

The drivers of collaboration

Working in partnership across
local government

Executive summary

Delivering an effective response to coronavirus means collaboration between county and district councils is more important than ever.

This was the key message in an article in the Local Government Chronicle written by the chairs of the County Councils' Network (CCN) and District Councils' Network (DCN) in March 2020. Councillors John Fuller and David Williams wrote: "One thing is for sure: we stand the best possible chance of success and then recovery by working together during this period of national emergency."

In this report, which was commissioned well before the first outbreak of coronavirus, we have set out the results of our research into the factors which drive collaboration between district and county councils.

Our evidence is drawn from a combination of attributable and non-attributable interviews in 12 areas with county and district councils. We have also benefited significantly from the support of the LGA's People and Places Board and contributions from DCN and CCN.

Seven drivers of collaboration

Drawing on our research we identified seven drivers of collaboration between county and district councils. They are:

1. **People and trust.** The importance of high levels of trust between political and managerial leaders was raised by everybody we interviewed. In many places longstanding relationships underpin effective collaboration; in others, changes in leadership can create the conditions for closer joint working. Even in areas where relationships are good, they require continuing time and attention.
2. **Formal structures.** Formal structures such as leaders' groups, joint committees, growth boards, collaboration agreements and district deals are important in providing a robust framework for collaboration and collective decision-making. It is also important to create the space and opportunities for informal meetings and real discussion.
3. **Joint posts and double hatting.** Joint posts and more extensive joint officer arrangements deliver benefits for the councils directly involved and wider district/county relationships. Members with roles in both types of council can also bring benefits to wider collaboration.
4. **One size does not always fit all.** County-wide collaboration is an important part of leveraging economies of scale across place. It can help avoid unnecessary duplication and support effective and efficient service delivery. There is also value in exploring whether more granular partnerships at project, district, or groups of district level can leverage opportunities unique to certain parts of a county, such as where a particular business type has clustered or where there is acute housing need.
5. **A mobilising topic or initiative.** Focusing on outcomes for people, places and communities is widely seen as the most powerful driver of collaboration. In many places the pursuit of a particular challenge, such as economic and housing

growth, the climate emergency or the future of high streets has proved to be a powerful mobilising force.

6. **A shared understanding of what is on the table.** A shared understanding between leaders of what is and is not on the table for discussion is a prerequisite for sustained collaboration, giving clearly defined boundaries.
7. **This is difficult.** The historically hierarchical nature of government in England can place both counties and districts in a particular mindset about how they relate to one another. This in turn creates barriers to collaboration from the perspective of both types of council.

We identified eight “top tips” to prompt councils to consider the extent to which they are mobilising these drivers of collaboration in their area. They are:

- Always pay attention to the quality of relationships and levels of trust.
- Do not assume that good relations between

leaders and chief executives are reflected throughout organisations.

- Always make space and time for informal conversations.
- Think about how to make the most of joint member and officer roles between two councils.
- Be clear about what forms of collaboration require a county-wide approach and which can be pursued in different ways in different parts of the county.
- Retain a remorseless focus on outcomes for residents, places and communities.
- Maintain a shared understanding of what is and is not on the table.
- Remember that collaboration between district and county councils is difficult, but the wellbeing of many people, places and communities depend on it being successful.

Our case studies

We developed five case studies of effective collaboration with a small set of key learning points from each. The case studies and learning points are summarised in the table below.

Derbyshire: Non-structural reform	Devon: The climate emergency
<p>Seeking maximum benefit from non-structural reform is a key priority for the county and district councils in Derbyshire. A joint committee for economic prosperity, which also includes Derby City Council, provides the formal vehicle for pursuing this initiative, but informal conversations are widely recognised as being equally important.</p>	<p>The county and district councils in Devon have agreed a collaborative response to the climate emergency. This builds from a foundation of good relationships which has survived significant changes in council leadership. The approach is not a prescriptive one, enabling activity at both strategic and local levels.</p>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced resources can be a driver of collaboration, but an approach which focuses primarily on securing savings is unlikely to succeed. • A joint response to an emergency can help to reinforce and embed collaborative working. • It is inevitable that priorities will vary across a county area: collaborative arrangements must allow for that. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreeing a statement of intent gave a clear sense of direction for the work on the climate emergency. • A framework which enabled action at different geographical levels enabled the councils in Devon to mobilise strategic and local delivery capacity while eliminating duplication. • Being alert to resident awareness, interest and expectations was an important driver of this collaboration. |
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Kent: Planning and infrastructure	Suffolk: Inclusive economic growth
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<p>Kent is a large county with a very diverse geography and 12 city, district and borough councils. There are major growth opportunities in the county including housing development in Canterbury. There is well developed collaboration between the councils in Kent on housing, planning and infrastructure at a county-wide level and involving clusters of districts such as East Kent, which includes Canterbury.</p>	<p>The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) group has created conditions for collaboration between the councils on a range of topics including youth unemployment, county lines and inclusive growth. Key to the success of the group, however, are good relationships and high levels of trust between the political and managerial leaders in the county. County and district leaders see the arrangements in Suffolk as a partnership of equals.</p>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between a county and clusters of districts can add real value in a large, diverse county with many city, borough and district councils. • Getting the right working groups in place to support collaboration on a topic such as housing, planning and infrastructures is very important. • It is possible to pursue a shared vision for a large county while respecting the roles and responsibilities of individual councils. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is possible to create the conditions for effective collaboration following a difficult period using a combination of appropriate structures, such as the SPSL, attention to relationships and trust and a focus on outcomes for local people. • Engagement of other partners, such as police and health, is an important part of the process. |
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Joint posts and officer structures

