CHANGING LIVES, CHANGING SYSTEMS
RECONNECTING LONELY OLDER PEOPLE WITH THEIR COMMUNITY
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FOREWORD

Loneliness can affect everyone, and the suffering it causes is something which we can all understand in the increased isolation of the COVID-19 crisis. Whilst some people have the personal and external means to find a way out of loneliness, others may require a helping hand. Reconnections provides this personalised support to older people to connect them with others or with activities that may interest them. It is not about distraction for a couple of hours a week but instead tailored support to build confidence, develop mutually supportive relationships and enjoy life once again.

Reconnections started in Worcestershire in 2015, commissioned as a Social Impact Bond by Worcestershire County Council and the three local NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups. The relative flexibility of a ‘payment-by-results’ contract enabled the Reconnections delivery and management teams to drive significant modifications and improvements to the initial model through a ‘test and learn’ approach. Over five years, the service supported over 1,500 lonely older people, with a majority reporting a marked reduction in their feelings of loneliness. Some also quoted a range of other positive outcomes including increased independence and improvements in health and wellbeing.

For Reconnections Ltd (the company setup to manage Reconnections), it was important not only to leave a legacy in Worcestershire, but to achieve greater impact by spreading the learning to new areas. Reconnections Ltd and Social Finance (as the Managing Agent), identified that to achieve these scaling ambitions, they would need to find an appropriate organisation to take forward the model. This led to the exciting partnership with Independent Age – a leading UK-wide charity that supports older people to live with dignity, choice and purpose.

The transfer of a social model to another organisation is a less conventional approach to scale in the voluntary sector, although it is seen more frequently in commercial settings. We hope this report will prove valuable to voluntary sector organisations and funders to explore whether this may be appropriate to their own ambitions to achieve greater impact.

A year on since Reconnections transferred to Independent Age, two further pilots have been established. Whilst COVID-19 has brought undeniable challenges, it is evident that the new services are already making an impact despite their relative infancy. There is still much to learn from the new pilots as they evolve, and to plan out the next steps for Reconnections by Independent Age to achieve even more impact.

John Kingston
Chair, Reconnections Ltd
Introduction

This report is one of a series of Changing Lives, Changing Systems reports commissioned by Social Finance into its experience of pursuing impact at scale, in order to draw out and share lessons for charities, funders and others involved in social change.

The series covers five initiatives that Social Finance has worked on over the last five years:

- **Drive** – a ‘systems change’ initiative aiming to change the way that the criminal justice system, social services and other statutory and voluntary agencies respond to high harm perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse
- **Health & Employment Partnerships** – a ‘portfolio’ programme which has pursued a wide variety of approaches to develop and spread better models of employment support for people with health conditions
- **Housing Gateway** – an initiative which took an ‘open source’ approach to share its sustainable model for housing homeless families more widely
- **Positive Families Partnership** – a programme supporting families at risk of breakdown, which was built around a ‘platform’ model that enabled new areas to come on board quickly and easily
- **Reconnections** – a programme for lonely and isolated older people which Social Finance helped to transfer to a larger specialist organisation with the resources to replicate it in multiple areas

Drawing on our experiences and learning from these initiatives, as well as the social change efforts of other organisations, we have identified a range of strategies and approaches for achieving social impact at scale. These are captured in our ‘Routes to Scale’ framework, which sets out a series of ‘building blocks’ or milestones on the way to impact at scale, and a variety of different ‘strategic levers’ that organisations and movements can deploy to put these building blocks in place (see Figure 1).¹

Having established and tested a strong service model and demonstrated its effectiveness, Reconnections chose to find a ‘new vehicle’ for scale, by developing a relationship with a larger, more specialist organisation with the resources and capability to grow the work, rather than seeking to expand its own delivery footprint. The Reconnections route to scale is highlighted in red and purple in the diagram below.

While buyout by another company is one of the main routes to scale for commercial innovations, and a core exit strategy for venture investors, it is not an approach commonly taken in the voluntary sector. This report sets out the lessons from our experience of pursuing scale through transferring the Reconnections programme to a new ‘parent’ organisation – a process with some parallels to a commercial buyout but with a social objective at its heart.

We hope that these lessons will be of interest to VCSE organisations and funders who recognise that their best route to scale may be to transfer their programme / service model to a new ‘parent’ organisation – for example, because that organisation has a wider geographical footprint, a stronger mandate or can bring new capabilities or resources to support the ongoing spread of this model to new areas.

