

WAB

Making Collaboration Work

Lessons from the CollaborationNI
evaluation

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CollaborationNI Conference: The Impact of Collaboration

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Overview

My comments today are based on our work over the last three years as advisers and evaluators to CollaborationNI and Building Change Trust. I will also draw on our insights into the challenges and critical success factors of collaborative working (both within the voluntary sector and between voluntary organisations and public agencies) from a series of research studies and support programmes carried out in England over the last 15 years.

Part One

Headlines from the evaluation

Before I try to answer the exam question – about making collaboration work – let me frame my comments with some brief observations about what we – that is myself and my colleague, Miranda Lewis – found in our evaluation. These headlines are based on survey data and interviews from around 130 organisations in receipt of support from CollaborationNI.

1. Drivers for collaboration

Drivers for collaboration

- Delivering better outcomes for beneficiaries
- Funding pressures/organisational survival.

So, a mix (often in combination) of proactive and reactive drivers.

2.The challenges of working in collaboration

The challenges of working in collaboration

- Dealing with difference
- Developing a shared vision
- Designing appropriate structures.

So, a classic blend of challenges relating to organisational culture, and both the function and form of inter-organisational collaboration.

3. The support provided by CollaborationNI

The support provided by CollaborationNI

- Independent, impartial and honest: ‘the honest broker’
- Professional and knowledgeable.

Before I summarise our findings on outcomes, let me say that the volume and quality of activity has been really impressive, across all elements of the support and influencing offer. Whilst there can never be room for complacency, the feedback from individuals and organisations in meaningful contact with CollaborationNI confirms that the service has, both directly and indirectly, contributed to positive outcomes, from raised awareness, through to service improvement and innovations.

To those findings, we should also add an observation about the behaviour of the funder, Building Change Trust, led by Nigel McKinney. Without question, this has been, in our judgement, a rare and exceptional example of a funder setting aside power and status, and working with and alongside funded organisations to identify shared goals and values. That behaviour has, in our view, contributed over phase two to an improved service and, in turn, better outcomes for voluntary organisations and their beneficiaries. The flexibility and trust displayed by BCT should stand as a lesson to other funders (both charitable and public).

4. The outcomes for voluntary organisations of support provided by CollaborationNI

The outcomes for voluntary organisations of support provided by CollaborationNI

- More knowledgeable about collaboration
- More able and willing to collaborate
- Links to behaviour change: more confident and more trusting.

5. Improvements for beneficiaries

Improvements for beneficiaries

- Gaps in services addressed
- Greater choice
- Enhanced advocacy and influence
- Retention of some key services
- And streamlining of others.

Part Two

Three lessons from the evaluation

Lesson 1: The shortcomings of top-down collaboration

One of the dangers of discussions about collaboration is that they often start mid or downstream, and can be based on untested assumptions. Let me illustrate that point by focusing for a moment on mergers.

Policymakers have traditionally alighted on mergers as a solution to their view that there is too much duplication and inefficiency within the sector. And yet such a public policy view has often been found to be flawed. Why? Well, I can think of at least two reasons.

First, if there is duplication, it is either, in the case of organisations that operate outside of the reach of public funding, none of government's business. Or, duplication has often come about as a direct result of governmental funding and, in some cases, active promotion of diversity. One of the consequences of policy encouragement for community-based provision, for localism, for social entrepreneurship and innovation has been more organisations.

More specifically, policy makers and funders in Northern Ireland (through both the peace process and the influx of European money) were happy to encourage the development of organisations often serving one community or the other – with little thought given to what to do when the funding began to dry up. So, if the sector does look bloated in certain areas, public agencies have had a hand in that.

Second, what little evidence we do have about mergers suggests that they are likely to be expensive to achieve (and, as we have heard from CollaborationNI staff, stressful and time-consuming). You need significant investment and time to bring about cost-savings. The truth is – and I say this as someone who has facilitated more than 20 merger studies – mergers are an inexact science that rely on human emotions and leaps of faith for success. So, as a solution to duplication or cost-cutting, they are a risky bet.

So, my first lesson, is that little good is likely to come from a top-down approach to collaboration that isn't fully attuned to the practical difficulties of trying to work collaboratively with others.

We might wonder why public policy hasn't been more attuned. After all, we only have to look at governmental agencies and their ongoing struggles, locally and nationally, to integrate and join up to appreciate that working across organisational or sectoral boundaries can be challenging. (Take, for example, the costs of RDA and the suggestion that it has been so expensive to achieve that the hoped-for savings may not now accrue.)

But, for whatever reasons, policy assumptions about collaboration are not always matched by the reality on the ground. However much sense collaboration might make, however compelling the case, we're talking here about independent organisations; organisations whose decision-making powers are their own; whose destinies are in their own hands. As one of our interviewees noted: *'The worry about a funder-driven collaboration is that it can look sensible and rational from a distance, but once you get into the detail, and exposed to the context and each organisation's history and ways of working, it gets messier and harder to reconcile differences'*.

