae of particular programmes to focus on the main ideas within and across them (Pawson et al. 2005; Pawson 2006).

A programme theory describes how the intervention is expected to lead to its effects and in which conditions it might do so.

Questions are aimed to encourage participants to recount their experience of working within the Thriving Together Programme and to theorise together with the researcher on CMO relationships.

Initial Programme Theory



Incite model Context Mechanisms and Outcomes (CMOs)

Theme	Aspects of context that matter	Mechanisms	Intermediate Outcomes
Momentum	Organisational cultures	Desire for change Pace of change	Emotional connectivity Aspiring to sustainability Increased societal awareness Transformed world view
Safe, secure spaces	Historical perspectives Organisational culture	Creating a safe psychological space Creating a safe meeting space Using spaces with ascribed meaning	Increased psychological safety Authentic relationships Greater reach
Identity	Historical perspectives	Challenging professional identity Redefining professional and personal identity	Increase in social capital and social cohesion Different relationships with participants Clarity of purpose
Narrative	Historical perspectives Policy Social determinants of health	Establishing shared values Developing appeal Seeing all perspectives as valid	Authenticity of relationships and decision making Commitment to partnerships Fluidity of relationship
Power	Historical perspectives Organisational cultures Social determinants of health	Talking about power Understanding power	Power sharing Power shifting
Overall Outcome Efficient, effective intersectoral partnership delivering health and social care objectives for people with multiple and complex needs			

Appendix Three:

Asking Questions from a Realist Perspective

Realist-informed interviews require the researcher to be well versed in the programmes at hand, and to have constructed an initial programme theory which is then tested within the interview (Pawson and Tilly 1997).

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Appendix Four:

Realist-orientated interview questions

QUESTION focus	QUESTION probes
Opening	Please can you tell me about your role in the Thrive Together programme?) - What has been most rewarding - What has been most frustrating - What has been surprising for you in developing the partnership
Exploring Programme theory	Does this model resonate with you? - If yes in what ways? - If no can you explain a bit why not?
Exploring mechanisms	Are there other mechanisms in addition to the Incite ones of shared narrative, power, identity, safe psychological space, momentum that we need to pay attention to?
Exploring mechanisms	Within the mechanisms is there a hierarchy or order?
Exploring phrases	Do the phases – <i>Invite, create, formulate and enact</i>, resonate with you? Are there others?
Exploring phases	Which phase do you think you have spent most time in? Which phase are you in?
Exploring contexts	In terms of context – how would you describe the world we are operating in What is impacting on individuals, organisations and systems
Exploring outcomes	We have an overarching outcome of improving the wellbeing of veterans and their families - Are there intermediate outcomes you are observing? - Individual - Organisational - Systemic
Exploring ideas	Is there anything else you would like to add?

THRIVE TOGETHER

*Empowering Veterans and Families:
Creating Connections, Building Futures*