

District and county council collaboration Final Report

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

This paper appends the Shared Intelligence report on district and county council collaboration for member discussion.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. **Note** the report has been written with the support and oversight of the District Councils' Network and County Councils Network.
2. **Reflect** on the findings of report and the case studies it outlines

Action

Officers to take on board comments from members.

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District and county council collaboration

Final Report

Background

1. At the September Board, members asked for a piece of work be undertaken to explore the opportunities and future direction of collaboration between district and county councils. Shared Intelligence were commissioned to undertake the research and updated members on their progress at the last Board. The work has now been completed, and this paper appends (**Appendix A**) the final report which has been approved by lead members, for the discussion at the Board.
2. At members' request, both the County Council Network and District Councils' Network have been involved in the project from the start, helping steer the project's focus and select the case studies for inclusion. The work culminated in a workshop bringing together members of the People and Places Board, district and county representatives and officers from the CCN and DCN to comment on and "sense check" the research's findings. Both CCN and DCN have also commented on and approved the final report presented to members.
3. As members will also be aware, the report was commissioned and written before the Covid-19 emergency. However, within the limits of the original research specification, its introduction has been reframed to reflect current circumstances.

The drivers of collaboration

4. To inform the research Shared Intelligence conducted over 30 non-attributable and attributable interviews with district and county councils across the country. The research outlines seven drivers of collaboration:
 - 4.1. **People and trust.** The importance of high levels of trust between political and managerial leaders
 - 4.2. **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.
 - 4.3. **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.
 - 4.4. **One size does not always fit all.** Whilst county-wide collaboration is an important part of leveraging economies of scale across place there is also value in exploring more granular partnerships at project, district, or groups of district level to seize opportunities unique to certain parts of a county.

- 4.5. **A mobilising topic or initiative.** In many places the pursuit of a particular challenge, such as economic and housing growth or the climate emergency has proved to be a powerful mobilising force.
- 4.6. **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.
- 4.7. **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.

5. The report's five detailed case studies focus on:

Topic	County	District
Inclusive Growth	Suffolk	Babergh and Mid Suffolk
The Climate Emergency	Devon	Mid-Devon
Non-structural Reform	Derbyshire	High Peak
Planning and Infrastructure	Kent	Canterbury
Joint Officer Posts	Interviews across several counties and districts	

The Final Output

6. The report will be published on the LGA's website once all case studies have been formally signed off by local areas. It will be shared widely through the LGA, DCN and CCN's communications channels.

Next steps

7. Members are asked to:
- 7.1. **Note** the report has been written with the support and oversight of the District Councils' Network and County Councils Network.
- 7.2. **Reflect** on the findings of report and the case studies it details

Appendix A The drivers of collaboration

Working across local government for the benefit of communities

Executive Summary

Delivering an effective response to the coronavirus means that 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 and District Councils Network in March 2020. Cllrs John Fuller OBE 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 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 the District Councils Network and County Councils Network.

Seven drivers of collaboration

Drawing on our research we have 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.

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

widely recognised as being equally important.	prescriptive one, enabling activity at both strategic and local levels.
<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.
Kent: Planning and Infrastructure	Suffolk: Inclusive Economic Growth
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 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.
<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.
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 seen as bringing wider benefits to the relations across the areas concerned as well as to the pairs of councils involved.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	

Introduction

The final stages of research for this assignment coincided with the introducing of stringent social distancing measures to tackle coronavirus. Writing in *Local Government Chronicle* in late March Cllrs John Fuller and David Williams, the chairs of the district and county council networks respectively, called on county and district councils to work together closer 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 councils¹. 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.

¹ Our methodology is set out in more detail in the annex.

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 of the 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. The seven themes 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 has been raised by everybody we 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 in. 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 of the places in which 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 leadership.

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 the 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 that "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, 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 in which 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 that 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 in which 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 improving 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: LEP 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. And it is clear from the joint article in the 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 in which 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 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 once 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.

These quotes from two leaders reinforce the point: “The leaders are clear about the importance of two-tier collaboration. Rows are about issues, not the principle.” “I said at my first leaders meeting that I wouldn’t fire the first shot.”

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 that 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 the district councils. So does the 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 cause offence illustrates the point. In essence, there is something powerful about the way in which 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 notwithstanding 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 a wider geographical area 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 people, communities and people matter more. And that's what drives collaboration.

Case studies

Derbyshire: Non-structural Reform

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

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. The strength of the relationship between Derbyshire County Council and High Peak Borough Council was demonstrated by the response to the Toddbrook Reservoir

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 Cllr 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 in 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.