There are examples of joint senior posts between a county and a district council and in one case a joint officer structure. These are viewed as bringing wider benefits to the relations across the areas concerned, as well as to the pairs of councils involved.

- Joint posts can deliver benefits to the wider local government system in an area as well as to the pair of councils concerned.
- Constructive challenge is an important feature of effective collaboration.

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Introduction

The final stages of research for this assignment coincided with the introduction of stringent social distancing measures to tackle coronavirus. Writing in Local Government Chronicle in late March councillors John Fuller and David Williams, chairs of the DCN and CCN respectively, called on county and district councils to work together, more closely than ever before at a time of national crisis.

The two leading councillors said that nowhere was collaboration “more important than the challenge set by the government to help shield our most clinically vulnerable residents through the establishment of community hubs. It is vital that all districts and counties work in tandem in a coordinated and consistent way under the auspices of their local resilience forums.” They went on to point to the importance of continued collaboration to support the recovery process “once we are over the peak.”

The brief for this assignment, which was commissioned well before the first outbreak of coronavirus, was to carry out qualitative research to evidence the opportunities and future direction of collaboration between districts and counties in two-tier areas. We have looked in particular at the factors which create the conditions for collaboration between the two types of councils.

Our evidence is drawn from a combination of attributable and non-attributable interviews with council leaders, chief executives in 12 of the 26 areas in England with county and district councils.¹ We have drawn on the attributable interviews to develop case studies of collaboration in four areas: Derbyshire, Devon, Kent and Suffolk. We have also described the contribution of joint posts in Gloucestershire and North Yorkshire and comprehensive joint arrangements in Oxfordshire.

The following sections of the report:

- explore seven themes we have identified as the main drivers of collaboration and identify eight ‘top tips’ for effective collaboration
- include a set of conclusions and reflections
- present our case studies including key learning points.

The drivers of cross-tier collaboration

It is clear from our research that a number of conditions need to be put in place if collaboration between district and county councils is to be effective. They include organisational constructs such as leaders' boards and joint posts. Also important is the existence of a topic around which to mobilise, a shared understanding of what is and what is not on the table, and a recognition that what may work in one part of a county may not do so in another.

There is, however, one theme which everyone we interviewed raised: trust and the quality of relationships. This is a factor that features in each of our case studies and in all other examples of collaboration that we have heard about in the course of this research.

As one council leader said: "Collaboration is good here because there is a genuine sense of mutual respect between the county and the districts and we work together successfully on things such as the quality of place."

In this section we explore seven key themes that have emerged from our interviews. It is important to note, however, that while this research is about relations between county and district councils many of the themes we have identified are also relevant to other collaborative settings including, joint working between unitary councils across a wider geographical area and the relationship between combined authorities and their constituent councils. They are:

- people and trust
- formal structures
- joint posts and 'double hatting'
- one size does not always fit all

- a mobilising topic or initiative
- a shared understanding of what is on the table
- a recognition that this can be difficult.

People and trust

The importance of high levels of trust between political and managerial leaders was raised by everybody interviewed. It applies to relationships between council leaders, portfolio holders and between chief executives and senior officers.

In many places long standing relationships underpin effective collaboration. Changes in leadership roles can create the conditions for collaboration, but in some places even the prospect of a change in leadership may destabilise relationships.

What good looks like, was summed up by two leaders in one of the counties we carried out interviews. The leader of one of the districts said: "It all comes down to personalities and a shared understanding of the needs of the place." The county council leader added: "As long as the leaders are talking everything is OK. I know that I can always pick up the phone."

History is important in this context. In many of the places we looked at, relations were helped by the fact that senior members of one council had represented the same area on the other type of council. In other places, previously poor collaboration was attributed to a history of a lack of trust and personal acrimony.

Several interviewees stressed that, while they are important, good relations at a very senior level are not sufficient to ensure effective collaboration. Good relations are needed at all levels: between portfolio holders; between frontline councillors; between directors and between heads of service. It cannot be assumed that relationships at these levels will be good just because the chiefs get on.

In five places where we carried out interviews an improvement in relationships was directly attributed to a change in leader at either district or county level, but our interviewees also referred to the fact that for a change in leadership to have a significant impact officers must be attuned to the political relationships.

