

# Collaborative working in complexity

*Helping it go well*

*July 2023*

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# Introduction

The voluntary and public sectors are awash with talk of ‘systems change’ and ‘complexity’. New initiatives, new funds, new structures are all requiring people to work across organisational and sectoral boundaries to tackle complex challenges. For many, this is not business as usual – far from it. It is unfamiliar and it is daunting, not least because it requires a dramatic shift in mindset – from competition to collaboration, from control to cooperation – as well as a new set of behaviours.

This briefing provides practical learning points and reflections about ‘*collaborative working in complexity*’ as a resource for people setting out to work in this new and different way, before taking any significant steps. It is based on work carried out to support the early implementation stages of Oxfordshire’s Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-26 (see Annex 1<sup>1</sup>).

The briefing covers:

- 1) A process with activities designed to maximise success (pages 4 to 6)
- 2) A distillation of ‘Rules of Engagement’ for this new way of working (page 7)
- 3) Personal reflections from three people with direct experience of a new and different way of working (pages 9 to 11)
- 4) A summary of learning for use as a system self-assessment tool (page 12)

## Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Ben Cairns, Vita Terry and Diana Wray, based on interviews and desk research.

Thanks to the participants for giving up their time to take part in this project and for sharing their experiences and ideas so freely and openly.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s57561/CA\\_OCT1921R09%20-%20Annex%201%20-%20Oxfordshires%20and%20homelessness%20sleeping%20strategy%202021-2026.pdf](https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s57561/CA_OCT1921R09%20-%20Annex%201%20-%20Oxfordshires%20and%20homelessness%20sleeping%20strategy%202021-2026.pdf)

# Context

Oxfordshire's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-26 commits everyone to: 'a "one system" approach'; 'a transformation'; 'a whole system approach', supported by:

- *Greater cooperation and collaboration*
- *Countywide governance; system-wide performance indicators*
- *New protocols and ways of working*
- *Workforce transformation, including in commissioning*

The challenges of this new commissioning environment included:

- An alliance of providers moving towards a collaborative approach with a fixed pot of money for five years, ongoing competition for resources, and differences in size and remit.
- An Alliance Leadership Team incorporating providers and representatives of multiple commissioners in one accountable structure for a relatively loose contract, to enable creative transformation and the management of risk.
- A context of overlapping governance structures including group and individual organisation accountabilities.
- A commissioning structure which engaged providers in broader and different decision-making than hitherto.

From the outset, there was an understanding of wanting to 'try something that is different and transformational; that is unfamiliar and can easily be overtaken or undermined by entrenched and familiar practices. So, it felt important to engage carefully with questions about how we will work together. This brings into play issues of trust, respect and risk. And requires an open exploration of what this way of working looks and feels like, what it requires, what to avoid and what to prioritise'.<sup>2</sup>

To support this, IVAR offered pro bono support to help start the thinking on what this new and different way of working required, and plan for *what it will take to do things differently*, so that better collaboration could support the transformation of services and the reduction of homelessness in Oxfordshire. Drawing on earlier work in this area,<sup>3</sup> we facilitated three workshops between July and November 2022. Participants included providers (mainly voluntary sector organisations), commissioners and public agencies (with representatives from city, district and county councils), and people with lived experience. Later, in April 2023, we interviewed three Alliance members to reflect on their direct experiences of this new and different way of working.

What follows is an outline of a process with activities designed to maximise success. We offer brief details of the exercises we used, alongside examples of the insights and observations generated by people with both direct and lived experience. We hope that this will give you ideas about how to find a way into conversations about working in a new and different way, and what you might expect to surface and reveal.

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<sup>2</sup> Unattributed quotes are taken from participants in the IVAR process.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ivar.org.uk/publication/trust-power-and-collaboration/>; <http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/1.-Exploring-the-New-World-Report-MAIN-FINAL.pdf>

# Getting started with working in complexity

1

Share what it feels like to work 'towards transformation' in a new and complex commissioning environment



## Exercise

Select an image that represents how you currently feel about trying to work towards transformation.

## Examples of insights and observations



- A rich ecosystem
- A mosaic of different, complementary pieces
- Full of promise
- Seeds have been planted, some signs of green shoots appearing
- Committed, headed somewhere positive
- It needs to get going, so we can drive change through delivery
- Work has started; uncertain what will happen
- Working at a speed, along a route that isn't linear
- There is a lot going on; not yet sure of how it all fits together
- Messy
- Trying to live with the uncertainty

## 2

Identify aspirations for what can be achieved through working differently across organisational and sectoral boundaries



### Exercise

Think about the words 'transformation' and 'collaboration'. What do you wish for in terms of the actual experience of working differently? What would you like this transformation to feel like – for you, in your role?

