

Thinking about... collaboration

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Terms

We use 'voluntary organisations' in this document as a broad term to cover organisations which variously describe themselves as belonging to the following:

- community sector
- voluntary and community sector
- third sector
- non-profit sector
- civil society
- NGO sector.

IVAR's Thinking about... series

The *Thinking about...* series is based around a straightforward idea. Using the findings from previous research (our own and others), we want to provide useful information for voluntary sector organisations that is grounded in the experiences of others.

The *Thinking about...* series is not prescriptive, nor does it offer 'toolkits' or step-by-step guides for organisations to follow. The series is intended to help practitioners to make informed decisions about changes they may be considering.

The *Thinking about...* series is primarily aimed at staff and trustees of small to medium sized voluntary sector organisations. However, we believe policy makers, academics and those with an interest in the voluntary sector will also find the publications in the series illuminating and thought provoking.

Other publications in the *Thinking about...* series include:

- *Thinking about... merger*: this document brings together the experiences of a wide variety of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) that have contemplated or carried out merger. Available at www.ivar.org.uk

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Introduction

In spite of unprecedented levels of policy-driven interest in collaborative working involving voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), we know from our work that individuals and organisations can experience practical difficulties when trying to work collaboratively with others.

They face searching questions, such as:

- Who should we collaborate with and why?
- What form should collaboration take?
- What do we need to do to make collaboration worthwhile?
- How can we minimise the tensions which seem to accompany attempts to enact change in organisations?

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In an attempt to shed some light on these enduring puzzles of VCOs, we decided to look across our portfolio of research over our first 10 years and synthesise our findings from the projects we completed in that period.

To help us understand the process of inter-organisational collaborations, and in keeping with our goal to be a problem-solving research institute, we posed the following four questions to guide our synthesis of the original data:

- What are the organisational challenges for voluntary organisations to which collaborative working is a response?
- What are the problems and challenges associated with collaborative working in practice?
- What are the organisational responses to the problems of implementing collaborative working?
- What theories and concepts emerge from the accumulated research as useful for those VCOs contemplating collaboration?

In relation to each of these questions, we looked especially for common themes but also noted differences between findings in projects.

Our approach

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For the purposes of this exercise we defined 'collaboration' broadly to include all kinds of interactions across the boundaries of two or more voluntary organisations; from temporary cooperation, strategic alliances and consortia through to takeover and merger. We also looked at and included:

- instances of inter-organisational interaction which were not explicitly seen as collaboration by participants – for example, interactions labelled as partnerships
- collaborations between the public and voluntary sectors
- collaborations whereby public sector organisations purchased or commissioned services from voluntary organisations.

We also decided to focus, for the purposes of this exercise, on the process and implementation of collaborative ventures (rather than their outcomes, for example).

We use quotations (indicated in italics) from reports of some of IVAR's and the Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research's (ACVAR) 70 research projects to illustrate the key themes. We also provide some brief examples. We attribute quotations and examples to particular projects only where the material is available in published form – for example, online via IVAR's website or the organisation concerned – or where research participants have given permission for findings to be made public. We refer to those who have taken part in our research projects as 'study participants'.

Context

Collaborative working, in all its guises, has become a central feature of organisational life in the voluntary and community sector (VCS).ⁱ The period covered by this research synthesis – 2000 to 2010 – coincided with an explosion of policy interest in the VCS, both as a provider of public services and as an agent of social and democratic renewal. A common thread running through public policy for the VCS, since the publication of the Treasury's 2002 cross-cutting review,ⁱⁱ has been the idea of collaborative working between VCOs as a means of achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and impact.

At the same time, the Cabinet Office strategy unit's 2002 review considered the way in which the voluntary sector's legal and regulatory framework might be overhauled, in part to facilitate greater collaboration and merger.ⁱⁱⁱ Later, the 2009 plan to help VCOs withstand the effects of the economic recession included a modernisation fund for organisations wanting to merge or collaborate.^{iv} Most recently, the coalition government's programme^v and its commitment to the 'Big Society'^{vi} indicate that policy interest in the VCS remains high and that the emphasis on collaboration continues to be strong, with a particular focus on 'broad partnerships for change'.^{vii}



Background to this publication

This document has been produced as part of IVAR's 10th anniversary celebrations. Discussions within the team about how best to mark the passage of time since our establishment as the ACVAR in October 2000 led us to alight upon the theme of collaboration as the focus for our 10th anniversary. We wanted primarily to recognise the enormous debt we owe to the many individuals and organisations who have supported our efforts over the years and with whom we have worked in collaborative arrangements of various kinds. Our research unit would never have lifted off without: the support we received from colleagues at Aston University and, more recently, at Birkbeck; the financial backing of our three core funders – Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Lankelly Chase and the Tudor Trust; the guidance and encouragement of our advisors and board members; and the willingness of so many VCOs to engage with us in a joint search for solutions

to their organisational challenges. The theme of collaboration gave us an opportunity to thank these many 'partners'. The theme also provided another kind of opportunity to celebrate our 10th birthday.