As one district leader recalled: “The more positive approach from the new county leader was undoubtedly picked up on by officers and reflected in their relationships.”

A leader from another area said that long standing good relationships between officers meant that speedy progress could be made when relations at a political level improved following changes in political administration.

Finally, in one way or another, every interviewee referred to the fact that good, trusting relations must not be taken for granted. Even in areas where relationships are currently strong, they require continuing time and attention.

TOP TIPS

Always pay attention to the quality of relationships and levels of trust.

Do not assume that good relations between leaders and chief executives are reflected throughout organisations.

Formal structures

In many areas, collaboration between councils is underpinned by some formal structures. Examples include leaders’ groups, joint committees, growth boards, collaboration agreements and district deals.

It is clear that mechanisms such as these have an important part to play in enabling collaboration, but many of our interviewees were keen to stress the importance of good, trusting relationships to create the conditions in which structures such as these can be effective.

One council leader explained: “You need both structures and relationships to get you through this. The collaboration doesn’t rely solely on relationships, you need a structure to agree action particularly in a complex area like this.” A senior officer from the same area added: “Formal groups enable regular meetings and conversations.”

A council leader from another area said “the collaboration agreement is important, but so is talking. We do fall out, but we address things by talking.”

A second leader made a similar point: “We have a partnership agreement, but the relationship is key. If it’s not there, the agreement won’t work.” He added: “Formal and informal meetings are important, but there must be time for real discussion.”

A shared vision was the starting point for one leader: “Sound governance is important for collective decision-making. It can be tricky, but less so if you are working towards a joint vision.”

Several interviewees stressed that bodies such as growth boards include other organisations such as local enterprise partnerships, (LEPs) the NHS and educational institutions. This highlights the fact that while county-district relations are important, this is in the context of increasingly important relationships with other partners. One objective for cross-tier collaboration must be to ensure that local government in a place, is an effective participant and leader in these wider partnerships.

TOP TIP

Always make space and time for informal conversations.

Joint posts and double hatting

Senior joint posts between the county and a district council exist in two of the areas we conducted interviews, and in one there is a joint officer structure for the two councils.

In all three councils, interviewees agreed that relationships of this type benefit both the two councils concerned, and the wider county/district relationship. Interviewees talked about the way in which joint posts at chief executive and director level can ensure there is a district perspective in a county's corporate management team, and a county perspective in meetings of district chief executives.

A significant minority of councillors are members of county, district and, in many cases, town and parish councils. One interviewee saw this as "both a blessing and a curse": helping to generate shared understanding of the different perspectives of the two types of council, but in some cases making it more difficult to have confidential conversations. It was, however, raised as a factor in relations between tiers in seven of the areas we conducted interviews.

Previous political experience in a different council is more consistently reported as a positive factor in collaboration. The fact that a current leader was, or in one case still is, a senior district or county council member was cited as a driver of good and improving relations by interviewees in four areas.

TOP TIP

Think about how to make the most of joint member and officer roles between two councils.

One size does not always fit all

Many of our interviewees stress that effective collaboration need not involve every district in a county area. Indeed, trying to involve every council may well hinder progress in some cases.

There is often a case for adopting different arrangements in different parts of a county because of the nature of the issues that require attention and the fact that what works in one part of a county might not work in another.

This can relate to individual districts or, in larger counties, to groups of districts within a county. This does not take away from the fact that a county-wide framework can reduce unnecessary duplication, particularly for the county, and significant benefits can be accrued from county-wide collaboration over services such as waste collection and disposal. In these cases, the more consistent the mechanisms, standards and policies are, the more efficient and effective the services can be.

In one county, care is taken to distinguish between collaboration at project, district, cluster and county-wide levels. In another county a district leader quoted the county leader's analogy of "a big umbrella and little umbrellas" and added: "we can tackle different issues in different areas in different ways."

Several interviewees cited examples of places in their areas with pressing challenges that require a joined-up approach by the district and county councils and other partners.

Overall, our interviews point to the need for a flexible approach. In one area, for example, we heard of a district which has rapidly improved relations with the county. It is an active participant in county-wide meetings and has a partnership board with the county. The district does not participate with the county in one major county-wide initiative, but it has a bespoke relationship with the county that meets its requirements and is highly valued by both councils.

TOP TIP

Be clear about what forms of collaboration require a county-wide approach and which can be pursued in different ways in different parts of the county.

A mobilising topic or initiative

The importance of there being a challenge or opportunity around which to mobilise collaboration between county and district councils is another common theme from our interviews. As a senior officer in one area said: “Shared interests are a real driver of collaboration.”

The topics our interviewees referred to include: LEPs and Homes England funding; infrastructure and growth; business rate retention; energy; waste; town centres and public realm. Housing and land use planning was also raised, both as a mobilising force and, in some circumstances, one which can threaten collaboration.

Emergencies can also drive collaboration. One interviewee quoted the response to the recent floods. It is clear from the joint article in the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) in March by the chairs of CCN and DCN that district and county councils are working closely together in the response to coronavirus and its consequences.