It was written by Dan Jones with input from Ben Jupp, Janette Powell and Tara Rowe. Dan is an independent consultant who has worked with Social Finance to capture its learning on impact at scale. He has extensive experience in programme delivery, policy influencing and system change across the social sector in the UK and internationally.
Executive Summary

Reconnections is a service which aims to address loneliness and social isolation among older people. Volunteers help lonely individuals to reconnect with groups and activities in their community, based on their personal interests and aspirations.

The initial Reconnections programme in Worcestershire was led by Age UK Herefordshire and Worcestershire (Age UK HW), with programme management support from Social Finance. Services were delivered by Age UK and three local voluntary sector partners – Onside Advocacy, Simply Limitless and Worcester Community Trust.

It was commissioned as a Social Impact Bond (SIB) by Worcestershire County Council and local NHS commissioners. Backed by a group of socially motivated investors and grant makers, including Nesta, Macmillan Cancer Support, Big Society Capital and Age UK. Reconnections was the first ever loneliness SIB.

The programme achieved considerable positive impact, demonstrating the value of proactive, targeted, community-based support for older people who had more complex needs than initially anticipated. It has been recommissioned by Worcestershire County Council with a wider all-ages remit.
Reconnections is now being replicated and further developed in two other sites by Independent Age, a leading national older people’s charity. The original social investors and Social Finance have transferred the Reconnections brand and know-how to Independent Age, which is well placed to scale the programme more widely. Handing over the model to a new ‘parent’ organisation has allowed Social Finance and the investors to exit responsibly, while enabling Reconnections to keep growing. Although it is still early days, they are confident of continued impact at increasing scale.

The Reconnections experience suggests a number of lessons for organisations seeking to grow new approaches to social problems through this kind of ‘transfer approach’ to scale:

1. **Invest in defining and evaluating a ‘product’** – another organisation will only take on your new model if you can define it specifically enough and demonstrate its feasibility and effectiveness

2. **Codify the product** – describing your model specifically enough for another organisation to pick it up and deliver it is a separate task in itself

3. **Transfer people as well as product** – sharing and embedding of tacit knowledge and culture

4. **Find the right ‘parent’** – above all, ensure that the new organisation’s mission and ethos are well aligned with yours, as well as the resources and capabilities for delivery at scale

5. **Allow for adaptation** – even the best defined model will need modification to fit with the new organisation and new sites

6. **Consider the context** – it’s important to recognise that this approach is unusual in the voluntary sector, and you will need to consider if the context will support a successful transfer

Funders can support organisations to pursue a ‘transfer approach’ to scale by providing funds for learning, evaluation and service refinement and definition, as well as meeting the costs of the initial ‘product’ development and innovation. They can also support the costs of due diligence and negotiation by the transferring organisation, and funding the adaptation of the service as part of the cost of transfer.
What is Reconnections?

Social isolation and loneliness reduce older people's quality of life, and are linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes. Chronic loneliness is associated with depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment, declining mobility, high blood pressure and increased mortality risk. Analysis of the evidence has found that chronic loneliness increases the likelihood of premature mortality by as much as 20% compared to individuals with good social connections. Isolated older people are more likely to visit their GP, and to enter residential care.

Reconnections is a service for older people who are lonely or socially isolated, which provides tailored support to help them connect with people or activities that matter to them. The aim is to help people develop mutually supportive relationships with other individuals or groups, which they can sustain or develop over the long term, building resilience and improving independence.

On referral to Reconnections, the older person is supported to discuss her / his hopes and aspirations, working with a caseworker to develop a personal plan to pursue the things that matter to her / him. The person may then be matched with a volunteer who provides practical and emotional support to take the first steps in this plan, whether joining a dog walking group or community choir or a more unusual activity such as motorcycling. From these first steps, people are supported and encouraged to do more and to grow in confidence and independence, with support generally provided for six to nine months. Volunteer matches are overseen by a paid coordinator who also monitors progress. The team also includes a caseworker, to support people whose situation is too complex for a volunteer, and make referrals to other professional services as needed.

Reconnections is an example of a ‘Community Connector’ service, supporting people to make links to activities, groups, services and other sources of support, locally or further afield. This model has been identified as particularly valuable for tackling loneliness and social isolation. Reconnections helps people build a community around themselves and their individual interests, connecting them to what's going on and supporting the development of new groups and activities where these are missing.

The initial Reconnections scheme was launched in Worcestershire in 2015, and ended in March 2020. It was delivered as a partnership between Social Finance, a small number of social investors, Age UK HW and three other local community organisations, Onside Advocacy, Simply Limitless and Worcester Community Trust. Caseworkers were based in Age UK HW and the other community organisations. Age UK HW Reconnections staff provided service management, volunteer recruitment and support.