Behind this short document, therefore, is a tome of data on the theme of collaboration gathered from 70 IVAR (and ACVAR) research projects. Some of those concentrated explicitly on the theme of collaboration – for example, on partnerships or mergers – but much of the data comes from projects that focused primarily on other issues but which, on re-examination, proved to have interesting insights into the challenges of collaborative working involving voluntary organisations.

We were fortunate to have the opportunity to discuss the emerging findings from the synthesis with a group of voluntary sector practitioners and funders at IVAR's 10th anniversary consultation event in June 2010. This publication takes into account their comments about the implications of our findings.



Organisational challenges for voluntary organisations to which collaborative working is a response

In Part 2 we set out the perceived challenges that VCOs have sought to address by entering into collaborative ventures.

For some VCOs, the main concern has been about how best to **react** to the challenges facing them as a result of the changing policy environment, increased financial vulnerability or insufficient organisational capacity. Others have been interested in collaboration as a way of being **proactive** in developing their organisation; providing more comprehensive or higher-quality services; or having more influence on the policies of governmental authorities and funders. In many cases, organisations have attempted to address a complex web of inter-linked challenges and difficulties through collaboration – for example, when a change in policy relating to their field of work has occurred at the same time as a reduction in funding.

Some common factors emerged from our research synthesis about the challenges to which VCOs try to respond through collaborative working. We address in turn:

- responding to the policy environment
- achieving financial security
- enhancing organisational capacity
- developing organisational structures
- improving service provision
- influencing policy.

2.1

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Responding to the policy environment

As we described in Part 1, our research over the last 10 years has taken place in an environment in which collaborative working – including collaborations across sectoral boundaries – has been encouraged, at least in principle, by government and statutory agencies operating at national, regional and local levels.

Collaborative arrangements of various kinds have provided frameworks that have enabled or encouraged organisations to either come together or offer different or additional services. Examples include Springfield Children's Centre in Birmingham, several faith-based organisations and many multi-purpose community organisations that are members of bassac, Community Matters or the Development Trusts Association (DTA). While these collaborations have not necessarily been formed specifically in response to external pressures, a policy environment that favours collaboration has nevertheless been an important influence, as highlighted by participants in one study we undertook for bassac: *"There is talk about collaborative working because people know it can help in terms of funding; people work collaboratively if there is something in it for them"; and "We are working more collaboratively to deliver services to clients; government policies and regional policies encourage you to do so, but we were doing so anyway, so it's not causal, more coincidental."*

More generally, VCOs have needed to operate in a more competitive external environment, in terms of funding, policy influence and human resources – trustees, volunteers, staff and sometimes clients. For example, when Gingerbread and One Parent Families first explored the possibility of merger in 2005, it was suggested that the increasingly competitive external environment made it difficult to justify the existence of two organisations working with and for lone parents. Similarly, participants in a study of the Jewish voluntary sector saw closer collaboration between organisations in the same field and geographical area as a possible response to funders' perceptions that there was duplication of specialist provision and simply too many VCOs for available resources.

In some cases, collaboration has been a response to some very specific policy changes. Early on in our unit's history, we worked with the Terrence Higgins Trust to explore what had happened since their merger with regional HIV and AIDS agencies. We discovered that one of the many inter-related factors that had led them to consider a closer working relationship in the first place was the changing roles of the state and the voluntary sector in meeting the health needs of their client group. In another study, organisations working in the field of adoption revealed that changes to the way in which adoption work is funded by governmental agencies have acted as a driver to organisational alliances.

2.2

Achieving financial security

In many of our research projects, we found organisations that felt increasingly uncertain about their future as a result of difficulties in securing sufficient and sustained funding. They also had to compete more aggressively for income. One group that found this funding environment particularly challenging was small adoption and fostering agencies; several of them considered collaboration as a way of guaranteeing their own survival, albeit under different auspices. Some smaller agencies saw merger with TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) as a means of gaining, among other benefits, opportunities for greater financial stability, economies of scale and a more developed organisational infrastructure that they could not afford as a very small organisation: in other words, it was: *"a way of keeping the organisation together with the security of the infrastructure provided by a bigger organisation."* For these small organisations, anxiety about financial security was part of a broader concern – to ensure that their client group could continue to access the services they need: *"The number one priority was the young people and the carers, so they didn't lose out in any way."*

Our research also suggested that the availability of funding for collaborative ventures (rather than to single agencies) has played a part in the decisions taken by other, less financially vulnerable organisations, leading them to seriously consider entering into partnership arrangements: *"It was pragmatic, a way of securing money and enabling the organisations to continue doing what they were doing already."*

2.3

Enhancing organisational capacity

In several of our studies, the desire to address issues of organisational capacity emerged as a factor that influenced the thinking of staff and trustees about whether to engage in collaborative arrangements with other organisations. In some VCOs, a perception of insufficient capacity (in governance, staffing or infrastructure) as well as the funding issues discussed above led to a decision to collaborate; others saw collaboration as a means to enhance and improve existing organisational arrangements.

