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GETTING READY FOR **COLLABORATION:** LEARNING FROM **EXPERIENCE**

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For more information about the Collaboration Benefits programme, visit www.bassac.org.uk/collaborationbenefits

For more information about the Institute for Voluntary Action Research, visit www.ivar.org.uk

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Getting ready for collaboration: Learning from experience has been written to help staff, trustees and volunteers from voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) to get ready for working in collaboration. The guide should help with all forms of collaboration – from sharing information and developing a common policy response to mergers. We decided to produce this guide because organisations have told us that they gain more from collaboration when they are well prepared from the outset.

Getting ready for collaboration can help you and your organisation to:

- make an informed choice about whether and how to work in collaboration with another VCO
- think carefully and thoroughly about the process of working in collaboration, so that any possible change to your organisation can be safe, inclusive and cause minimum disruption
- become more aware of the practical implications and requirements of collaborative working.

What this guide covers

There is a wide range of checklists and ‘how to’ guides already available to *support* collaboration, but little that focuses specifically on how to prepare to collaborate with others. Working through the questions in this guide should help your organisation to be better prepared to collaborate with others in the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

This guide does not cover collaborative working across sectoral boundaries – for example working in partnership with local authorities. While many of the issues that arise in forming and maintaining collaborative arrangements are common to collaboration both within and across sectors, cross-sector working presents a particular set of challenges. These are addressed by other programmes and forms of support, including training courses provided through the Collaboration Benefits programme and the IVAR/IDeA Partnership Improvement Programme.¹

The public policy context for collaborative working

Collaborative working has become a more significant feature of the VCS in an environment where central government increasingly emphasised an enhanced role for the sector in public service delivery.² The government has also highlighted the part that VCOs can play in building more cohesive communities – for example, the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* comments that VCOs ‘can provide the glue that binds communities together and create the opportunities for people of different backgrounds to work together for shared goals.’³ Similarly, the White Paper *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* stresses the sector’s valuable role in social and democratic renewal: ‘[it] has a unique ability to give a voice to the community and drive change’.⁴

Since the Treasury’s 2002 cross-cutting review,⁵ the idea of collaborative working between VCOs as a means of achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and impact has been a common thread running through public policy for the VCS. The review expressed the government’s concern with: reshaping its relationship with the VCS; modernising the sector; and making VCOs more effective service providers. At the same time, the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit’s 2002 review of the not-for-profit sector considered the way in which the legal and regulatory framework of the VCS might be overhauled. Included among its recommendations were that: ‘the Charity Commission should provide specific advice to facilitate mergers, possibly by creating a dedicated internal unit’; and ‘a package of legal measures should be introduced that will facilitate mergers and, more generally, the administrative running of the charity’.⁶ Capacitybuilders’ subsequent publication of the strategy document for the ChangeUp programme⁷ outlined plans to encourage greater collaboration within the VCS.

Most recently, the government published its plans to help VCOs withstand the effects of

the economic recession,^{viii} including a £16.5m modernisation fund to help them merge or collaborate. While the document notes the 'effectiveness of collaborative approaches in strengthening the sector', it also acknowledges that the full potential of collaborative working has not yet been realised, and that the external costs of more formal types of collaboration, such as mergers, can be a hindrance.

Despite this unprecedented level of interest in collaborative working, VCOs continue to experience practical difficulties when working together, and face searching questions, such as:

- Who should we collaborate with and why?
- What form should the collaboration take?
- What do we need to do to make the collaboration worthwhile?

This guide offers some responses to these questions.

Collaboration Benefits programme

Part of the work of Collaboration Benefits is to support groupings or 'clusters' of VCOs to take forward particular collaborations. Clusters are a group or network of organisations (usually linked by location or interest) that have decided to collaborate in order to develop resources and/or have an impact that they could not achieve individually. The term 'clustering' may be used interchangeably with 'sharing without merging', a concept developed by bassac since 2002. Collaboration Benefits employs cluster managers, whose role is to support organisations to come together to form clusters and achieve their objectives through collaboration.

Organisations choose to engage in different types of collaboration for different reasons. Drivers towards and motives for collaboration are addressed in Part two.

The basis for this guide

This guide draws on the findings of a series of studies by IVAR concerned with collaborative working between VCOs in England. These studies were carried out between 2001 and 2008 according to action research principles, particularly:

- a commitment to collaboration between researchers and practitioners
- a focus on producing practically useful and usable knowledge
- an interest in both building and transferring knowledge.