During this period, Reconnections received 3,000 referrals from 150 different agencies and teams, and has worked with over 1,500 lonely / socially isolated older people.

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4 Kate Jopling and Anna Howells, Connecting communities to tackle loneliness and social isolation, British Red Cross (2018)
Changing Lives, Changing Systems: Reconnecting lonely older people with their community

The programme has been successful, even though many people referred for support had a wider range of needs than anticipated. People supported by Reconnections report a marked improvement in their feelings of loneliness (an average reduction of 1.4 points on the UCLA 4-item loneliness scale, against a target of 0.8 points). This has generally been sustained when assessed a year after finishing the initial support. Eight out of ten would recommend Reconnections to a friend or family member who was lonely.

Reconnections was commissioned as a Social Impact Bond (SIB) by Worcestershire County Council and the three NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) which cover the county, with payments dependent on reductions in loneliness, as reported by people receiving support. Upfront funding for development and delivery was provided by a group of socially motivated investors and grant makers, including Nesta, Macmillan Cancer Support, Big Society Capital and Age UK. Reconnections was one of the earliest SIBs, and the first to focus on loneliness.

Reconnections was developed to test whether proactive, targeted, community-based support could make a difference to older people already experiencing loneliness. As well as the investment to set up and run the service, Social Finance and Age UK HW secured grants from a range of funders to support innovation, learning and evaluation.

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5 A widely used, evidence-based tool for assessing subjective feelings of loneliness. The scale runs from 4 (least lonely) to 16 (most lonely), so a 1.4 point reduction represents -10% of the total breadth of the scale.

6 Reconnections, as a new service model, made significant losses for the social investors in the first two years, particularly reflecting the need to respond to greater than anticipated needs. The service broke even or made modest surpluses in the subsequent years, but these investors will not have recouped all of their original investment. The ethos of social investment remained critical in the decision to continue Reconnections in the interest of the long-term impact.

THE RECONNECTIONS PATHWAY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGAGE AND REFER</th>
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<tr>
<td>Receive referrals</td>
<td>Home visit</td>
<td>Practical &amp; emotional support</td>
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<td>Active signposting within the community</td>
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<td>Discuss eligibility &amp; suitability</td>
<td>What would good look like?</td>
<td>Behavioural change thinking</td>
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The RECONNECTIONS PATHWAY

ENGAGE AND REFER
- Receive referrals
- Open conversation
- Discuss eligibility & suitability

PERSONALISED PLAN
- Home visit
- Guided conversation
- What would good look like?

6–9 MONTHS SUPPORT
- Practical & emotional support
- Active signposting within the community
- Behavioural change thinking
- Engage relevant activities and interests

TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE
- Improved health and wellbeing
- Reduced loneliness
- Wider social connections
- Greater confidence & resilience

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The RECONNECTIONS PATHWAY

ENGAGE AND REFER

PERSONALISED PLAN

6–9 MONTHS SUPPORT

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RECONNECTIONS RELATIONSHIPS

RECONNECTIONS LTD

INVESTORS/ FUNDERS

- ageUK
- Big Society Capital
- Macmillan Cancer Support
- nesta
- Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch

MANAGING AGENT

- Social Finance

COMMISSIONERS / OUTCOMES FUNDERS

- Worcestershire County Council
- Cabinet Office
- National Lottery Funded
- Redditch and Bromsgrove Clinical Commissioning Group
- South Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group
- Wyre Forest Clinical Commissioning Group

DELIVERY PARTNERS

- Herefordshire & Worcestershire
- OnSide
- Simply Limitless
- Worcester Community Trust
Replication and exit

With the SIB contract drawing to a close, Worcestershire County Council and the NHS have commissioned a follow up programme (with a more traditional services contract) which takes the core elements of the model and extends the offer to lonely adults of all ages. This is being delivered by three of the original local community organisations providing the service.

In addition, Reconnections is now being replicated and further developed in two other sites, under the leadership of a new ‘parent’ organisation, Independent Age. This is an integral element of Independent Age’s service development strategy.

In the final eighteen months of the Reconnections SIB, Social Finance worked with Independent Age, a leading national older people’s charity, to find ways to replicate and further develop the model. The Reconnections brand and intellectual property has now been transferred to Independent Age. As part of that transfer, Independent Age made a financial contribution which covers some of the initial investment in service development. Social Finance has also seconded two members of staff to support the replication and roll out of the model.

