

Collaboration Executive Summary

Introduction

The National Leadership Centre (NLC) was established to support cross-sector leadership and working together on the toughest challenges facing the country. As part of this mission, they wanted to explore examples of when organisations effectively collaborate. The NLC commissioned Ipsos MORI to develop six case studies of collaboration in public services. The examples draw on experiences from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify challenges, enablers and lessons to support public service leaders in the future. The key themes from across the six examples are summarised below. This is part of wider research looking at public service leaders' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. You can find a synthesis report and all six case studies on the NLC's website.

Methodology

From January to March 2021, Ipsos MORI developed six case studies exploring collaboration in public services. Across the case studies, Ipsos MORI interviewed 37 participants from a wide range of organisations and regions, as shown below.

Table 1: Number of participants in the case study interviews

Case study name	Number of leaders
Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service, Nightingale Courts	5
Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, Homelessness Prevention Taskforces	8
Responding to COVID-19 in Northumbria	7
Kent Fire and Rescue Service, Responding to COVID-19	5
East Ayrshire Council, Vibrant Communities Programme	6
The Stepping Up Leadership Programme, Bristol	6
TOTAL	37

The NLC identified four examples of collaboration from their network of public service leaders, with the remaining two examples selected from interviews carried out by Ipsos MORI as part of the wider COVID-19 research project. Following an initial call to explain the research and agree their involvement, leaders took part in an interview with Ipsos MORI to explore the situation in more detail. They also identified others involved in the example, who were subsequently invited to take part in an interview. As such, recruitment took place through a 'snowball' approach, identifying individuals who could help build our understanding of what happened. All participants were also told that anything they shared would be fully attributed in reporting. Further detail on our methodology is available on the NLC's website.

Collaboration in public services

'Collaboration' refers to organisations working together to join up services or deliver shared outcomes. It can range from **formal** (contracts, joint commissioning) to **informal** (conversations outside of formal settings); from **horizontal** (across different services) to **vertical** (between levels within an organisation); or from **professional** (with policy-makers, strategists and contractors) to **non-professional** (with the public and service users). This is summarised in Figure 1.¹

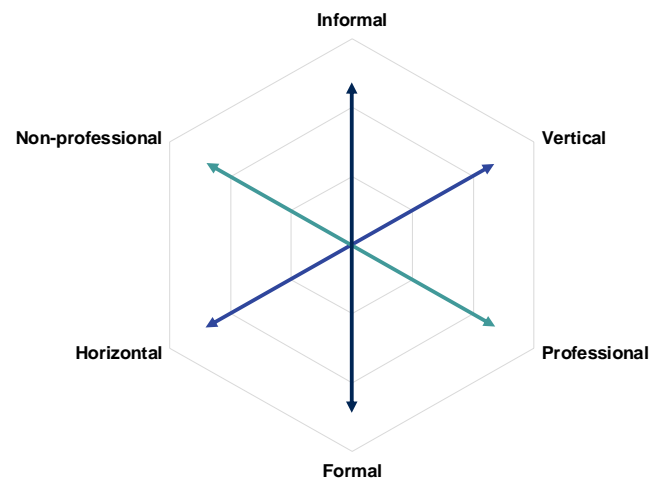


Figure 1: Dimensions of collaboration

The six case studies illustrate the diverse forms collaboration can take:

- In **establishing Nightingale Courts**, a central team within HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) worked closely with local teams to identify suitable locations and establish a business case.
- **Regional Homelessness Prevention Teams**, established by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), collaborated with local authorities across the country to support people leaving prison to find permanent accommodation.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust worked with a local private sector textiles company to **establish a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) factory** to meet local demand and protect staff in hospitals and care homes. The Trust also worked with local authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to **create a new discharge pathway** for patients from hospital to local care homes.
- Kent Fire & Rescue Service established a new relationship with the charity Age UK to **deliver meals to elderly and vulnerable people** self-isolating due to COVID-19, as well as supporting the local ambulance service's pandemic response.
- In East Ayrshire, the council-led **Vibrant Communities programme** brought together local authority teams with public services and the wider community to meet local needs. For example, during the pandemic, local community resilience groups supported food delivery, prescription pick-ups and befriending services for vulnerable residents.
- The **Stepping Up Leadership Programme** brought together organisations from all sectors in Bristol to work towards improving the diversity of leadership in the city.

Below, we summarise the challenges and enablers to collaboration seen across the six case studies. We have provided a brief example for each theme, with further details found in the detailed write-up.

¹ This framework was developed by Ipsos MORI on the basis of research looking at issues facing public service leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, commissioned by the National Leadership Centre.

