

### 1. What is collaborative working?

Collaborative working can be about one organisation working in a more integrated and ‘joined up’ way, and there is plenty of scope for improvement here in most organisations. But more commonly, it is used to describe two or more organisations working together. There is no one, agreed definition of what it means, but to a very practical one is to think of collaborative working as a way of *achieving better or new outcomes, than my organisation could achieve through working alone.*

The following definition adds something about what collaboration is *like*:

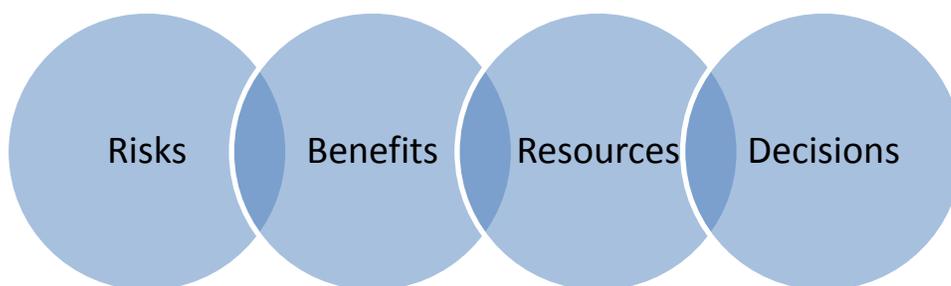
Collaborative working is “a cooperative, interorganizational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control (Ouchi, 1980) but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process”.

*Watching Whale Watching. Lawrence et al. Journal of Applied Behavioural Science. 1999*

This quote underlines that collaboration cannot be done through our most common structural approaches – the market, or ‘command and control’ hierarchy. Instead, collaboration has to be based on high quality, ongoing discussion, shared understanding and shared decision making.

### 2. Partnership, collaboration or cooperation?

It is useful to think of collaboration as a general term to describe all kinds of activities that fit the definition above – from light touch cooperation through to full partnership working. Partnership can be seen as the most engaged, formalised form of collaboration, distinguished by sharing of at least two of:



### 3. The magic of outcomes

Through our work helping organisations and individuals to work more effectively together, we have come to believe that ‘outcomes are magic’. If you can understand and use outcomes as a concept, you have a really powerful tool that can quickly cut through confusion, misunderstanding and woolliness, to arrive at innovative, compelling and clear ideas, reaching decisions and agreements more easily.

Yet relatively few people know about this magical power, or how to use it. Most of are naturally more comfortable with talking about solutions, actions and projects, (train local volunteers, build

a bird hide, provide more information on X, build a new cycle route), but less used to clarifying exactly what results on the ground need to be achieved through the outputs enthusiastically listed.

It is very common for partnerships to work together for some time, apparently agreeing on a list of projects, only to find, things unfold, that there are fundamental disagreements about what really needs to be achieved ie the outcomes, by when, with what stakeholders.

### **A true tale of one cycle route and different outcomes**

A multi-agency cycling group agreed on the urgent need for a cycle route connecting their city to an outlying area of that city – an area that is a tourist attraction and hub for local leisure activities. Only after months of working together did the group find that they had a fundamental disagreement about the *purpose* of the cycle route –the outcomes they wanted to achieve through creating the new route.

Some stakeholders wanted a cycle route that would support local people to cycle between the city and the outlying area, year round, for work, school, shopping etc. They wanted the route to be efficient ie the shortest route possible, be integrated into the road network and feel safe even in the dark.

The other stakeholders wanted the cycle route to enhance the leisure and tourism attractions of the area. They wanted the route to follow the riverside, which is mainly rural, unlit at night and is a longer route.

Months had been wasted before the group discovered their fundamental disagreement about what they wanted to achieve. Relationships were soured and the project was badly set back.

## 4. Finding out what you each really want

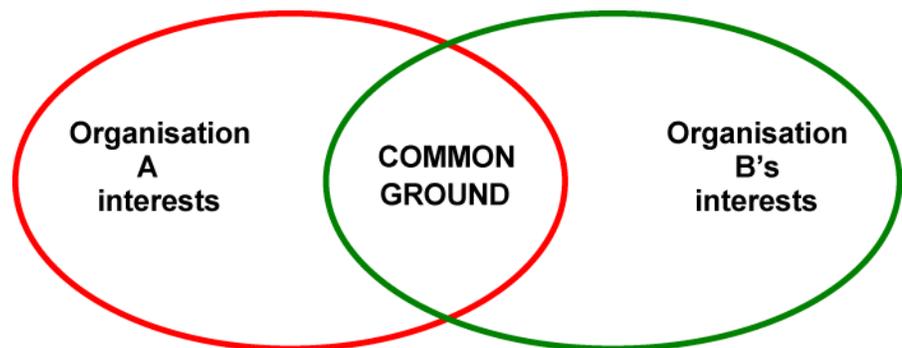
There is a huge body of literature, from fields ranging from psychology, business management and conflict resolution, confirming that *unambiguous, transparently expressed goals* (outcomes) – whether personal, organisational or multi-organisational, *lie at the very heart of achieving results*.

We see this in our work with clients, and have developed a specialty in understanding why it is so hard to get to clear outcomes, and to help people get better – quickly – at expressing and agreeing on what they really, really want.

The diagram below presents a conceptual way of describing the process we help clients to work through<sup>1</sup>.