Interviewees also highlighted other pressing public service challenges as a driver of collaboration between the tiers. One thing that issues such as climate change, health inequalities and inclusive growth all have in common is that action to address them involves the full range of council services.

Action on issues such as these often requires difficult political choices. As one leader commented: “Safety in numbers can be important politically, as can the strength of joint messages.” A number of people warned about the size of the task involved in addressing issues such as these: “Do it in small steps, not all at once”, he said.

Most important of all, however, according to our interviewees is the value of focussing on outcomes for people, places and communities rather than structures.

Asked for his reflections on what drives collaboration between counties and districts, one leader said: “Focus on people and place rather than structures. Be clear what the outcome is and set the direction of travel early on.” Another responded in the same way: “Focus on the people of the county and have a shared goal.”

Significantly in one county where relations between the county and districts vary significantly, the position was attributed to a degree of sector-wide complacency and the absence of an issue on which all the councils are focussed.

TOP TIP

Retain a remorseless focus on outcomes for residents, places and communities.

A shared understanding of what is on the table

Many interviewees pointed to the need to have a shared understanding between leaders of what is (and is not) on the table for discussion as a prerequisite for collaboration.

In at least one place the development of a more collaborative approach between the districts and county was driven by an ambition to explore in full, the benefits that can be achieved by non-structural local government reform.

Interviewees also pointed out, however, that a lack of clarity or understanding about each stakeholder’s future ambitions can lead to a lack of trust between tiers and a slowing or stalling of collaboration going forward.

This quote from a leader reinforces the point: “The leaders are clear about the importance of two-tier collaboration. Rows are about issues, not the principle.”

TOP TIP

Maintain a shared understanding of what is and is not on the table.

This is difficult

Collaboration in any context can be challenging, but collaboration across two tier areas can be particularly challenging. Our interviews suggest in many cases this comes down to perceptions and misperceptions about hierarchy and the comparative size and scale of different organisations.

Perceptions and misperceptions are held by district and county members and officers. Language and the way organisational structures and planning frameworks are drawn reinforce this sense of hierarchy and the anxieties that flow from that.

Most of our interviewees talked about the prejudices that abound in both types of council and can undermine collaboration; the surprise expressed when someone moves from one type of council to another, the perceptions of arrogance and remoteness and of insularity and small mindedness, the failure to see the strategic and the local as mutually important parts of an integrated process.

Our interviewees were keen that the particular challenges involved in collaboration between district and county councils should be explicitly recognised. In terms of what can be done to make progress despite them, at least four possible steps emerged from our conversations.

First, focus remorselessly on communities, people and place. Second, remember that the language used can set the tone. Third distinguish between the county as a place, and a collection of places, and the county council as an institution. And finally, encourage more movement of officers between counties and districts.

At the end of the day, however, the historically hierarchical nature of government in England can place both counties and districts in a particular mindset about how they relate to one another. This in turn creates barriers to collaboration from both a top down and a bottom up perspective. It is important to note, however, that similar tensions exist in relations between central and local government and are emerging in relations between combined authorities and their constituent councils. In short, this is not easy.

TOP TIP

Remember that collaboration between district and county councils is difficult, but the wellbeing of many people, places and communities depend on it being successful.

Conclusions and reflections

The imperative on local government to play a major role in the response to coronavirus highlights the importance of the closest possible collaboration between county and district councils. So does local government's contribution to tackling the climate emergency, enabling inclusive growth and reducing health inequalities.

Each of these challenges requires an unambiguous focus on outcomes for people, places and communities, and this research shows that maintaining that focus is one of the most powerful drivers of effective joint work between counties and districts.

All collaboration has its challenges, but many of the interviewees that contributed to this research felt that collaboration between county and district councils involves a distinctive set of challenges.

The fact that it is difficult to describe those challenges in a way that does not offend illustrates the point. In essence there is something powerful about the way English political and organisational culture treats hierarchy that makes collaboration in this context particularly difficult. This is often compounded by how language is used and heard, and by perceptions and misperceptions relating to relative size, scale, role and geography.

Our research has shown, however, that despite these challenges, there are many examples of close and effective collaboration between district and county councils that are securing high quality outcomes for people, places and communities.

There is no doubt that collaboration between councils continues to be important in the 26 parts of the country with county and district councils. The need for a truly joint and integrated response to coronavirus is a powerful example of that.

We have identified a set of learning points and top tips from our research which are intended to prompt councils to consider whether there is more they can do to foster collaboration with their county and/or district partners.

Our research has looked specifically at joint work between county and district councils, but we are confident that our findings will be of value in other settings including collaboration between councils across wider geographical areas and in the relationship between combined authorities and their constituent councils.

Several of the drivers we have identified, most notably the importance of people and trust and the need for a mobilising issue or initiative, apply to all forms of collaboration. Others relate more directly to the characteristics of the relationship between counties and districts, including, for example, the contribution of joint roles, the scope for different arrangements in different parts of the county and the importance of being clear about what is and is not on the table.