Independent Age has now launched its own Reconnections programmes, first in the east London boroughs of Barking & Dagenham and Havering in January 2020, with a second launching in Guildford and Waverley in November 2020. These build on the learning from Worcestershire.

Shortly after launch in Barking & Dagenham and Havering, COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. The team has developed creative solutions for delivery, working in partnership with local statutory and community services.

The second pilot in Surrey has been adapted to include a small cohort of dementia patients. The local NHS Integrated Care Partnership is keen to see how the service might achieve outcomes for this high priority patient group.

Independent Age has entered partnership agreements with commissioners in each new locality for the first two years to develop and test the models. A range of funding models may be considered in the future including direct local authority commissioning (as in Worcestershire), grant funding, outcome-based contracts or hybrid models.
Transfer as a route to impact at scale

For many voluntary and community sector organisations, who focus on a specific issue or group, transferring their work to another organisation and exiting from it is neither feasible nor desirable. While they may wish to influence and encourage others to adopt the models they have developed, their mission means that they will continue working on their issue.

However, Social Finance seeks to apply new thinking and develop new ways of working to achieve impact on a wide range of topics. For organisations involved in stimulating this kind of innovation, as well as many funders and others whose work is more ‘topic neutral’, ensuring the sustainability of new approaches they have developed or catalysed is an ongoing challenge.

Many great initiatives flounder at this stage, when the initial development and piloting phase is over, but before they have established themselves and built a wider profile and momentum. Handing over the Reconnections model has allowed Social Finance and the social investors to ‘exit’ responsibly, confident that the approach will continue to grow under the sponsorship of a new ‘parent’ organisation which is well placed to take it to scale. In our framework, this is an example of ‘using new vehicles’ to achieve impact at scale.

This approach to scale is relatively common in the commercial world – entrepreneurs develop a new product, and then sell it to a larger, established business with the capability to take it to market at scale. However, the transfer of a going concern or viable service model from one organisation to another is extremely unusual in the not-for-profit sector, even if another organisation is better placed to take the initiative to scale. This report sets out Social Finance’s learning from this ‘transfer approach’ to scale.
Rationale for a transfer approach to scale

The decision to transfer Reconnections to another organisation reflects three key parameters:

- The change Social Finance and social investors were trying to achieve
- The organisation’s capabilities and constraints
- The external context

Social Finance, the social investors and delivery partners initially aimed to demonstrate the value of a community-based, individually tailored approach to tackling loneliness. Having built, tested and refined the Reconnections model and demonstrated its value, arguably they had achieved this objective. The next change they wanted to see was wider take up of the model, and this represented a crossroads for Reconnections.

Reconnections could have sought to grow organically, seeking to continue in Worcestershire and extending into new places. However, this would have required significant time and effort to secure new funding and contracts, as well as local programme management and partnership development. The operational mandates and footprints of the original delivery organisations are limited to Worcestershire and Herefordshire. The social investors and grant funders would have needed to provide significant additional resources to establish Reconnections as a social business able to operate in other areas.

There are significant constraints in growing from a single pilot area to enough sites to generate sufficient income to cover programme oversight and future business development on a sustainable basis. It can take years to cross this ‘scaling gap’, and this is one of the main reasons why so many promising innovations remain relatively small scale.

Social Finance works across multiple issues to develop new approaches and catalyse wider change. Directly managing the long-term growth of the Reconnections model would require very different capabilities in terms of systems, funding and management structures. It was therefore important to find an alternative route to scale.

The wider context was critical in making a ‘transfer’ a plausible option. The last five years have seen a significant growth in attention to loneliness, in government (with the creation of a ministerial portfolio for loneliness and the publication of the 2018 Loneliness Strategy) and among the wider public as well as in the VCSE sector. There has been a major injection of funding, from the National Lottery Community Fund’s £80m investment in local Ageing Better partnerships to local authority and health commissioners across the country. In this context, a service that has already proven to be effective in addressing loneliness has a greater opportunity to further develop and scale.

It was also important that there were established voluntary and community sector organisations with the experience and resources necessary for scaling.
Lessons from a transfer approach to scale

In the commercial world, a buyout requires a product that can be sold, and a buyer to sell it to. The Reconnections experience suggests that neither of these are especially straightforward in the not-for-profit context.

For a social programme like Reconnections, where support is highly tailored to each individual, and evolves through relationships, developing and defining the service tightly enough to transfer was very different from a commercial process. There are also additional considerations when it comes to identifying the right ‘parent’ to take on the programme, especially in terms of mission and values.

