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New development: Rallying together—The rationale for and structure of collaborative practice in England

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the increasing adoption of collaborative arrangements within local authorities and asks whether they signal a new era in public service delivery—one characterized by collaborative governance and power-sharing within communities. Using qualitative data from nine partnerships in England, the article documents observed rationales for and typologizes structures of collaborative practice, as well as captures the degree to which co-creation activities are observed within each site. Findings show many of these partnerships use the rhetoric of co-creation earnestly, but that rhetoric is occasionally misapplied when describing citizen self-help and community self-organization efforts.

IMPACT

This article provides a framework for public service policy-makers and managers to describe, compare, and analyse key dimensions of collaborative practice. It poses important questions for actors pursuing collaborative arrangements, in particular whether co-creative elements and mechanisms for ensuring democratic accountability are meaningfully integrated into ways of working.

Introduction

After a decade of austerity, then Brexit and Covid-19, English local authorities are exploring strategies to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable—often turning to their communities for help. Concepts like 'collaboration', 'asset-based working', 'co-creation' and 'community participation' are increasingly used to represent changes in public sector practice across the UK. Professional organizations tout new public service paradigms focused on communities rather than policies (for example NLGN, 2019). Central government, too, is promoting the 'levelling up' agenda after the unexpected shift of voter loyalty in the last election (Swinney & Enenkel, 2020). As a research team, we wondered: is this a brave new era in public service delivery? An innovative shift in practice introducing new ideas characterized by collaboration and power-sharing within communities?

In this article, we summarize insights from qualitative fieldwork to respond to these questions. In 2018–2019, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from nine collaborative partnerships in England. From these, we describe the rationale for and structure of collaborative practice across these partnerships. We offer a typology of observed collaborative structures and explore the inclusion of co-creation activities within them.

We found that the rationale for and structure of these collaborative partnerships are in part responses to fragmented public service delivery systems brought on by contemporary privatization efforts and the need to make resources 'go further' under austerity. Given the collaborative nature of the partnerships included in this study, interviewees' distinct preferences for collaboration are unsurprising. Nevertheless, those preferences tended to lack specific justifications. While many partnerships use co-creation rhetoric, that rhetoric is sometimes misapplied to activities which more closely resemble citizen self-help or community self-organization efforts.

Rationales for collaboration and co-creation

Collaboration occurs when individuals across multiple organizations co-ordinate and share resources to achieve a common goal. Collaboration has broad appeal as a solution to 'wicked problems'—social issues without clear answers, definitions, or links between cause and effect. When collaboration includes citizens working with the public sector—where public sector professionals and the community use each other's resources and assets to improve efficiency and/or outcomes—this is often called 'co-creation' or 'co-production' (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012).

In England, collaboration is often positioned as a response to fragmentation wrought by privatization reforms beginning in the 1980s, including sales of state-owned assets and enterprises, and contracting-out of public services to reduce state-monopoly delivery. Such marketized reforms resulted in more service provider organizations, increasing fragmentation and competition in local systems and between members of those systems. Recently, scholars have documented a distinct preference for collaboration stemming from multiple sources, including 'professionals, foundations, researchers, government agencies, and groups of organizations and volunteers … each perceive[ing] the clear need for greater communication, collaboration, and co-ordination of organizational efforts to achieve desired

outcomes in local communities' (Christens & Inzeo, 2015, p. 423). Hence, the popularity of collaboration partially stems from its ability to 'jointly address seemingly borderless problems' (Koliba et al., 2019, p. 29).

These rationales played out in our examples too— collaboration and co-creation were pursued because they were seen to enable more efficient and effective ways of arranging public services locally.

Collaboration

From our interviews, we identified three consistent and interrelated rationales for collaboration:

- First, and most common, was the belief that collaboration would allow the public sector to share financial and service-delivery responsibility across sectors and with the community.
- Second, the widely held belief that collaboration would give the voluntary sector a more significant role in tackling complex social challenges, specifically via smaller organizations with local expertise.
- Third, and least common, was that collaboration would make the public sector a better place to work.

Taken together, these rationales convey a shift in the role of local authorities whereby collaboration with local public service organizations— and in some cases the community — can enable local authorities to share their financial and service delivery responsibilities and improve social outcomes. Nevertheless, those we interviewed did not always clarify how this would be achieved. Instead, collaborative approaches were often justified by a general belief that they deliver better overall impact and value.

