

Transforming City Centres through Partnership Excellence, Collaborative Ethos and Ecosystem Maximisation

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Imagine your place as an exemplar for 'partnership excellence'.

A place where the public, private, voluntary and community sectors come together in 'Coalitions of The Willing' to collaborate and deliver transformational outcomes to improve your place; and the lives of your people and communities.

What would that actually look and feel like?

Introduction

This paper has been prepared to aid senior leaders, policy makers, opinion-formers and partnership professionals in thinking through some of the inherent challenges of 'working together' within collaborative transformation programmes to deliver transformational outcomes that improve their place and / or their peoples' lives. This is even more relevant now as we come out of the Covid-19 pandemic and many are seeking to re-set and re-vision their place. The following definitions are used within this paper:

- **Partnership** – the framework for delivering joint action together.
- **Collaboration** – the approach for undertaking joint action together.
- **Ecosystem** – the complex network of organisations and partnerships.

Whilst the future maybe uncertain; one thing is definitely for certain – that the future success and prosperity of our city centres is critically dependent on partnership frameworks committed to excellence; collaborative ethos at the heart of everything; and ecosystem maximisation.

Partnership / Collaboration / Ecosystems – Key Insights

By way of background, I have spent over 25 years working in the partnership / collaboration / ecosystem (PCE) space – both as a local government employee and as an independent consultant. My experiences and insights range from establishing the Local Strategic Partnership for Southampton (and being awarded a Top 25% Green national rating from Government) in order to maximise partnership working to improve economic, social and environmental outcomes; through to the provision of trusted advisor services to senior leaders and delivery of partnership development programmes to drive collaborative transformation programmes across (in the main) southern and central England.

When talking to senior leaders, opinion formers and partnership professionals around their desire to drive collaborative transformation programmes that seek to improve their place and / or the lives of their people; three main themes generally emerge in the discussion:

- 1) They want to make a real difference and have a strong commitment to doing so.
- 2) They feel that their partnership working needs to be better structured and organised.
- 3) There is a great sense that 'we know where we want to go and what needs to be done BUT we just can't seem to work out how to make it actually happen'?

Collaborative transformation programmes seek to address complex and wicked issues such as city centre rejuvenation; estate regeneration; levelling up; improving health outcomes; improving learning and skills outcomes; etc. These programmes need to fully maximise the contributions of 'key value creators' from across the public, private, community and voluntary sectors. They are, by their very nature, long-term in delivery and critically need to be underpinned by value-creating relationships by everyone involved.

As mentioned earlier, these programmes also need to be driven by a relentless commitment and focus on partnership excellence; collaborative ethos; and ecosystem maximisation.

Yet, worryingly, many collaborative transformation programmes across the country fail to deliver on their full potential. My Top 3 insights as to why this is are:

- 1) Lack of investment (*time and money*) in systematic partnership development activities focused on building excellence, commitment and strengthening trust.
- 2) Lack of investment (*consideration, time and money*) into the partnership management role and skills needed (the engine room!) to make the partnership work.
- 3) Lack of emotional attachment by partners to the partnership itself and its shared vision.

With this as the contextual backdrop, what are the key considerations when seeking to Secure Transformational Outcomes through Partnership Excellence, Collaborative Ethos and Ecosystem Maximisation?

Partnership Excellence:

Partnership is the framework for delivering joint action together. It holds people and organisations together; it provides the home for shared vision and shared value. Yet, the headline characteristics of many partnerships tends to be:

- Status quo mind-sets in design and execution; formulaic and boring!
- For the 'backbone organisation' (in many cases the local authority) they tend to design and execute partnerships in a mirror image of how they operate – this is not a criticism but a reality.

- Partnerships never really collectively consider ‘what partnership excellence should look and feel like’ and then design their operating model around it.
- Very rarely do partnerships take time out to learn, review and adapt.
- They struggle to release innovation and creativity; struggle to unleash the sense of excitement that should come with ‘we are going to do some amazing stuff together’!

