

Briefing

Are we Rallying Together? Reflecting on our early findings

November 2018

Reflecting on our early findings and what's next

Across the UK, collaborative and innovative approaches to local public services are being adopted. From redefining the relationship between council and community in Wigan, to building partnerships to address cross-cutting challenges in Plymouth, changes are happening. At the GO Lab, we want to understand more about what these innovative approaches look like in practice, and what can be learned from them.

Why collaborate?

There is much conversation at the moment within local government and civil society about changing the relationship between citizens and the state. This may be partly a response to austerity, but the ethos and intent around sharing responsibility seems to be grounded in a more broadly based belief that the local state should develop a new and more equal relationship with its local community. So while circumstances may indeed be forcing change, there is a broader movement towards a way of working which recognises the role of citizens and community organisations for delivering public services and tackling social issues. The [Civil Society Strategy](#) recently published by the UK government, reflects the growing emphasis on these themes.

Our research into public sector collaboration

We are looking at a number of local authorities and provider organisations who are pioneering this type of collaborative approach. The aim of our research is to better understand the dynamics, challenges and benefits of collaboration from the perspective of managers at the local level. An initial round of interviews was held with a senior manager from each of the ten places shown in the box below. These places were deliberately chosen to reflect a self-declared collaborative effort, and to take in a diversity of approaches and geographies. The initial interviews will be followed by an in-depth exploration of further questions with some of the places. Here, we share emerging themes from our initial interviews, and we welcome responses and input to inform our ongoing work.

Initial findings: an ambition for transformational change in a context of austerity

Two consistent themes emerged from our interviews: an ambition for a new relationship with the community and the necessity to meet fiscal challenges in providing public services. Both were seen to be important in inspiring the collaborative approach.

Our first round of interviews included four local authorities and six charities, all of whom are attempting to address complex social issues through collaboration.

Organisation	Sector	Region
Plymouth Public Health	Public sector	Plymouth
Oldham Council	Public sector	Oldham
Wigan Council	Public sector	Wigan
Wirral Council	Public sector	Wirral
Ignite	Charity	Coventry
<i>Doing the Right Thing</i> (The Richmond Group of Charities)	Charity	Somerset
Golden Key	Charity	Bristol
Kibble	Charity	Paisley (Scotland)
West London Zone	Charity	Inner West London
Young Harrow Foundation	Charity	Harrow (North-West London)

Our interviewees consistently voiced their ambition to achieve transformational change in the relationship between the local public sector and communities. In all cases there was an explicit intent to engage more fully the wider assets available in communities, and to bring greater citizen engagement into commissioning decisions and delivery.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we also found a fiscal imperative for local authorities to reduce the role of the state in directly delivering outcomes. This could involve sharing, or in some instances ceding responsibility for services to other organisations or individuals. Examples included local authorities investing in a new social enterprise, passing greater responsibility to people and organisations in the local community, and transferring public assets into community ownership.

Wigan Council

Wigan was one of the local councils most affected by austerity cuts and faced very significant challenges in continuing to deliver high quality and effective services. The CEO, Donna Hall, with the political support of elected members, led a programme of radical change called the Wigan Deal. The council was open with residents about the financial pressures on services, and asked local people to share responsibility for contributing to the Wigan community and economy. The Deal has established a more collaborative and open relationship between local government and local people which our interviewees believe better uses the strengths and resources in Wigan.

Complex journeys towards change

As noted above, our interviews revealed that local government leaders consider it increasingly necessary to create effective partnerships with other local organisations to tackle fiscal and social challenges. In all cases, organisations needed to go on complex journeys to establish these relationships.

Some interviewees said that this process had changed the very fundamentals of the purpose and identity of their own organisations. They also recognised the critical importance of establishing a new organisational culture that reflected the ethos and shared values of the partnership. In every instance, that journey seems to have required leaders with a deep belief in the need for change. There was a personal willingness to take on the risks associated with giving

up power, whilst carrying responsibility for spending decisions and the effectiveness of services. We are seeking to understand better the circumstances that enable this type of leadership.



Oldham Council

Oldham Council, in conjunction with local partners from the NHS, voluntary sector and businesses, developed a plan to align strategy and delivery for cross-cutting challenges such as loneliness. The plan is delivered through a partnership, which was built over a 12-month period involving what our interviewee described as “tough and open conversations”. The partnership is held together by consensus and commitment of those involved, rather than formalised agreements or structural change.