Leo O'Reilly talked earlier today about moving funding to an *'outcomes-based approach'* and argued that, in order to tackle *'complex problems'*, a *'partnership approach'* (ie. cross-sectoral collaboration) would be essential. We would argue that, for this shift to be meaningful, for it to be more than just rhetoric, the principle of form follows function needs to be applied. In other words: what kind of funding and support for the voluntary sector is required to enable them to tackle complex problems and achieve positive outcomes? The features of public funding in relation to collaboration that we have heard about today – short-term funding; unrealistic timescales for bidding processes; unrealistic expectations around joint bidding; disproportionate arrangements for reporting; heavy-handed contract management – are not, we would suggest, the answer.

Lesson 2: The importance and value of collaboration for purpose

If Lesson One is, in essence, about the importance of governmental bodies becoming more aware and sensitive to the practical realities of collaboration for voluntary organisations, and perhaps taking a less directive approach to how the sector organises itself, what about voluntary organisations themselves?

CollaborationNI, supported by Building Change Trust, have been clear that, in an operating environment characterised by complexity and change, there is both a need and an opportunity to promote the benefits and opportunities of collaboration.

Complex situations challenge traditional practices. To quote one of our interviewees, *'work in complex areas cannot really be effectively tackled by one organisation on its own and therefore there is a need for collaboration'*. And, in an elaboration of that point, a similar perspective: *'people need help to shift mindsets from inward looking parochialism to a more outward looking approach. The focus needs to be on practical, meaningful changes to the way in which organisations can interact with each other and that needs to be prefaced by identifying shared issues and goals'*.

This shift in language and tone, to talking about the benefits and various models of *collaborating for a purpose* (in which the interests of beneficiaries are privileged over those of organisations, and where a premium is placed on *a vision for change*) has been at the heart of phase two of CollaborationNI. As much as there has been an emphasis on a reality check for governmental agencies and officials, there has also been a sustained effort to issue a wake-up call for the voluntary sector itself. But with the critical caveat that the focus is on creating a more sustainable, effective, vibrant sector, not undermining it or diminishing it. And so collaboration has been promoted as an opportunity rather than a budget cutting measure for funders.

So, Lesson Two is that the voluntary sector itself has a part to play in advancing collaborative working. Promoting, encouraging, unearthing, enabling collaboration for purpose - rather than requiring or stipulating or demanding it - is not only appropriate. It is important and necessary.

Lesson 3: The importance of support for collaboration

My third and final lesson is about the importance of support for collaboration.

We have written elsewhere about '*collaboration champions*' being a critical ingredient of effective and productive inter-organisational working. The work of CollaborationNI, and in particular its focus on supporting and enabling 'collaboration for purpose', can be seen as an act of championing. Our evaluation findings confirm that it is an act that produces real and tangible benefits and changes on the ground. This is in marked contrast to previous efforts at organising collaboration support in England where there tended to be a greater emphasis on more technical and generalist support at the expense of the more bespoke and sustained interventions provided by CollaborationNI.

I should confess here that the original title of this talk was: "Is Northern Ireland ahead of the game when it comes to collaboration?" I persuaded Nora to tone this down a little. However, subsequent events in England have prompted me to think that she might have been on to something.

When I first gave a talk about collaboration in Belfast, in April 2013, I was interested to see that some of our own research findings about mergers were being used by CollaborationNI colleagues.

Three years later, it seems that the reverse might now be happening. For, as part of the review of civil society infrastructure in London, recently published as 'The Way Ahead - Civil Society at the Heart of London', the idea of 'collaboration for purpose' and bespoke support is being considered, based on the model that has been so successfully developed here in Northern Ireland. So, to answer the original question, CollaborationNI is very much ahead of the game.

And our view, as the independent evaluators, is that the case for collaboration support has been tried, tested and proven. So, it is with some frustration bordering on bewilderment that, whilst voluntary organisations continue to be, at best, encouraged and, at worst, cajoled into collaborative working, policy rhetoric is not matched by any investment for support. This is despite the findings highlighted in this report, and elsewhere, that working across organisational boundaries can be difficult and complex, and invariably requires significant time and resource.

We were struck by this comment from one of our interviewees: 'It requires a different mindset and a wider rethinking of the space that we occupy. For collaboration to really yield benefits, it will take time and effort and trust: look at the NI Executive if you want an example of how difficult it is and how long it can take'.

Organisations will always struggle to collaborate meaningfully and effectively if they do not have the time and space to fully understand the drivers, purpose and potential benefits of coming together. Invariably, that process requires and benefits from independent facilitation and expert guidance. So, at risk of repeating myself, **Lesson Three from the evaluation of CollaborationNI is that the case for support for collaborative working is compelling.** That case is strengthened by what is happening to the voluntary sector, where the pace and unpredictability of change is significant, including reforms to local government; heightened expectations around the integration of health and social care services; reductions in spending across the board; and welfare reforms affecting service users and clients. For voluntary organisations to flourish and thrive, and to make an active and meaningful contribution to civil society, we would suggest that the need for specialist and bespoke support with collaborative working (across both organisational and sectoral boundaries) won't disappear in a hurry.