Many ways to collaborate

3 minute read

What this is and who it's for

This resource is aimed at helping community groups interested in collaborative working. Here we outline some of the main types of collaboration and provide 3 key steps that can be taken to make collaboration more successful.

For many years, Locality has supported our members and other organisations to initiate and engage in collaborative working. We believe it strengthens the power of individuals, organisations and communities at a community level. From this position of strength, communities can challenge, influence and participate confidently in local decision-making and service delivery.

However, collaborative working is not always easy: there is a spectrum of approaches, motivations and outcomes. Often it is the people and power dynamics that can determine whether a collaborative venture succeeds or fails.

Our work has developed against the backdrop of an increasing interest in the breadth of collaborative working arrangements across the voluntary and community sector. The shift from grant funding to contracts, commissioning and procurement, the aggregation and greatly increased sizes of available contracts, and the commonplace requirement from funders to provide services in partnership have become incentives to collaboration.

The adversity created by the recent economic situation has meant that community and voluntary organisations are actively seeking innovative ways to provide services and make money go further – developing partnership bids, forming consortia, sharing buildings and back office services.

Types of collaboration

Collaboration can take many forms. Our experience includes working on the following:

- **For relationship building and networking** – collaboration in its simplest form. This can take the form of sharing information (about funding or contract opportunities), lobbying or campaigning activities, mutual support and organisations learning from each other
- **For efficiencies** – including collaborative purchasing arrangements (e.g. admin supplies or energy) and sharing the same buildings and spaces
- **Consortia** - taking several different forms in response to meeting a scale of delivery required. This could include responding to tendered public sector contracts and large grant funding opportunities which encourage a partnership approach
- **Mergers** – the ultimate form of collaboration where two or more organisations legally and organisationally merge their assets and operations

3 simple steps for effective collaboration

1) Visioning

This initial phase represents the coming together of the parties involved, often triggered by one or more party realising that a collaborative approach would be advantageous. It would be wrong to underestimate the complexities of this stage. If organisations have not worked together before and if there are a high number of stakeholders involved the atmosphere can sometimes be akin to mutual distrust rather than mutual support. Initially meetings can sometimes be chaotic and unfocussed, rife with tensions linked to mentalities including:

"I don't think this is going to work, but have to be here just in case it does"

"I'm really busy – do I really have time for this?"

"This is really frustrating! Why can't people listen to me because I know what to do"

"I've had a bad experience with that person/ organisation – so why would this be any different"

"It always starts of this way – loads of enthusiasm! But then it all falls by the wayside"

If you've called the meeting and are taking a leadership role in it - it can sometimes be useful to acknowledge that some of these feelings exist and use that as a catalyst to get people to focus on:

- Whether they want to continue to explore collaboration
- The outcomes that the collaboration is seeking to achieve
- The structure which will underpin the collaboration (leadership and governance issues)
- How best to ensure that the exercise does not fail?

A steering group or committee may be established to oversee the development of the collaboration, but it is also imperative that an individual agrees to undertake the role of coordinator.

A final element of this stage are the partners working on the collaboration to sign up to some sort of agreement – a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) which stops short of a legal agreement, but which could include the following:

- Name of the collaboration
- Aims/objectives of the collaboration
- The participants or members (or the criteria for who can be involved if the plan is to bring on board others in the future)
- Timescale of the agreement
- Governance issues – meetings, decision-making, individual roles and responsibilities
- Confidentiality and conflict of interest

2) Planning

Even in the initial meeting some thought should be given to the development of a plan. A plan for any substantial collaboration should include:

- Tasks to be undertaken
- Timescale
- Who is responsible
- Clear outcomes

The level of complexity depends on the exact nature of the collaboration. For example, the process of organisational merger will take far longer, and will be more complex than the establishment of an informal network, but even the simplest collaboration takes time and needs detailed planning.

In addition, at this stage, consideration of resources available to support the collaboration is essential. Having loads of people in coordination meetings is pointless if nothing happens in between them because of a lack of time and resources. Therefore, it is not unusual for the largest, highest capacity organisation to take the lead.

3) Delivering

The delivery phase is the most complex. All the planning in the world won't account for all eventualities. Monitoring of the plan should take place over the lifespan of the collaboration – to ensure that it continues to be driven and does not lose momentum. This also allows plans to be adjusted in response to circumstances, and particularly supports the collaboration process as a shared learning experience.

Despite the presence of an overall coordinator and individual tasks it should be acknowledged that success is a collective responsibility. If the collaboration involves multiple organisations at the outset, it is not unusual for some to drop out. An acceptance that this will be the case by those involved makes it more likely that the collaboration will succeed.

Further information

Locality has vast experience in this area and can help you with your collaboration ambitions.

For more information about our support services contact us at info@locality.org.uk or on 0345 458 8336