Co-creation

Rationales for co-creation, meanwhile, were often fully justified in interviews. For local government officials, co-creation was principally a means to enhance their understanding of the community, enabling service quality improvements and the identification of salient preventative interventions.

As a framing tool for community interaction and integration however, co-creation was not as commonly cited as 'asset-based working'. Like co-creation, asset-based working frames communities as having strengths to be harnessed through stewardship rather than control, but we found that the activities executed under this banner did not always exemplify the reciprocal nature of co-creation: concrete and ongoing public engagement was rare or inconsistent, and the power to define problems and direct action generally remained with local government.

Structure of collaboration

Informed by social network and collaborative governance theories, we developed a typology of collaborative structures by considering who led the partnership or collaboration, their role relative to other stakeholders (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015), and the scope of change the collaboration sought to deliver (Nowell & Kenis, 2019).

We identified four collaborative types amongst our nine partnerships (see Table 1). First, *collaborative councils* pursued radical programmes of change, reforming their internal and external ways of working, changing their relationships with local voluntary and private organizations, and integrating the public into service delivery, attempting to reignite citizens' sense of civic duty. Second, led by local authorities, *collaborative markets* sought to reduce competition between service providers through the use of flexible procurement processes, alternative contract models (for example alliance contracts), and relational approaches to contract management (for example progress conversations rather than key performance indicator reports). Third, *system connectors* were small organizations providing administrative support—like data capture and reporting, contract management, and back-office functions —to enhance the performance of formal networks of public and voluntary service providers. Fourth, *agents of change* were voluntary-sector organizations who embedded teams within local council departments to develop more responsive frontline services.

Co-creation in collaborative structures

We observed co-creation activities within collaborative councils and agents of change models. While collaborative markets and system connects were actively working to embed citizen and service user perspectives in delivery, decision-making power was not observably shared with these groups.

Different collaboration purposes may explain this variation. Co-creation by collaborative councils is linked to their objective of changing the way they relate to and work with citizens. Agents of change, meanwhile, integrated service users into their model as a way of shifting frontline practice. While system connectors and collaborative markets bought into the ethos of asset-based and community-centred service delivery, they did not express specific objectives around community, citizen, or service user integration.

We observed two types of co-creation: co-design and co-delivery (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). Collaborative councils incorporated both co-design and co-delivery activities; agents of change models tended to focus on co-design.

Co-design activities included integrating former service users and community members in service design, community conversations, and local research. Oldham (collaborative council) used community conversations to gather evidence about social norms in the local area so services and outreach campaigns could be more tailored. In Wirral (collaborative council), ethnographic research methods were used to understand which factors influenced peoples' food choices. In collaboration with the community, the findings were used to design a bespoke strategy to tackle local food poverty and poor health outcomes. Golden Key (agent of change) employed former service users to redesign services around their client groups: 'It's about insight and understanding … gathered in a very different way from the usual suspects, and in unusual places. And then brought in for a conversation. We have had a lot of data in the past and our own analysis hasn't necessarily led us to the right conclusion (council senior manager).

Table 1. Collaborative structures and co-creation activities.

Collaborative structure	Who led?	Their role	Scope of change	Observed co-creation activities
Collaborative council Oldham Wigan Wirral	Local council leadership team	Local government direct service provision	Radical programme of change inspiring community sense of civic duty	Co-design: Community conversations: asking citizens about their aspirations and concerns for service development Local research exploring citizens' needs, experiences, and local context Co-delivery: Integration of citizens' skills in service delivery
Collaborative market Plymouth Alliance Young People's Foundations	Local council department head or voluntary prime contractor	Central contract holder working with network of local service providers	Changing the way contracted providers relate to one another	
System connector West London Zone Doing the Right Thing	Small external organization	Enhanced administrative and strategic support	Improve information flow & resource distribution within network of existing service providers	
Agent of change Ignite Golden Key	Nongovernmental organization	Guidance/advice to public service delivery teams	Develop services to be more responsive to service users	Co-design: Integration of former service users in the service design

Collaborative councils often viewed co-delivery as a tool for employing citizens' competences in service delivery. In Oldham, the 'Make Every Contact Count' initiative offered training to help community members engage others in 'health chats' about smoking and drinking, and learn how to signpost people to appropriate support services. In Wirral, conversations between frontline staff and service users were structured to uncover the root issues and real aspirations of service users. Here, we saw the role of the public sector shifting from doing on behalf of people to supporting people to achieve their own aspirations: 'it is a different conversation, which is based not on "what can we do for you?", but "what would you like to be able to do? What resources have you got to help you do that, and then what are the gaps?"' (council director).