Motivations

Challenges for collaboration

- Every organisation or team has its own mission and remit to deliver, often resulting in **competing priorities** that can prevent or limit collaboration. This is exacerbated by competitive tendering for services, a narrow organisation-specific focus and a 'silo' mentality that looks at issues from a single perspective.
- Differences in motivation and approach make it **difficult to align goals** across collaborators and reduces the motivation for leaders and wider teams to find common ground. This may be heightened by a **lack of ownership or buy-in** from collaborators. It can be more difficult to motivate different organisations if they feel they have little control over planning or decision-making. The wider literature highlights how real or perceived asymmetries in power, resources or knowledge can prevent collaboration, weakening commitment to the process or leaving it vulnerable to manipulation.²
- **Focusing on processes (rather than shared outcomes) and general risk-aversion** or reluctance to change also pose barriers to collaboration by discouraging innovation and delegation, and focusing on short-term activities rather than larger, long-term outcomes.

Bristol Council reported that public and private sector organisations had tried to tackle problems of diversity among leadership individually, with limited success. Only by coming together and looking at the issue as a system could they make progress.

Enablers of collaboration

- The COVID-19 pandemic provided a **clear, shared purpose to work together**. This has resulted in increased collaboration across public services with the majority of leaders reporting that collaboration was better than in usual circumstances within the workplace, with other organisations in their sector and in the local area.³
- Getting **buy-in from all organisational levels and collaborators** can be key to ensuring everyone feels they have something to contribute and something to gain. This involves **listening** to the motivations and desires of different parties, which also helps to align goals and expertise, as well as **gathering data** to provide an up-to-date and transparent evidence base so issues can be identified.
- Coming together behind a broad goal based on local needs encourages a **focus on outcomes rather than specific processes or activities**. This helps to provide a banner to unite behind, with flexibility given to organisations or individuals to deliver in a way that reflects individual structures and cultures.

In Northumbria, a local textiles company worked with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to meet demand for PPE by establishing a factory and bringing together furloughed textile workers. The team collaborated with other businesses in the industry to establish a network which could deliver the

² King et al. (2020) Organisational Effectiveness and Collaboration Across the System: Literature Review Summary <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nlc-public-service-leadership-literature-reviews/organisational-effectiveness-and-collaboration-across-the-system-literature-review-summary-by-dr-martin-king-professor-rob-wilson-sophie-wilson>

³ NLC Experiences of COVID-19 report.

Trust's order of 15,500 gowns a day. The shared motivation to support the NHS brought businesses and individuals together to go out of their way to find a solution to meeting local needs.

Structures

Challenges for collaboration

- **Organisational hierarchies** can restrict who is involved in planning and decision-making both within and between services. This can limit the scope for shared decision-making and reduce the spread of ideas or opportunities to try new approaches.
- **Siloed funding streams and competition** for funding can prevent the sharing of resources, including staff and budgets. There can also be **variation in funding periods** across different sectors which makes it more difficult to align the resources needed to implement a shared policy. This is a challenge for organisations that might want to make a joint bid for commissioned services but are unable to because certain organisations cannot guarantee funds over the necessary timescales.
- Governance structures, while necessary for transparency and accountability, can **limit an organisation's flexibility to innovate** or delegate tasks. Some structures require organisations to demonstrate value for money quickly, not recognising that culture change and collaboration often take longer to establish and show results.
- Organisations often have their own **internal systems and bureaucracies**. This means public services often have different procedures and rules in place even if they deliver the 'same' service. This creates barriers to joint working, for example by preventing data sharing or through incompatible HR policies.

Offender managers grappled with navigating different processes and forms across every local authority in England and Wales to rehouse prisoners as part of the Homelessness Prevention Taskforce. This made it harder to share learning across regions and created additional work and complexity for managers.

Enablers of collaboration

- By having **existing cross-sector structures** in place before the pandemic, organisations were able to quickly come together and make shared decisions without needing to establish a new body. This also supports and is supported by regular communication and relationship-building between organisations. Establishing such structures may involve aligning administrative processes, facilitating secondments or formalising existing arrangements.
- **Local ownership** gives greater flexibility for bringing organisations together in a region, reflecting their organisational priorities and supporting fast-paced decision making. It is important to get the **scale of regional autonomy** right so that leaders can get to know each other, build relationships and collectively make decisions without the numbers involved becoming overwhelming.
- Similarly, agreeing **clear responsibilities** helps to avoid misunderstanding and allows individuals across organisations to focus on their area of responsibility.

- The reduction in competition and the release of new funding streams during the pandemic removed barriers to collaboration by allowing organisations to share resources more easily through **dedicated, flexible funding**. This can help bring organisations together behind a pooled resource.
- **Streamlining or flattening decision-making structures**, for example, by removing steps or delegating responsibilities, makes processes more accessible to collaborators and reduces the barriers which can arise from incompatible administrative systems. This increased flexibility can enable organisations to work together in new ways to achieve a shared goal.