A programme of work on non-structural reform has been led by the Derby and Derbyshire Joint Committee for Economic Prosperity. Chaired by county council leader Cllr Barry Lewis, the committee brings together leaders and senior officers from Derby City Council, the county council and the nine districts and boroughs in Derbyshire. The joint committee’s priorities 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. Cllr Lewis says that in order to collaborate effectively, you must “set a direction of travel early on”.

An important driver of collaboration has been the decrease in council resources at both a district and county level over the past decade. There has been 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's 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 Cllr 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 nine district and borough councils, their officers and leaders. The leader of Derbyshire Cllr 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.

Devon: The Climate Emergency

Interviewees: Cllr John Hart, leader, and Phil Norrey, Chief Executive, Devon County Council; and Cllr Bob Deed, leader, and Stephen Walford, Chief Executive, Mid Devon District Council.

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. 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 PV cells and reviewed existing housing and planning policies.

Joined up working at a strategic level means that work is not being delivered or commissioned by the county and all the districts. Collaborating across tiers removes the

scope for duplication with different districts and the county taking a lead on different aspects of the response. For example, various approaches are being piloted by different councils.

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.

Kent: Planning and Infrastructure

Interviewees: Cllr Roger Gough, leader, David Cockburn and Barbara Cooper, senior officers, Kent County Council; and Cllr Robert Thomas, leader, and Colin Carmichael, chief executive, Canterbury City Council

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 office 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 the county council, Cllr 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 is a topic on which collaboration and effective joint working is essential given the different statutory roles the two types of council 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 that 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 particularly 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 Thanet 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 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.

Suffolk: Inclusive Economic Growth

Interviewees: Cllr Matthew Hicks, leader, and Nicola Beach, chief executive, Suffolk County Council; and Cllr Suzie Morley, Cllr John Ward, leaders, and Arthur Charvonia, chief executive, Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils

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 in which 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 Cllr Matthew Hicks who felt that there is both “political and officer will to collaborate” between councils in the county. The raft of collaborative projects which 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.

This, however, has not always been the case: in the past relationships have been rocky and collaboration has stalled. This challenging period coincided with a focus on council structures. Since then, both county and districts have seen a huge culture shift, embodied and enacted by political and managerial leaders who see collaboration as key to achieving outcomes for communities in Suffolk.

The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group (SPSL), initially set up in 2009, survived that rocky period. Following a governance review, it has become a vehicle for joined up and collaborative working in the county. The group, although not a formal part of the governance arrangements, 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 and the CCGs.

The group has supported joint work on topics such as youth employment, highways, and action to tackle gang and county lines issues. The leaders of Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, Cllrs John Ward and Suzie Morley, both felt that this co-ordinated approach had delivered tangible benefits for the county. Cllr 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”.

The SPSL has enabled effective collaboration on inclusive growth. In the past year, with a pot of £2m from the Local Growth Fund, the SPSL 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.

These projects all require close collaboration between districts and county with their different statutory responsibilities around planning and infrastructure. For example, in Babergh the district council worked hand-in-hand with the county team on public realm and highways improvements in Sudbury as part of its wider place-making for its market towns.

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.
- 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

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

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 post 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 case 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 the Gloucestershire's Economic Growth Statutory Joint Committee alongside the other districts and Cherwell and Oxfordshire are key players in the Oxfordshire Growth Board.

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 and Oxfordshire councils have also benefitted from a joint officer team. This means that officers who were previously part of the county council often work in what were district settings leading to far more contact and exchanges between officers from different disciplines and cultures. . This creates the opportunity for more collaboration, understanding and shared learning.

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 that people would prefer consensus to that constructive challenge. In Oxfordshire and Cherwell Chief Executive Yvonne Rees and Joint Director Claire Taylor emphasised that incrementalism was one of the biggest things to get right and that it wasn't just about a joint post holder improving collaboration. Having a joint structure means bringing along everyone in your organisation 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 1: 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 and County Councils Network 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. The list of councils which took part in the research calls are detailed below:

District Councils:	County Councils:
Cherwell District Council	Oxfordshire County Council
Selby Borough Council	North Yorkshire County Council
Gloucester City Council	Gloucestershire County Council
Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils	Suffolk County Council
East Staffordshire District Council	Staffordshire County Council
Canterbury City Council	Kent County Council
Mid Devon District Council	Devon County Council
High Peak District Council	Derbyshire District Council
North Kesteven District Council	
Mendip District Council	
	Surrey County Council
	Norfolk County Council



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