We also found organisations grappling with inherited models of governance and/or staffing arrangements that were inappropriate to the situations they were now having to address. When Gingerbread and One Parent Families finally took the decision to merge, for example, it was suggested that: *"We [Gingerbread] didn't have enough money to employ enough staff to implement the business plan"* and that: *"their [Gingerbread's] model of governance meant that they were not able to pursue opportunities and developments."*

Other organisations viewed collaboration more as a strategic choice that would enhance existing organisational effectiveness than as a response to a perceived lack of organisational capacity. The decision by bassac and the DTA to co-locate in a jointly owned building provides an example of this.

bassac and the Development Trusts Association

Both bassac and the DTA are well established national membership organisations with a long history of collaboration with each other through various forums and networks. Both had identified buying a building as a key strategic objective and saw this as more achievable together than separately.

bassac and the DTA noted the potential that co-location offered for sharing some functions and services, in particular reception services and 'back office' functions such as accounting, payroll, IT support, use of photocopiers and other office equipment. Additionally, they thought that they would be able to work together on policy development, funding bids and developing services to members. They also saw co-location as a means of enabling them to learn from one another: *"We thought our individual knowledge bases would add up to more than the sum of their parts."*

The idea of 'pioneering a new way of working', with shared learning at its heart, was very attractive to both organisations, and played a role in the decision to co-locate. Ultimately it was hoped that the opportunities for shared learning and support, developed from a physical base offering improved facilities and resources, would benefit both their memberships. They also hoped that co-location would help improve their reach and effectiveness, while allowing them to retain their respective strengths and areas of specialism.^{viii}

2.4

Developing organisational structures

For the adoption and fostering agency TACT, merger with smaller organisations operating in the same field enabled them to expand both their range of services and geographical reach, thus increasing their ability to benefit looked-after children. Similarly, the merger of the Terrence Higgins Trust with regional HIV and AIDS agencies was described as having been driven by a number of complementary challenges that included: the changing needs of service users; the desire for greater policy influence; the financial vulnerability of some of the regional agencies; and the need to relate to a complex and changing policy environment. Key staff and trustees thought that they could deal with these challenges, and provide a better service to their users if they were to become a single national agency.

Terrence Higgins Trust and regional HIV and AIDS agencies

Following the merger of the London-based Terrence Higgins Trust with regional HIV and AIDS agencies, it was considered that the new merged organisation had been able to achieve greater geographical coverage and a broader funding base than they had before merger. It had become: *“a national organisation with strengthened services and strengthened fundraising”*; *“a proper national, health charity”*. The merger was seen as having raised the profile of HIV at national level – in government and with the media. The merged organisation had more influence and more credibility in its claim to represent the views of people with HIV. In its position as a truly national organisation it was seen as providing a better and more comprehensive response to the needs of people with HIV and AIDS than had been possible under the former organisational structure, which consisted of a number of independent regional and specialist agencies.

2.5

Improving service provision

P 15

The opportunity to ‘achieve more together than by working singly’ was a theme that recurred across our studies. Working in partnership with other agencies, often across sectoral boundaries, was described by many participants in the research projects as an effective way of providing more services, or services that are of higher quality or more directly geared to users’ needs. Participants in the Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP) commented that working with VCOs enabled local authorities to reach, and get closer to, local communities. The VCOs saw working with the local authority as an opportunity for the latter to become more conversant with the needs of traditionally excluded members of local communities – such as BME groups, faith groups and disabled people. Likewise, a study of the operation of local Compacts indicated that participants in their development were motivated less by the desire to have a Compact for its own sake and more by a concern to use cross-sectoral working as a means to achieve improved services.

A desire of this kind, to sustain or improve, the quality of existing services was frequently described as a spur to VCOs to collaborate with public sector agencies. One such example is the development of the Springfield Children’s Centre in Birmingham.

Springfield Children's Centre, Birmingham

Those involved in running the Springfield project described how they had been concerned to consolidate, and, if possible, extend the work the project was already doing with children, young people and families. Entering into a partnership with Birmingham City Council (BCC) offered the opportunity to develop and extend existing services to further benefit the local community: it was *"a really good thing for the church, the project and the community"*; *"Everyone realises what a great offer was being made to us that could really make an impact on people's lives."*

For BCC, the fact that the project was already providing a range of high-quality services to local children and their families was an important factor: *"It was on their agenda; it was a natural extension of what they were doing."* The project's long history of inter-faith working and understanding the needs of a multi-faith community was seen as being of primary importance in developing a Children's Centre in that area.

In terms of inclusivity of ethos and practice, the agendas of BCC and Springfield were at one: *"The whole idea of being inclusive was on their agenda."*

Similarly, in our study of local projects linked to the Church of England, we found churches that, as well as running their own projects, developed partnerships with other organisations for particular areas of work. Church leaders felt that these made a major contribution to the services they were able to offer: *"We could not do half of what we do, or do it so effectively, without people with expertise in particular fields, eg debt advice, Sure Start. Partnership and working together really makes a difference, and increases the possibility for signposting people to other sources of help."*

For merger partners specifically, bringing together different services for the same client group was seen as a means to achieve greater continuity of care and a wider range of services, to provide: *"stronger and more effective direct support, with the quality of that support feeding into the voice and the quality of the voice reinforcing the support."*