If there is one key message from this work it is that, of course, structures matter, but communities and people matter more. And that's what drives collaboration.

Case studies

The following case studies show how councils across tiers are working effectively in collaboration on a wide range of service areas. They identify the place based challenges areas have faced and how councils are tackling them in partnership. Each case study includes key lessons that stakeholders have learned. They were compiled following discussions with lead officers and members in the areas.

Vision Derbyshire – non-structural reform

INTERVIEWEES

Councillor Barry Lewis, Leader, Derbyshire County Council; Emma Alexander, Executive Director for Commissioning, Communities and Policy, Derbyshire County Council; Councillor Anthony McKeown, Leader, High Peak Borough Council.

SUMMARY

Seeking maximum benefit for local people and communities from non-structural reform is a key priority for the county and district councils in Derbyshire. A joint committee for economic prosperity currently provides the formal vehicle for pursuing this initiative, but informal conversations are widely recognised as being equally important. The strength of the relationship between Derbyshire County Council and High Peak Borough Council was demonstrated by the response to the Toddbrook Reservoir Dam incident.

Derbyshire County Council and all eight district and borough councils have committed to working together to improve outcomes for local people through Vision Derbyshire – a programme of work on non-structural reform, led by the Derbyshire and Derby Joint Committee for Economic Prosperity.

Chaired by county council leader Councillor Barry Lewis, the committee brings together leaders and senior officers from the county council and the eight districts and boroughs in Derbyshire, together with Derby City Council.

The joint committee's priorities to focus future collaboration include climate change, skills and employment, thriving communities and economic prosperity. The commitment to build relationships and have a shared vision for Derbyshire has underpinned its work. Councillor Lewis says that in order to collaborate effectively, you must "set a direction of travel early on".

Derbyshire has, in the words of County Council Executive Director for Commissioning, Communities and Policy, Emma Alexander, "sought to focus on people and place rather than governance structures".

A shared commitment to non-structural reform is something which Councillor Anthony McKeown, Leader of High Peak District Council says can withstand the challenges of the county and borough councils being under different political control.

The relationship between the two councils is seen as a positive one with many joint projects under way. They include increasing collaboration around the climate emergency to more strategic working on the future benefits of the HS2. The leaders and senior officers of both councils refer to the strength of this relationship and the part it played in the emergency planning response around the Toddbrook Reservoir Dam incident in 2019.

An important driver of collaboration has been the decrease in council resources at both a district and county level over the past decade and an increasing push to pool resources where it makes sense to do so.

However, it is also recognised that collaboration with the sole aim of generating savings is not sustainable; in Derbyshire the real driver has been a new and deeper relationship between tiers. Both officers and members say that the key attributes of successful collaboration are a genuinely people-centred approach seeking to achieve better outcomes for the communities the councils serve.

This relationship has been achieved through continued conversation and discussion in both formal and informal settings at officer and member level. Derbyshire covers a large rural area which means that flexible ways of working are needed to ensure that these conversations happen even when face-to-face meetings are more difficult.

A further strength of the relationship in Derbyshire is the acknowledgement that some districts and boroughs will inevitably have their own priorities. For example, in the discussion of the impact of HS2 in Derbyshire, many parts of the county are primarily interested in the links to Leeds whereas High Peak is more interested in the links with Manchester. Differences such as these can be accommodated, says Councillor McKeown, as long as there is a shared understanding of “the core areas where there is an agreed priority”.

There are, of course, challenges to collaboration. One which Derbyshire faced was the initial effort to build trust between the county and the eight district and borough councils, their officers and leaders. The Leader of Derbyshire, Councillor Lewis, noted that getting all these people on board was one of the biggest challenges upfront, but it was achieved. The current challenge is the uncertainty surrounding the current government’s approach to devolution outside the major conurbations and what this means for the current focus on non-structural reform in the county.

Lessons

- Reduced resources can be a driver of collaboration, but an approach which focuses primarily on securing savings is unlikely to succeed.
- A joint response to an emergency can help to reinforce and embed collaborative working.
- It is inevitable that priorities will vary across a county area: collaborative arrangements must allow for that.

The climate emergency

INTERVIEWEES

Councillor John Hart, Leader, Devon County Council; Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council; Councillor Bob Deed, Leader, Mid Devon District Council; Stephen Walford, Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council.

SUMMARY

The county and district councils in Devon have agreed a collaborative response to the climate emergency. This builds on a foundation of good relationships which has survived significant changes in council leadership. The approach is not a prescriptive one, enabling activity at both strategic and local levels. It has, however, reduced the scope for duplication and enabled an ambitious but realistic approach which matches the high level of resident expectation and engagement.

Responding to the climate emergency is now one of the most important areas for collaboration between councils in many parts of the country. In Devon, this is being achieved through a partnership which includes Devon County Council and all eight districts as well as Torbay and Plymouth unitary authorities and the national parks.

