

October 2007



## real collaboration

a guide to establishing effective collaborative relationships in planning services



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**This guide is designed to support local authority planning professionals to initiate and drive projects requiring collaboration. It details the key steps and activities a collaborative partnership must pursue to successfully deliver the desired outcomes for the participants and the communities they serve.**

**The contents are based on research and participation in a number of collaborative planning projects involving local authorities and academic research into collaboration in the public sector.**

The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) aims to facilitate self-sustaining change and improvement in the local authority planning sector. PAS helps councils provide faster, fairer, more efficient and better quality services.

PAS is funded by the [Communities and Local Government](#) and is part of the [Improvement and Development Agency](#) (IDeA). Building on the IDeA's work in the local government sector, PAS supports local planning authorities throughout England to develop both their capacity and capability to deliver services and the best possible outcomes for their communities.

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## preface

**This guide is based on the experiences of people who have been directly involved in setting up and developing collaborative working. Whilst these have been primarily in relation to local authority planning services, the issues raised are generally transferable.**

There is no single right way to go about collaboration. Joint-working arises in a vast range of circumstances and there have been a number of different approaches to making it a success. Each new collaboration project will also throw up new experiences that the whole local government community can learn from.

Whilst this guide is available in the PDF version you are reading now, it is also available online. The online version includes the facility for you to add your thoughts and describe your experiences and share them with your colleagues.

You can access the online version at: <http://www.pas.gov.uk/collaboration>. Please take the time to share what you know. There are questions included throughout this resource that you can respond to. Your responses to these will provide valuable insights for others and the Planning Advisory Service will keep the document up to date by absorbing the learning from doing you tell us about.

## background

The guide is designed to support local authority planning professionals to initiate and drive projects requiring collaboration between local authorities.

It details the key steps and activities a collaborative partnership must pursue to successfully deliver the desired outcomes for the participants and the communities they serve.

It is based on research and participation in a number of collaborative planning projects, a number of collaborative projects involving local authorities, and academic research into collaboration in the public sector.

The guide addresses the following key steps and aspects of collaboration:

- Initiating Collaboration
- Agreeing Goals and Outcomes
- Building Trust
- Governing Initiatives

- Exercising Leadership
- Communicating
- Resourcing Collaborative Projects
- Realising Benefits

## introduction

The rationale and prize for collaborative efforts is 'collaborative advantage'. By working together, authorities can deliver value that that would be impossible working individually. The basis of collaborative advantage is the synergy generated by combining resources, expertise and ideas from multiple authorities.

In short, something can be achieved that could not be achieved by any one of the organisations acting alone.

Collaborative working differs from co-operative working in the degree and nature of the commitment required for participants. A collaborative initiative is a venture that leverages the collective assets of the partners. These assets include the financial, human, intellectual and social capital of the participants. Collaboration requires the participants to give up a greater degree of autonomy in terms of decision-making and/or resource allocation in order to work together to deliver or achieve an objective.

There are risks to the partners in committing these assets, but the rewards are higher than the partners could deliver acting alone.

### why collaborate?

Collaboration can deliver outcomes that the parties could not deliver acting alone. This is a theme of all the collaborative projects investigated as part of this work.

There are different reasons for entering into collaborative arrangements. These range from voluntary initiatives undertaken at the discretion of the parties – such as best value service management, staying ahead of a changing agenda – to projects that are mandatory or created in response to external challenges.

The North Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit (NNJPU) is an example of a project created in response to external challenge. It was created to pursue the local growth agenda and in response to the prospect of a development corporation being created. This would have removed powers from the local authorities. Instead, by pooling resources and ceding some individual decision-making authority to the collective, the partners demonstrated an alternative means of achieving better outcomes. It allowed NNDC, the local delivery vehicle for the North Northamptonshire Growth Area, to be established as an Urban Regeneration Company without statutory planning powers. The joint-approach thus allowed the councils to retain development control powers and discretion in decision-making. Moreover, the ability to make strategic planning decisions in a sub-regional context enhanced the prospects for effective development planning in the area.

### no single right way

Another key theme is that there is no single “right way” to pursue collaboration. In fact, the taken-for-granted common wisdom of how you successfully pursue collaboration is often contradicted by the reality of practice. Finding the right way is a question of exercising managerial judgement in the light of circumstances.

It can be enlightening and helpful for practitioners pursuing collaboration between organisations to recognise that many of the challenges that a collaborative endeavour encounters are common and inevitable. The following sections seek to highlight the nature of collaboration and the key issues that require attention at each stage. The paper also offers frameworks for thinking through challenges and ways of overcoming obstacles.

## initiating collaboration

### identify past achievements

One of the characteristics of successful collaborative projects is that they grew from an existing network or bedrock of close working relationships between organizations and individuals.

Hence, a productive first step in initiating a new collaborative agenda between authorities is to assess the prospective partners’ prior record of sharing or partnering.

Prospective participants should first take stock of what has already been achieved jointly, and what can be built upon. Past collaboration could be at a strategic or operational level, or be formal or informal. To some extent, past history will help shape the scale and pace of future achievements.

A clear and agreed account of the benefits of past work will help participants to overcome the sense that they are “starting from scratch” or at “square one” in their journey.

Officers can also find it instructive to examine the reasons for past successes, and to identify the contributory factors. For example, collaboration may have arisen in response to an external driver, or may have succeeded due to specific local conditions or specific individuals.



In your view, what conditions support collaborative working?

Do you have any examples of small co-operative projects leading to large scale efforts?

### identify principal barriers

As part of this initial exploratory phase, officers should also take time to make explicit the barriers that need to be overcome for collaboration to progress.

