

Commission
on Excellence
and Innovation
in Health.

Building quality partnerships in the healthcare sector

LET'S PUT IMAGINATION TO WORK

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Government
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Building quality partnerships in the healthcare sector

Introduction – why partner?

Across South Australia, and throughout the world, our healthcare systems are under immense pressure and demands on public health systems are likely to increase in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this strain on health systems, disrupting the capacity of already stretched resources. Increasingly new and formidable challenges, including public health emergencies, mean that – now more than ever – we need strategies to support the pursuit of excellence and innovation in healthcare and to strengthen the resilience of healthcare systems.

Much attention has recently been devoted to the role of collaboration and cooperation in addressing health challenges. Traditionally, organisational systems within and outside of government have often operated in ‘silos’, tackling issues independently using exclusively their own knowledge, resourcing and influence.

However, it is increasingly recognised that complex, contemporary issues – sometimes referred to as “wicked problems” – benefit from collaborative responses from diverse, cooperative partners, including the community, working together towards a shared goal. This was highlighted through the fostering of government-science-industry partnerships for the rapid development of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines.

Partnership action is not a new concept, but there is a rapidly growing realisation of what deliberate, strategic partnerships for healthcare can achieve. As an example, the United Nations has identified working in partnership as the integral approach for achieving the 2030 global health and sustainable development goals.

Effective partnerships mean partners benefit from shared knowledge, skills and resources which enable the co-production of outcomes that meet both partners’ and the community’s expectations and needs. Importantly, working in partnership can extend the reach, impact and sustainability of health outcomes.

The Commission on Excellence and Innovation in Health (CEIH) is committed to building quality partnerships for healthcare and taking forward a strengthened partnership agenda. CEIH calls on the South Australian healthcare sector to elevate its focus on collaborative partnership approaches and shift to different ways of thinking and practice to increase the potential for partnership action.

This approach and suite of connected tools aims to support sector capability in facilitating and brokering partnerships and building a collaborative, productive partnership ecosystem. Going forward, the CEIH hopes healthcare organisations will strengthen partnership approaches in organisational planning and business activity.

What do we mean by partnerships?

A partnership is a collaborative relationship between two or more entities to work toward shared objectives through a mutually agreed division of resources. Partners engage in joint activities and decision-making to progress a shared purpose.

For partnerships to be effective they require specific attributes, as discussed in detail through this document. These include factors such as a commitment and dedication of time to working together; a clear mandate and purpose; leadership; flexibility and a willingness to share power; good governance; transparency and trust in relationships; and working to achieve mutual benefits.

Partnership action is highly context-specific; the entry points for partnering and the structures for inter-agency governance will vary. Different collaborative approaches are often required for different problems and contexts however, as we will describe, there are consistent enabling processes and attributes that underpin success.

To assist in describing what “partnership” means for the purpose of this document, Figure 1 (pg 3) illustrates the scope of relationship types according to the level of engagement and the relative impact. At different times, different relationship types can be important. For example, at one end of the scale, communication and consultation require less engagement and commitment to shared goals, however there is generally lower impact and no long-term commitment. At the upper end of the scale, genuine partnerships require significant intensity of engagement, shared goals and transparency, but in return lead to more effective and sustainable impacts on healthcare outcomes.