This collaboration builds on the existing strong and positive relationships between the county and districts which has seen joint working on issues from housing delivery to clean growth to health and social care. Indeed, the relationships have proved strong enough to weather the potential disruption of changes in leadership in all eight Devon districts at the May 2019 elections.

The issue of the climate emergency is one which Mid Devon and the county council both agree “transcends political and ideological differences”. The clear statement of intent from members that this was a priority has also helped to turn the words of climate emergency declarations into action.

It is an issue which has been approached with a great degree of realism in terms of the scale on which the problem must be tackled. The Chief Executive of Mid Devon, Stephen Walford, noted that there was no pretence that Mid Devon District was going to solve the climate emergency alone: it had to be a collaborative effort.

The decision to approach the climate emergency on a Devon-wide footprint was one which all partners agreed would allow for a “strategic umbrella” under which to work. This has included the county council providing a coordinator and communications team, as well as using its convening role to bring on board key stakeholders such as the Environment Agency and experts from Exeter University.

The county and districts have all agreed that having an overarching strategic framework on a county level does not preclude districts from having their workstreams at a district level. The two leaders were at pains to point out that there is no prescription in the agreed framework. In fact, in order to sign up to this partnership, all districts have produced their own carbon plans. Some, such as Mid Devon, have carried out baseline studies, installed solar panels and reviewed existing housing and planning policies.

Joined up working at a strategic level means that work is not necessarily being delivered or commissioned by the county and all the districts on a generic basis. Collaborating across tiers removes the scope for duplication with different districts and the county taking a lead on different aspects of the response. It has also allowed for local variation under the common Devon framework; for example, various approaches are being piloted by different councils.

This has advantages in place-based policy work as it provides for flexibility at district level while sharing the learning at scale – ultimately accelerating the delivery of the strategic aims and ambition of the whole county.

A Net-Zero Taskforce, which has been charged with developing solutions to be taken to a citizens assembly, is one of the formal structures used in the partnership. Other meetings, both formal and informal, such as meetings of Devon chief executives and leaders help to keep communication and collaboration going across a large geography.

Information sharing is also a key part of the successful collaboration with a knowledge hub for sharing good practice and enabling joint procurement.

There have been challenges through all of this, but our interviewees reported that the partnership has operated smoothly. The scale of the issue is a challenge in its own right, as is the degree of public interest and the high expectations of many residents.

The ability to act at a strategic county-wide level and at a district and locality level has enabled local government to respond to these high levels of resident engagement and attention. The progress that is being made is seen to have helped to rebut scepticism about the value of collaborative working between the two types of council in Devon.

Lessons

- Agreeing a statement of intent gave a clear sense of direction for the work on the climate emergency.
- A framework which enabled action at different geographical levels enabled the councils in Devon to mobilise strategic and local delivery capacity while eliminating duplication.
- Being alert to resident awareness, interest and expectations was an important driver of this collaboration.

Planning and infrastructure

INTERVIEWEES

Councillor Roger Gough, Leader, Kent County Council; David Cockburn and Barbara Cooper, Senior Officers, Kent County Council; Councillor Robert Thomas, Leader, Canterbury City Council; Colin Carmichael, Chief Executive, Canterbury City Council.

SUMMARY

Kent is a large county with a very diverse geography and 12 city, district and borough councils. There are major growth opportunities in the county including housing development in Canterbury. There is well developed collaboration between the councils in Kent on housing, planning and infrastructure at a county-wide level and involving clusters of districts such as East Kent, which includes Canterbury. The work is supported by a network of officer groups and is led by the Kent leaders group. Care is taken to balance the delivery of a shared vision for the county with the statutory responsibilities of individual districts.

Kent is an area with a longstanding commitment to joint working according to the Leader of Kent County Council, Councillor Roger Gough. County Council Director Barbara Cooper and Canterbury City Council Chief Executive Colin Carmichael also pointed to the positive relationships which exist between the two councils at both officer and member level.

The county and districts in Kent have collaborated on a wide range of issues from Brexit no-deal emergency planning to business rate retention and housing and infrastructure. This collaboration happens at a county-wide level and between the county council and clusters of districts.

All the councils in Kent are clear that housing, planning and infrastructure are topics on which collaboration and effective joint working are essential given the different statutory roles the two types of councils have in relation to these topics. This is possible because of the many positive relationships which have developed over a long period of time and the fact that the councils recognise they have a shared interest in getting this right.

In carrying out this work around housing and infrastructure the county and districts are clear that one size does not always fit all, and that sub-county working can be of great benefit.

There is a recognition, for example, that it does not make sense to look at strategic highways issues at an individual district level, but that doing so at a cluster level adds real value. This is true of the East Kent Cluster, of which Canterbury is a part. This group of districts has worked with the county on bids into the LEP growth fund and efforts to influence MHCLG. There has also been joint work on highways improvements and investment particularly to support major housing development around Canterbury.