There are a range of different barriers that should be addressed. Barriers can be internal to the organizations, and external. Barriers or inhibitors can be structural, procedural, financial, professional, cultural and political. “Political” barriers can be about status and legitimacy, as well as arising from differences in political complexion.

Projects should also take the time to verify the nature of the barriers that are raised. It is worth while engaging stakeholders in discussions to bottom-out the assumptions around the perceived barriers. Closer inspection can help project teams to understand the nature of the challenge and the potential routes through the obstacles. Projects should test the assumptions behind perceived barriers, particularly where one group claim to speak on behalf of another. Oftentimes, the barrier has been found to be overstated.

However, the identification of barriers should be treated as a time-fenced activity that takes place in the context of an exploration of the opportunities and prospective value from joint working. Since it is a potentially negative conversation, instigators of collaboration should be careful not to spend excessive time for fear of sapping the enthusiasm of prospective participants.



In your experience, what are the principal barriers or inhibitors to joint working and how have you sought to overcome them?

Is it likely that politicians will perceive different barriers than the officers?

To what extent are these barriers real or perceived?

## appreciate the need for partnership and understand collaborative advantage

The stakeholders, including both officers and members, require a frank exchange of views at this stage to determine whether collaboration is desirable. Moreover, the participants need to gauge whether there is sufficient consensus and will to succeed to risk the time and effort necessary to establish and drive a collaborative project forward.

Participants also need to be clear with each other regarding the drivers and pressures that are pushing their interest in collaboration. This includes the policy context. The degree to which collaboration is discretionary or mandatory also needs to be acknowledged as it will help to shape expectations and governance arrangements. In the case of the collaboration project for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Planning officers' group (HIPOG), the collaboration agenda was set by Chief Executives and espoused by the Hampshire Planning Officers group. After the initial work with PAS, the project was supported financially by the Hampshire Improvement Programme. The drivers were understood by the group and were used as a reference point during the project development.

Successful collaboration demands resources and attention. Without an open and honest exchange at this stage there is a risk that the participants will invest energy but make little progress. This can lead to failure and an aversion to collaboration in the future. It also has implications for deciding upon the optimal membership of a partnership (see [Determining membership](#)).



What approaches help to facilitate an open and constructive exchange of views at the exploratory phase of a joint working project?

## exploring the possibilities

Successful collaborations “start with the end in mind” and continue to focus on the desired outcomes throughout delivery. Participants first need to identify and agree the common problem or business issue that the collaboration is seeking to address. Articulating high-level outcomes that all parties desire is an essential part of successful project initiation.

The route forwards - towards achieving these outcomes - can be considered and agreed separately.

The outcomes from collaboration can be many and varied. Broadly speaking, collaborative projects pursue outcomes relating to either customers or resources (or both). Resource-based outcomes might include:

- delivering a better service for the same or fewer resources
- addressing shortages of resources by sharing
- clubbing together to increase market power

Customer-based outcomes could include:

- improving the experience of using the service for customers
- providing better accessibility for customer
- sharing information to provide proactive, pre-emptive service

An understanding of the common problem or business issue that the collaboration is seeking to address needs to be at the centre of these discussions. In the planning context, these include the scarcity of planning staff and specialist skills, constraints on other resources and the recognition that delivering good quality spatial planning requires closer working with neighbouring authorities and service providers. These challenges cannot be addressed by individual authorities working alone. The common challenges, and the desired outcome, need to be kept “front-of-mind” throughout.



What are the business challenges that you need to change to meet?

What outcomes are you seeking from collaborative working?

### Advice and Action Box

- Involve a cross section of the important players from each participating authority in early discussions
- Take stock of what has already been achieved jointly, and what can be built upon
- Examine the reasons for past successes, and identify the contributory factors
- Articulate the common problem or business issue that the collaboration seeks to address
- Discuss the barriers that need to be overcome for the collaboration to be successful
- Gauge whether there is sufficient consensus and commitment to succeed

## agreeing goals and outcomes

Agreeing a shared vision and set of outcomes in an individual organisation can be challenging. Generating and agreeing a shared vision in collaboration can be even more so.

The authorities you work with bring the benefit of different resources, expertise and experience. However, they might arrive with different values, goals, work practices, management styles and decision-making processes. They might also have different reasons for participating, and be seeking different outputs. There can also be direct conflicts of interest. These factors can make agreeing a single vision problematic.

Partnerships report a tension between achieving clarity of purpose and conducting an open discussion. One can provide much needed direction but the other can unearth irreconcilable differences. Paradoxically, sometimes the only practical way forward is to get started on an action without fully agreeing the aims.

Articulating the vision in the form of a handful of desired outcomes can help to get the ball rolling. These outcomes can be articulated as brief statements, and at a high-level, to encourage agreement and commitment from participants.

Details can be added later, as the project progresses. These can be refined and prioritised when the participants have achieved sufficient trust and a shared understanding.

Agreeing these outcomes upfront is essential, since participants often encounter disagreements regarding the route towards those outcomes, and how far along the route each participant is comfortable in travelling.

Ultimately, organisations need to discover the way forward themselves as a group. It is not possible for a single participant to prescribe unilaterally the right course. As one participant in the NNJPU comprising partners from two tiers of local government summarises:

**"We reached the logical conclusion regarding the services and the location of the Unit, but it was a conclusion that the group probably could not have reached on day one because participants were very sensitive about any one of the councils taking the dominant role."**



How have you addressed the tension between agreeing outcomes and making practical progress?

focus on opportunities for early success

Partnerships should identify areas for early successes and achievable wins that are informed by the overall strategic direction and can add up to a big win over time. In short: think big, act small.