2.6

Influencing policy

P 17

As we described earlier, VCOs often feel that they are working in a competitive environment where it can be difficult to make their own voices – and those of the individuals and groups they work with – heard by policy-makers and statutory bodies. Study participants often noted that VCOs were more likely to influence government policy by working together. For example, a strong factor in the formation of the Community Alliance was the view that its members (bassac, Community Matters and the DTA) could wield greater influence to the advantage of the broad community sector by working together than they could working separately. In early discussions, senior staff from the partner organisations found that they had: *“common concerns over policy around community issues”* and: *“an increasing sense that the policy and environmental change we were trying to bring about was bigger than we could achieve by ourselves.”* Participants also saw raising the profile of the community sector through working together as being of crucial importance: *“The community sector would dwell in the shadows forever unless we do something.”*



The problems and challenges of collaborative working in practice

In this part, we consider some of the challenges of implementing collaborative working in practice as described by participants in our research studies.

We address in turn:

- dealing with difference
- protecting organisational identity and niche
- balancing individual and collective interests
- developing appropriate leadership
- developing appropriate governance structures
- securing resources and organisational capacity for the collaboration
- developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration.

3.1

P 20

Dealing with difference

Participants in several projects described how they needed to find ways of living with the differences between partner organisations – such as organisational culture, management style, ways of working, approaches to service delivery and decision-making structures.

In some instances, these differences led to further challenges that were about power and equity in the partnership: *“We are keen to see equity in the partnership... It has been a big issue about power and who has it. The way we operate and our style is different – some of us wanted to, and others didn’t want to, take strong leadership roles. Maintaining equity is important.”*

In a study of collaborative working between large and small VCOs, differences in organisational culture presented challenges which manifested themselves in a variety of ways. For example, the larger organisations had a greater focus on risk management and their smaller partners adopted a less cautious approach. For some collaborations involving national organisations with a regional structure, staff at the most senior level managed to find ways of working with organisational differences, but at the local or regional level the differences were more difficult to address, with staff often having limited expertise of working with partners from other organisations and a heavy agenda of competing preoccupations. A participant in one study commented: *“It would have been better if we had prepared for it culturally by visiting the organisations and finding out what they did.”* Others were grappling with the question: *“How do you develop a common language and come up with common goals?”*

For those engaged in cross-sectoral collaborations, the structural differences between the sectors posed a further set of challenges. In one study, for example, local authority participants struggled with the breadth and diversity of the VCS, and yearned for: *“a clear method to discuss with the voluntary sector”*, while VCS participants commented that: *“government agendas don’t match ours or the community’s.”*

3.2

Protecting organisational identity and niche

Participants in several projects expressed concerns about the extent to which collaboration might dilute or even obliterate their organisational identity and their freedom to act independently. They referred, for example, to anxieties about being seen as: *“just part of some loose alliance”* rather than an independent organisation with its own distinct brand. They struggled with trying to preserve their organisational culture, ways of working and particular message while at the same time benefiting from the potential gains of collaborative working. A study of multi-purpose community sector organisations illustrates the challenges of this balancing act.

Multi-purpose community sector organisations involved in collaboration

Study participants described how they had become increasingly involved in partnerships with other VCOs in recent years. While they felt that collaborative working had many positive effects on services, in some cases it had also reduced their independence. They needed to make decisions about future work based not only on their own capacity to deliver, but also on what other organisations were doing – for example, study participants said: *“We wouldn’t set up a community café if they (another community-based organisation with whom they worked closely) [were already] doing something”; “We wouldn’t do work with Kashmiri and Pakistani elders because another organisation [was already] doing that”; “We have to position ourselves, carve out a niche, protect what we’ve got, expand where we can.”*

Organisations were also acutely concerned about potential losses that might arise through merger, such as the possibility of staff redundancies or the lack of a continuing role for trustees. Where the organisations merging were of different sizes, those in the smaller organisations were anxious about being ‘swallowed up’: *“I’m very worried about a takeover; we might feel over-awed.”*

3.3

P 22

Balancing individual and collective interests

The policy environment in which VCOs are operating has been characterised not only by the pressures for collaboration referred to in Part 1, but also by a contradictory pressure to compete. In one study of the impact of public policy on volunteering in community-based organisations, it was suggested that competition for funding and the consequent lack of trust makes it increasingly difficult to share information with, and gain support from, other local organisations. This was seen as having helped to create a more individualistic environment: *“Competitive tendering has destroyed so much within the VCS.”* Some of our study participants also struggled to balance their own organisation’s interests with those of a partnership. This was described as creating uncertainties and tensions: *“What happens when the next big issue comes up? What would make us say individual [organisational interests] are more important than [the] partnership?”*

The sharing of resources within a collaborative venture could also prove challenging. In some partnerships we heard of difficult discussions taking place about the allocation of money across the organisations involved: *“There was a lot of phone wrangling about who would get what.”* For some study participants this raised questions about the extent to which a collaborative venture could in practice be one of equals, and whether individual organisational interests would always tend to take precedence over the interests of the partnership as a whole.