1. INVEST IN DEFINING AND EVALUATING A ‘PRODUCT’

Reconnections was initially set up as a test-and-learn initiative. The SIB contract model meant that the partnership of social investors, Social Finance, Age UK Herefordshire & Worcestershire and local delivery partners had to measure people’s levels of loneliness at the beginning and end of the six to nine month support period, and again 18 months after the start of the service. With payment dependent on sustained reductions in self-reported loneliness, there was a powerful incentive to refine and improve the service as it went. This was supplemented with grant funding for innovation, evaluation and learning, enabling a significant investment of money and time into ongoing review and adaptation.

Reconnections encountered significant challenges in the first two years of delivery, including lower than anticipated referral volumes, much wider and more serious needs among those who were referred, and difficulty in recruiting volunteers. This necessitated a root and branch operational review, leading to a fundamental redesign of the model and funding structure. More money was allocated to a reduced number of frontline delivery partners so that they could invest more in recruiting and supporting both service users and volunteers. The ‘offer’ was also made more flexible and responsive to people’s individual circumstances, with a greater role for case workers to support people alongside volunteers.

With these changes, outcomes for individuals supported by Reconnections exceeded expectations, despite their high levels of need – going well beyond loneliness into issues such as housing or health. Reconnections drew on the experience of initial, less successful programme delivery and learned from experimenting with different responses to build a more effective and efficient service model.

However, there were still challenges with the financial model. Referral volumes remained below target, and the revised delivery model brought greater costs. As a result, Reconnections made significant losses for the social investors in the first two years. A revised payment model, based on a cost-benefit analysis by the London School of Economics, led the programme to make a small surplus in its last three years, but the investors will not have recouped all of their original investment.
The flexibility and commitment of the social investors, along with grant funding for innovation and learning, allowed Reconnections not just to meet these financial challenges, but to continue to evolve towards sustainability. The service that Independent Age is now replicating is therefore very different from the original Reconnections model.

Adapting delivery to improve performance or efficiency in response to initial learning is an important element of all successful innovation. For Reconnections, it was critical to establish a model which was financially and operationally viable, with evidence of longer-term outcomes. Taking on a model which was ‘not invented here’ is inherently risky, and Independent Age needed the reassurance that Reconnections had been tested and refined.

This kind of iterative product and business case development and testing is familiar in the commercial world, along with the acceptance that many (most) products will fail at this stage. By contrast, in the social sector we often tend either to develop and adapt our work incrementally, due to limited resources, or find we have limited scope for service innovation due to the constraints of accountability to funders.

Organisations should seek funding which explicitly allows for testing and refinement – another organisation will be more likely to adopt a ‘product’ that has already been shown to work.

They should use this testing and learning process to define a clear model and proposition. This is likely to include evaluation and analysis to build a compelling business case for investment in the model, recognising the particular challenges social programmes face in becoming commercially viable.

Funders can support organisations interested in this route to scale by providing funds for learning, innovation and adaptation.

While this is likely to entail designated funding for ‘product development’, it is just as important to ensure that reporting, metrics and accountability during this development period allow for genuine flexibility (for Reconnections, refining the model included changing partnerships, staff roles, budgets and the funding model, as well as the service offer).

2. CODIFY THE PRODUCT

Reconnections is not a physical or digital ‘product’, or even a design for a new product or process, that can be straightforwardly packaged up. Like most programmes in the voluntary and community sector, it is a ‘model’ – a combination of a service specification, a set of processes, guidelines and principles (some written down and some implicit) and a way of doing things.

Funders and Social Finance had already invested in capturing and evaluating the Reconnections model in its first three years. In the early stages of the partnership with Independent Age, both parties put significant staff time and effort into codifying the model further, supported by an injection of additional funding from Independent Age.

There were a number of issues that had to be addressed to define the model sufficiently to be able to transfer it:
• Specifying the core components of the service
• Pinning down a moving target
• Reconstructing the learning from Reconnections
• Establishing intellectual property rights

As described above, the Worcestershire Reconnections programme was commissioned in a very specific way, as a Social Impact Bond. While Independent Age wanted to strengthen their service offer on loneliness, they were not interested in developing new SIBs. For obvious reasons, much of the existing material on Reconnections related to the SIB contract and associated outcome metrics, payment mechanisms and reporting.

A key question that had to be resolved in the initial discussions with Independent Age was what, exactly, they were taking on. Significant effort was needed to strip back elements that were specific to the SIB arrangement or the Worcestershire context, to isolate the non-negotiable processes, standards and moving parts needed to replicate the Reconnections model and results – its ‘DNA’.