Where appropriate, the guide also refers to other research carried out in this area.

Introduction

Getting ready for collaboration should help you prepare for working in collaboration with other VCOs. The guide is presented in five parts:

1. **What is collaborative working?**
2. **Why do organisations collaborate with each other?**
3. **What forms can collaborative working take?**
4. **What can be difficult about collaborative working?**
5. **What can be done to help make collaborative working succeed?**

At the end of each part, you will find suggested questions for reflection. Thinking through these questions – and what they mean for you and your organisation – can help you prepare better for collaborative working.

At the end of the guide, there are suggestions for where to look for more resources.

How you could use *Getting ready for collaboration*

We can suggest two ways for you to use this guide:

Within your own organisation

To secure widespread involvement and commitment, this may be best carried out through a small working group comprising trustees, staff and volunteers. You could appoint one member of the group as a facilitator, or bring in someone from outside to coordinate the process.

To allow sufficient time for reflection, you could choose to work through the guide over two or three sessions. Each session should be recorded so that a final summary of discussions and action points can be circulated to all key stakeholders.

Using the guide in this way will encourage people to think deeply and widely about collaborative working and ensure that you are well prepared for any subsequent action.

In a workshop with other organisations

To benefit from peer learning, the guide could be used in a facilitated workshop with other VCOs also thinking about collaborative working. This could be supported by the Collaboration Benefits programme or a local support agency, such as a Council for Voluntary Service.

The guide follows an approach which is based on two key principles:

- Form follows function: how you collaborate and the form that collaboration takes – joint venture, co-location, merger, etc – should be shaped and informed by why you are collaborating – for example, drivers, purpose, aspirations, etc.
- Forewarned is forearmed: informed choice (about all aspects of collaboration, including challenges and risks) is likely to yield greater benefits.

Definitions

We use the term 'collaborative working' to describe any situation in which people are working across organisational boundaries towards some positive end.^{ix}

The terms 'collaboration' and 'partnership' are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this guide, collaboration is the generic term used for all forms of working together. Partnership is one type of collaboration which, unlike more informal types of collaboration, is generally governed by some formalities such as having terms of reference or an elected membership.

Types of collaborative working

The collaboration spectrum in Figure 1 (p 8) is an explanatory model of some of the different forms that collaboration can take.

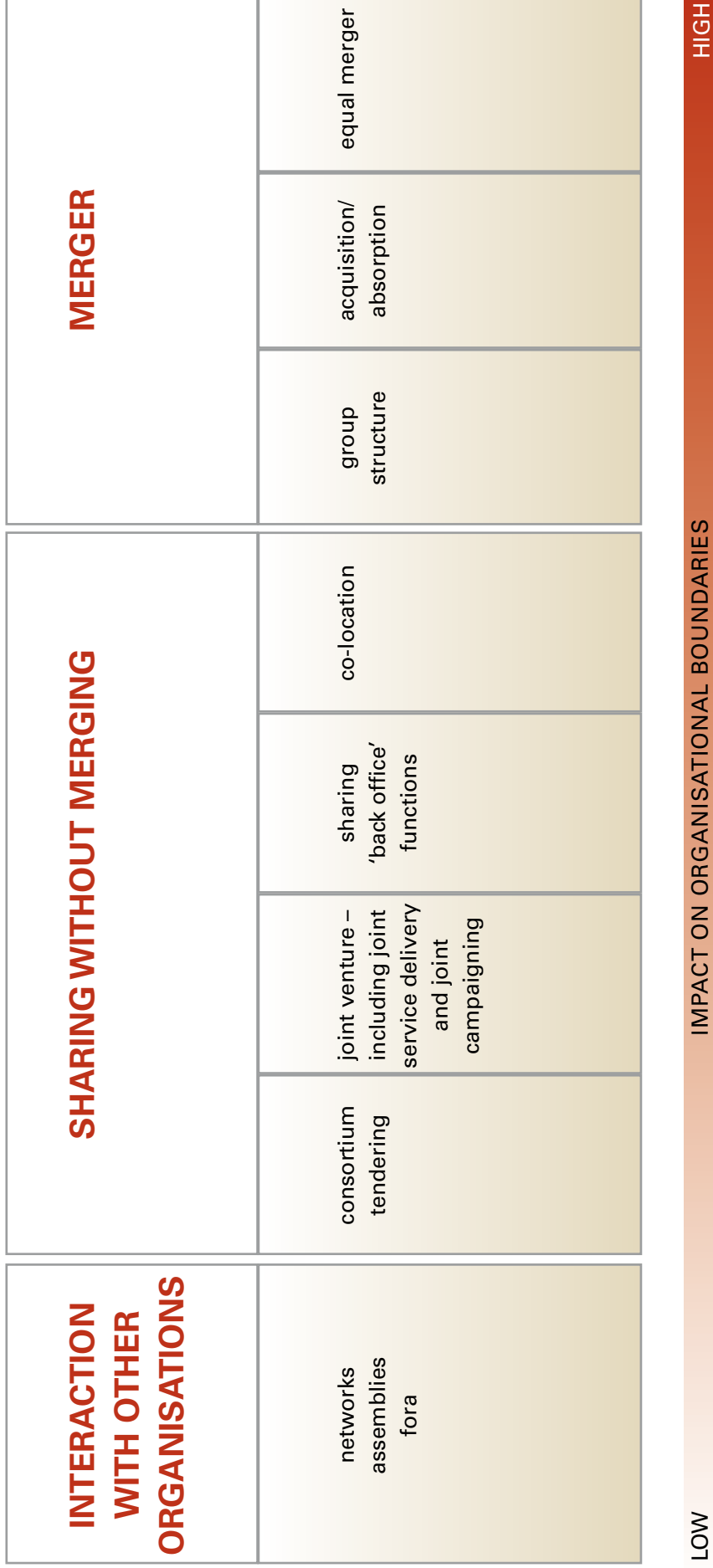
At one end of the spectrum, organisations may come together in networks or assemblies. The key feature of such arrangements is that the collaborating organisations remain independent, but may engage in activities such as sharing information, developing a common response to a policy initiative or discussing a shared problem.

