

# A Guide to Collaboration

What it is, why it matters and  
what it takes to make it work

Collaborate CIC 2023



**Collaborate** was established to be a centre of excellence in the thinking, culture and practice of collaboration. This resource draws on what we have observed in our years of work across multiple fields and sectors, distilling multiple reports, frameworks and projects into a few pages. You can also find links to more in-depth resources throughout.

## Contact

enquiries@collaboratecic.com

020 7815 8297

6 St George's Circus, London SE1 6FE

[www.collaboratecic.com](http://www.collaboratecic.com)

# **We're facing significant social challenges, from reforming healthcare to tackling climate change and ensuring safe housing for all.**

At Collaborate, we've learned that rather than trying to tackle the symptoms of big social problems, **we need to address the underlying causes** that hold those problems in place.<sup>1</sup>

A lot of these big problems are complex—**they have more than one underlying cause, involve multiple actors and are experienced differently.**

Collaboration must be at the heart of our efforts to address the challenges we face because **it enables us to achieve together what we can't alone.**

Many people coming together is hard, as **every person and organisation sees the world in their own way**, has their own hopes, fears and ideas of success.

For these reasons, in our experience, it is **easy to talk about collaboration but hard to do well.**

<sup>1</sup> Check out [FSG](#), who came up with this idea of systems change.

This guide sets out what we currently understand to be the basics: what collaboration is, why and when it matters, and six foundations for effective collaboration. It links to additional resources, which expand these insights in more detail.

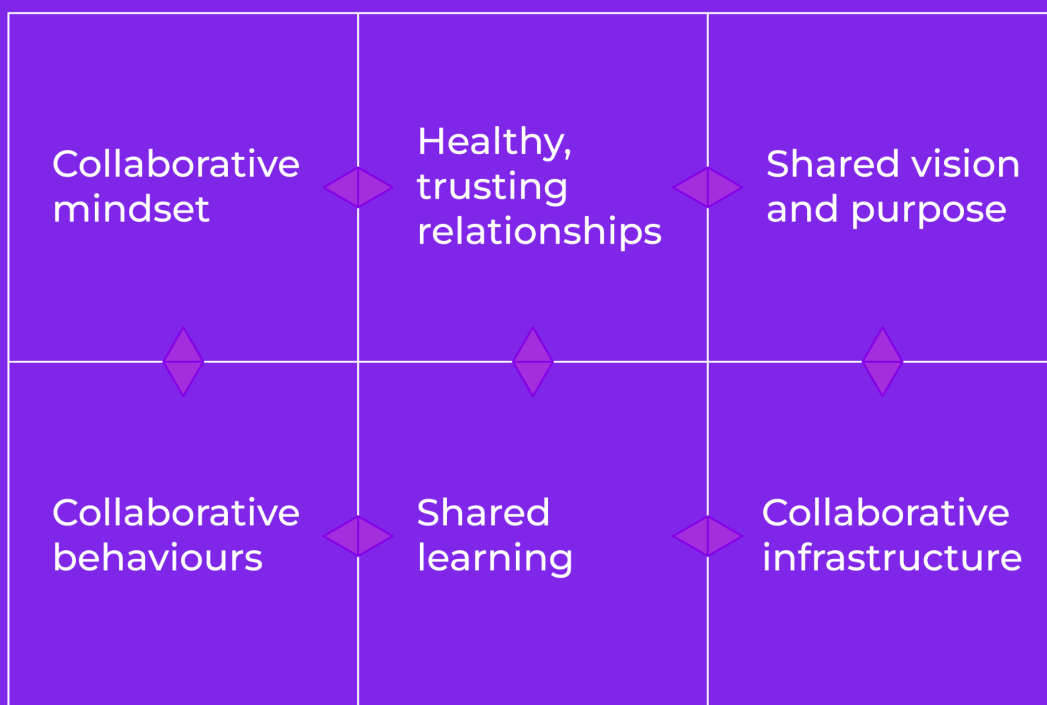
We recognise there are many ways of collaborating, but our focus for this resource is about **how to create sustained, effective collaborations for social change**. In these collaborations, generative conflict is welcome and it's okay to believe different things because you ultimately have a shared sense of purpose.