The Reconnections model was still developing even as Social Finance sought to identify the key elements to transfer to Independent Age. For example, learning from performance data and the final evaluation of the Worcestershire programme highlighted gaps and areas for further development, such as access to psychological support. There is an inherent tension between describing current practice for replication, and evaluating it for future development and improvement, especially in a test-and-learn initiative such as Reconnections.

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**INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS**

Three different kinds of intellectual property rights may be relevant for VCSE organisations.

A **patent** applies to an invention – something new (rather than a modification of something that already exists), that can be made, used or applied in practice. Typically, patents are granted for physical products, although it is sometimes possible to patent processes and ways of doing things. However, applying for a patent is long, complicated and expensive, and it is typically harder to prove that a method (as opposed to a physical invention) is genuinely novel.

A **trademark** applies to a brand, logo, name or other way of distinguishing a product or service from others. As well as a service name, it’s possible to trademark a brand (for example, the service name in a particular font / colour), logo and a range of other aspects of visual identity – indeed, it’s also possible to trademark sounds (such as the Intel notes). Applying for a trademark is relatively straightforward, as the test is simply whether a similar trademark has already been registered.

**Copyright** applies to original work, which required skill or judgement to produce. While we often think of copyright on artistic and creative work, it is also possible to assert copyright in any original written material, such as a handbook or guidelines for delivery of a service. There is no application process – the author can simply assert copyright, but is also responsible for policing it.⁷

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⁷ For more information, see [https://www.gov.uk/intellectual-property-an-overview](https://www.gov.uk/intellectual-property-an-overview) and [https://www.bl.uk/business-and-ip-centre/protection-your-ideas](https://www.bl.uk/business-and-ip-centre/protection-your-ideas)
The work of documentation was not helped by the fact that the prior learning and evolution of the model had not always been documented in ways that were easy to transfer. Learning was captured as it happened, for example in notes of meetings or reviews, but these were stored in different locations over a long period of time. It wasn’t always clear whether and how recommendations and proposals for improvement or adaptation had been implemented. Programme manuals, training materials and other documents captured a moment in time, and were not always updated to fully reflect lessons or new thinking. All of this reflects the needs of operational delivery and performance – the focus was on using learning to improve Reconnections in practice, rather than creating a blueprint for transfer.

Many social organisations have developed their working models over time, adding new components as funding allowed and adapting to changes in context or personnel in a flexible but often relatively reactive way. Reconnections had the huge advantage of being designed and structured as a ‘test-and-learn’ pilot, and even so it was not straightforward to articulate the core ‘product’.

One thing that made the process easier was that the Reconnections partners had reached clear agreements on intellectual property from the start. The ownership of the Reconnections brand, and the rights of different parties to operate the programme were all clearly set out in the documents governing the partnership. For example, the original agreements with commissioners and local providers allowed them to continue delivering a service in Worcestershire, while granting Reconnections Ltd the rights to replicate the approach elsewhere. These replication rights were transferred to Independent Age as part of the overall transfer agreement.

Organisations interested in pursuing transfer as a route to scale should ensure that they are thinking about the ‘DNA’ of their model, and regularly capturing the non-negotiable elements in a ‘blueprint’ that could be used for replication.

As part of this they should invest time to document the model as it evolves, for example using a decision or change log to record key developments, or commissioning a process evaluation.

Organisations should also consider early action to ensure appropriate intellectual property rights:

- **Anticipating potential routes to scale, such as replication or transfer, and agreeing appropriate intellectual property rights among the different parties from the outset.**

- **Establishing trademarks and/or copyright in the programme brand and key materials as early as possible.**

Funders can support organisations interested in this route to scale by encouraging reflection and reporting on how the model is developing and what critical success factors are emerging during development and implementation.
3. TRANSFER PEOPLE AS WELL AS PRODUCT

As with many VCSE services, especially those working with people in difficult and challenging circumstances, what makes Reconnections distinctive – and worth replicating in the first place – is a combination of individuals, their attitudes and interactions with each other, and their accumulated experience of what works. These all go to create a particular way of doing things which is at the heart of the programme's success.

“RECONNECTIONS IS AS MUCH ABOUT CULTURE AS IT IS ABOUT A SPECIFIC SERVICE OR PROCESS”

In practice it’s impossible to capture this sort of ‘special sauce’ in any kind of manual. Even with all the work outlined above, there is a limit to how far a service or approach can be codified or turned into a replicable product. Ultimately, the only way to transfer the ‘know how’ that underpins the model was in person.