One of our studies of Jewish community organisations highlighted some of the difficulties – not only for Jewish organisations, but for VCOs in general – of putting aside individual interests in pursuit of collaboration with others. Study participants cited individual loyalties, historical associations and a difficulty with thinking communally, rather than in terms of particular organisations, as barriers to collaborative ways of working. They also widely acknowledged that: *“the community must be the priority, not individuals getting their names in lights; it is not about personal gratitude but about moving the community forward.”* Yet this was seen as difficult to achieve in practice.

3.4

Developing appropriate leadership

Our studies found that collaborative arrangements were usually initiated by senior staff, or, in smaller organisations, by trustees. Their ability to inspire trust within and beyond their own organisations emerged as a key factor in the success of such arrangements; many of our studies pointed to the crucial leadership role played by key individuals. Trusting relationships between individuals from different organisations also helped sustain partnerships: *“The better [personal relationships] are, the more effective the working... policies don’t mean much.”*

The studies suggested that in cross-sectoral partnerships, local authority staff attached particular importance to the ‘legitimacy’ of VCO leaders; in other words, their ability to represent views that were not just those of their own organisation, but also of a wider spectrum of voluntary sector opinion: *“We always have to think about who the organisation is; [about] who is part of it.”* In studies about the implementation of the Compact, the important role played by collaborative ‘champions’ from both sectors emerged clearly.

What makes a successful local Compact? The importance of leadership

Collaborative champions were described as people who could: *“bring about change”* or: *“knock heads together”*. In one case, a breach of the Compact was resolved to mutual satisfaction following a challenge from the voluntary sector to the local authority. As one study participant explained: *“It was quite clear that the most important factor was having intelligent senior local authority staff who were genuinely committed to partnership working and willing to admit they’d made a mistake.”*

A major part of the leadership challenge for senior staff and trustees is communicating the purpose of collaboration – the vision of what can be achieved by working together rather than separately – and the expectations of how staff at all levels need to work to achieve that aim. In several projects it emerged that the role of leaders was crucial in helping to embed the notion of collaborative working throughout the organisations involved.

3.5

Developing appropriate governance structures

Study participants referred not only to the challenges of leadership but also to the interlinked challenge of developing appropriate governance structures and organisational accountability. In some instances, new structures were developed, which not only helped address some of the governance challenges, but also led to more complex chains of accountability. For example, the collaborative move to co-locate the staff of bassac and the DTA led to the establishment of a new 'hub board' to discuss issues relating to the shared building: senior staff and trustees from both organisations had to relate to the new board in addition to their own separate boards. However, this approach has its dangers – for example, participants in the study on cross-sectoral partnerships involved in PIP were unclear about how, and by whom, decisions were made because of the complexity of the additional structures established.

Governance challenges were also a feature of organisations contemplating merger, or that had recently merged. In some cases, organisations that were considering merger needed to grapple with different models of governance and the associated impact these had on their decision-making processes. Gingerbread, for example, had traditionally had a board made up of representatives from its local groups, while One Parent Families had adopted a skills-based approach to board composition. In the early discussions about a possible merger this perceived lack of fit in relation to governance was viewed as an obstacle to future collaboration.

3.6

Securing resources and organisational capacity for collaboration

We have already discussed how some partners in collaborative ventures viewed working with other organisations as a way of increasing their organisational capacity. At the same time, however, securing resources, in terms of financial support and people with time to devote to the collaboration, often proved challenging. It was particularly difficult where staff were expected to work collaboratively with colleagues from other organisations in addition to carrying out their existing work. Participants in one partnership commented: *"Do we have enough time to do this? I saw this beast being set up; there didn't seem to be any warm-up phase"*; and: *"It is a bolt-on to what we already do and for that reason it will always be second."* In another study of collaboration between membership organisations, participants said that money was available to employ regional staff, but not to cover the cost of running joint events for members: *"There is money... only for staff; [there is] not project money for delivery, events, resources, training etc, for which regional staff are expected to fundraise."*

A study of collaborative working between large and small organisations revealed that, while larger organisations could have several staff working on issues relating to the partnership, smaller organisations might be able to involve only one staff member. This often placed disproportionate burdens on the latter and complicated communications and feedback between the organisations. A study of one ChangeUp consortium found that only the partners with the capacity for senior staff to regularly attend consortium meetings could participate to a degree that enabled them to influence the development of strategy and funding proposals. The challenge of resourcing collaboration was also evident in PIP.

Partnership Improvement Programme (PIP) study

Working in partnership was found to be immensely time consuming: both VCOs and local authorities indicated that they lacked sufficient capacity – in terms of staff time, skills and funding – to meet all the expectations placed upon them. The burden of making partnerships function well often fell onto a small number of individuals, who picked up tasks because nobody else would do them or because their involvement was politically important. The corollary of this was that partnerships were often seen to depend too much on individual personalities. This, in turn, raised concerns about organisational and community accountability, and project sustainability.