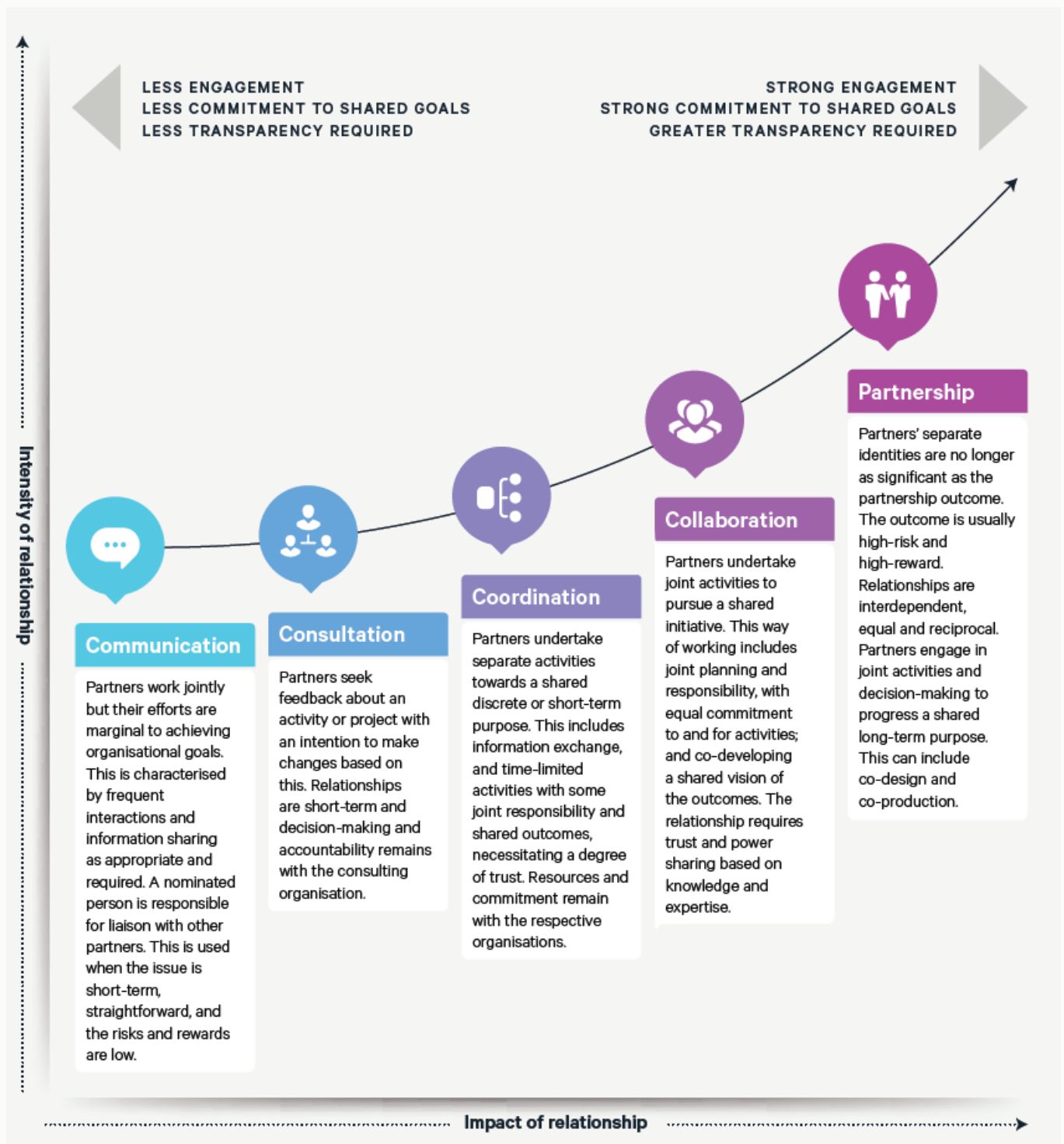


Figure 1. The relationship continuum illustrates a range of relationship types according to their intensity of effort and expected impact on desired outcomes¹.

¹ Adapted from the Western Australian Government Department of Communities, Communities Partnership Framework.

The CEIH partnership process

The CEIH partnership process (Figure 2) describes the key stages of building strong collaborative partnerships.

The process provides a blueprint and strategic mechanism for driving collaborative action in the healthcare sector. It highlights the dynamic and iterative nature of partnering, with a clear focus on people and the application of foundational partnership skills to foster relationships, trust and mutual understanding. The partnership process – through its four stages – can be used across diverse approaches, highlights the need for organisational commitment, and has a strong evaluative process to guide reflection and continual improvement.