For example, the Hampshire collaboration conducted workshops at the beginning of their programme to identify and agree three areas of likely benefit. As a result, the partnership commissioned three workstreams to investigate the opportunities in those areas more closely. The collaboration encouraged authorities to participate by making it clear that they could step out of the collaboration were it to take a direction contrary to their organisation's objectives. The project used the metaphor of a bus journey, with different passengers reaching different milestones, to assure local authorities at the outset.

Expressing the aims of a partnership in terms of an external stakeholder – such as service recipients – can also help to join-up thinking among partners. For example, a project could describe the outcome from the perspective of the citizen or business. Participants should articulate how the partnership working will lead to these improved outcomes.

One additional task can also be valuable. Parties should spend some time assessing whether the aims they declared for themselves are realistic and sustainable. The participants need to appraise the "collaborative capacity" of the partnership, which depends on the level of activity a partnership arrangement is able to sustain. Unrealistic goals will inevitably lead to failure.

Since organisations can sometimes feel threatened by collaboration, the remit and limitations of the work also needs to be clear. Recognising partners' core business and "legitimate" self-interest can be a good way to assure sceptics that the collaboration is not a "take-over". One of the collaborative projects between planning departments in the Hampshire and the Isle of Wight emphasised from the outset that the work was focused on the application processing component of Development Control, *not* the decision-making dimension. They were subsequently careful not to overstep the limits of agreed working

In the Hampshire example, participants agreed direction early. At the project's inception meetings, the partners agreed to investigate the integration of development control services as a means of delivering both efficiency savings and improving the customer experience by providing a more consistent experience for people submitting, commenting on or seeking information on planning applications.

The route forward for the project was left open in order to encourage commitment in the early stages. However, one key barrier to moving forward was the variety of IT and data collection systems used in the authorities. A full audit and development of options for harmonising these systems and the business process model was commissioned to overcome this.

As the project has progressed, it has set decision points at which participants define the next steps and the commitment required. This sophisticated structure has allowed the costs and benefits to be fully explored before a heavy financial commitment is made. This staged approach gives participants the time to build confidence in their partners and in the aims of the project before committing funding or devolving decision-making autonomy.



Do you have any similar or alternative means of structuring the initial exploratory phases of a collaborative project that you can share?

### Advice and Action Box

- Focus on agreeing shared values and principles for service development
- Ambiguity may help to generate commitment where clarity is too threatening
- Think big and act small by focusing on areas of likely success, early success and confidence building before the project requires progress into areas of higher risk
- Express the aims of a partnership in terms of an external stakeholder
- Assess whether the declared aims are realistic and sustainable

## building trust

Participants often comment that suspicion, rather than trust, is the starting point for partnership working. However, collaborative projects will achieve little without trust. The trust and social capital between partners enables the risk-taking that produces the rewards of collaboration. Hence, trust needs to be high enough to encourage risk-taking.

From the outset, participants need to trust each other enough to take a risk to initiate the collaboration. Trust is often required between a range of actors, including planners, senior officers, members and staff. The formation of expectations of the future (and prospects) of collaboration is largely based on reputation, past behaviour, informal contracts and agreements. Many collaborative projects have succeeded through having the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

However, projects can also benefit from deliberate efforts to kick-start the trust-building process. Following discussions and preliminary work by the senior planning managers in Surrey (SPOA), the Surrey collaboration project launched with a workshop for a group of some eighty people. This group comprised a cross section of officers from the planning teams and elected members to identify opportunities to deliver value from collaboration. This was followed by two further workshops involving similar groups from all the constituent authorities to explore the potential projects in more detail. These workshops served to get people at the authorities "on-board", and generated some momentum for the initiative.

The NNJPU took members and key officers on a tour of the area and conducted induction seminars to illustrate local challenges.

Similarly, a project between a Metropolitan Borough in the North West and the Pension Service found that joint trust-building workshops organised at the commencement of a collaborative project proved invaluable to participants and the later success of the project.

Arrangements for managing and governing the partnership need to engender trust. Convenors need to demonstrate fairness and equitability in setting the agenda, defining the language of the partnership, hosting or chairing meetings and scheduling meetings, priorities and timescales.

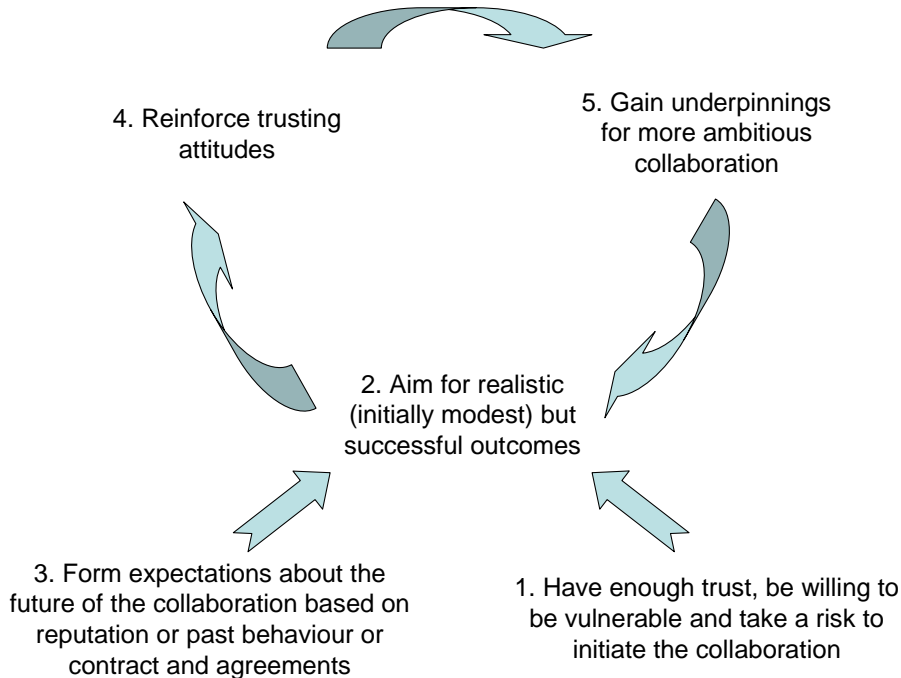
Once partners have committed to a joint course of action, participants need to be made aware of the potential consequences of inconsistent behaviour or of mixed messages.

