

03

Must struggling local councils turn to citizens for help to deliver vital services?

Think piece from the 2019 Public service: state of transformation report

Whilst Brexit is distracting politicians from caring about local issues, councils seem to be scrabbling for spare change to help the most vulnerable. Some local councils seem to be turning to their own communities for help. Is this a brave new era in public service delivery, or does it represent the end of the road for the universal, state-funded public services? That is one of the questions the GO Lab recently set out to try and answer.

Rallying together or passing the buck?

As part of our ongoing work up and down the country researching Whitehall's policies for tackling tricky social problems, we were increasingly hearing talk of a new approach. Commonly used buzzwords like 'collaboration', 'place-based working' and 'community participation' seemed to be representing genuinely meaningful changes in practice in some parts of the country. We wanted to find out what people were up to.

We began some research which culminated in a report, 'Are we Rallying Together'. This explores ten locally-led projects from across the UK in 2018/19 which identify

as collaborations. We saw that rather than the usual contractual relationships and organisational hierarchies, power was being relinquished to community organisations and frontline workers. This brought risks, but where there is risk, there can be reward.

The projects we looked at are all very different. Some are initiated by public authorities, others by the voluntary sector. Some focus on narrow projects for a particular group of citizens, while others represent a comprehensive set of reforms across whole councils. All are 'works in progress', but some are permanent, fully embedded ways of working, whilst others are a time-limited initiative.

We found that collaboration has broad appeal as a solution to intractable social problems that we struggle to address as a society.

We linked what we heard to what is already known about collaborative practice, to help those who work in public service delivery to consider collaborative approaches. Whilst we found some exciting new practice, there was no such thing as a blueprint for success.

If privatisation got us in here, collaboration will get us out

We found that collaboration has broad appeal as a solution to intractable social problems that we struggle to address as a society. But it is not a new concept: the UK public sector has a long history of cooperation with the voluntary and private sectors. We believe the trends driving this are the persistence of 'wicked problems', the 'move to privatise', and the 'move to partner'.

'Wicked problems' are those social problems for which there are no clear links between cause and effect – like homelessness, chronic unemployment, or educational underachievement. Most agree that progress in tackling these has been slow, yet these kinds of problems aren't likely to just go away. If anything, they're likely

to become more complicated – perhaps because of the ‘move to privatise’. Starting in the 1980s, this applied private sector thinking to government operations. The belief was that market forces could increase efficiency and quality in the delivery of public services. Governments increasingly turned to third parties to provide core public services: in the UK, the amount of public spending on voluntary organisations grew to £15.3 billion in 2014/15. This increasingly complex network of organisations delivering services led to a ‘move to partner’, due to the perceived need for organisations to ‘pull in the same direction’ towards jointly desired outcomes for communities.

In this context, the projects we spoke to broadly gave four justifications for collaborating:

- to share financial and service delivery responsibility across organisations and sectors;
- to give members of communities a more significant role in shaping and delivering services which affect them;
- to deliver better overall impact and value; and
- to make the public sector a better place to work

Collaboration can mean very different things

There are well-established models for groups to collaborate. They can self-organise, appoint one of their members to take charge of organising things, or create a new body to do the organising. In this context, we found different models in the places we went:

Collaborative councils (Oldham, Wigan, Wirral) are broad programmes of change where entire

Many places tried to change the conversation with citizens from ‘what can we do for you?’ to ‘what can we help you do for yourselves?’

councils are attempting to change the way they, and other local public agencies, work.

Collaborative markets (Plymouth Alliance Contract, Young People’s Foundations) aim to change the relationship between local voluntary sector delivery organisations from competitive to collaborative.

Agents of change (Ignite, Golden Key) sit outside the public sector, and attempt to use the fact that they are not part of the system to change it from the outside in.

System connectors (West London Zone, Doing the Right Thing) aim to better integrate the public and voluntary sectors by leveraging existing resources, without fundamentally uprooting existing relationships and structures.

Engagement not exploitation

Is this about empowering the disempowered? Or is it just pushing critical public responsibilities onto organisations and people ill-equipped and inadequately compensated to deal with them? We saw big changes in ways of working to enable real collaboration to happen.