## Examples of insights and observations

1. **Customer-focused:** Working together towards the same goal
2. **Efficient:** Sharing skills and minimising duplication, through understanding each other's priorities and constraints
3. **Supportive:** Creating an environment where it is okay to challenge and be challenged
4. **Liberating:** Easier, more comfortable to communicate and negotiate roadblocks
5. **Shared responsibility:** Jointly owning the process and what we are trying to achieve
6. **Straightforward:** Across the breadth of the alliance itself (both providers and commissioners), but also for clients, with services accessible for all
7. **Energising:** So that it feels like we have made progress and are on the journey towards change, within a culture that supports innovation
8. **Resourced:** With the money, people and systems that we need to succeed
9. **Focused:** Supported by regular review and prioritisation, recognising that there is a long journey ahead
10. **Organisational empathy:** Working towards person-centred change, within a culture of honesty and trust, with alignment from strategy through to frontline workers
11. **What do you need?** Focus on what each person in the system needs – from street level, up through all the layers
12. **Fun:** People should feel free and willing to take risks

# 3

Jointly agree the things that you most want to define the experience of working in a new and different way



## Exercise

Select the three aspirations which feel most significant for working together in a new and different way.

## Examples of insights and observations

### Liberating



- Make sure each audience can participate (leaders, frontline workers, people accessing services)
- Embrace a cultural shift to support risk-taking and give permission – this will lead to shared responsibility
- Create dedicated spaces for communication, innovation and learning
- Role modelling – leaders adopting a liberating style to influence others

### Straightforward and human



- Remove silos between different providers
- Simple systems, processes and relationships between people
- One point of contact for individuals rather than having a range of providers
- Accept people where they are

### Resourced



- Recognise need for a structured approach to change management.
- Manage limited resources to meet increased need; *'don't chew off too much'* but be realistic about what you can do with the resource provided.

# 4

Establish 'rules of engagement' for working together in a new and different way



## Exercise

Identify behaviours and mindsets required to bring to life the aspirations for working together in a new and different way.

## Examples of insights and observations

### Having difficult conversations



- Important to clarify the meaning/application of key terminology, e.g. what does 'accountability' and 'transparency' mean to avoid confusion/doubts about intentions
- Need to ensure space to step away from the operational, and to think out loud and problematise together: *'Here's the challenges I'm facing, here's what I've tried so far and the questions it has surfaced, etc.'*

### Living with emergence and ambiguity



- Important to acknowledge and respect the tension between:
  - Funders' expectations/requirements for outcomes and 'evidence of progress' (an urgent need to 'get on with it' and *'potentially looking for too much too soon'*)
  - The complexity of the task itself and the ambitions of a strategy
  - The experience of providers *'busting a gut to make a difference'*, against a backdrop of huge pressure on budgets and people
- In a context of unprecedented uncertainty and upheaval, commissioners, in particular, may need to be careful and sensible about what kind of progress can be achieved, and at what pace (it is likely to be erratic): *'Resist or counter the top-down pressure to prove'*.

## Bringing empathy and patience



- Some differences may be explained by people's different organisational roles, contexts and mandates; and different levels and types of risk-appetite and accountability. This reinforces the importance of empathy in work that crosses organisational and sectoral boundaries:
  - Providers will need to appreciate the different demands placed on statutory colleagues who operate within and across multiple layers of decision-making
  - It is important that people have the freedom to use their assets to the best effect. In practice, this requires commissioners to recognise that design and delivery expertise rests with providers, and any formal expectations about plans or progress should be negotiated with due respect



# Reflections

Based on interviews with three people involved in the process (representing a provider, public agency and commissioner) to reflect on what collaborative working in complexity involves and requires.

## Helen Denyer

*Service Director – West of England, Mental Health and Substance Use, St Mungo's*



***Keeping the client at the heart of what we do and doing things differently is central to working in this new and different way. A genuine spirit of partnership requires the right people being part of decision-making meetings, and a commitment and consistency to this.***

*That means decision-making powers being devolved, and not feeling that everything has to go through bureaucratic processes to be signed off. And that means you have to understand the value and expertise of one another's organisations. I think there's probably lots of assumptions that providers make about local authorities, but also that local authorities make about providers, and that everybody makes about everyone else. So you do need time to be able to start thinking about some of that in a different way and see where different people sit in this process.*

*You also need to put yourself in another person's shoes, to have empathy about their situation, and more awareness about positionality and what comes with that. Different people have different challenges. By understanding what those are, we can work together to navigate the challenges that we have to get to the end result quicker.*

*But this way of working also comes with a price and with risks. It requires a disproportionate amount of time to build relationships compared to other partnership models, though hopefully the end result will be worth it. And organisations are coming with different starting points, priorities, levels of risk and the challenge of trying to manage this without having a detrimental impact on some organisations, e.g. being pushed out. That has required us to be a lot more open about things that normally would be treated as commercially sensitive, sharing things that you wouldn't normally share, like budgets and costings. And there's a risk with that that all providers feel due to how we've had to work in a competitive way: you lose your edge, and then you competitively tender for something and somebody else wins it on your ideas. So, we have to be conscious of the different elements of complexity, make them visible, and find a way through them together.*

