

Getting started with collaboration:

A framework for joint action

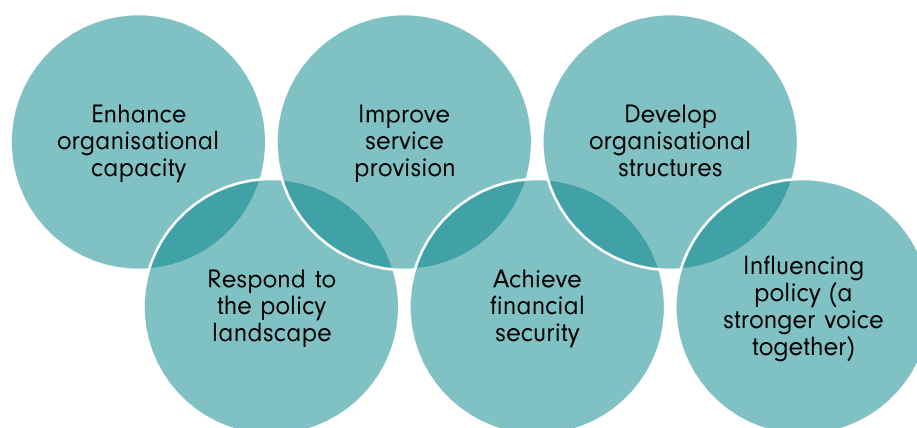
In spite of unprecedented levels of policy-driven interest in collaborative working involving voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs), we know from our work that individuals and organisations can experience practical difficulties when trying to work collaboratively with others – particularly when that work crosses sectoral??, as well as organisational, boundaries.

This framework is for individuals and organisations who are setting out on new collaborative ventures. It draws on 15 years researching, facilitating and evaluating collaboration, including [Thinking about... collaboration](#), [Working in Place: Collaborative funding in practice](#) and [Building Health Partnerships](#).

1. Why are you thinking about collaboration?

It is important to explore and identify why you are seeking to work collaboratively – what is really driving this decision?

For some organisations, the focus is on how best to respond to the changing policy environment, increased financial vulnerability or insufficient organisational capacity. For others, it is about being proactive in developing organisational structures, providing a more comprehensive or higher quality service or having more influence over the policies of governmental authorities and funders.



2. Who do you need to work with?

After identifying the motivation behind collaboration, explore which organisation(s) share similar interests and would help you to achieve your aims. The identification of organisations which share similar values to your organisation (or about an issue) is important in helping all parties to see the process of working together as a form of 'exchange', in which all organisations will need to make compromise in order to gain

the benefits they seek for their beneficiaries, communities and organisations in the longer term.

3. What are you trying to achieve?

Collaboration is building **purposeful** interactions between two or more organisations for a shared vision.

Developing a shared vision is crucial to successful collaboration. Think about 'what' you are trying to achieve together and 'why'. Try to put the people or issue at the centre and think about what they need and what role you/others will play – what do you bring to the table?

4. What form of collaboration is most appropriate?

Informal alliance

An arrangement that is essentially informal and based on good relationships and understandings that may be written but are non-contractual.

Contract based alliance

The relationship is underpinned by a contract between the parties that sets out the objectives, respective roles, cost sharing/charging arrangements etc.

Joint venture

The parties establish a legal entity, which they jointly own and control, and which has the purpose of undertaking specified roles.

Group structure

This is an identity preserving form of merger. The parties agree to become controlled by a holding entity. The holding entity owns/controls the parties (which become subsidiaries).

Merger

The parties merge on whatever basis is agreed. This either creates a new entity (where there is relative equality between the parties) or enlarges an existing entity (referred to as a 'takeover').

5. What will success look like?

Start thinking early about what success might look like and what evidence you may need to collect – to develop shared understanding about collective impact. Different partners will require different kinds of evidence. Think about who you will want to communicate with or influence and what evidence will speak to them. You may want to think about process learning as well as outcomes for beneficiaries.

6. What will sustain the collaboration in the long-run?

Proactive management with a focus on shared responsibility and mutual accountability are the enablers which ensure successful collaboration. This way of working takes time and is resource intensive so it is important to be clear about roles and responsibilities/who is doing what to minimise confusion. Strong leadership is also important.

Identify individuals/system leaders who can act as 'collaborative champions'. These are likely to be people with the ability to look beyond their organisations, spot opportunities for collaboration and are great at building relationships and bringing people together.

Things to keep in mind

Collaboration needs...

1. A 'dual focus'

Doing things together is important, but don't forget to cultivate/maintain the relationships that underpin joint action.

2. Meaningful buy-in from senior leaders

This will help and encourage staff to take the time required to build relationships and explore opportunities. It involves giving the staff permission from the very top and modelling an outlook which will help with building institutional rather than individual links. This is safer as it counters the risk of the entire collaboration falling apart when one person moves on.

3. Regular review points

Collaboration and partnership working is hard work and it can feel messy so give yourselves time and permission to step back and review, reflect and adapt together. Check in points can use whatever structures you have in place, whether that's a steering group or independent facilitation.

4. Safe space for people to express and share how they feel

Collaborative working can be emotionally hard. It is important to recognise this – and to create opportunities and spaces for people to express frustrations. Sometimes it will feel difficult, people might feel threatened or defensive about their roles or about the organisational contribution/brand not being visible. Recognising these challenges and creating spaces for sharing emotions will help make the collaboration smoother.