Leadership shifted from being about decision-making exerted through traditional hierarchies, to the facilitation of relationships. This type of ‘collaborative’ leadership is quite well understood. We saw stewards, who listen to partners and create a shared understanding of the issue; mediators, who negotiate differences of opinion and nurture the building of trust; and catalysts, who identify opportunities for new approaches and help mobilise partners to pursue them.

Culture had to change. Giving frontline staff more decision-making power and freedom to operate came with risks for those staff as well as their managers and organisation leaders. It represented a major change of working culture. Communicating a shared imperative to work in a different way early on was essential.

Infrastructure had to be put in place. New ways of capturing data and sharing information were needed. Co-location was sometimes identified as a major facilitator, but was not always essential, nor enough on its own. Many sites used new types of meetings to improve communication and relationships between teams, and some provided access to shared IT systems.

Communities were always involved, though in varied ways. Sometimes community members were used as innovators, coming up with ideas that, one public sector leader said, ‘we would never think of as bureaucrats’. Sometimes assets like libraries and swimming pools were transferred to the community to run – though this came with risks in terms of competencies and maintaining equality of access. Many places tried to change the conversation with citizens from ‘what can we do for you?’ to ‘what can we help you do for yourselves?’

If everyone is responsible, no one is responsible

Collaboration rests on equal relationships between partners, underpinned by an empowered and entrusted workforce. So who is in charge? Who measures success, sets targets, and is answerable if things go wrong?

Ensuring healthy flows of information is important. Unlike traditional methods of performance measurement, we found data capture in collaborations was bottom-up, place-based and included qualitative insights. All agreed measurement was useful for providing learning and feedback, and had a role to play in accountability too.

The jury is out on whether collaborative approaches enhance or reduce democratic accountability. On the one hand, because government gives up control of a service, there is no longer a straightforward mechanism by which policymakers are held to account by the electorate. On the other hand, some argue that spreading responsibility out amongst organisations that are part of local communities offers more opportunities for citizens' voices to be heard – and for services to be responsive to local needs and preferences. The places we spoke to were held externally accountable in multiple ways – by funders, to an elected local council, by government regulators – but ultimately sought to base their legitimacy on improving outcomes for service users. Doing so was dependent on a high level of good quality information and feedback.



Download this report from <https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/our-projects/about-future-state/>

Unlike traditional methods of performance measurement, we found data capture in collaborations was bottom-up, place-based and included qualitative insights.

Should we all start rallying together?

As with any research-inspired exercise, we found ourselves ending this phase of investigation with more questions than answers. We would welcome more conversation, discussion and debate.

- Does the web of regulations, statutory requirements, and devolved powers prevent us unlocking the full benefits of collaborative working?
- Does collaboration deliver better value and impact than the status quo? Do we need to show that it does before politicians and policy-makers will be convinced?
- Is collaborative practice resilient in the face of setbacks? Can it withstand a scandal?
- Is it possible to maintain quality of services and access to them when decisions are made by frontline workers and community organisations?
- Is there a system of measurement that can deal with the complexity of the issues, allow learning, and deliver accountability?
- What is the 'right way' to involve citizens in the delivery of their own public services?

A rejection of traditional, top-down approaches imposed by a centralised elite. A desperate response to a decade of financial pressure. A recognition that we should engage citizens more in the delivery of services which are supposed to be for them. We are only at the very start of understanding what collaboration is really about.

Is this about empowering the disempowered? Or is it just pushing critical public responsibilities onto organisations and people ill-equipped and inadequately compensated to deal with them?

Nigel Ball

As Deputy Director at the Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Nigel Ball, nigel.ball@bsg.ox.ac.uk leads the work on engaging government commissioners and other practitioners in the research and best practice generated by the GO Lab team. Before joining the GO Lab, Nigel was part of the founding team of West London Zone for Children and Young People. Previous roles include being the Head of Innovation at Teach First, the leading education charity, and supporting social entrepreneurship in East Africa.