### Step 1: find your common ground (outcomes)

You are trying to find outcomes that each organisation really wants to achieve, and can only achieve at all, or to a greater degree, through working together. This requires open exploration as the answers are often hidden behind jargon and mutual misunderstandings.



Some tips are:

- **Have an up front, transparent focus on outcomes.** for example, by helping people to express, openly and clearly, what they want to achieve, as early as possible within a project
- **Use 'outcomes language'.** We base all of our work on using 'outcomes focus language'. For us, this means:
  - Avoid woolly and jargon-heavy ideas and language that partners may well not understand
  - Ensure that everyone is using the same kind of language to agree outcomes eg agreeing on definitions of important words.
- **Use participative techniques which support outcomes oriented thinking**
  - Use creative visualisation and 'back casting' techniques
  - Help people to consider strategic and operational outcomes at the same time, so that strategic aims help to set realistic operational actions, and all actions clearly link back up to strategic aims.
  - Designing meetings and workshops in ways that make outcomes the focus and help people to explore and share what they want to achieve.

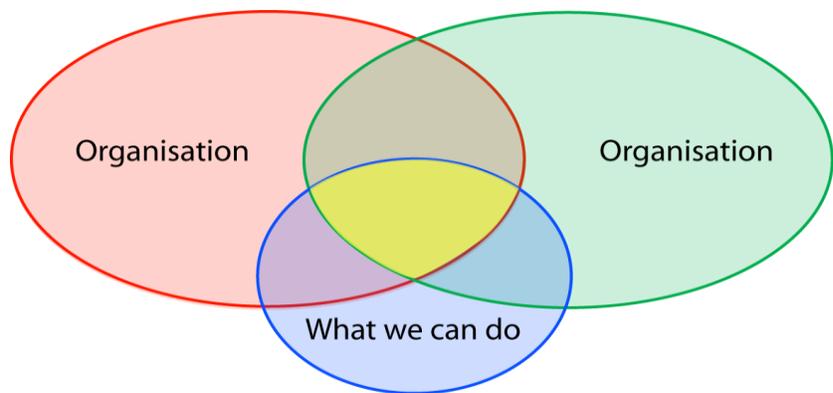
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<sup>1</sup> Material adapted by Wetenhall Associates, drawing on diagrams from now defunct website - The Government Improvement Network

## Step 2: Explore what you can do better together

Now explore what you can do together –that you couldn't do alone, or could do less alone – to achieve those outcomes. Brainstorm the kinds of activities you can achieve that will deliver that common ground. Getting that information out early on will bring clarity to the early negotiations, ensure you are delivering common outcomes as a partnership and reduce the likelihood of organisations pushing their own agendas to the detriment of the shared agenda.

The yellow area represents those actions, projects and solutions which you can work collaboratively on to mutual benefit, for clear and agreed results.



## 5. Embrace the complexity and mess

We spend a lot of time helping clients to accept and embrace the fact that collaborative working is inevitably messy and complex, and that working with the grain of this will get you results. Working in collaboration means working with a natural system, not with the relatively tidy, controllable context of working in one organisation:

“The long-standing machine metaphor of organisation and social systems is handicapping our ability to understand the environment we work in and how to change the behaviours of those systems”.

*John Atkinson, Managing Director, Leadership Centre for Local Government.*

## 6. How to do collaborative working –well

Doing collaboration well means learning how to work differently. You and your collaborators have to actually do work together in order to integrate the ‘thinking’ and the ‘doing’ and keep learning from what does and doesn’t work. Here are some practical tips on doing collaborative work effectively.

### **Tip 1: Don't let your project or partnership officer do all the work**

Is your project or partnership officer trying to do all the work? This will stop the respective collaborators/partners being engaged enough in the content and key decisions, to make the thing fly. Effective collaborators get their own hands dirty and get things done in between partnership meetings.

### **Tip 2: Pay attention to how you work together**

In collaborative working, the process is part of getting to the results. This means that as a group, you need to discuss and agree how you will work together. Don't make assumptions, and do be open to new ideas. For example, do you need a conventional style ‘chair’ of a partnership group, or are there more effective and appropriate ways of managing the group and the process? What style of meetings will work for this group and project? Think about your joint work plan and don't just stumble from one meeting to the next.

### **Tip 3: An adaptive change approach to work**

Follow these golden rules:

- Real change happens in real work
- Those who do the work do the change
- People own what they create
- Start anywhere, go everywhere
- Connect the system to more of itself

*From 'Total Place: A Practitioners Guide to Doing Things Differently*

"It is through collaborative working and shared experience that *partners learn to work together*. Both local partners and central government need to value and make time for shared learning".

*Collaboration and Co-ordination in Area-Based Initiatives Research Summary Number. May 2002 Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.*

### **Tip 4: High quality documents matter**

Whether it is the minutes of your meetings, a report to partners or evidence being put together, collaborations thrive on written material that is fit for purpose – clear, unambiguous and at the right level of detail for the audience. Conversely, partnerships drown in mountains of poorly written reports, inappropriate presentations and meeting notes that are impossible to make sense of unless you were at the meeting (and often not then either).

### **Tip 5: Face to face time matters**

Partnerships and collaborative initiatives tend to be about dealing with long term, difficult issues, and to do this, they rely on robust, sustainable relationships – between individuals and between organisations. They therefore simply cannot survive on a diet of emails and phone calls. Quality face to face time – whether in working groups, well run, participative meetings, or one to ones, is essential if a partnership is going to have 'teeth' and achieve things.