Partnership not competition

Our interviewees described a diminishing appetite among local authorities for entering into commercially aggressive contracts with large organisations that have no long-term interest in the community. We heard about the tensions between traditional procurement routes based on open competition, which tend to disadvantage local providers and disincentivise collaboration, and the new approach based on local partnerships. Some interviewees told us that these partnerships relied on trust and a sense of shared values, without contracts being used.

Plymouth Council

The Director of Public Health brought together organisations delivering services to people with complex needs. This collective approach to commissioning and service improvement contrasted sharply with the competitive, market-based approach previously employed. The partnership was able to agree reductions in spending by agreement. The council is now making this partnership formal using a type of multi-party contract in which all providers have an equal voice (known as an “Alliance contract”).

The procurement puzzle

The Civil Society Strategy recognises that “more must be done to encourage commissioners to use the flexibilities available to them” through the recently adopted Public Contracts Regulations 2015. It highlights a need for learning and development of commissioning skills for “local councillors, for legal, procurement and planning officers, and a wider range of staff.” Our conversations indicated that in many cases these were on-going challenges. Related to this, the strategy also proposes strengthening implementation of the Social Value Act, and the revival of grant-making (through “Grants 2.0”).



Defining success and measuring for learning

Along with ceding power and authority to community organisations, our interviewees are also determining how they define and measure success.

We heard that while traditional methods of defining targets and measuring performance have their place, collaboration requires shared ambitions and mutual accountability.

For some interviewees, there was a view that it is as important to focus on getting the system of delivery right as it is to focus on the end outcomes for citizens. "System health" becomes the key metric, rather than outcomes – though how this is measured remains a question. We are seeking to understand more about how measures of shared success evolve in collaborative relationships, and how data is used to inform learning and change.

West London Zone

West London Zone charity acts as a "backbone organisation" that brings together a network of mainly local, social sector partners with a shared ambition to improve the life chances of disadvantaged children in an area of west London. The partnership is funded by a variety of sources: it is commissioned by two local authorities on a payment-by-results model, with schools and local philanthropists also contributing. Measurement of outcomes is used both in order to release payment from commissioners, and to align a diverse range of provision around individualised, child-centred, measures of success. This focus on the specific needs of participating children helped to build consensus between participating organisations.

Beyond co-production

We examined how citizens and service users were being engaged and empowered, and found a set of practices that go beyond co-design or co-production. We saw an empowerment of front-line professionals to do what is *needed* to meet the needs of service users, rather than what is *allowed* or mandated. We saw new ways of listening to communities that have disrupted sometimes long-held perceptions of needs and priorities. These models varied considerably across our cases, and in the next stage of our work we will further investigate these changing relationships between citizens and the state.

How it sounds – Wirral Council

The below quotes are taken from our interviews with managers at Wirral Council. They illustrate some of the way public sector organisations are talking about the new way of working.



The partnership in the last three years [...] has become very much more how can we work around joint outcomes, rather than around organisational delivery."

Policy and Strategy Manager, Wirral Council



Instead of being eight organisations, bringing their organisational perspective to things, it's about eight sectors of expertise and knowledge coming together to see if we can solve the problem and to make that difference. [...] It's a fundamental cultural shift which is about seeing the people that come through the door as equal partners."

Director of Public Health, Wirral Council

Putting principles into practice

This article describes how ten places who all say they are making a deliberate effort towards greater community collaboration are putting this into practice. Our findings so far illustrate that some of the ideas discussed in the Civil Society Strategy, and the broader discourse it reflects, are already taking place to some degree – but also the considerable changes this requires.

In our next phase of work, we are going to examine in more depth how some of these collaborative relationships are constituted and governed. Does it matter if no single organisation is in charge, and that we can't hold community organisations to account in the same way as democratically elected councillors? If we believe that citizens must be active participants in making communities better, how should the state develop a more effective relationship with communities in order to achieve this? What should define success, and does it matter how outcomes are delivered and by whom?

While we may not be able to answer all these questions, we hope to provide further insights into this much talked-about collaborative approach. We hope to provide some guidance for those who are considering collaboration but are much earlier on in their journey. ■

