Oliver started the meeting by asking attendees some introductory questions. Here are the results:







Ruth Feder and Donna Buxton, Head of Learning and Impact (City Bridge Trust) presented their experience of working with Renaisi as a learning partner:

Their aims were to develop a learning ethos, to make learning more equitable and to achieve more effective philanthropy as a result.

Aims of working with their learning partner:

* Better data for decision making – make philanthropy better – that’s the aim
* Growing learning ethos
* Continually working on making philanthropy more equitable

Key lessons of working with a learning partner:

* Need to have organisational buy in at all levels - you need to involve leadership team and committees
* Make sure there is clarity on what you want to achieve with a learning partner and discuss what the relationship with the learning partner is and what it isn’t
* Regular communication with learning partners and staff team– always evaluating and reflecting
* At some levels it’s an assessment but be open and honest. Be prepared to take feedback you don’t want to hear. It’s about building the relationship
* The value of having the learning reflected back from the learning partner was very important
* How is the learning shared back? Every 6 months there is a review which is presented in an interactive way. The data analyst does data digests, also presented in a very interactive way. Its important to discuss the learning together. Learning is everyone’s business

The relationship with learning partners:

* ‘From learning for to learning with’ – this sums it up
* Would define them as a ‘critical friend’ – you need to have a definition that you agree on and the relationship will always be tailored to the right purpose. Be clear about the role of the learning partner
* Midwifery relationship = painful/ long/ productive
* Learning partners were there when the 5-year strategy started – this sent a signal that learning was part of the strategy.

Benefits of having a learning partner:

* The extra team members, particularly during the pandemic
* They were wise/ calm/ supportive/ rational/ modelled good learning behaviours
* They have encouraged a culture of flowing information in every direction and ensured everyone in the team is heard.

Important groups that facilitate learning and supplement the learning relationship:

* [UK Evaluation Society](https://www.evaluation.org.uk/) and [Social Research Association](https://the-sra.org.uk/) – give you the credence that what you are doing is correct
* [Charity Evaluation Working Group (CHEW)](https://www.chewgroup.org.uk/) - a group that share tips/ themetic learning/ developmental evaluation over informal coffee mornings- they have 300 members and 100 charities represented and are registered with the Charity Commission. They talk about the challenges people are facing right now and offer solutions
* CBT has working groups which are usually centered around specific areas e.g. impact and learning working group. They offer a safe non hierarchical space and are integral to what they do. They have a coordinator who works across all the groups to collect the learning. Result has been a really engaged staff.
* Impact research champion network – specific roles/ they meet quarterly/ trained in research methods. This network enhances the learning (something Donna did at BHF)
* Informal peer learning – external programme in CBT where they brought in a facilitator. This offered the chance to network and learn from each other within that space. Funded organisations day on 1st April. They have around 500 large projects.
* Research and residence is important to get buy in and call out unconscious biases

Catherine-Rose Stocks-Rankin, Scotland Director at Dartington Service Design Lab then spoke about their role as a social research charity

Dartington has moved into the learning partner space in the last 5- 8 years

Keira Lowther at Dartington has written a series of blogs on the learning partner relationship that you can access [here](https://www.dartington.org.uk/keira-blogs). *The mirror, the mentor and the midwife* explore what makes a good learning partner:

* Mirror – understand the practice and shows things from their point of view
* Mentor – particular skills/ helping partner to enact the learning
* Midwife – we’re learning together/ embedded/ facilitator role

Why is the learning partner needed?

* There is something powerful about how people use data and ensuring learning goes into action
* Barriers to evidence use include overwhelming information, time constraints, lack of trust in the evidence presented, access issues e.g. being behind the pay wall and procedural barriers

Social systems as a defense against anxiety

Systems are often very fragmented and researchers have found they sometimes undermined purpose in some areas. Where there is a lot of delegation there can be ambiguity of responsibilities. Desensitization and de personalization can occur.

When you’re moving evidence in to action you’re putting fish in to a system and hopping someone fishes it out. The risk is that others might not be engaged.

Conditions for learning and advice:

Permission to challenge and learn

* Learning partners need skills to challenge - Dartington does own reflective practices
* Beginning are important to this work – need to have the different conversations at the beginning
* Being able to take risks

Honesty and openness

* Measure annually – develops ethos. Ask staff for feedback and important to challenge ourselves to take action on feedback
* If you’re not a failure tolerant organisation you need to develop that ability and have conversations to reflect on insights.
* Working together and have agreement and discussion around power
* Comfort with change and ambiguity and champions for learning

Support from leadership and capacity within the team

* A challenge during the pandemic was time to slow down and pause – bring reflective learning into team meetings and make space for learning
* Its about getting senior leaders to say they are not best placed – to bring someone in who is independent

Recognition and respect of different roles

* There will be things to use as touch points – early work is about understanding and buying in to values.
* You need to ask each year how much you are living the values

Further questions:

How to tackle information overload ? – bring in communication navigators/ have a clear strategy/ leadership to create intentionality/ team capacity to engage in a sensitive way

How to manage expectations in terms of time frame?– coming together and understanding the starting point is key about having understanding at the beginning that it’s going to take time

Learning is the aim but sometimes it gets lost