At the opposite end is merger, a form of collaboration which involves an organisation giving up its independence to come together with another organisation.

Between these two extremes are forms of collaboration that involve coming together with varying degrees of commitment to permanent arrangements and sharing across organisational boundaries.

See Figure 2 in Part three for a more detailed description of each stage of the collaboration spectrum.

Figure 1: The collaboration spectrum



Reflection...

What is your organisation's purpose?

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What do you understand by the term 'collaborative working'?

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Why are you interested in collaborative working?

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Are you already collaborating with other organisations? Quickly list all the collaborations you are involved in with other VCOs. Then plot these examples on the spectrum on the next page.

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Exercise 1: Plot your existing and future collaborations on the spectrum

Use the grid provided below to plot where on the spectrum you would place:

- the collaborations you are already involved in
- any future collaborations that you anticipate becoming involved in.

Interaction with other organisations	Sharing without merging	Merger

A. Drivers and motives for collaboration

Organisations that are thinking about collaboration are generally motivated by a range of factors, both internal and external. The decision to collaborate may be the result of a long process of consideration, or an unplanned reaction to a perceived crisis such as loss of funding or the departure of a long-serving chief executive. IVAR's research suggests that, while economic factors and the influence of funding bodies can affect the decision to collaborate, other factors, or more often a combination of factors, also have a bearing on the decision.

Some factors – such as financial pressures and governance problems – can be considered as primarily reactive, while others – for example, a desire to have greater influence on the external environment; concern with meeting users' needs more effectively; or a wish to diversify the organisation's service portfolio – are more proactive. An existing history of collaboration has also been a driver for a number of collaborative ventures.

bassac's research into sharing without merging identifies both environmental and organisational drivers towards collaboration: ^x

External drivers include:

- differences in scale, power and capacity across the VCS
- resources not reaching frontline community organisations
- under-investment in capacity building and partnership development
- perception that the independence and diversity of the VCS is being threatened or eroded
- commissioner or breadth of tender specification that requires a consortium bid.

Internal drivers include:

- less senior management time for strategic planning and development
- less time or money for frontline activity
- under-capacity threatening local voice
- fragility and waste of potential.

B. Potential benefits of collaboration

Although many organisations collaborate because they believe they have to, tangible benefits can flow from collaboration, including:

- new or improved services
- more efficient use of resources
- knowledge and information sharing
- sharing risks
- stronger, united voice
- coordinated activities
- competitive advantage.

Reflection...

Some people have argued that organisations collaborate because they have to, not because they choose to. Is this your experience?

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Why do you or your organisation want to work collaboratively?

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What are the pressures on your organisation to work collaboratively and where do they come from?

