

## **Collab – for Children and Young People’s Services: an evaluation report for Common Purpose**

### **Background**

Common Purpose is a not-for-profit organisation that brings together people from a wide range of backgrounds to help them become more effective leaders in society.

The Institute of Education (IOE), University of London, is one of the world’s leading universities for research into education and social science and The London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL), a department of the Institute, undertakes research, evaluation, teaching and consultancy in professional and leadership development and its impact on learning and change.

LCLL was commissioned by Sara Clarkson, on behalf of Common Purpose, to evaluate *Collab*, a pilot course designed by Common Purpose to support organisations seeking to develop collaborative leadership. On behalf of LCLL, Vivienne Porritt, the Centre’s Executive Director, undertook this review.

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## 1. *Collab*: aims and structure

*Collab* (Collaboration Laboratories) is a bespoke course that provides participants with a tailored case study based on a problem that closely reflects reality and calls for collaboration across multiple organisational and sector boundaries. In the particular pilot course being evaluated, participants came from organisations involved formally or informally in the lives of children and young people and representing the public, private and voluntary sectors across four Local Authority areas. The structure of the course included three sessions:

- an initial evening session in which participants from organisations across the local authority were introduced to the aims of the *Collab*, to each other and to the structure of the collaborative case study approach
- a morning session on the next day in which participants engaged in a tailored simulation. This explored the challenges around working collaboratively for the benefit of the local authority stakeholders and how to develop partnerships to address such challenges
- an afternoon session which reflected on the morning's activity and identified what participants had learned about partnership and collaboration across organisations and sectors
- participants were divided into groups and asked to role play working for an organisation within the local authority area and to identify other organisations they could work with to address the challenges faced by Children's and Young People's Services in achieving goals for families, children and young people. The other organisations were also represented within the simulation with other *Collab* participants taking these roles. To ensure the actions proposed to build partnerships were feasible and realistic, each group was briefed and advised by a real member of their adopted organisation
- the groups had to work to a set timescale to identify and then negotiate to achieve the partnerships they felt were the most beneficial to their organisational aims and which met the defined criteria. These criteria were taken from the local priorities for Children, Young People and Families. During this period, authentic problems to be solved were added into the discussions to add a further dimension of reality to the simulation.

The sessions were facilitated by Common Purpose staff and, in the two sample councils for this evaluation, the initial session was introduced by the Directors of the Children's Services. The pilot series of *Collabs* was funded by The Local Government Association and grew from a conference for Directors of Children's Services.

## **2. Methodology**

The evaluation was commissioned to review whether the pilot *Collabs* had achieved their aims, purposes and anticipated benefits. The impact of the pilot course was also within the scope of the evaluation as were any recommendations as to ways *Collabs* could be improved.

*Collabs* that took place in Sheffield and Reading were sampled for the purposes of this evaluation. The evaluator visited the second of the three *Collab* sessions in Reading and sampled the simulation activity and dialogue of two groups representing Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and the Youth Engagement Service. This supported the evaluation of whether the aims, purposes and anticipated benefits of *Collab* were understood by participants and were achieved. The immediate impact of the simulation activity on participants was also able to be evaluated by sampling dialogue and discussing such impact with one participant in each group. The evaluator also conducted structured telephone interviews with the following people following the *Collab* sessions:

- Julia Middleton, Chief Executive of Common Purpose
- Anna Wright, Director of Education and Children's Services, Reading Borough Council
- Sonia Sharp, Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services, Sheffield City Council.

Three participants from the Sheffield *Collab* were selected by Common Purpose to be interviewed several months after their experience. This enabled the evaluator to review their perspective on the aims and benefits of *Collab* and any subsequent impact on their own thinking and practice or organisational outcomes.