In essence, the big question here is ‘who is responsible for ensuring that our partnership works in the most efficient, effective and engaging way’? The answer is not the Chair or the Partnership Manager, but all members of the partnership. The follow-up big question is then around ‘if all members of the partnership should co-create their modus-operandi; then do they actually do so’? Or is the partnership framework imposed and reluctantly accepted?

If I could bottle four key ingredients of partnership excellence – I would call it SODA:

- **Structure** – all about getting the right people around the right tables looking at the right issues at the right time with a clear split between strategy and delivery.
- **Organisation** – need exceptional organisation to fully maximise the ‘valuable together time’ that partnership members have. Value creating meetings focused on accelerating delivery; collaborative problem-solving; and seizing new opportunities.
- **Discipline** – absolute adherence to co-created partnership policies and house rules. Meeting agreed deadlines; avoiding slippage with its associated frustrations.
- **Agility** – working in a way that seeks to deliver shared value outcomes with maximum partnership flexibility and minimum partnership constraints.

Collaborative Ethos:

Collaboration is the approach for undertaking joint action together. Its key ingredient is the full engagement of all partners through co-creation, experimentation and joint delivery. The more that diverse partners discuss things together; deliver together; learn, review and adapt together; and celebrate success together – the stronger and more embedded your collaborative ethos becomes. It also critically builds TRUST – the number one key ingredient for any collaborative transformation programme.

I liken trust to collaboration fuel – the more you have in the tank, the faster and further you can go. Of course, the opposite applies with low levels of trust (fuel), you won’t get very far and you will probably go much slower!

Ecosystem Maximisation:

The ecosystem is the complex network of organisations and partnerships that can help accelerate delivery of a collaborative transformation programme through their own resources, capacity, insights, projects and programmes, etc. Yet, many collaborative transformation programmes fail to map out their ecosystem; they don’t understand or know who else is out there that can help them. As such, consideration of complex challenges and the actions needed to address them tend to be preserve of ‘those sat around the table’. This

approach can lead to missed opportunities for greater alignment and exploitation of synergies. Also, the danger of duplication of effort with its left hand / right hand analogy.

Given the above, there is a need to fully map the Ecosystem in localities and then seek to maximise its potential by 'joining things up' as a solution to addressing complex challenges and delivering shared value outcomes.

Partnership Management / The Engine Room:

In my experience, many partnerships never really consider the partnership management (engine room) capacity and capabilities they need. As such, I have seen many cases of 'square pegs in round holes' where good policy or performance managers inherit a partnership and told to make it work! They have had no training or mentoring in partnership management and the challenges in getting diverse organisations and individuals working together. The danger here is that full partnership potential is not realised.

Given the above, all ambitious collaborative transformation programmes need an experienced and credible Partnership Manager who can guide them to success and has a clear remit for:

- ***'holding the partnership together; making the system work' &***
- ***'minimising partnership risk; maximising partnership value'***

To undertake this effectively, they need strong skills in 5 key areas:

- 1) **visioning and strategy** - keeping all partners focused on the prize;
- 2) **relationship management** - building value-creating partner relationships;
- 3) **partnership management** - making the governance structure work;
- 4) **collaborative working** - the approaches and methods; and
- 5) **programme management** - the planning, delivery and performance reporting.

Partnership Culture:

Finally, when seeking to Secure Transformational Outcomes through Partnership Excellence, Collaborative Ethos and Ecosystem Maximisation; I would strongly urge deep consideration of the partnership culture you are seeking to secure.

Culture can be described as how partnership work is undertaken and how the partnership functions. It affects every aspect of your partnership from how you develop solutions to how you deliver shared value outcomes. It is about patterns of thinking and behaviours.

Culture is an enabler of partnership strategy; begin with the end in mind; as with the right partnership culture – you and your partners will deliver shared outcomes a whole lot faster.

[End]