

Collaborative working

The engine room of sustainable development

1. Definitions

'Collaborative working' is here used as an overarching term, to cover a range of different types and levels of joint working. Our suggested definition for 'collaborative working' is:

A means of working, whereby people from different departments and /or organisations work together to achieve something, or some benefit, which they could not achieve through working alone.

The 'something' or benefit is sometimes called 'collaborative advantage', and it can be seen as the fuel of collaborative working – the greater the potential or actual advantage gained by all parties, the greater the levels of energy fuelling the collaboration.

Collaborative working can be seen as a spectrum of activities, ranging from a 'light touch' approach, through to a level of mature, sophisticated collaboration that can take years of work to achieve.

Degree of innovation, shared decision making. Amount of collaborative advantage.	Exchanging information	A critical starting point for any further progress
	Coordination	<i>'Lets not duplicate each other's activities'</i>
	Cooperation	<i>'Doing what we each do, in a more cooperative way'.</i> For example, joint branding of existing projects / initiatives. Tends to be for activities which are more or less 'business as usual' for the cooperating organisations
	Jointly conceived / managed / funded initiatives / projects	<i>'It's our project'.</i> This involves some innovation, but each organisation is still entirely 'separate'. For example, agreeing to deliver a new project together, with each organisation putting in staff time and some money.
	Joint conception of and delivery of mainstream services, at operational level	<i>'We have to do this specific thing together'.</i> Core services are delivered in a joint way. There may be commitment to shared management and monitoring, and certainly some pooled resources. Senior management / strategic priorities can remain relatively unaffected.
	Full strategic and operational mainstreaming	<i>'It's our shared issue / we all really want this'.</i> This is where the government is trying to push the public sector to be: negotiation and agreement on high level strategic priorities, on how they will be delivered across named collaborating organisations, and all of this integrated into the respective organisations' business plans ie beyond 'projects', into 'everyone's day job'.

2. What's different about collaborative working?

Collaborative working, whether across teams and/or with other organisations, requires a cultural shift. You will need to think and work in ways that are different to what you may be used to. That's because collaborative working is different to working within one organisation or department, in several key ways:

- a) The need to **transparently agree the issue to be jointly addressed and/or the outcomes you want to achieve**. It won't do to 'fudge' what you want to achieve.
- b) **Different 'cultures' and ways of working need to be accommodated**. Even within public sector organisations, ways of working and organisational culture are very different indeed – indeed, they can be mutually baffling.
- c) Collaborative working is often embarked upon to achieve quite **challenging goals or to tackle difficult issues** ie issues that no one organisation can sort out alone. This means that collaborators are dealing with complex and changing situations, which makes the work even harder. Remember - if it was easy, you would be doing it yourself, or they would be doing it themselves.
- d) There is **no accepted, 'fixed' process by which things will happen**. Unlike within an organisation, that tends to have agreed 'ways we do things around here', in collaborative working, you have to make it up as you go along. It is all about flexibility, negotiating and navigating across terrain that is often unfamiliar to all concerned. Even within apparently structured processes like Local Area Agreements or Local Strategic Partnerships, the territory, boundaries and ways of working are constantly changing.

3. Guiding principles

These principles are particularly valuable when either exploring the setting up of a new collaboration, and/or reviewing an existing collaborative venture.

a) Have an outcomes focus

Expressing what you all want to achieve in clear, outcomes-oriented language, and being able to continually recheck those outcomes as your work together proceeds, is the single most important key to successful collaboration.

However, it is actually quite difficult to express outcomes in ways that are unambiguous and clearly understood by all of the potential or actual collaborators, so be prepared to take the time to do this properly.

For any existing collaboration:

- How long is it since you checked on your agreed outcomes?
- If asked, would everyone involved be able to state them clearly?
- Do they need refreshing?

b) Be prepared to explore and stay open to ideas

Because it is hard for us to understand each other at first, and because we all carry prejudices about what we think 'they' are thinking, allow time for each party to set out their stall, be prepared to all listen well, and maintain an open mind. Once you are all sure you have understood each other and shared ideas across a wide range of possibilities, then you can start to narrow down to an agreed area of focus.

c) Be clear who 'we' is at each stage of a collaboration

Many collaborative activities now involve multiple levels of 'we'. For example, a core steering group, key players within the organisations of the steering group, a wider reference group, and 'all other relevant stakeholders'. Be clear which bits of the system you are actually referring to when you say 'we'.

When exploring the setting up of new collaborative ventures, it is vital to be clear about who the first set of 'we' is, and be open to changing that as the initiative grows.

d) Invest in understanding each other

Successful collaboration requires an early exploration of what the relevant organisations / individuals are about, in order to reach a base line of mutual understanding. What are their drivers, ways of working, decision-making systems, scope of operation? How informed are you about organisations that you want to collaborate with, or are already working with? If you are operating under a significant misconception with regard to a potential collaborator, this could be enough to cause major problems. Act like a lobbyist – gathering 'intelligence' as a means to later successfully influencing and working with that organisation or individual.

e) Invest in building strong relationships

Research and practice on collaborative working and partnership confirm that personal relationships are critical to the success of collaboration. A successful relationship in the context of collaborative working, is one characterised by high levels of mutual understanding, openness, trust, honesty and respect. Such relationships *can* be carefully built – they rarely just happen by chance.

f) Look for innovation and creativity

If you do what you and your collaborators have always done, you will get what you always got. You are only working together, or considering working, together to tackle something difficult and that is bound to mean looking at innovative ways to address your issues. Innovation and creative responses to entrenched issues are a critical 'added value' aspect of collaborative working

g) Communicate, communicate and communicate - well

Pay attention to all aspects of communication – from written documents, to interpersonal interactions. It is good communication, of all types, at all levels, which builds shared understanding and releases greater collective result.

h) Try, reflect, adjust

Because collaborators are usually trying to do things differently, in a challenging context of change and uncertainty, it is essential to have a reflective approach. That is, be prepared to try things out, but always reflect and evaluate, making adjustments and not being afraid to stop doing things that aren't working.

i) Just do it....

In collaborative working, there are fewer rules and 'must do's' than within organisations. This means you need to exploit energy and enthusiasm where you encounter it, and have a 'can do' attitude. Starting something that feels right between you all, if only at a relatively minor level of activity, can lead onto greater things, so just do it!