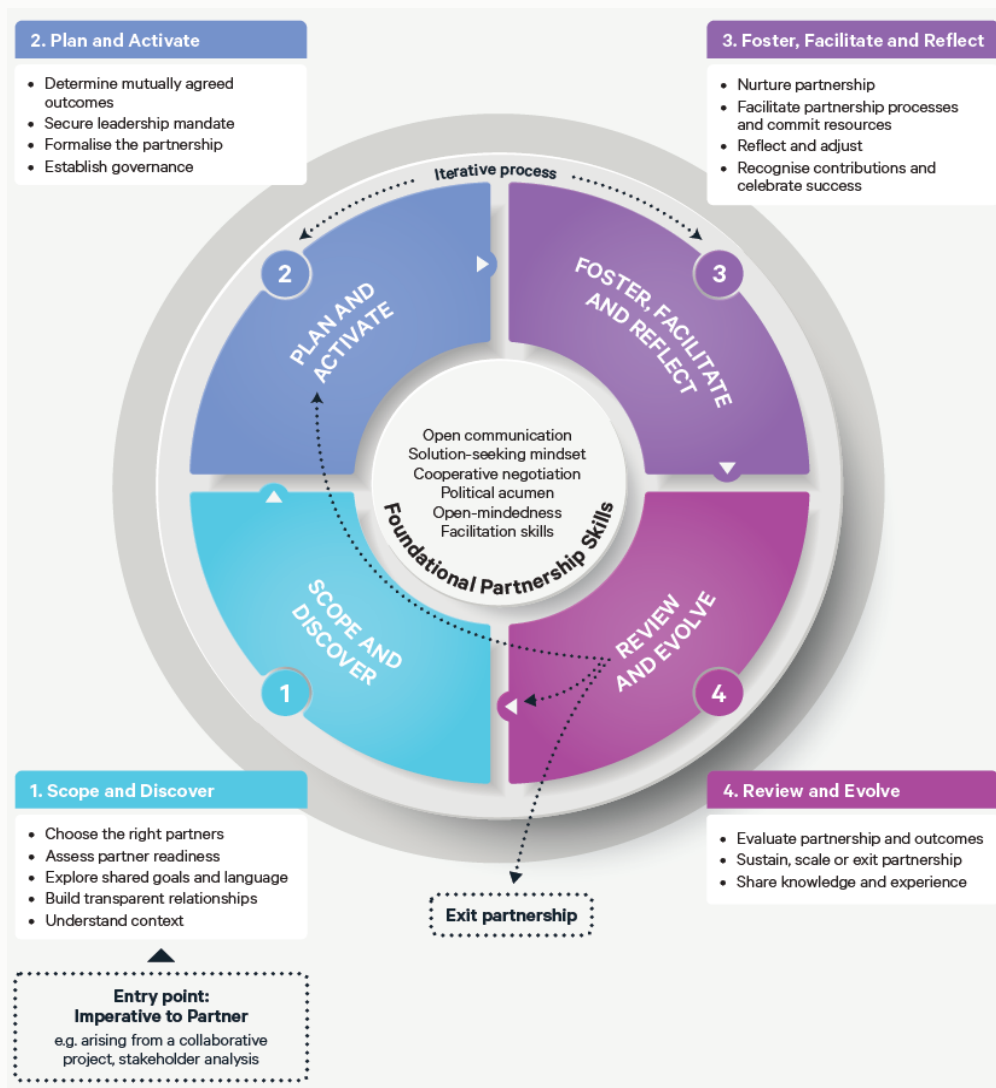


Figure 2. CEIH partnership process cycle.

A set of supporting tools have been developed as a companion to this process however, please note, the tools are not intended to be a comprehensive toolkit; rather they aim to provide additional prompts to consider within several of the key steps. Relevant tools for each stage of the partnership process are highlighted in the following sections.

