

## People as Partners – NI Health Collective Roundtable Report

### Executive Summary

This report summarises the insights from the NI Health Collective roundtable, held at Hillsborough Castle on 28 January 2026. The session affirmed the strategic importance of embedding the People as Partners approach, as outlined within PCC/NICON report<sup>1</sup> and aligned with the HSCNI Reset Plan<sup>2</sup>. Senior leaders from the VCSE sector, PCC and the Department of Health emphasised that the shift from ‘doing to’ toward ‘doing with’ represents both a cultural and structural transformation essential for sustainable and equitable improvement in population health and reducing health inequalities.

The VCSE sector is already operationalising People as Partners principles through trusted relationships, co-design, peer-led models, community-centred prevention and lived-experience-led insight. However, system conditions remain inconsistent. The report outlines systemic barriers, leadership implications, and the required strategic actions to ensure alignment across structures, governance, commissioning, culture and investment.

Key themes include the need for senior leadership modelling, increased system coherence, harmonised evaluation, long-term investment in prevention as infrastructure, and a regionally consistent framework for embedding VCSE expertise within care pathways. NIHC, as a network of networks, is uniquely positioned to translate community insight into system intelligence and support strategic partners in delivering a coherent and scalable People as Partners approach.

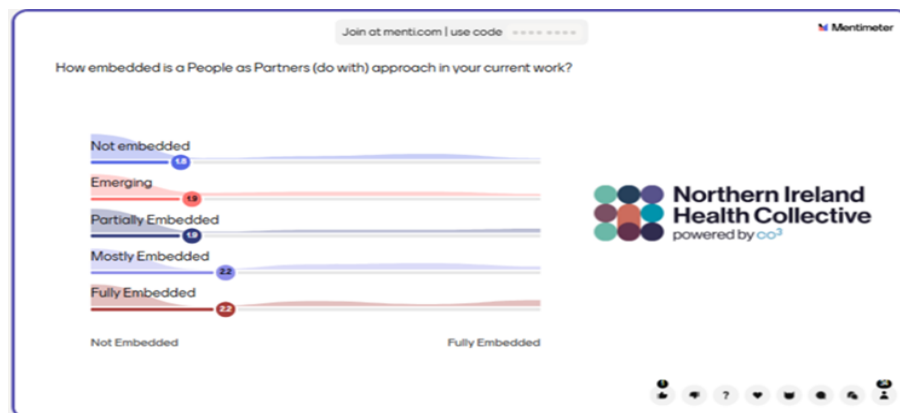
### 1. Context

The People as Partners framework sets out a clear ambition: individuals, families and communities must be active partners in shaping, designing and improving health and social care. PCC/NICON guidance identifies shared decision-making, co-production, trust, transparency and lived-experience leadership as essential components. The roundtable discussion affirmed that these principles are well embedded across VCSE delivery models but require strengthened alignment across statutory organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> [People as Partners](#)

<sup>2</sup> [HSC NI Reset Plan](#)



### 1 Menti Meter Poll Results: How Embedded is a People as Partners approach in your current work?

## 2. Summary of Findings

VCSE leaders reported strong existing practice, including trusted community relationships, peer-led advocacy, relational models of support and asset-based approaches. These illustrate a mature 'doing with' ethos consistent with national and international models of community-powered change.

However, several system barriers persist, including risk aversion, bureaucratic processes, fragmented commissioning, and inconsistent embedding of VCSE organisations across Trust areas. Participants stressed that cultural change must be driven from senior system leadership to support distributed decision-making and authentic partnership.

## 3. Alignment with People as Partners Principles

The roundtable affirmed strong alignment with the core People as Partners principles:

- **Shared decision-making:** VCSE organisations model co-design and autonomy-led practice.
- **Co-production:** Participants emphasised the need to move from consultation to co-decision.
- **Strength-based practice:** Asset-based community development is well embedded.
- **Transparency and trust:** System complexity and inconsistent behaviours limit progress.
- **Equity:** Disparities across HSC structures and geographies risk widening inequalities.

## 4. Leadership Implications

Senior leaders across DoH, HSCNI, PCC and VCSE organisations must collectively:

- Embed shared governance and co-decision structures.
- Treat prevention and early intervention as core system infrastructure.

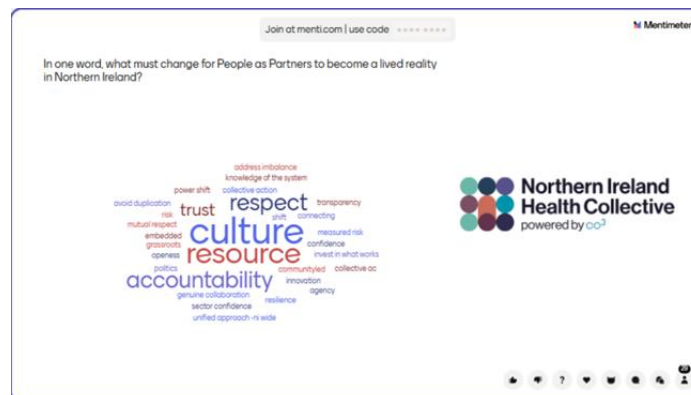
- Reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and enable proportionate risk management.
- Harmonise outcomes frameworks while respecting community context.
- Adopt a common leadership behaviours standard that models partnership working.

## 5. Recommendations

- **Governance:** Explore the potential for a People as Partners Joint Leadership Forum with formal decision rights.
- **Funding:** Shift from pilots to multi-year commissioning aligned to prevention.
- **Evidence:** Create a People as Partners Evidence Bank and harmonised outcomes framework.
- **Culture:** Implement a cross-sector leadership development programme focusing on collaboration, trust and shared accountability.
- **Voice:** Formalise NIHC's role in synthesising lived-experience insight across its member networks.

## 6. Conclusion

The VCSE sector is already delivering the ethos of People as Partners. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that system structures, leadership behaviours and investment approaches match this ambition. NIHC welcomes the opportunity to support the development of a regionally coherent framework and to work with DoH, HSCNI and PCC to translate policy intent into operational culture and measurable improvements in population health.



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