The creation of the Additional Courts and Tribunal Capacity Programme streamlined the process of locating and establishing courts during the pandemic. The programme updated courtroom design protocols, which allowed greater flexibility to repurpose buildings to be used as courtrooms. It also involved local stakeholders from the legal system in visits to assess the suitability of venues, establishing buy-in to the process from the beginning and avoiding the need for further consultation. This meant it took six weeks rather than the usual 18-24 months to establish a new court.

Relationships

Challenges for collaboration

- Collaboration requires trust and open communication as well as strong relationships. But **building relationships is not always straightforward** and can be influenced by the motivations to collaborate, existing structures as well as the personality and ethos of those involved.
- A lack of cross-organisation or cross-sector relationships also means that individuals may be **unaware of what others have to offer**.
- Being **geographically distant**, including being located in separate buildings, makes it more difficult to build relationships with would-be collaborators as it becomes harder to build trust through informal or casual interactions.
- Although the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a rapid increase in home working, this has brought additional pressures to balance stresses in professional and personal lives. Leaders need to **evaluate and adapt how they manage relationships** with their staff to ensure that collaborative projects **do not add unnecessarily to workloads** or stress, given the risk of illness or burnout.

Age UK was unaware of how broad the remit of the fire service was before working with Kent Fire & Rescue Service as part of their pandemic response. This meant they had not considered collaborating with them before despite having shared priorities and relevant skills.

Enablers of collaboration

- Increased digitisation and home working during the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled collaboration by **breaking down physical barriers**, expanding networks and enabling people to work together across greater distances. There is no longer a need to travel to meet someone from a different organisation, allowing more freedom to engage with a wider network.
- Sharing information and **maintaining open, frequent communication** helps to build mutual understanding and knowledge of other organisations. This helps raise awareness of what others can contribute and builds a common terminology with which to develop shared strategies. Having

regular communication is also critical for building trust and rapport, with **strong pre-existing relationships** supporting quick decision-making and greater delegation in times of crisis.

- Adopting **facilitative styles of leadership**, where the role of a leader is focused on bringing the right people together, enables positive relationships between collaborators by encouraging sharing, equality, ownership and motivation to collaborate.
- It can be important to take a **solutions-focused tone**, coming with ideas to solve a problem together rather than expecting a partner to tackle a problem on their own.

In the East Ayrshire Vibrant Communities programme, leaders described themselves as facilitators whose main role was bringing together experts and deferring to their expertise. The programme spent 18 months gathering evidence and perspectives from communities to build the necessary buy-in, trust and relationships with local people, critical to the programme’s success.

Summary

Effective collaboration is built upon a combination of factors relating to motivations, structures and relationships. These factors can act as both challenges and enablers to collaboration, interacting and overlapping in diverse ways depending on the situation and individuals involved. Figure 2 illustrates some of the ways these factors interact to enable collaboration.

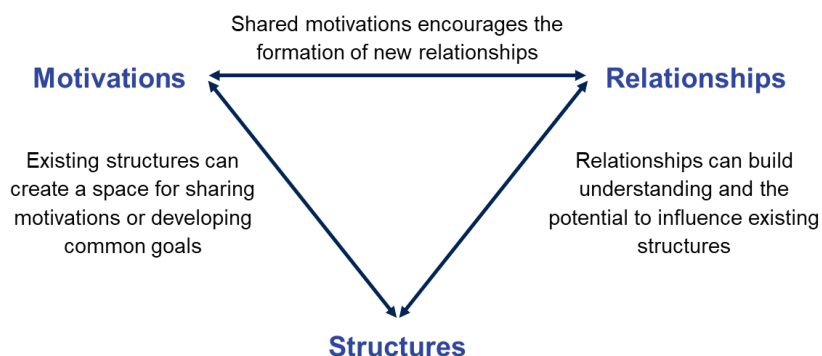


Figure 2: Enablers of collaboration

Table 2: Summary of challenges and enablers

	Challenges for collaboration	Enablers of collaboration
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competing priorities • Difficult to align goals • Lack of ownership or buy-in • Focusing on processes • General risk-aversion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, shared purpose • Buy-in from all organisational levels and collaborators • Listening to and gathering data from all stakeholders • Focusing on outcomes
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational hierarchies • Siloed funding streams and competition • Variation in funding periods • Limits on the flexibility to innovate • Excessive or complicated internal systems and bureaucracies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing cross-sector structures • Local ownership and clear responsibilities • Balance in the scale of regional autonomy • Dedicated, flexible funding • Streamlining or flattening decision-making structures
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building new relationships • Lack of awareness of what others have to offer • Geographical and physical distance • Managing relationships under new circumstances • Evaluating staff wellbeing while in crisis mode 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong pre-existing relationships • Breaking down physical barriers • Maintaining open, frequent communication • Adopting facilitative styles of leadership • Being solutions-focused