Whether you are someone who has been invited to a collaboration or are supporting a collaboration (or both), we encourage you to **wear whatever metaphorical hat is most relevant** as you read.

**We hope you find it useful!**

# Collaboration is what happens when people, teams, or organisations create value by working together towards shared goals.

Collaboration depends on the purposeful development and maintenance of trusting relationships, ways of working, capabilities and supporting infrastructure. Through our work, we have identified six core foundations for effective collaboration. They are:



# 1 ) Collaborative mindset

The most fundamental foundation is the belief that **we, and the challenges we face, are all connected**; we are interdependent with each other and our environment.

We call this a collaborative mindset.<sup>2</sup> This mindset is first and foremost a determination that **we will go further together**; it renounces the idea that social change depends on heroic saviours acting on their own.

This mindset gives us an awareness that **our perspective on the challenge and its possible solutions is partial and limited**, so we need to stay curious and open-minded.

<sup>2</sup> Mindsets are the lenses through which we view and understand the world.



Collaborate's 2020 [Manifesto for A Collaborative Society](#) sets out our thoughts on why a Collaborative Society is needed today and how it might be realised.

## Believing in us

### Reflection questions

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1. Do your actions align with the belief that working together is necessary to achieve collective goals?
2. Do you share an understanding of the complex nature of the challenges you're addressing together?
3. Are you all willing to change how you work and how resources flow to meet your shared goals?

# 2 ) Healthy, trusting relationships

Healthy relationships and trust among those collaborating help you understand each other and move to action.

Trusting relationships enable us to **navigate different expectations and hold the tension** between common purpose and diverse perspectives on the problem(s).

Inclusive<sup>3</sup> collaborations ensure the right people are involved in ways that are welcoming, fair, and proportional to their capacity and commitment.

<sup>3</sup> Inclusivity means creating an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and feel as if they genuinely belong, are valued and matter.



# Finding critical friends

## Reflection questions

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1. Could you name the different perspectives those you are collaborating with have on the work?
2. Do you spend time building and strengthening your relationships as a group?
3. Can you work through disagreements in a constructive and generative way?

### **3 ) Shared vision and purpose**

Shared vision and purpose is the **direction of travel** for the collaboration, which builds coherence and motivation.

The co-creation of a shared vision and purpose by everyone involved in a collaborative effort is essential to **achieving clarity and collective ownership** about what you want to achieve together.

Involving people outside the collaboration in charting the vision and purpose can be critical, especially when those people are affected by the activities of those who are collaborating.

## Charting a path

### Reflection questions

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1. Is your vision clearly outlined and do those you're collaborating with know it well enough to express it to others?
2. Do you regularly revisit your goals together and ensure your work is aligned with them?
3. Is everyone's personal and organisational purpose aligned with collective goals?

# 4 ) Collaborative behaviours

Collaborative behaviours are the **ways of working together** that make change possible. They include:

- Building connections across boundaries and seeking out others' points of view
- Sharing power and promoting equality of voice
- Practising mutual accountability
- Nurturing leadership in everyone
- Communicating openly and actively
- Encouraging curiosity and experimentation
- Influencing and mobilising others towards your shared purpose

People's authority can come not just from knowledge or networks, but also from role and status. People with positional power in a collaboration have a particular responsibility to demonstrate collaborative behaviours and to **use their authority to support effective collaboration**. This includes encouraging debate and protecting minoritised perspectives, supporting others to take on responsibility and valuing each other's

contributions, promoting experimentation and learning from failure.



Some of the above thinking is drawn from [Lankelly Chase's brilliant work on system behaviours](#), alongside Collaborate's own reports [Behaving Like a System](#) and [Building Collaborative Places](#).