A sense of shared ownership also can contribute to progress. Partnership working is rarely self-perpetuating – any collaboration needs to harness the energy and drive of participants to deliver progress. Commitment from senior planning officers is critical, otherwise efforts of enthusiasts can become marginalised.

Ideally, individual commitment from senior officers develops into personal connections between key decision-makers. Such connections help to cement a culture of trust, and lead to participants continuing to find opportunities to collaborate even when the original objective has been achieved.

Similarly, staff can "make or break" shared arrangements. Staff have considerable contact with other organisations, and often enjoy discretionary powers and day-to-day autonomy – not least in contact with service recipients. Hence, staff need to be engaged in the process to develop a sense of ownership of the process and the outcome – otherwise they will perceive the initiative as an imposition and resistance can result.

## the trust-building loop



Source: Based on Huxham, C. and Vangen, S. (2004) Doing Things Collaboratively: Realising the Advantage or Succumbing to Inertia? *Organizational Dynamics*, 33:2 pp. 190-201

The trust-building loop illustrates how trust is built-up through activity cycles. Success breeds success. Participants start at the bottom right-hand corner and progress clockwise, starting with modest but realistic aims that are likely to be successfully realised. Where trust is low, an urgent need can prompt parties to take a risk and initiate collaboration.

Trust needs time to develop, and it is a fragile process. There are many threats to the development of trust, including changes in policies, membership and representatives. The nurturing process must be continuous and permanent

As one participant in the preparation of the Greater Manchester Joint Waste Development Plan Document comments, "Everyone needs to go through an education cycle, to become familiar with the issues and each other...it takes time to build-up relationships."



What approaches have you found helpful to building trust between partners?

### Advice and Action Box

- Consider kick-starting the process with joint workshops, a study-tour or induction seminars etc
- Build governance arrangements that engender trust
- Be aware of the potential consequences of inconsistent behaviour or of mixed messages
- Encourage a sense of ownership in participating officers and staff
- Remember, trust needs time to develop, and it is a fragile process.

## governing collaborative initiatives

In the light of issues of trust, officers seeking to establish successful collaboration must pay attention to the governance arrangements for the partnership. As a guideline, these arrangements should be as simple as possible.

Complex structures often reflect partners' defensiveness about their own interests and uncertainty about degrees of mutual trust.

However, arrangements that become bureaucratic and unwieldy can sap the enthusiasm of participants. Equally, parties are unlikely to buy into structural arrangements that reflect the relative resource strength or perceived statuses of the participants.

Instead, a focus on the desired outcomes from the collaboration should shape the design of the governance arrangements. To concentrate effort and attention, these arrangements ought to be simple, task-orientated and time-limited.

Such concentration of effort in collaborative working helps to overcome two challenges relating to collaborative working.

1. the scope for lack of focus is inherently great when working with multiple organisations
2. partnership working is often an additional task added to officers' day-to-day responsibilities.

Optimal governance arrangements will vary according to the nature of the collaboration. In some cases, governance bodies pre-exist the collaborative project or are externally imposed. The collaborative planning project in North Northamptonshire established a Joint Committee comprising members from the participating authorities. This was created by Parliamentary Order and has decision making powers in relation to joint strategic plans. A Steering Group, comprising the Chief Planning Officers of the partner authorities, meets monthly with the Manager of the Joint Planning Unit and is responsible for directing and driving the working of the Unit. Communication between the Chief Planning Officers and members of the Joint Committee is close.



Do you have experience of other successful governance models that you could share?

### clarifying responsibilities

Partners need to be clear about their responsibilities in the collaboration. Parties also need to be clear about the division of responsibilities between the collaboration, other partners and their own organisation.

However, one of the findings from the research is that a degree of ambiguity or complexity is inevitable given the scale and nature of public services, and this needs to be tolerated. Policies change and emerge, funding shifts, officers move and the membership of a partnership can evolve. Depicting membership and responsibilities as diagrams can be enlightening, but cannot remove ambiguity or complexity completely.

The relationship with other partnerships and collaborative initiatives should also be made explicit. The county-wide collaboration between planning departments in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight found that one of their work-streams overlapped significantly with a county-wide procurement project, and initiated dialogue with that project. The two projects had progressed in parallel until the Hampshire Improvement Board – the key governing forum for both – brought the two together. The planning project had generated significant learning and a model for procuring specialist skills which the procurement project incorporated into their mainstream project.

### empowering representatives

Arguably the single most significant way an authority can demonstrate willing is by empowering officers to represent its interests in a collaborative setting. Participants at meetings need the autonomy to address issues and make decisions on behalf of their organisations.

A lack of autonomy on the part of representatives can have major detrimental affects on a project, not least in causing significant delay in reaching decisions. The process of continually checking with their authorities can be debilitating, creating major time lapses and slowing down the rate of output. Ultimately, a collaboration's success will be judged on its rate of progress and delivery record.

It is a matter of managerial judgement, but many authorities recommend setting expectations regarding the degree of autonomy required from representatives. This also has implications for the level of seniority required of representatives, and makes it imperative that they attend meetings (see "Managing Time").