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Exercise 2: The benefits of collaboration and current real life examples

In the left hand column of the table below is a list of the potential benefits of collaboration. Add others if you wish. Then, think about any current real life examples where collaboration produced this benefit and write them down.

Analyse these examples. What was the outcome? What happened in the longer term?

The benefit	Real life examples	Outcomes
New or improved services		
More efficient use of resources		
Knowledge and information sharing		
Sharing risks		
Stronger, united voice		
Coordinated activities		
Competitive advantage		

Exercise 3: The benefits of collaboration and future opportunities

In the left hand column of the table below is a list of the potential benefits of collaboration. Add others if you wish. Then, think about any future opportunities you may have to work in collaboration with others.

Analyse these examples. What outcomes would you look for – both for your organisation and your beneficiaries?

The benefit	Future opportunities	Intended outcomes
New or improved services		
More efficient use of resources		
Knowledge and information sharing		
Sharing risks		
Stronger, united voice		
Coordinated activities		
Competitive advantage		

In Part one we introduced the idea of a collaboration spectrum. Figure 2 sets out in more detail some of the features of each type of collaboration on the spectrum, with some examples of arrangements that fit each category and a summary of the possible advantages and disadvantages of each.

At the end of this section there is a series of questions to help you decide which form of

collaboration might best help your organisation to meet its aims and objectives. Bear in mind that collaborations are 'live' and can move along the spectrum. For example, a group of organisations that form a network may later form a consortium in order to tender to provide a service.

Figure 2: The collaboration spectrum: features, examples, potential benefits, risks and disadvantages

Form of collaboration	Features and examples	Potential benefits	Risks and disadvantages
INTERACTION Networks, assemblies and fora	A number of VCOs collaborate by: sharing information; responding jointly to consultations; developing policy; sharing good practice; or (possibly) electing representatives to speak on behalf of a sector or sub-sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing information about what is happening locally or nationally • Being able to develop a joint response to consultations and policy documents • Potential to develop policy • Sharing good practice • Vehicle for representing VCS views • Reduces isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be difficult to achieve consensus • Collaborating organisations may also be competitors – risk of sharing too much information • Lack of resources to support these arrangements can lead to one or two organisations bearing the burden • Member organisations drop out when under pressure
SHARING WITHOUT MERGING Consortium tendering	Two or more agencies undertake a specific project together, which may involve new money for new services, or the rationalisation of existing services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding duplication of services • Possible benefit from others' core competencies or technical expertise • Funders may be attracted by the idea of 'partnership' • Ability to achieve funding together that would not be possible alone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management can be difficult without clear lines of accountability and responsibility
SHARING WITHOUT MERGING Joint venture	Ongoing or temporary cooperation, possibly around campaigning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies speaking with a unified voice have a better chance of influencing the media, public opinion and policy-makers • Expertise can be shared • Ensures that agencies are not breaching charitable status by involving themselves in 'political' activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in deciding what the common approach should be when a number of disparate interests are involved • Funding for these types of ventures can be difficult to obtain
SHARING WITHOUT MERGING Resource sharing, including 'back office' functions and co-location	Sharing buildings or staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost savings leading to greater efficiency • Agencies are able to learn and benefit from each other's skills • Resources freed up for service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurring of roles • Potential conflicts of interest for staff • Clients or funders may be confused about the separate identity of agencies sharing resources

MERGER	
<p>Group structure</p>	<p>Constitutionally separate entities become part of a group, with a 'parent' organisation.</p>
<p>Acquisition/ absorption</p>	<p>One agency, which retains its corporate existence, absorbs another (or more) whose corporate existence is relinquished.</p>
<p>'Equal' merger</p>	<p>Two (or more) agencies join together as equal partners to form a new entity.</p>
<p>Structure allows smaller organisations to benefit from the 'brand name' of a nationally recognised group or organisation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants can determine the relative power of parent and subsidiaries, and can move closer towards full merger if the circumstances are appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion around the roles of separate management committees and lines of accountability May be a great deal of bureaucracy as parent tries to satisfy itself that subsidiaries are not 'out of control' Funders may be confused about identity of subsidiaries, and in particular perceive them as wealthier than they are
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be a rescue opportunity for agencies in crisis Allows acquiring agency to expand its services rapidly Economies of scale if agencies share a common infrastructure Addresses perceived problem of duplication of services New expanded organisation can benefit from greater skill base and improve effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of identity for the acquired agency Danger that funding will be lost because funders have a commitment to an agency that no longer exists Redundancies Loss of services in rationalisation, possible loss of locally based services Reduction in user choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economies of scale Addresses duplication of services Stronger infrastructure allows resources to be concentrated on improving services May enable local agencies to become a regional/national body, with associated advantages Extends reach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collectively, funders may not give the same amount to one organisation as to two or more Time-consuming process Risk of failure and inability to 'turn back the clock' May be expensive at the outset, with efficiency gains only in the longer term

Reflection...