Stage one: scope and discover

- Choose the right partners
- Assess partner readiness
- Explore shared goals and language
- Build transparent relationships
- Understand context

The scope and discover stage is the start of the partnership process. This is where partners are first identified – perhaps through a stakeholder analysis, project planning, research or general networking. This stage develops relationships, explores shared goals and clarifies contextual issues.

It requires a focus on building transparency between partners through sharing information, refraining from pursuing hidden agendas, being honest about the opinions and goals of your organisation, recognising the expertise of all partners involved, and acknowledging differences of opinion. Transparency can foster greater openness, which can lead to new insights and better solutions.

At this stage, it is critical to identify and consider alignment of partner organisation's goals. This establishes the foundation to enable a collaborative approach to building shared understanding and a mutual vision. This represents a cultural shift from pursuing independent, siloed, topic-based interests to embracing shared perspectives and pursuing common goals.

Every discipline has its own language, dedicated terminology, jargon and acronyms. A first step in building relationships is to make sure that people understand each other. This can include being mindful of language that is hard to understand and of situations where differences in use of terms may cause disagreement or confusion.

In the scope and discover stage, understanding context is critical. This means paying attention to the political and organisational context in which your partners are working, including past interactions, successes and failures, or other issues that may support or impede perspectives on the current effort. In addition, understanding the broader context that the partnership will operate in is necessary to strategically position the collaboration, take advantage of windows of opportunity, and help establish the authorising environment.

Establishing and maintaining a solid collaborative partnership takes time, particularly if you have multiple partners. Sufficient time is needed for relationship building, learning about your partners' goals, and developing agreements and shared action plans (more detail is highlighted in stage two: plan and activate).

The following CEIH tool may be useful in this stage:

- [Partner readiness analysis](#)

Stage two: plan and activate

- Determine mutually agreed outcomes
- Secure leadership mandate
- Formalise the partnership
- Establish governance

The plan and activate stage is essential for gaining leadership commitment for the partnership approach and therefore securing the mandate for action and requisite authorising environment.

This stage identifies supportive structures, processes and mechanisms to guide decision-making and partnership action. As relationships are built with partners, the type of structure and governance will depend on the availability of staff and resources to undertake and sustain the effort, as well as the commitment by leadership and the scope of the collaborative action.

While informal approaches may be a useful first step in supporting collaboration, for long-term transformational and sustainable change it is best to support with stable formal structures capable of withstanding changes in leadership and funding. Inclusion of a formal governance structure to oversee the collaborative partnership is also needed to ensure long-term benefits, accountability, clear decision-making and visibility of effort. This may include, for example, a partnership oversight committee which comprises senior leaders or executives (vertical governance structure) in addition to multi-organisational working group(s) (horizontal governance structure).

Formalising a partnership should involve signing a written document such as a charter, partnership agreement or memorandum of understanding. This document should explicitly lay out a shared vision, a common purpose or mutual areas of interest, goals, objectives and high-level deliverables. It may also identify key processes for decision-making (governance arrangements) and the roles and responsibilities of the partners.

Arriving at these points will require open communication and cooperative negotiation, internally and with partners. This can be helped by starting with broad discussions and then, as relationships develop, refining focus to what the partnership aims to achieve.

At this stage, a collaborative action plan is particularly useful as it reflects and tracks the mutually agreed outcomes and associated actions. When developing the action plan, partners should consult and review the data and evidence available, including both qualitative and quantitative methods to support planning and justification of particular courses of action.

Note: if specific, definable projects are identified within the action plan, the [CEIH Project Lifecycle](#) and its tools are recommended as supports through the project phases.

The following CEIH tools may be useful in this stage:

- [Partnership agreement template](#)
- [Collaborative action plan template](#)
- [CEIH Project Lifecycle and supporting project tools](#)

Stage three: foster, facilitate and reflect

- Nurture partnership
- Facilitate partnership processes and commit resources
- Reflect and adjust
- Recognise contributions and celebrate success

Stage three influences the quality of the collaboration throughout the life of the partnership. Partnerships require nurturing through continuous communication and mutually reinforcing activities. This includes holding regular partnership meetings to drive the implementation of shared work and to resolve any conflicts or disagreements in a timely manner.