Social Finance has therefore seconded two staff to Independent Age to work alongside their Reconnections team for up to two years. As well as supporting the process of documenting the model, these staff have been closely involved in negotiating and setting up the two Reconnections pilots in London and Surrey, and in managing service mobilisation and delivery. This hands-on support is what has really enabled Independent Age to take on the model in practice.

So in the end, the Reconnections ‘product’ was a combination of:

- The Reconnections brand, as this was where intellectual property rights could be established most straightforwardly
- The formal programme management and delivery procedures and systems developed for Reconnections, as these were the most clearly documented elements
- The ‘knowhow’ and tacit knowledge held by the two members of staff seconded to Independent Age

Of all these elements, the ‘transfer’ of key people has probably been the most important.

This is obviously a major commitment for both organisations, and above all for the two individuals concerned. Social Finance’s more project-oriented organisational model, with a core staff team who are flexibly allocated to projects in response to funding and delivery requirements, made this easier than it would be for an organisation where staff are committed to ongoing programmes or services. Even so, seconding highly experienced operational staff creates a significant gap, and may have opportunity costs in terms of developing and mobilising the next project.
Organisations interested in pursuing transfer as a route to scale will need to find ways for key people to share their experience and tacit knowledge. This may be through secondments, exchanges, training or mentorships.

Organisations will need to negotiate appropriate roles and contractual / employment arrangements with these staff, as well as with the new parent organisation.

This investment of staff time needs to be costed as part of the arrangements for the transfer. Many organisations will also need to cover the gap created in their own services when key people are focused on transferring their knowledge to the new parent organisation.

Funders can support organisations interested in this route to scale by helping to meet these costs.

4. FIND THE RIGHT ‘PARENT’

However good your product, the most important thing is to find an organisation which is well placed to take it on.

Although Reconnections was achieving good results for the people who received support, lower than anticipated caseload / referral volumes meant that the programme was only breaking even. Further replication would require additional investment. In an uncertain commissioning environment, Reconnections was not a straightforward business proposition.

The initial experience of development and delivery also suggested that voluntary income (e.g. grant funding) could be an important element of the funding mix alongside earned income from commissioners, particularly in supporting further innovation. This was one reason for looking for a VCSE organisation to take over the replication and development of Reconnections, rather than pursuing a purely commercial model, reliant exclusively on earned income.

Independent Age had a strong profile within the ageing and loneliness sectors. At the time Reconnections was considering a transfer, Independent Age was seeking to develop a new ‘on the ground’ service offer as part of its overall strategy.

Several VCSE organisations were considered as part of this selection process, and the team had exploratory discussions with a selected sub-group.

Reconnections already had some links with Independent Age – inevitable in the relatively small loneliness sector. The then Chief Executive of Independent Age served as a non-executive director on the Board of Reconnections Ltd. She stepped down from the Reconnections board prior to the transfer to avoid being conflicted on both sides of negotiations.

Even so, the process of scoping development options, ensuring alignment and negotiating the specific transfer on both sides was lengthy. Discussions around a possible transfer began in spring 2018, and were not concluded until the end of 2019. The need to develop a workable model for replication, and find the right fit between the programme and the organisation, in terms of values as well as implementation, led to an iterative approach, with independent testing by trustees and social investors at key points.
Ensuring the alignment between the two organisations’ missions was critical. As well as a robust programme and business model, Independent Age wanted to be assured that Reconnections fitted with the organisation’s wider strategy and ethos.

In a non-profit transfer, the ‘seller’ needs to do its own due diligence on the new parent, just as much as the other way round. The social investors and Social Finance sought wider impact for people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, so they needed assurance that Independent Age were committed to the issue for the longer term, and would replicate what made Reconnections effective.

It is important to note that while the originating organisation can seek to lock in some ‘red lines’ on fidelity or future delivery, they are ultimately transferring ownership and control to another organisation. The only real guarantee that this will lead to wider impact is the ongoing commitment of the new ‘parent’ organisation to their model / vision. As a longstanding provider of befriending services and the host and founder of the Campaign to End Loneliness, Independent Age had a deep commitment to tackling loneliness and social isolation.

Organisations pursuing transfer as a route to scale will need to find a potential ‘parent’ with the capacity to take on their model.

They will need to invest significant time and effort in assuring themselves that the other organisation shares enough of their mission, vision and commitment to the model.

This can be an equally resource intensive process for the new ‘parent’ organisation.

Funders can support organisations interested in this route to scale by funding a commitment of senior staff time to this process of due diligence, negotiation and ensuring alignment, as well as providing support with legal advice.

5. ALLOW FOR ADAPTATION

Even with a great product and a well-aligned new ‘parent’ organisation, transferring a model to a new organisation requires a degree of adaptation and ‘retrofitting’.