## **3. Strengths of the *Collab* process**

### ***Aims and purpose***

The aims and purpose of *Collab* are clarified at the initial session for those who participate from the start and the broad aims of enabling organisations to collaborate more effectively in partnership are well understood by participants. Participants at both the Sheffield and Reading events saw the aims to be the promotion of collaboration and the exploration of the processes and principles of partnership working. Such perceptions resonate strongly with the aims for *Collab* described by Julia Middleton, Common Purpose's Chief Executive, as being to engage a wider group of stakeholders to be creative in supporting the wider children's services agenda through building an 'alliance of practical relationships'. Participants were able to explain these aims as outlined by the introductory session and they were also stated clearly on the materials handed out to participants. Participants were able to

build on these aims and relate them to their own personal and organisational aims which included:

- develop a better understanding of what other organisations in the locality do
- better collaboration across the public, private and voluntary sectors seeking benefits to cross agency working
- find new ways to solve old problems

Sheffield participants valued the presence of the Executive Director which gave the *Collab* a strategic mandate.

Anna Wright, the Director of Education and Children's Service for Reading Borough Council, felt it was important to personalise the broad aims outlined above. In her introductory words, she aligned these aims to the aims of Reading Borough Council and, in particular, the need to address issues of inequality in a difficult financial climate. Anna felt it was imperative to align Reading's aims to the process in which participants would engage:

'The Children's Services *Collab* in Reading had important and real benefits for us. At a time of budget cuts and low morale it is even more important to have clear direction and a shared understanding of the priorities. The *Collab* event got us to the point that we had a clear mandate on our key priorities going forward. It also helped to raise levels of trust between the participants representing many different interests so they can work together more efficiently and effectively. The Common Purpose team listened to what we needed as outcomes from the Reading *Collab* as specific local goals. They were flexible in incorporating our priorities into a coherent process. Not only did we come away with a shared sense of direction, we also established a context in which people could build relationships on the basis of better mutual understanding.'

It is a strength of the *Collab* process that it lends itself to such personalisation.

### **Structure**

The structure of the course was praised by all those interviewed and participants were engaged positively and in a creative way throughout the session the evaluator visited. The activities of the initial session placed the users and stakeholders at the heart of the *Collab* which was valued by participants in Reading. In working to identify how other organisations could help the organisation they had adopted for the simulation, participants found they did not know enough about the type of work or stakeholders covered. The real advisors were a key resource here and enabled participants to learn about roles and challenges of their adopted organisation. The negotiation period deepened this learning and extended participant knowledge of the aims and challenges across the sectors. Inevitably, there were times when the fiction of the simulation and reality merged and Sheffield participants spoke of 'real deals being done' by organisations alongside the simulated negotiations. This was

seen as a natural and welcome outcome by both the participants and Common Purpose. Private and voluntary sector participants and participants from the wider public sector, for example, the police, had welcomed the opportunity for them to find out more about the needs of other organisations so they could best tailor what they could offer. Participants also commented on the sessions being well run and facilitated.

### ***Impact on participants***

It is very clear that participants felt they had gained a great deal by the end of the *Collab*. Individuals talked about the event's 'vibrancy' and the 'chance to explore partnership in practice'. Several people had seen the event as being fulfilling and exciting as well as excellent professional development for themselves in building their understanding of partnership and personal communication skills. One person felt he had 'come away with more than he had brought' and particularly valued the impact the event had had on raising the profile of the voluntary sector.

Participants felt it was 'good to get a different perspective' which enabled them to 'find connections'. One participant who was new to the locality saw the event as 'a gift' in meeting new colleagues and building partnerships and a network.

### ***Impact on collaboration and partnerships***

The immediate impact of the *Collab* event for the two sampled councils was a clearly stated intent on the part of many participants to contact other organisations and build active relationships. In Reading, one member of a faith-based organisation stated:

'As a result of today, I'm thinking of ensuring the Youth Engagement Service know what we are doing. I will change the focus of our suburban mums' group because we now have a clearer idea of participants who may be forgotten.'

In Sheffield, a media based private sector company had already collaborated with the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service and the Police with commercial agreements and financial savings as outcomes. The private sector representative felt that all organisations had their thinking challenged as a result of their deeper understanding of what other organisations could offer. South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service were able to collaborate with the Primary Care Trust and have seen immediate, tangible outcomes to such collaboration. It does need to be acknowledged that long term outcomes from such collaboration will be seen in changes in lifestyles and behaviours and will take time to come to fruition. The networks built through the *Collab* process also give the opportunity to revisit the contacts made in the future.