In this stage, clarity is needed about resource allocation for the collaboration. Partnerships rely on appropriate resources and organisational capacity to sustain efforts, and sharing resources facilitates joint working. While staff time is likely to be the largest expense for the partnership, resources such as communication channels, equipment, data and technical expertise are other important resources which can be shared. Although equal contribution from partners can often reflect shared commitment, diversity in partner organisations' sizes and resources means this will not always be possible. Open communication about resource sharing is therefore critical to understand contexts and how less tangible resource contributions (e.g. organisational reach or reputation) can play an equally important role.

Taking time to reflect on what is working well and what is proving challenging enables adjustments to be made to improve the partnership while it is in action. Collaborative partnerships are dynamic, and a regular reflective cycle ensures the partnership is meeting the needs of all involved.

Conducting partnership 'pulse checks' early in the relationship and recurring regularly over time (annually or as agreed) can provide important learning about organisations' partnership capabilities, including strengths and areas for improvement. An associated action plan may be useful where adjustments are needed.

Recognition is an important driver of longer-term partnerships. Successes should be shared and celebrated to promote the outcomes of the partnership and build encouragement, support and goodwill between partners.

The following CEIH tools may be useful in this stage:

- [Quick guide to nurturing partnerships](#)
- [Partnership pulse check](#)
- [Partnership pulse check review and action plan](#)

Stage four: review and evolve

- Evaluate partnership and outcomes
- Sustain, scale or exit partnership
- Share knowledge and experience

The review and evolve stage should occur when objectives have been met or the partnership agreement timeframe is potentially at an end. This stage explores whether sustaining the partnership may enable continued benefits, whether scaling up the partnership (e.g. in size, reach or number of partners) may create new opportunities to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes, or if an appropriate conclusion to the partnership should be drawn.

Lessons learned throughout the partnership should be captured and disseminated to contribute to the evidence base and knowledge exchange. A thorough review of the partnership itself, such as through a final partnership 'pulse check', will also support understanding about the effectiveness of the partnership process cycle, its impact and the outcomes. This exercise is not about scoring or judging how partners fared but enabling a continuous cycle of improvement to help guide the evolution of partnership action.

Documenting processes and actions, critical success factors and outcomes of the partnership in a way that speaks to decision-makers and multiple audiences will support future buy-in by demonstrating the tangible benefits of collaborative partnerships.

The following CEIH tool may be useful in this stage:

- [Partnership pulse check](#)

Cycle centre: foundational partnership skills

- Open communication
- Solution-seeking mindset
- Cooperative negotiation
- Political acumen
- Open-mindedness
- Facilitation skills

To successfully navigate through the partnership process, partners need what are often called the ‘soft skills’ of partnering. At the core of the partnership process cycle are what CEIH consider the foundational skills and capabilities required by those working in partnership to achieve optimal partnering success. Although some organisations and individuals in the healthcare sector may have some of these skills, often those used to working largely within specific technical or professional health skillsets may need to actively strengthen these abilities.

Open and transparent communication approaches are necessary to build trusting and respectful relationships and encourage a shared understanding of the issues. While different methods of communication suit different people and contexts, some regularity and consistency in interactions is beneficial and helps ensure all parties receive the information they need.

An attitude that focuses on solving problems, rather than avoiding issues and challenges, encourages critical thinking. Collaborative solution-seeking efforts can push the boundaries of creative problem solving, with partners able to co-produce solutions and outcomes.

Cooperative negotiation involves jointly meeting each other’s needs and satisfying all interests as equitably as possible. Partnerships call for a more collaborative and engaged approach to negotiation, rather than directive or assertive approaches. This draws on the additional skills of active listening, reasoning, and searching for common ground.