3.7

Developing a shared understanding of the purpose of the collaboration

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In several cases, we found different understandings of the purpose of the collaboration in question – both across the organisations involved and within single organisations. A situation we frequently encountered was for partnerships to be agreed and developed at chief executive level while other staff had an incomplete understanding of why they were expected to work with staff of other organisations. One study participant explained: *“The bid was put together by the partners, but no-one owned it. Everyone had a different interpretation of the main thrust of the bid.”* Staff were often uncertain about the purpose of the partnership as a whole and of a particular programme within it: *“We have a different understanding of what this partnership is meant to be and what we’re meant to be doing”; “We need to investigate more and understand more how we can work collaboratively together.”*



4

Responses to the challenges

In Parts 2 and 3 we synthesised the study findings in relation to the organisational challenges for voluntary organisations to which collaborative working is a response; and the problems and challenges of collaborative working in practice.

In Part 4, we look at how organisations responded to the challenges of collaboration.

We address in turn:

- collaboration management
- recognising the emotions of collaboration
- developing a shared vision
- collaboration champions.

4.1

P 28

Collaboration management

Our studies showed that moving across and outside of organisational boundaries often necessitates engagement with different ways of working – for example, different styles of decision-making or systems of accountability. It can also involve changes and upheaval for staff, and new or additional responsibilities for people in positions of authority. For organisations working together across sectoral boundaries, these challenges can be further compounded by cultural differences.

A frequent response in the collaborations we studied was to accept and actively manage the collaboration. This strategy of 'collaboration management' involved, for example:

- managers setting aside time specifically for relationship-building and requiring their staff to do so too
- treating collaboration as a process rather than as a one-off event
- establishing dedicated coordination structures, for both the planning and implementation of collaborative ventures
- setting up financial management systems to support the collaboration
- providing training and skills development to support collaborative working
- building on the complementary skills of the collaborating organisations.

Throughout our studies participants regularly stressed the importance of taking time to build mutual trust and respect between the staff of collaborating organisations; they also said that, for the collaborative venture to become embedded in the participating organisations, staff at all levels should be involved in this process. The studies suggested that, where collaborations involved organisations from different sectors, joint training, induction and staff development were useful strategies for enhancing cross-sectoral understanding.

Some cross-sectoral partnerships established pre-partnership agreements as a core element of the process. They saw these as a way to help improve the governance of partnerships, and as providing an opportunity to invest in a development phase that would enable participants to anticipate and address some of the challenges of collaborating across sectoral boundaries. Participants also described written agreements as being helpful to: manage the risks associated with the receipt of large amounts of funding; spell out joint objectives; and provide a framework within which conflicts could be resolved. Participants in one study on collaborations between large and small VCOs stressed the importance of any such agreements being 'living documents', that could reflect the stage of development of the collaboration and the type of work being undertaken.

As we described in Part 3, some collaborating organisations established new and over-arching governance structures to deal with inter-organisational issues. While in some instances participants viewed these as adding a new link to already complex chains of accountability, they also saw them as beneficial in that they could, for example, create a legal entity through which contractual obligations and funding agreements could be collectively discharged. Studies indicated that effective collaboration management was closely linked to the availability of resources – in terms of both time and money. Although investment in skills and

relationships, and the enhancement of capacity before and during the collaborative process, were commonly identified as important, the resource implications of entering into collaborations were often overlooked. In cases that secured adequate funds for the collaborative process and allocated dedicated staff time as an integral part of collaboration management, the process of change was generally achieved more smoothly and efficiently.

4.2

Recognising the emotions of collaboration

The studies revealed how heavy the emotional burden can be that is placed on those who are closely involved in, and affected by, the collaboration process. As we noted in Part 3, staff, and in some instances trustees, were sometimes concerned about the impact that being involved in a collaborative venture might have on their organisational identity, their freedom to act independently, their organisational culture and their traditional ways of working. In some studies, particularly of organisations contemplating merger, people expressed concerns about the potential loss of their own position in the organisation.

The organisations involved in the studies were generally aware of these issues and some took explicit steps to acknowledge emotions and feelings; many study participants saw this recognition and being given time to explore these emotions as important. Participants also indicated that inter-organisational meetings at an early stage of the process – to share information, get to know each other and find out about organisational histories and working practices – were important precursors to closer working relationships that helped build trust between collaborators. Some organisations found that independent facilitation provided valuable opportunities for stakeholders to discuss their feelings about the implications of collaboration, particularly where it seemed likely to result in the loss of job or status.

The studies also demonstrated the importance of respecting organisational stories and traditions, especially in mergers where ‘... the delicate merging of organisational cultures can be facilitated by paying attention to and preserving key cultural elements from each of the predecessor associations.’^{ix} Conversely, our studies suggested that a failure to see beyond the ‘technical’ aspects of collaboration to the emotional issues involved could impede the collaboration process.

4.3

P 30

Developing a shared vision

Our studies showed that many VCOs respond to the challenges of collaboration by focusing on identifying, articulating and communicating its existence, purpose and potential benefits. Participants saw working towards a shared and over-arching vision as critical to the success of collaborative ventures. Identifying a vision of what could be achieved through collaboration – for example, improved services or greater policy influence – helped organisations, particularly those considering merger, to deal with their differences and move forward together. It could act as a reference point when making difficult decisions by reminding participants of the larger purpose of the collaboration.