## Paul Wilding

*former Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager, Oxford City Council*



***With complex systems, it is important to recognise the need to work collectively and differently to be able to make a difference and achieve your goals. I think that takes four things: a different mindset, empathy, buy-in and a mature alliance.***

*First, it requires a mindset which is open to explore alternative approaches. You need an appetite to experiment with new approaches, try things out and be comfortable with uncertainty: it's about recognising that everything you're going to do isn't necessarily going to work out and being prepared to take an approach which is a little bit sort of trial and error. You can't map out the process by which you will get to your end goal.*

*Second, you need to be able to understand other people's perspectives, to put yourself in someone else's shoes, and not base thoughts on assumptions but have a greater awareness that there might be other factors that have influenced their behaviour. It's very easy to make a simplistic mental shortcut in your head as to why you are seeing a certain behaviour or a lack of a certain behaviour. But there's an awful lot of value in understanding, particularly with commissioner/provider relationships, that when things aren't happening as we would like, it's not because people aren't interested in delivering the best service they can, it's probably because there's a lack of resource. So, understanding people's barriers to achieving what we want to achieve is essential. This results in better quality conversations, better quality relationships, and better quality outcomes.*

*Third, you need buy-in at a senior level, and commitment at different levels (provider v provider; provider v commissioner; commissioner v commissioner). With the benefit of hindsight – and this is important learning for people just setting off down this path – consultation with the wider system (including partners and stakeholders both directly and indirectly involved in delivery) would have helped before designing the strategy and telling people what was going to be in it. This brings people into the process right from the beginning, rather than them feeling they are just being told what the plan is.*

*Fourth, you need a mature provider alliance to be able to hold complex conversations and give honest feedback. That requires holding reflective spaces throughout the process where people feel they can say: "I don't think this is working over here in your district or what you do in your organisation", confident that this won't be heard as a slur on your organisation or your personal commitment.*

## Mark Thompson

*former County Wide Strategic Homelessness Officer, Cherwell District Council*



***This work is complex and it's challenging. For it to have a chance of succeeding, you need a long lead in time to build relationships and, in turn, trust. Investing enough in the glue capacity to ensure that the commissioner-provider relationship is not just transactional will improve your prospects.***

*To build those foundations, it's important to set up a safe space for commissioners to share honest insights of their work, to show humility and vulnerability, and to enable individuals to feel they can challenge one another in a way they wouldn't have done before. This is a risk, but the rewards are significant: opening your eyes about one another's situations and positions; creating opportunities for conversations that educate people about power structures to explain different habits and behaviours; building organisational empathy; and opening up the possibility of more creative, collaborative decision-making.*

*Ultimately, this way of working requires a maturity of decision-making. That's a profound challenge, as it introduces a new set of structures and way of doing business, and new 'rules' for how organisations relate and talk to one another. So, you have to invest in developing relationships that can withstand pressures and that can cope with different types of decision-making around budgets – in effect, a reformulation of boundaries.*

# Key learning

Each learning point below can be used for self-assessment to keep track of progress.

- 1. Start 'upstream':** Before plunging into working in complexity, think about the behaviours required to work in a new and different way – all parties require a new mindset for conscious change to happen, but it is not easy and takes time.
- 2. Get the right people in the room:** For multi-agency work, it's vital that *'you have people who can make things happen, and can balance inclusion with being decisive, and exploration with action'*.
- 3. Be realistic:** It is important to minimise the risk of people becoming overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the task. Things that might help include:
  - Initiating change by *'just doing things – focusing on delivery'*. Positive experiences of doing things differently can help build buy-in and a sense of momentum, and reassure sceptics that change is possible.
  - Always stay focused on the overall purpose of the initiative; at each stage, asking: *'What has the most potential to change people's lives?'*
- 4. Recognise difference:** The importance of creating a safe and brave space, to respect each other's perspectives and experiences, but also to feel able to disagree and challenge one another in a constructive way.
- 5. Focus on assets:** A focus on a strengths-based approach – what is already working and how can that be built on – provides a common ground and collective reference point for holding one another to account.
- 6. Learn in the messiness:** Don't shy away from messiness and uncertainty, e.g. ambiguities around decision-making and authority need to be named and addressed.
- 7. Stay focused:** on the purpose and goals of a strategy: *'that is your North Star and the glue that binds you together'*.
- 8. Rethink 'impact':** *'Your actions are part of a web of relationships — most of which are beyond your control, many of which are beyond your influence, quite a few of which will be completely invisible to you'*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://toby-89881.medium.com/explode-on-impact-cba283b908cb>