On an operational level, representatives need a sense of what their organisation will tolerate. They also need to recognise that they are representatives in a dual sense – as well as representing their organisations in the collaboration, they need to champion the decisions of the partnership back in their organisations.



What are your views on responsibility and representation in join working? In your experience, what works best?

## managing time

Participants in a collaborative project need to be aware of the timetables, and the implications of delaying and deferring decisions. By "starting with the end in mind", a partnership can gain clear view of when decisions and milestone must be reached.

Given the above challenges of autonomy and attendance, a partnership should plan regular meetings as far in advance as possible and participants should prioritise attendance. The latter point is not merely to ensure that effective meetings can take place – attending meetings is also essential to ensure you are treating your partners with respect, which is in-turn essential for trust building.

Equally critical is to ensure progress *between* meetings. Participants often leave meetings enthused and keen to take the next steps, only to lose that energy and focus in the intervening phase. Hence, partnerships should build into arrangements incentives and deadlines for responses and comments to the documents associated with the collaboration.

The project manager plays a critical role in ensuring progress and momentum. Partnership projects that appoint a dedicated project manager find this to be invaluable in terms of prompting activity, facilitating progress and in freeing-up project leaders from administrative tasks to focus on championing the project (see "Role of the Project Sponsor"). The Surrey planning project used their funding from the Planning Advisory Service to pay for a full-time project manager. Use of external funds also allows the project manager to be perceived as independent of the individual interests of the organisations involved.

Participants in preparation of the Greater Manchester Joint Waste Development Plan Document emphasised the need to circulate meeting agendas well in advance to give everyone an opportunity to contribute, and also to close the communication loop by enforcing "follow-up" by a certain date – specifying each action by whom and when. This became established as a protocol for the management of communication between the project team and the constituent authorities.



Do you know any other techniques for managing time to ensure progress on collaborative projects?

### continuous review

The need for continuous improvement also needs to be recognised and management time built into a partnership's governance arrangements. Collaborative projects should be regarded as learning opportunities to be built-upon. Failure to review results in lost learning and isolated one-off initiatives. Collaborative know-how and trust accumulates and the partnerships need to take the time to review progress and record the lessons learnt.

#### Summary Advice and Action Box

- Pay attention to the governance arrangements – these should be as simple as possible
- Focus on the desired outcomes when designing governance arrangements
- Be clear about partners' responsibilities in the collaboration
- Ensure that participants are both empowered to represent their organisation, and willing to champion the collaboration "back-home"
- Plan meetings well in advance and build into arrangements incentives and deadlines for inputting to documents associated with the project

## exercising leadership

Leadership in a collaborative setting requires different qualities from leadership in the context of an organisation, not least because traditional hierarchies are absent. Instead, leaders are often working among equals of a comparable post, and have a dual role to lead the collaboration while also representing their own organisation.

Furthermore, the structures and processes of collaboration can shape the style of leadership required, and can take on a significance of their own.

One of the tensions in collaboration is between managing collaboration by consensus - making all decisions democratically - versus exerting power to make decisions more rapidly and drive progress towards delivery within a timescale. This is often expressed as the dilemma between "democracy" and "pragmatism", and is another example of how there is no single "right" way of going things. The choice requires an exercise of managerial judgement in the light of circumstances.

### role of the project sponsor

The project sponsor can make a valuable contribution by both challenging the participants constructively, while also instilling confidence with participants that the project is worthwhile. In one project, the sponsor maintained a dialogue with the programme managers and project leaders, reviewed the notes from every project meeting, and participated on most of the key review meetings. For example, In Northumberland when the project's external consultants presented their findings, the sponsor participated as challenger and critical friend, encouraging the project team to keep their eye on the longer term goals and investigate rather than dismiss options which at first glance seemed risky. The sponsor also brought to the table wider knowledge from outside the project team's expertise.

## leadership activities

Research into leadership in collaboration highlights six different types of activities leaders use to ensure progress.<sup>1</sup>

Four of these are essentially supportive and facilitative, while two are more assertive and potentially “coercive”. Partnerships benefit from a combination of these activities.

On the supportive side, leadership in collaboration comprises:

- *Embracing* members that are willing or necessary for the success of a project, and fostering collaboration between these participants
- *Empowering* collaboration, by creating structures that support participation and by keeping communication flowing
- *Involving* and supporting all members, even though participants may have different positions and powers
- *Mobilising* participants to act on behalf of the collaboration in the face of different levels of motivation and commitment

On the assertive side, leadership comprises:

- *Manipulating* the agenda, imposing their understanding of issues and making decisions on behalf of the partnership
- *Playing politics* between participants, networking and managing relationships between members, and excluding people if necessary



In your view, what are the characteristics of productive leadership in collaborative, joint working?

## determining membership

One area where tension can appear is in discussions about membership of a partnership. In the early stages, participants often propose that anyone with a stake in the outcome should be party to the initiative. However, this may not be practical - not least because too many organisations can increase the communication permutations and the difficulty of reaching agreement about aims and actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Vangen, S. and Huxham, C (2003) *Enacting Leadership for Collaborative Advantage. Dilemmas of Ideology and Pragmatism in the Activities of Partnership Managers*. British Journal of Management.

Parties to a prospective partnership need to choose the manner of their engagement, and should be open and upfront about their ability to contribute to a partnership.

Leaving the door open to authorities to join a partnership at a later date is possible so long as the new member is willing to recognise the procedures and products created so far.

### exercising power

In the absence of hierarchies, power is exercised in a range of ways in a collaboration. Power is not solely dependent on access to financial resources. On the contrary, partners bring different resources and sources of value and influence to a collaborative undertaking, and many of these are intangible assets such as knowledge or experience.