To successfully work across organisational or disciplinary boundaries, participants must know and navigate their agency’s interests and priorities while also understanding the motivations and interests of their partners. This includes understanding the political context in which a partnership is occurring, which requires shifting from a technical project focus to politically astute perspective. Demonstrating strong political acumen relates to having an awareness of the politics within and between agencies as well as the political environment in which the partnership operates.

Open-mindedness when undertaking a partnership ensures the breadth of perspectives, ideas and knowledge of partners can successfully influence creative problem-solving and the co-production of solutions. This requires the creation of a safe and respectful learning environment. Partners should be open to trying new approaches and taking considered risks by questioning the status quo.

Effective facilitation should encourage open and honest participation and engagement over an authoritative approach. It should enable all partners to articulate their views and positions, identify consensus or disagreements, facilitate learning and help find solutions.

Developing and enacting these foundational partnership skills helps build a culture of collaboration for a sustainable partnership ecosystem.

Attributes for quality partnerships

Evidence shows that effective partnerships should be guided by a set of attributes representing key values. Figure 3 illustrates the seven attributes that CEIH believe are critical for quality partnerships. They acknowledge that sustainable partnership mechanisms that enable shared responsibility and the co-creation of solutions are critical for addressing healthcare challenges in a more systematic manner.



Figure 3. Seven CEIH attributes for quality partnerships.

CEIH's commitment - building a sustainable partnership ecosystem

The CEIH is committed to establishing and nurturing partnerships in the healthcare sector as an integral approach to improving healthcare outcomes for South Australians. Ultimately, to support this, many levers are required for coherent and dedicated action at different levels.

At the CEIH, we envisage building a strong healthcare partnership ecosystem through three focus areas: leading by example, building capability and creating system-level change.

1. Lead by example

Working across organisational boundaries is challenging. To promote goodwill and collaboration among diverse partners, a strong foundation for collaboration is essential.

The CEIH is committed to building strong relationships with partners across the breadth of the healthcare sector to support system-level change and program delivery. Our current partnerships are described on our [website](#) and we work to continuously improve these using evidence-based strategies, while also harnessing windows of opportunity to build new mutually beneficial and innovative partnerships.

2. Build partnership capability

Recognising that partnerships are dynamic means that collaborators need both an understanding of the partnership processes in addition to a repertoire of skills to be drawn upon throughout the life of a partnership. Collaboratively tackling complex problems requires more than traditional professional and technical health expertise, it requires what we have previously described as the foundational partnership skills.

The CEIH partnership process and tools provide a starting point to support organisations' collaborative knowledge and skills. Important next steps for the CEIH include the development of a partnership capability framework for South Australia based on the needs of the local healthcare sector and showcasing examples and learnings from existing noteworthy healthcare partnerships across the sector.

3. Create system-level change

This focus area works towards the development of a partnership ecosystem by making improvements to structures and processes at a system level that can support and value partnerships in the healthcare sector. This means multi-disciplinary and inter-organisational problem solving is integrated as a crucial way of working across the sector. This system-level change requires a system leadership mandate plus integrated mechanisms such as workplace culture, community engagement, and policy and strategy to drive the healthcare sector to further work in partnership.

The CEIH recognises the opportunity for South Australia to be a leader in effective partnership action in healthcare by creating a supportive partnership ecosystem. A preliminary scan of the literature has identified key factors that can either facilitate or obstruct partnership efforts within the healthcare sector. By confirming these barriers and enablers with the SA healthcare sector, the CEIH will co-design innovative solutions with the sector and sustainably embed these changes into our state's partnership ecosystem.

Final thoughts

We hope that the partnership approach and tools highlighted in this document are of value to organisations across the South Australian healthcare sector and assist in strengthening partnership efforts.

Leaders can play a pivotal role in providing the space and resources to genuinely partner whilst also recognising the value of collaboration as an evidence-based way of working towards better health outcomes for all South Australians.

Together, the sector can continue to build upon existing partnership successes and stretch into new and emerging domains to unlock substantial benefits.

For more information about partnerships, partnership tools, and partnering with CEIH, visit our [website](#).