For example, the partnership between the Springfield Children's Centre and Birmingham City Council described in Part 2 was underpinned by a shared vision of the development of high-quality services for children and their families. Both parties understood their need for the other in order to succeed in this aim, and recognised that they would both gain something that neither could achieve in isolation. Their shared goals helped them focus on the longer-term aim and deal with detailed negotiations over buildings and finance in an open and positive manner.

Similarly, in the co-location of bassac and the DTA described in Part 2, staff were able to see that the loss of independent accommodation would be balanced by tangible benefits in terms of owning a high-quality building, opportunities for shared learning and the chance to improve the effectiveness of both organisations.

Our studies showed, therefore, that communicating the case for collaboration (rationale, vision and potential outcomes) throughout the organisations involved often helped to allay the fears – about loss of status, identity or organisational culture – referred to earlier. Clear messages, delivered promptly and simultaneously to everyone involved, were thought to be crucial in minimising the opportunities for anxiety to escalate through uncertainty about when decisions would be made and subsequent actions taken.

4.4

Collaboration champions

Our findings indicate that organisations that can respond to the challenges of collaboration are frequently characterised by the presence of at least one 'collaboration champion': an individual with enthusiasm for change through collaboration. Such people are often those who scan the environment, recognise collaborative opportunities and have the skills and charisma to bring together appropriate partners. The following are just a few of the numerous examples of 'collaboration champions' we found in our studies:

- the leadership role played by senior staff and trustees of TACT and trustees of their merger partners was crucial in helping the organisations involved concentrate on the longer-term vision of what could be achieved through merger: improved and more geographically comprehensive services for looked-after children and young people
- the role played by Compact champions in modelling good practice in cross-sectoral relationships was described as an important aspect of the success of local Compacts
- the role of the chair of Gingerbread in taking a fresh approach to merger negotiations with One Parent Families: his strong leadership and willingness to take some issues on trust helped to re-energise discussions that had previously foundered.

Individuals like these, with their ability to see beyond – but not ignore – presenting problems, and who can promote the vision of what can be achieved together rather than separately, made frequent appearances in our studies. We return to their role again in Part 5.



5

Concepts for practice

In this concluding part, we build on the research synthesis to note some concepts that emerge from the accumulated study findings as likely to be useful for practitioners. Our purpose is to provide those who lead and manage VCOs with some tools they can employ when considering collaboration with other VCOs or across the government / voluntary sector boundary.

We address in turn:

- organisational environment
- stakeholders
- sustainability of change
- collaborative advantage
- exchange
- superordinate goals
- collaboration champions
- emotional work
- collaboration management
- inter-organisational collaboration.

Some of the concepts in this part were specifically mentioned by study participants; others reflect themes that have emerged from the research synthesis. Our discussion of each concept is necessarily brief and does not do justice to the richness of the theories and insights underpinning many of them. Our intention is simply to suggest ways of thinking about collaboration which may be practically useful; we do not aim to provide a textbook or handbook. However, we do provide some suggestions for further reading for those who wish to explore these ideas further.

5.1

P 34

Organisational environment

Our studies show that what happens within and between organisations is closely linked to the environment in which the organisations have to operate. VCOs' collaborations are often driven by events, actions and changes that are beyond the control of the parties themselves – for example, changes in public policy, trends in social care practice and the agendas of external stakeholders (who may encourage or resist collaboration). Equally, the strategic choices made by VCOs – including whether or not to engage in collaborations at all – can in turn impact on their own environment and that of other VCOs. New institutional theory gives insight into this dynamic interplay between organisational behaviour and organisational environment, reminding us that collaboration requires management and leadership which is constantly aware of the way in which organisations shape, and are themselves shaped by, their environmental context.¹

5.2

Stakeholders

Multiple stakeholders have been noted as a distinctive feature and challenge of voluntary sector management. This applies not only to a single VCO, but also to the kinds of collaborative working which have to take into account the stakeholders of two or more organisations. Indeed, many of the challenges listed in Part 3 can be seen as reflecting the need to reconcile the often competing agendas of the various internal and external stakeholders involved in a collaborative venture. In several of the studies synthesised for this publication, the interests of one particular group of stakeholders – for example, paid staff or funders – were seen as having priority or as driving the collaboration process. Other research literature suggests that sustainable change requires managers to pay attention to the full range of organisational stakeholders.²

5.3

Sustainability of change

The studies synthesised in this document indicate that it is helpful to see collaboration not so much as a specific, finite or time-limited organisational event, but as a long-term, ongoing process. Some study participants talked about collaboration as a long process in which new ways of working are embedded and eventually become taken for granted. Others discussed the need for participating organisations to develop shared goals and common organisational cultures, and allow time for these to become widely accepted. This reflects generic organisational literature, which points to the importance of managers paying attention not only to securing change events, but also to ensuring that subsequent change is sustainable.³ It also suggests that embedding collaboration throughout all parts of the organisation, not just those involved in initiating the relationship, is an aspect of the collaborative process that requires specific allocations of time and financial resources.