Participants can also often unwittingly or unconsciously exert power, even when doing seemingly mundane activities. Points of power in a collaborative project include:

- naming the collaboration,
- choosing who to involve, and choosing the process for choosing who to involve
- making arrangements for meetings, including their location and timing
- choosing a chair or facilitator

Hence, convenors of collaboration need to be sensitive to the perceptions of other participants when exercising power, as any perceived mis-use or abuse of power can result in defensiveness or aggression.

Perceptions of inequality can also undermine collaborative efforts. Partnerships should be careful to avoid using terms such as "senior" and "junior" or "core" and "periphery". These can lead to suspicion, the erosion of trust and a lessening of commitment

Participants should also be aware that power and leadership can shift through the membership during the progress of collaboration. As responsibilities for work streams or deliverables are passed to participants, power is passed like a baton from member to member.

Sharing and transferring power like this can also help to cement a sense of ownership and commitment to the collaboration across the membership.



In your experience, how is power and influence best exercised in collaborative settings?

### Summary Advice and Action Box

- Leaders should exercise judgement when choosing either “democratic” or “pragmatic” means of progressing collaboration
- Be aware that power and leadership can shift through the membership as the collaboration progresses
- Avoid using terms such as “senior” and “junior” or “core and “periphery” when referring to the membership
- Sharing and transferring power can help to cement a sense of ownership and commitment to the collaboration across the membership
- Participants need to choose the manner of their engagement, and should be open and upfront about their ability to contribute

## communicating

**“If there is one thing we would have done differently, it would be to have hired a dedicated communications officer from the outset.”**

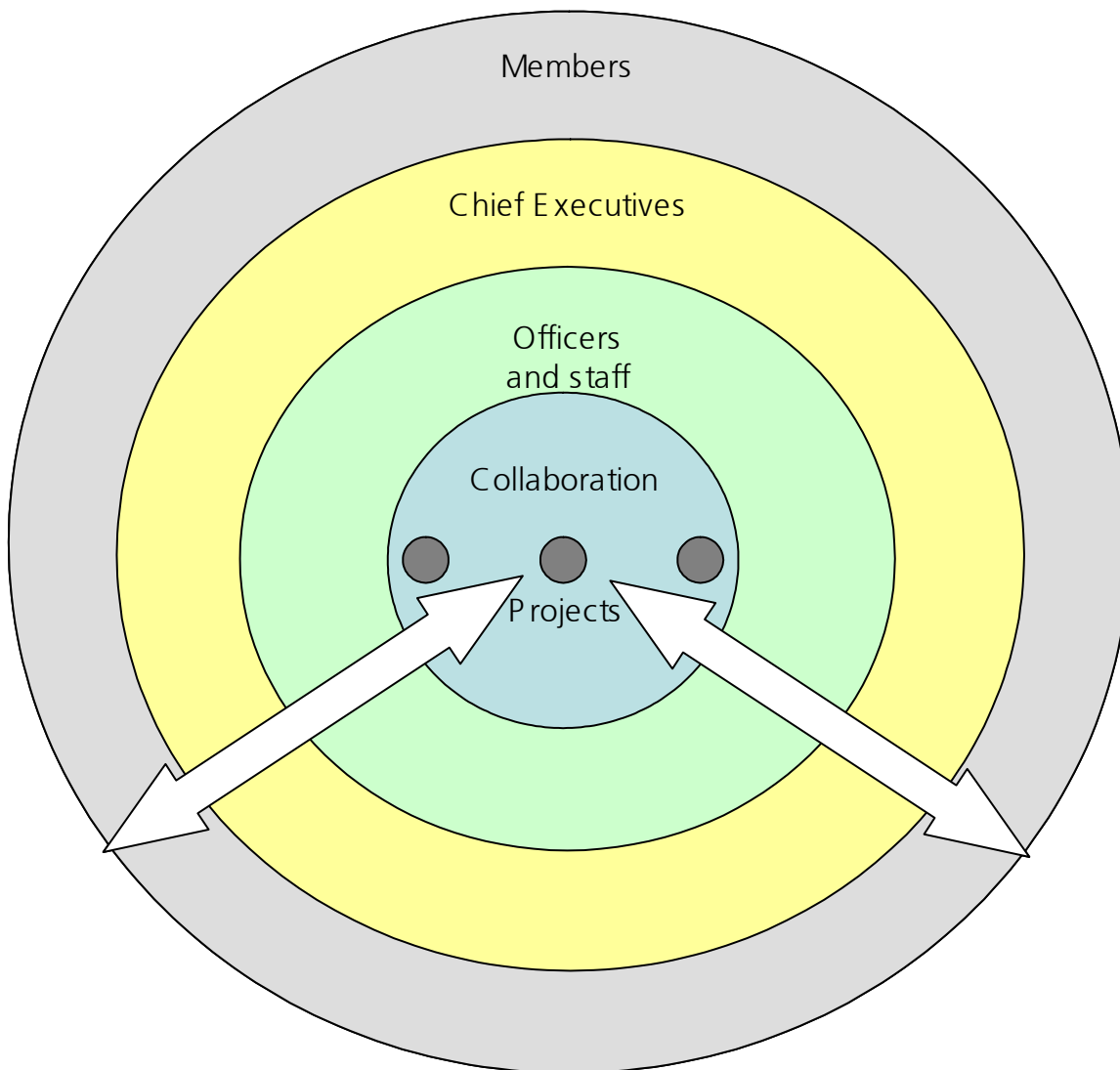
Many collaborative projects report that communication is the single most overlooked area, and the one that has resulted in the most problems. Communication is anything but a trivial issue in a collaborative project.