The clusters of districts have also played an important role in Kent's Growth and Infrastructure framework. This strategic framework identifies and prioritises the investment in infrastructure across Kent and Medway as well as at a more detailed sub-county level. It was prepared in collaboration with the districts and draws on their local plans and housing targets.

The framework is supported across the county by cross-tier working groups including a Kent Housing Group, planning officers group, finance officers group, legal officers group and environment officers group. At a member level there is also a Kent leaders group which enables the leaders of the county and districts to discuss key issues, set the direction of travel and maintain close relationships.

Our interviewees identified two particular challenges involved in collaboration on this topic in Kent. First, the need to strike a sensitive balance between the pursuit of a shared county-wide vision and objectives and the importance of not encroaching on the statutory responsibilities of individual districts. Second, the challenge of collaborating on housing and infrastructure in the context of the scale and diversity of Kent: from Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks in the West to Margate and Dover in the East, with a variety of different needs and opportunities. There is, however, confidence that progress can be made with the support of well-coordinated working groups, activity at a county, cluster and district level, a shared vision and willingness to work together.

Lessons

- Collaboration between a county and clusters of districts can add real value in a large, diverse county with many city, borough and district councils.
- Getting the right working groups in place to support collaboration on a topic such as housing, planning and infrastructure is very important.
- It is possible to pursue a shared vision for a large county while respecting the roles and responsibilities of individual councils.

Inclusive growth

INTERVIEWEES

Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader, Suffolk County Council; Nicola Beach, Chief Executive, Suffolk County Council; Councillor Suzie Morley and Councillor John Ward, Leaders, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils; Arthur Charvonia, Chief Executive, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils.

SUMMARY

The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group has created the conditions for collaboration between the councils on a range of topics including youth unemployment, county lines and inclusive growth. Key to the success of the group, however, are good relationships and high levels of trust between the political and managerial leaders in the county. County and district leaders see the arrangements in Suffolk as a partnership of equals.

Suffolk is a place where there is a “strong and natural urge to work together” according to the Chief Executive of Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, Arthur Charvonia.

This is echoed by Suffolk County Council leader Councillor Matthew Hicks who felt there is both “political and officer will to collaborate” between councils in the county. The raft of collaborative projects that have taken place over the last few years is evidence of this: from the Suffolk Waste Partnership to the co-location of district and county offices; from large infrastructure projects to emerging joint working on the response to the climate emergency.

The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group (SPSL), initially set up in 2009, embodies the culture of political and managerial leaders in Suffolk who see collaboration as key to achieving outcomes for their communities.

The group has become a vehicle for joined up and collaborative working in the county. Although it is not a formal part of the governance arrangements, it has worked as an effective forum for communication and joint work between authorities and wider partners including, for example, the pooling of business rates in Suffolk.

The membership of the group, which has bi-monthly meetings including alternate meetings held in public, includes council leaders, the Police and Crime Commissioner, the Suffolk constabulary, New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).

The SPSL has enabled effective collaboration on inclusive growth. In the past year SPSL invested £2 million of its Business Rates pool to create a Local Growth Fund. Combining shared countywide outcomes and a locally sensitive approach, it has funded local growth projects in each district.

They include place-based visions and public realm improvements for some market towns in Babergh, and an Innovation Cluster and Innovation Labs in Mid Suffolk. In Ipswich and East and West Suffolk there have been large scale infrastructure bids for a redevelopment scheme, full-fibre broadband and a public sector hub respectively.

SPSL's priority for inclusive growth is underpinned by its focus on the best outcomes for Suffolk's people and places. Therefore, its collaborative work is not limited to economic growth. The leaders of Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, Councillors John Ward and Suzie Morley, both felt that this co-ordinated approach had delivered tangible benefits for the county. Councillor Ward added that working with his county colleagues was a "partnership of equals", far from the perception that two-tier working is more like "us and them" than "we".

In terms of youth employment, Suffolk has aimed for a decentralised approach to skills and apprenticeships. Through a joint investment from the SPSL, Suffolk County Council and the transformation challenge award each of the districts in Suffolk have been able to "deliver, test and further develop activity that responds directly to local need" against shared strategic outcomes.

These localised skills projects to support particularly young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) have been carried out in partnership with local businesses, government agencies such as Department for Work and Pensions, and further education providers.

The projects are varied, with interventions from targeted coaching and training for young people, to the promotion of apprenticeship pathways and pilot schemes to provide mental health support to those who are at risk of becoming NEET.

These innovative, place based, youth employment projects, as well as the local growth projects, were made possible, partly, through the retention and pooling of business rates. This has been one of the district-led and focussed initiatives looking to drive inclusive growth ambitions and bring together national and local ambitions through a place-based allocation.

The SPSL is an important group, but it is not seen as the primary driver of this level of collaboration. All our interviewees attribute the effective collaboration on inclusive growth and other topics to "relationships and trust".

In Suffolk there is a shared understanding that it is strong personal relationships that really drive collaboration and enable structures such as the SPSL to work. This approach is now so embedded that it can survive changes in personnel. The key is to have the right people in the room, working to a common set of goals with a clear focus on improving outcomes for local people.