Co-creation, citizen self-help, or community self-organization?

Across collaborations, approaches to asset-based working engaged service users and community members in ways that did not easily settle into existing co-creation definitions. While open conversations commonly shaped the direction of services, in some instances these led to communities taking on direct responsibility for services, assuming responsibility for tasks that would otherwise be considered the job of the local authority (for example litter picking). While interviewees suggested that their communities accepted that the state could no longer afford to be responsible for all aspects of public service delivery, and therefore needed a different level of public involvement, this raises a host of questions about the role of communities as substitutes for public provision.

In collaborative councils, we observed a heightened emphasis on the reciprocity of responsibilities between the public sector and citizens. These obligations were articulated in the form of deals, pledges, and plans for the express purpose of creating a shared ambition between the public sector and the community, appealing to mutual civic

duty. For example, the Wigan Deal 2030 frames public sector and community obligations as 'Our part–your part' where the council pledges to keep council tax low in exchange for citizens carrying out civic duties like recycling; being healthy and active; getting involved in the community; and supporting local businesses: 'it's a different way of thinking about how the community functions, it's very anthropological, it's very based on human behaviour rather than systems and processes' (council executive).

While framed in the language of co-creation, it is difficult to parse whether the above is an example of co-delivery or a form of citizen self-help, aimed at reducing reliance on public services. Similar rationales were provided for community funds and asset transfers, activities associated with community self-organization initiatives. Community funds in Wigan offered grants to applicants seeking to initiate grassroots activities like art therapy for mental health patients and care placements for vulnerable adults in a community farm. The transfer of state assets (for example community centres, playing fields, public libraries) to community groups and private entities were variously structured as long-term leases and sales. On occasion, these transfers gave the responsibilities of maintenance and service delivery to third parties, reducing the public sector's control over service quality, accountability and equity of access.

We have got services that are under huge pressures [and we're] *making lots of budget reductions ... asset transfers could be used to get an asset off the books ... then there is a sort of concern about what happens if a* [community] *group can't manage it? What happens, who is responsible for it? What is the risk?* (council senior manager.)

Conclusion

The collaboration and co-creation described in this article are not new phenomena in public service delivery, and there is a vast literature on the methods, benefits, and costs of co-creation with citizens and communities. Thinking back to our initial curiosity—whether we were seeing a new era in

public service delivery—what we observed is not innovative in the sense that it is completely new but, rather, that it is new for many of the organizations involved in these collaborations.

Our exploration of rationales for collaboration provides some indication for why these modes of working are being adopted in England. The increasing traction of collaboration is partially a response to public service delivery fragmentation brought on by privatization and financial austerity. Collaboration was broadly viewed by those interviewed as a mechanism for tackling social issues that no single part of the public sphere had managed to tackle alone, as a way to realise the benefits of combining resources and joining up strategies without the cost and complexity of formal integration. Collaborative working seems to be part of an evolving discourse about what constitutes effective public leadership, with increasing attention and import given to stewardship rather than managerial models, and where the role of government is to enable others—service providers, users, and communities—to reach their full potential.

In this article, we have offered a typology of observed collaborative structures focusing on the entity leading the collaboration, their role, and the scope of change being sought. In exploring co-creation activities in collaborations, we found that, while many of these partnerships use the rhetoric of co-creation and seek to continuously improve the way that citizens' perspectives are built into service delivery, that rhetoric is misapplied when describing citizen self-help and community self-organization efforts like asset transfers.

Consequently, an unanswered aspect of collaborative practice is understanding under what conditions and structures democratic accountability can be maintained. Some scholars argue that multi-centred governance though local collaboration has equal or greater legitimacy because it provides more checks and balances than centralized systems, and can offer more opportunities for citizens' voices to be heard and for local or innovative solutions to be developed (Ostrom, 2010; Blundell et al., 2019). As we've seen however, this way of working presents accountability challenges, especially in instances where government responsibilities are being handed over to non-governmental actors. Thus, collaborations require a compelling and accurate narrative to communicate their legitimacy externally, and to guard against exacerbating inequity through capture by particular organizations, vocal groups or through neglect of individuals and entities that lack resources or capacity to participate.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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