# Walking the walk

## Reflection questions

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1. Are you able to communicate openly, seek out others' views and listen to each other?
2. Do you engage a wide range of people in your shared aims, seeking to influence and mobilise a wide range of system resources and knowledge?
3. Do you try to strengthen the wider system, fostering new connections and collaborative behaviours and action?

# 5 ) Shared learning

Collective and continuous learning that enables adaptation is important because when working to address complex issues, **change happens as you go**, resulting from the constant and often unpredictable interaction of many different factors.

Rather than delivering to fixed plans, healthy **collaboration requires continuous learning and response** by working to make sense of the changing context around us and reflecting on insights from the approaches we're testing.

This is a collective and relational activity that requires **bringing together multiple and diverse perspectives**, experiences and insights to inform ongoing adaptation.



[Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World](#) sets out a radical new approach to social change and public service based on being human, continuously learning and nurturing healthy systems.

## Putting our heads together

### Reflection questions

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1. Do you dedicate time to exploring the impact of your work together?
2. Do you make decisions based on robust 'data' and seek diverse viewpoints to understand the impact of your work?
3. Are you capable of adapting your approach based on this learning?



# 6 ) Collaborative infrastructure

Collaborations are supported and sustained by enabling structures. Collaborative (sometimes called 'system') infrastructure makes it **easier to work across boundaries** and helps **align the organisational incentives** of those collaborating.

Collaborative infrastructure can include:

- Shared data and information
- Integrated or aligned funding, resources and teams
- Coordinated communications
- Coordinated staff and organisational development across a system to enable new ways of working
- Collaborative governance that supports the aims and spirit of the collaboration
- Shared accountability and performance management approaches



The report [Building Collaborative Places](#) explores nine essential pieces of system infrastructure for public services.

# Making it happen

## Reflection questions

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1. Are you repurposing organisational infrastructure to support and enable the aims of your collaboration?
2. Are you building new collaborative infrastructure where it is needed (for example, new shared data sets, collective communications and integrated or aligned funding)?
3. Are you comfortable giving up organisational control over some things in the interests of your shared aims?

# Sometimes, people play specific and important roles focused on enabling collaboration across systems.

Playing a role to enable collaboration across systems is often called '**systems leadership**.'

System leaders mobilise collective action towards shared goals. They work across organisational boundaries, build informal authority through relationships, and focus collective attention on the work that needs to be done. They work with others to co-create the future, rather than solving problems in a reactive manner.<sup>4</sup>

Anyone can lead change—not just those in positions of formal authority.

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania's [writing here](#) on system leadership and the core capabilities of system leaders.

**System activists** think big picture to change outcomes, beyond individual roles or organisational boundaries. They seek to understand problems from different perspectives, identify underlying causes and develop effective interventions. This is often not a role they are invited to play, as systems resist change, but something they take on, working from where they're positioned.

**System stewards** are people and organisations who take responsibility for nurturing a 'healthy' system by helping people collaborate and learn together effectively. They often gain legitimacy from their ability to bridge across and bring together those in positions of formal and informal power, addressing power imbalances. They help collaborators make best use of collective relationships, insights and resources.



[From 'Me' to 'We' — Lessons on leading as a systems activist](#) shares seven shifts in people who become system activists. [Systems stewardship in practice: What it is and how to get started](#) draws on examples from the Human Learning Systems network to define stewardship practice. [This essay collection](#) was written by local government Chief Executives who participated in the Collaborate /Solace Ignite system leadership programme about their personal experiences and learning as system leaders.

***What's your role?***

Collaborate is an innovative social consultancy building the thinking, culture and practice of collaboration to help us meet the challenges of the twenty-first century together. We support collaboration in teams, organisations, places, across public services and with charities and funders, helping to build the conditions set out in this report. We're currently working with local authorities, ICS, charities, funders, senior teams and collaborations of all kinds across the UK, tackling issues from health inequalities to climate change, leadership to culture change.

**Get in touch if we can help you!**

**Visit: [www.collaboratecic.com](http://www.collaboratecic.com)**

**collaborate**  
for social change