Early and regular communication is critical for successful stakeholder engagement. As one commentator put it:

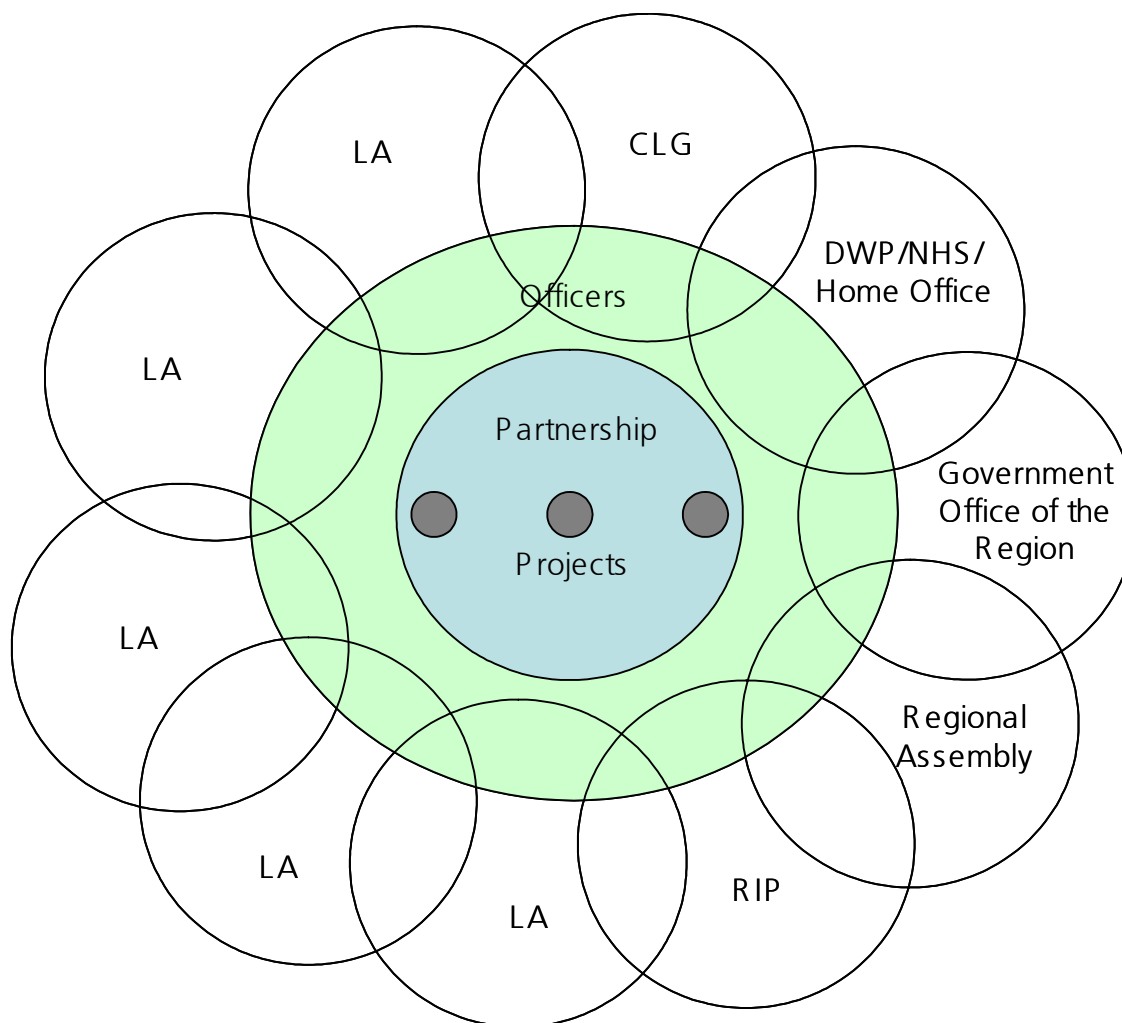
**“If you communicated a message once, you haven’t really begun to communicate. If you have communicated a message consistently three or more times, you may be beginning to get through.”**

In addition to this workload, different audiences will also require different messages. The following diagrams illustrate the various “circles of communication” with which collaborative initiatives in local government may need to engage. Mapping relationships between collaborations, and the relevant stakeholders in this way, can help to generate clarity in terms of roles, responsibilities and the communication required.

**Figure 1. Communication Between Collaboration to Officers and Members**



**Figure 2. Communication between Collaboration and External Agencies and Stakeholders**



Keeping up communication between organisations and the project group is likely to be highly time-consuming but essential. The NNPJU held “wider team meetings”, inviting policy planners for updates and feedback, while a Steering Group comprising the Chief Planning Officers mirrored the membership of a Joint Committee comprising members. The project also commented that clear lines of communication between the representative member and officer were essential to progress.

Project leaders and managers also need to facilitate open communication between parties. Encouraging open and active communication is essential to surface and test the assumptions actors make when considering options and routes forward. Participants in partnership projects, as with other major change projects, sometimes wrongly ascribe resistance to change to other actors in the process. This can be the result of a genuine misapprehension or the projection of a personal concern onto another group to avoid an option that they do not favour. Facilitators must manage these issues with tact and diplomacy.

Projects also emphasise the need to be open and honest about the influence of external events. External circumstances will change, and the collaboration will be impacted by events outside of its control. To mitigate the risks to the endeavour, participants should be encouraged to notify their partners of any shift in their organisation's priorities, rather than attempt to hide impediments.