As well as legal and contractual negotiations and documenting the existing Reconnections model, both Social Finance and Independent Age invested a large amount of staff time (mainly between July and December 2018) in designing an ‘Independent Age version’ of Reconnections.

The Worcestershire SIB organisation, its systems and ways of working were all built around delivery of Reconnections. Aligning the programme model to the organisational structures, back office systems, relationships and culture of Independent Age represented a significant hidden ‘transfer cost’ in terms of staff time and delayed implementation.

Having worked to describe the model and adapt it to Independent Age, the Social Finance staff seconded to Independent Age then played a lead role in engaging commissioners in potential replication sites (between January and June 2019). This led to a second phase of redesign and adaptation, to respond to the priorities of local statutory agencies and partners, before the first Independent Age pilot launched in January 2020.
This significant investment of time by people who already knew how Reconnections worked, to fit it to a new organisational and operational context, has been critical to successful replication. It is hard to imagine how this could have happened without a formal commitment of staff time.

Organisations considering transfer as a route to scale will need to work with the new ‘parent’ to transfer and adapt their model to the new organisation / context.

Funders can support organisations by including the costs of this investment of time and thinking as part of the total transfer cost.

6. CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

As noted earlier, the context was critical in enabling Social Finance to pursue a transfer as a route to scale – both in terms of the policy and funding context, and the relative maturity and sophistication of the ageing sector.

On the other hand, there were few precedents for this kind of transfer – unlike in the commercial world, there is no established ‘marketplace’ or procedures for one organisation to take on the work of another, nor is there the same ecosystem of legal or business advice and support.

This lack of practice limits the number of potential ‘parent’ organisations who might even consider a transfer. It also makes the process appear more risky. With no prior experience of this kind of non-commercial transaction, Independent Age’s trustees also required legal advice to assure themselves before committing.

Organisations seeking to transfer their model to another organisation should first consider whether the funding and institutional environment for their area of work is supportive of this route to scale.

They should also recognise that this is not a well-trodden route for the VCSE in any area – there are not many organisations in a position to take on new service models, and even those which could do this are likely to find this approach culturally and procedurally challenging.
Summary of lessons

The Reconnections experience suggests a number of lessons for VCSE organisations considering transfer as a route to scale:

INVEST IN DEFINING AND EVALUATING A ‘PRODUCT’

- Seek funding which explicitly allows for testing and refinement
- Use this testing and learning process to define a clear model and proposition, including evaluation and development of a business case

CODIFY THE PRODUCT

- Focus on the ‘DNA’ of their model and regularly capture non-negotiable elements in a ‘blueprint’
- Take time to document the model as it evolves – e.g. decision or change log, process evaluation.
- Agree appropriate intellectual property rights for replication or transfer among different parties from the outset
- Establish trademarks and/or copyright in the programme brand and key materials as early as possible

TRANSFER OF PEOPLE AS WELL AS PRODUCT

- Find ways for key people to share their experience and tacit knowledge – e.g. secondments, exchanges, training or mentorships
- Negotiate appropriate roles and contractual / employment arrangements with these staff, as well as with the new parent organisation
- Cost this investment of staff time and the need to cover any gaps created in their own services as part of the arrangements for the transfer

FIND THE RIGHT ‘PARENT’

- Find a potential ‘parent’ with the capacity to take on their model
- Invest significant time and effort in assuring themselves that the other organisation shares enough of their mission, vision and commitment to the model
- This can be an equally resource intensive process for the new ‘parent’ organisation
ALLOW FOR ADAPTATION

• Work with the new ‘parent’ to transfer and adapt their model to the new organisation/context

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

• Consider whether the funding and institutional environment for their area of work is supportive of this route to scale
• Recognise that this is not a well-trodden route for the VCSE in any area – there are likely to be significant barriers in terms of organisational capacity, culture and procedures

Funders who want to support organisations to scale or replicate their work by transferring it to another organisation can play very significant roles.

In the initial ‘development’ phase, funders can:

• Provide separate funds for learning, innovation and adaptation
• Ensure that reporting, metrics and accountability allow for genuine flexibility and potentially major changes to the model
• Encourage reflection and reporting on how the model is developing and what critical success factors are emerging during development and implementation

Once a transfer is in process, funders can:

• Help meet the costs of staff time and the transfer of people to the new ‘parent’ organisation
• Fund a commitment of senior staff time to due diligence, negotiation and ensuring alignment
• Provide support with legal advice
• Include the costs of adapting the model as part of the total transfer cost
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