Some organisations carry out a review of their mission and future plans before trying to work in collaboration with others. What do you think you need to do before you start thinking about collaborative working?

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Which type(s) of collaborative working and what issues do you need to know more about?

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Using Figure 2, which type of collaborative working fits most clearly with your organisation's needs and aspirations?

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A. Barriers to collaboration

Some of the factors that might prevent or deter organisations from collaborating are:

- fear of loss – for example, of organisational identity
- the need to retain autonomy and control – for example, around ethos or specialist area of benefit
- hierarchical thinking – which may lead, for example, to difficulties in relating to people at different levels in other organisations
- lack of time to form relationships
- lack of knowledge about the culture of other organisations – concerns about the ‘fit’ with other approaches and styles of working
- misperception about resource availability, or thinking that the organisation does not have the capacity to collaborate.

bassac’s work on ‘sharing without merging’ suggests that the three most prominent barriers to collaborative working are connected more to the characteristics of the VCS itself rather than to specific circumstances.^{XI}

First, the decision-making process within VCOs can be slow because governance structures often require decisions to implement a collaborative working model to go before the organisation’s board of trustees. This delay can result in a sense of excitement in the project being lost, or staff finding it difficult to present the concept to the board, which in turn does not feel confident enough to agree to proceed.

Second, collaboration requires a willingness to share information and effective communication, which depends on organisations overcoming any tendency towards secrecy and competition.

Finally, some VCOs are risk averse, which can make them wary of change. As collaboration includes risks and requires a commitment to take staff and the organisation through a change process, organisations without an entrepreneurial spirit may be unwilling to make this step.

B. Practical challenges in implementing collaborative arrangements

Drawing on learning from situations where VCOs have worked together – in this instance on campaigning activities – NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit^{xii} outlines a number of difficulties which may arise in such situations, including:

- disproportionate contribution of resources by partners
- lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities within the collaboration
- reputation risk through association
- financial costs of engaging in collaboration – for example, in the form of staff time, consultancy support or specialist advice.

Similarly, IVAR's research^{xiii} on co-location within the VCS identifies a number of practical challenges which fall under the general categories above – resources, relationship management and the value created through collaboration – including:

- unrealistic expectations about what the collaboration might achieve
- limited organisational capacity to engage
- disproportionate contribution of time and other resources by one partner
- complex administration of shared areas of work
- varying status levels of individuals in respective positions on engaging sides, based on differences in organisational cultures
- establishing personal and inter-organisational mutual trust
- lack of a shared practical understanding of the exchange benefits for all participants and of identifying the collaborative advantage of working together^{xiv}
- limited dissemination of collaborative work experience or knowledge transfer to others.

Reflection...

What barriers do you think your organisation will need to overcome in order to collaborate with others?

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What practical challenges do you foresee?

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Have you considered what time and resources are likely to be involved?

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Who else needs to be involved and what will they need to do?

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A. Understanding the process

We have found it helpful to think about collaboration in terms of a process with distinct stages. The amount of time needed for each of these stages may vary considerably – there is no set period for any particular stage, since individual situations will affect the amount of time needed. Clearly, planning a merger is likely to require more time and resources than entering into a time-limited joint project. In some cases, the stages may overlap – for example, where there are already loose cooperative ventures in place and the organisations decide to enter into a more formal collaboration. In others, there may be pauses between one phase and the next.

Stage one: Negotiation

This stage involves:

- testing ideas about the drivers towards collaboration
- discussing the purpose of collaboration
- developing a shared understanding of what success might look like
- assessing broad issues of organisational fit
- identifying any obvious deal breakers
- establishing the level of commitment among potential partners to take discussions to the next stage.

The amount of time spent on negotiating will depend on the type of collaboration being considered.

Stage two: Decision making

This stage is about:

- reaching consensus
- where appropriate, reaching a formal agreement to collaborate
- agreeing timescales
- agreeing process for subsequent stages.