Given the role of multiple organisations in place-shaping, and the interdependences between different partners of Government, collaborative projects should consider seeking out and drawing in support and participation from related service providers and stakeholders. The Northumberland Planning Officers' collaboration project plan set out an explicit task to engage stakeholders in a discussion of the options for collaborative service delivery which had been developed through the earlier phases of their process plan. The engagement was envisaged as both an opportunity to test their proposals against the needs and objectives of their stakeholders. They hoped to gain agreement and support and also identify further opportunities to enrich the collaboration by involving other partners.



How would you encourage and ensure effective communication across a collaborative project?

be present!

Over and above attendance at meetings, successful collaborations often remark that representatives at meetings need to be present both physically and mentally. One researcher tells the story of a GP who habitually answered his mobile telephone at each and every meeting. This occurred despite the partnership funding a locum to cover for the time the GP spent on partnership matters. The message such behaviour sent out to the other members of the partnership is negative and discouraging.

### Summary Advice and Action Box

- Early and regular communication with all stakeholders is critical
- Mapping relationships can help to generate clarity in terms of roles, responsibilities and the communication required
- Recognise that different audiences may require different messages
- Be open and honest about changes in circumstances
- Be present!

## resourcing collaboration

Resourcing collaboration can be challenging. Given the scarcity of skilled planning staff (itself a driver to collaboration) committing the time “away from the day job” to work on and drive the collaboration project is a very real conundrum. Partners need to be aware of the demands that a partnership project will place on their officers. Having to regularly travel and attend meetings in addition to undertaking their existing duties is not a trivial undertaking. As one participant on the HIPOG project commented:

**"When you are told to make time to do it, you fit it in. But it does distract from the day job."**

Resourcing is not merely a financial issue, and financial “solutions” such as re-charging for time spent is not straightforward. Planners working on collaborative projects in Hampshire reported that delegating work could be almost as time consuming as undertaking the work yourself, and carving out a portion of someone's workload and re-charging was not a simple calculation.

Unless the participating organisations recognise the extra workload placed on representatives, there's a risk these additional tasks will become a low priority “fringe” activity which never reaches the top of the “to-do” pile.

There is no single right way of addressing these challenges, and there are as many different resourcing models as there are collaborative projects.

Partners need to be able to resource the initial exploratory and investigative phases of a collaborative initiative, and the expertise required may not be available in the consortium. In the Hampshire project mentioned above, the Planning Advisory Service pumped-primed the project financially and input specialist expertise to help the partnership get moving. The lessons of the Hampshire project and other collaboration projects have been harvested in the form of studies and advice to help others looking to undertake collaboration projects in planning service delivery. (For further information, see the Planning Advisory Service website at [www.pas.gov.uk](http://www.pas.gov.uk).)

The NNJPU began by seconding staff from the constituent authorities to the Joint Unit, with officers typically spending three days a week with unit, and two days with their council. However, the officers found themselves trying to do a full job for each organisation. The benefit of having a direct link between the Unit and the councils was outweighed by the stress on the individuals. In the end, the Unit started to make full time appointments or to use a monetary substitute to hire contractors.

Typically, participation and contribution by participants to a partnership is not equal - a handful of organisations will provide the energy and other resources. However, there are examples where such disproportionate inputs of resources are not reflected in governance structures – and necessarily so. There are several examples of County Councils quietly sponsoring a partnership initiative, investing significantly more than the Districts to achieve outcome that would otherwise not be possible. They have, however, coupled these financial inputs with a deliberately facilitative – rather than domineering – style of leadership.

Such apparently benevolent behaviour represents an appreciation of the different types of resources - financial and non-financial - that different partners bring to a partnership. Resources can be human resources, IT and facilities or knowledge, experience, power and legitimacy. Even when costing these resources financially, the County Councils' achieve outcomes that they could not deliver acting alone.

Partnerships also need “to keep their eye on the prize” where resourcing is a challenge, since collaboration is one of the few potential solutions to the resource problem facing planning departments.



How have you addressed the resourcing challenges of collaborative projects?

### Advice and Action Box

- Be aware of the demands that a partnership project might produce
- Recognise that participation and contribution from members is unlikely to be equal
- Appreciate the different types of resources – financial and non-financial – that different partners bring to a partnership
- There is no single “right way” of doing things – there are as many different resourcing models as there are collaboration projects
- Keep your eye of the prize – collaboration offers a potential means of overcoming the resource scarcity in the planning sector

## realising benefits

The distribution of benefits also needs to be transparent and fair. However, this does not mean that the division of benefits has to be uniform or equal.

By fair, we mean that the benefits accruing to one partner should neither be disproportionate nor unduly at the expense of another.

Rather than an equal share, participants should expect an “equitable” share. Their share will be proportional to their contribution and more than could have been achieved by working alone.



How have the benefits of joint working been divided-up between participants? How have you managed this process?

### success breeds success

Collaborative projects often report that success breeds success. One of the greatest benefits from a successful project is the establishment of trust between parties and the will to continue working together.

**“Now that we are succeeding at what we were originally tasked to do, the Joint Planning Unit is evolving. People are actively talking about “well, what can we do next”**

North Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit

The transformation of planning and other public services will require a greater degree of joint, collaborative and partnership working between authorities and other agencies. Joint working can be challenging, but also greatly rewarding as participants achieve outcomes that would otherwise be impossible.

The pathway to success of collaborative endeavours varies according to circumstances, and the approaches to overcoming challenges will differ accordingly. However, while no “single right way” will suit all situations, local authorities embarking on joint projects can benefit from reflecting on approaches that have proven successful elsewhere.

There is also the opportunity to compare experiences and learn from each other. The publication of this guidance is at the beginning of a learning process – rather than the end. You are encouraged to contribute your views on what is presented here and help grow the sector’s knowledge and understanding of successful joint working.



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