#### **4. Recommendations for further consideration**

The overall view of all interviewed was that *Collab* was very successful with one participant saying it was 'hard to improve on the event'. *Collab* generated high quality, robust discussion that was frank and honest and offered the potential for practical outcomes to come from the day.

The following points are offered from participants and the evaluator as considerations for ways a pilot course could be further refined if offered again.

##### ***Aims and purpose***

It is clear that the immediate aims of the *Collab* events were met in that participants gained a greater understanding of other organisations and explored issues around building partnerships. There was less clarity as to whether the aim was also for organisations to act on such knowledge. Sonia Sharp in Sheffield saw the aim to be a robust improvement in relationships between organisations, with improved relationships being the platform for people working better rather than expecting *Collab* to bring about tangible lasting impact. In Reading, Anna Wright was clear that there would be follow up from the *Collab* process as it was to shape the Council's strategic Children's and Young People's Plan and so influence actions to address inequalities. This aim shaped the first session for Reading and enabled the *Collab* to be strongly aligned with Reading's strategic goals.

A recommendation for consideration is to be clear with commissioning clients and participants as to whether the aim of *Collab* is to increase immediate understanding and relationships with other outcomes seen as adding value or to be clear as to whether longer term impact is desired. The latter aim may alter or sharpen the structure of *Collab*.

##### ***Structure***

The following points are offered for further consideration.

1. Whilst participants felt the role of the advisors deepened their knowledge and added realism into the negotiations, their contribution could have been more consistent with some varying interpretations of their brief. Some participants felt that one or two advisors became quite defensive of their own organisation: this could be a question of revisiting the advisors' brief and outlining the need to avoid this natural inclination. One participant commented that the *Collab* really took off when the advisors joined and felt this could have happened in the first session rather than the second.
2. Whilst participants appreciated the value of entering the simulation with little prior knowledge and one participant felt the pre-event information was helpful, several would have valued more detailed briefing beforehand: 'I would have

liked to read and research beforehand. That may have been pre-judging but would have also quickened the pace a little’.

3. The afternoon slot was felt by several participants to be a little too long and focused too much on reflection. They would have valued some space for participants to come out of role and engage practically with opportunities to ‘do the real business’ and apply the learning from *Collab*.

### ***Impact on collaboration and partnerships***

The immediate impact on participants in terms of their motivation, thinking and desire to bring about change is unquestionable. More problematic is the impact on collaboration and partnerships. The point has been raised above as to whether the aim of *Collab* is to achieve longer term impact through demonstrable benefits to the stakeholders of the councils involved. Equally pertinent is whether this is the aim of the councils who commission *Collab*. Current thinking in the field of impact evaluation states that anticipated impact needs to be designed into the process from the outset<sup>1</sup>. The stated aims of *Collab* to enable organisations to collaborate more effectively in partnership imply actions as a result of the event. Whilst Sheffield participants were able to describe some practical outcomes from collaboration between organisations, other Sheffield participants reported that attempts at contact had not elicited replies or that their organisation valued partnership but was not yet in a position to further such relationships. In exploring with interviewees whether there had been follow up to *Collab*, follow up was seen to lie in the hands of the organisations and individuals rather than structured opportunities to enable this to happen.

There may well be value in following up organisations who have been involved in the pilots to ascertain actual outcomes and to support them to identify the impact on stakeholders of such outcomes. Equally, *Collab* could be refined further so that impact from participants’ changed thinking could be explored and organisations supported to work on an evidence-based approach to designing and demonstrating impact as a result of *Collab*.

## **5. Conclusions**

*Collab* is a very well received event and process that participants recommend should be available for more councils. The approach has motivated and energised participants and opened their eyes to the values of partnership within a challenging environment.

Further consideration could be given to the overall aim of *Collab* and how to support participants to apply their changed thinking so that it has short term and longer term impact on the stakeholders in their locality.

## References

1. Porritt, V. (2009) 'Evaluating the impact of professional development'. *Education Journal*, Issue 116.
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