5.4

Collaborative advantage

Because (as shown in Parts 2 and 3) the practical challenges of collaboration can be formidable, and the process can extend over a long time period, the management of collaboration involves motivating paid staff, volunteers, trustees and other stakeholders to make special efforts to contribute positively to the enactment and embedding of change. This is especially the case where there is a strong sense of loss among some stakeholders or a lack of understanding of the compensatory benefits that might accrue from collaboration. It follows that it can be helpful if the potential collaborative advantage⁴ is clearly articulated to all stakeholders at an early stage of a collaborative process. Those whose full cooperation is required to enact and sustain organisational change need to be able to see the added value for themselves and others which can result from their cooperation and the abandonment or modification of former working norms and cultures.

5.5

P 36

Exchange

In some of the studies, the collaboration process moved more smoothly when the parties were able to visualise the process as a form of 'exchange', in which all parties needed to give up some cherished beliefs and practices in order to gain the benefits they sought for their clients and organisations in the longer term.⁵ This was particularly the case where study participants saw themselves as engaged in a struggle for supremacy, as described in Part 3: progress was often made when the process was re-framed as being more of an exchange which could yield benefits to all parties, irrespective of sector or organisational size.⁶

5.6

Superordinate goals

In several of the studies synthesised in this report, participants emphasised the need for a common vision between collaborative partners. While that vision could consist of as little as a shared view of the immediate practical benefits likely to accrue from collaboration, many study participants seemed to be talking, additionally, about the idea of a strategic goal that all parties could work towards. This reflects the concept of superordinate goals found in peace and reconciliation literature. Authors suggest that, in order to create links and promote interaction between diverse – perhaps initially antagonistic – people, one should focus on shared visions, shared tasks and goals that are 'above' those of the individual parties to the interaction.⁷

5.7

Collaboration champions

Looking across our research findings, we were struck by the number of collaborative ventures that are driven by a single key individual – usually a paid employee or volunteer trustee. Following the references in generic literature to ‘early adopters of change’ and ‘change champions’,⁸ we can see such individuals as ‘collaboration champions’. In our studies, people in this role were often entrepreneurial, in the sense that they were constantly scanning the organisational environment to tune in to threats and opportunities, and would respond positively to them. However, the synthesised findings suggest that entrepreneurial qualities were not the only, or even necessary, characteristic of collaboration champions. The crucial qualities were: leadership; their ability to enthuse others about the eventual collaborative advantage to be achieved; and their positive approach to overcoming the many obstacles inevitably encountered during the collaborative process.

5.8

Emotional work

The accumulated findings synthesised in this report are notable for their numerous references to the emotional responses engendered by the organisational collaboration process. The topic of ‘emotional work’ is addressed in some generic management literature, while literature on the voluntary sector has also recognised the importance of emotions such as commitment to values and loyalty to founders.⁹ Our accumulated findings certainly point to the need to recognise that the process of involving VCOs in collaboration will potentially raise highly emotional responses from participants – for example, regarding organisational identity and history. Since cooperation from a range of stakeholders and building cross-organisational trust is essential for achieving collaboration, it follows that acknowledging – and responding sensitively and positively to – emotions is an essential element in the management of collaboration.

5.9

Collaboration management

In reviewing the various concepts discussed so far, it becomes clear that the management of collaboration requires a distinctive set of specialist competencies. These include: the ability to discern how organisations interact with their environments and stakeholders; the willingness to see collaboration as a long-term developmental process rather than a one-off task; the recognition of the emotional elements involved in the process; and the skill to act as an intermediary and build trust across organisational boundaries.¹⁰ In short, we suggest that, on the basis of our synthesis, 'collaboration management' should be recognised as a specialist management competence, and supported by dedicated resources of time and money.

5.10

Inter-organisational collaboration

In concluding this Part 5 of our research synthesis, we think it is appropriate to direct attention to the very concept of 'organisational collaboration' which we chose as the original framework for our task.

Many of the studies brought together were focused on particular kinds of organisational collaboration – for example, mergers, cross-sectoral partnership working or strategic alliances. In framing our synthesis under the broad heading of 'collaboration' we were hypothesising that useful insights would be found by looking across different manifestations of inter-organisational cooperation. We think that the findings from the synthesis, as well as the useable concepts listed in this Part 5, fully support our hypothesis.

To the extent that there are common findings from studies of very different kinds of collaborations involving organisations with varied characteristics, there is a clear benefit in using a wide-angle lens to examine the process of VCO collaboration. VCOs contemplating collaborative ventures are likely to learn from the experiences of other VCOs – including those with different organisational features or that are contemplating different kinds of collaborative arrangements. Indeed, the wide-angle approach may help VCOs to recognise that there is a range of possible forms of organisational collaboration from which to choose.

At the same time, we are aware that our use of the wide-angle lens may have obscured important differences in the behaviours of collaboration partners with different characteristics such as income or size, and in the challenges associated with different kinds of collaboration. Moreover, different organisational behaviours and challenges may in practice be associated with particular kinds of collaboration.

We hope, therefore, that this document not only provides useful insights for practice, but can also act as a spur to further practice-relevant research in the future. It would be helpful for practitioners to know whether different kinds of collaborations are associated with particular challenges and whether organisations with particular characteristics face particular challenges in implementing collaboration.

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P 40

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