Lessons

- It is possible to create the conditions for effective collaboration following a difficult period using a combination of appropriate structures, such as the SPSL, attention to the relationships and trust and a focus on outcomes for local people. This collaborative approach to relationship and trust building, across senior leadership, has enabled it to be replicated across both district and county councils from managers to frontline staff.
- Engagement of other partners, such as police and health, is an important part of the process.

Joint posts and officer structures

INTERVIEWEES

Yvonne Rees, Chief Executive of Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council; Claire Taylor, Corporate Director Customers and Organisational Development, Cherwell District Council; Councillor Mark Crane, Leader Selby District Council; Janet Waggott, Chief Executive, Selby District Council and Assistant Chief Executive of North Yorkshire County Council; Jon McGinty, Managing Director, Gloucester City Council and Commissioning Director, Gloucestershire County Council.

SUMMARY

There are examples of joint senior posts between a county and a district council and in one case a joint officer structure. These are seen as bringing wider benefits to the relations across the areas concerned as well as to the pairs of councils involved.

There are a number of joint senior posts and officer structures between councils, but most are between pairs of district councils. Some, however, span a district and county council and in this research, we interviewed senior joint post-holders in three of these areas: Cherwell District and Oxfordshire, Gloucester City and Gloucestershire and Selby District and North Yorkshire.

In all three cases the joint posts are part of wider collaboration between the councils in the area. For example, in Selby and North Yorkshire the district Section 151 officer is also a county council employee, Gloucester City is part of Gloucestershire's Economic Growth Joint Committee alongside the other districts and Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council have a fully joint management team with all posts (including the three statutory roles) joint appointments.

The key point that all of the interviewees made is that these posts not only benefit the councils concerned, but also deliver wider benefits to the relationship between councils in the area.

For example, Jon McGinty the managing director of Gloucester City Council and commissioning director at the county council, saw the joint post as "improving the link between the other five districts and the county too". There is a view that these joint posts can bring a county perspective to, say, meetings of the district council chief executives and a district perspective to meetings of a county's corporate management team.

Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council have benefitted from a variety of joint posts at all levels. This means that officers have dual responsibilities for both traditional county and district service functions, enabling a holistic approach to delivery.

This has created an environment and culture in which both officers and councillors better understand the whole system approach from the viewpoint of the resident.

All chief executives and leaders interviewed were clear that “collaboration doesn’t happen by magic” and that a concerted effort has to be made to maintain relations. This applies even in those areas which have longstanding agreements and relationships.

The different cultures which exist in county and district councils is one aspect which Janet Waggott, Chief Executive of Selby District and Assistant Chief Executive of North Yorkshire County councils raised. She said that you have to ensure that the spirit of collaboration spreads to middle managers and frontline staff.

Jon McGinty noted that even when county and districts were working well together there still needed to be constructive challenge in the relationship despite the joint post and that there was a danger people would prefer consensus to that constructive challenge.

In Oxfordshire and Cherwell Chief Executive Yvonne Rees and Joint Director Claire Taylor emphasised that incrementalism and maximising opportunities as they present themselves were critical, and that simply having joint posts will not improve collaboration on its own. Having a joint structure means bringing everyone in your organisation along on the journey from members to frontline staff which is not something which will happen overnight.

Lessons

- Joint posts can deliver benefits to the wider local government system in an area as well as to the pair of councils concerned.
- Constructive challenge is an important feature of effective collaboration.

Appendix: Methodology

This research was carried out through two phases of telephone interviews. From an initial long list by Shared Intelligence and calls to members from the District Councils' Network (DCN) and County Councils Network (CCN) nine two-tier areas were chosen for non-attributable interviews. In each area we aimed to speak with a chief executive or senior officer and the leader or another senior member.

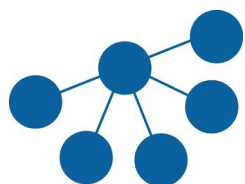
These calls, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, aimed to collect opinions on the drivers of and barriers to collaboration, examples of collaboration between counties and districts and also to begin looking at the lessons for other areas and thoughts on the future of collaboration in the next five years.

The second round of attributable calls focused in on four areas in particular looking at different areas in which cross-tier collaboration is happening.

This included three new areas which were added to the list of possible case studies. These calls took place with chief executives, senior officers and leaders of both the county and district in each area. They are identified in green on the table below.

The findings from these calls were summarised and discussed internally with the LGA, DCN and CCN. They were further tested out in a sensemaking workshop with representatives from the case study areas and members of the LGA's People and Places Board.

Overall, calls took place in 12 of the 26 two-tier areas in England.



Shared Intelligence

Shared Intelligence is a small consultancy working primarily with councils and their partners in the public, private and charity sectors. We use data and evidence, logical ways of thinking and facilitated conversations to help our clients achieve better outcomes for the communities they serve.



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REF 5.87