Stage two might conclude with the participating organisations drawing up some sort of agreement or terms of reference for collaboration, a document which might include a statement about:

- who will contribute what resources to the collaboration
- what will happen if one party wishes to withdraw or if there is a dispute
- what the collaborating organisations intend to achieve together
- how decisions will be made.

Stage three: Planning

Although this stage is particularly important for organisations entering into more complex collaborative arrangements, it is also relevant to other types of collaboration. At this stage organisations will need to think about:

- how the collaboration will work in practice
- who will do what and when
- what resources will be needed.

For a more complex collaboration, such as co-location, you will need to draw up a detailed project plan.

Stage four: Implementation

This stage is about making the collaboration work in practice. If the earlier stages of the process have been well thought through, then the implementation stage should run smoothly. Nevertheless, it will be important to monitor and manage the implementation of the project plan.

B. Preparing for collaboration

Our experience suggests that organisations are better able to reap the benefits of collaboration when they have taken time to think through the issues identified in this guide. Indeed, it is helpful to do this before the prospect of a collaborative arrangement emerges, so that your organisation is prepared to collaborate when the time comes and can be proactive in identifying opportunities for collaboration.

C. Governance and leadership

Leadership is essential at all stages of a collaboration. If the collaboration is more formal (for example, a merger or joint service delivery) it will be important to think about how the arrangements will be governed – for example:

- Who has ultimate responsibility?
- In a dispute, where does authority lie?
- Who decides whether to continue with the arrangement or not?
- To whom are staff and volunteers accountable?

This does not mean that one person should do all the work associated with a collaboration. Some organisations choose to establish a small steering group drawn from both partners, which reports back to the trustees and senior staff. Their role might include:

- maintaining and explaining the vision of the collaborating organisations
- helping find solutions to issues relating to staffing, governance, organisational culture and structure
- providing clear information
- dealing with unanticipated problems.

D.Evaluation

There is little or no point in collaborating if it does not bring some tangible advantage to the organisations involved. This may sound self-evident, but it is quite possible for two organisations to invest a large amount of time – and sometimes money – without being clear about the benefits of collaboration.

As previously discussed, organisations enter into collaborative arrangements for a wide variety of reasons. They can be reacting to external circumstances or it could be a proactive decision. Either way, the reasons are often underpinned by certain assumptions – for example, that collaboration will lead to economies of scale, increased capacity or a higher national profile.

Where possible, such assumptions need to be tested – through reflection and thorough discussion among all key stakeholders about what they expect from collaboration and how it might be achieved.

Organisations thinking about collaboration may find it useful to draw up a list of objectives to evaluate later. These objectives need to be as specific as possible, and might include:

- making financial savings
- developing new services
- reaching more people
- raising the organisation's profile
- achieving more influence.

Developing a collaboration can take time. As a result, circumstances may change and the initially desired benefits may not in the end prove realisable. It is therefore vital that both organisations review their objectives periodically during the collaboration and take action where necessary. This may include terminating the collaboration.

Reflection...

Can you define your objectives in forming a collaboration?

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How will your collaboration affect the other service(s) you provide or your organisation's other activities?

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What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of (a) your organisation and (b) the organisation(s) you are thinking of collaborating with?

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What do you think are the major challenges in making your collaboration work?

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What can you do to overcome these challenges?

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Who will lead your collaboration process?

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How will you evaluate the success of your collaboration?

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Collaboration Benefits programme www.bassac.org.uk/collaborationbenefits

The programme provides training and support to enable VCOs to develop strong and successful partnerships. Specifically, it has devised a training programme for development workers wishing to become more skilled in supporting collaboration and also offers a programme of direct support to VCOs that wish to collaborate. Collaboration Benefits is a partnership between bassac, Action with Communities in Rural England, Community Foundation Network and IVAR.

NCVO Collaborative Working Unit www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/advice-support/collaborative-working

This unit is a source of advice and information about collaborative working and merger. It aims to raise awareness of the opportunities of collaboration, enable the sector to make informed decisions about whether and how to work collaboratively, improve practice and develop the collaboration agenda by providing advice, support case studies on collaboration types.

Documents referred to in this guide

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- II See for example, HM Treasury/Cabinet Office (2007) *The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration*, HMSO, London; Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) *Strong and prosperous communities*, The Local Government White Paper, DCLG: London

- III Department for Communities and Local Government (2006) *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, The Local Government White Paper, DCLG: London, p 159
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