

# How collaboration can boost productivity in public services

*Mainly due to budget cuts over the past seven years, councils have become more efficient in how they work. But a new approach is needed in order to boost productivity and maintain the quality of service. [Lucy Terry](#) explains how new forms of collaboration can aid those efforts, and offers some ideas as to how local government can go about implementing such collaborations.*

Local government has become one of the most efficient parts of the public sector in recent years – albeit in an extremely challenging context. On average, budgets have been reduced by [around 22%](#), and the workforce has been reduced by 700,000 (September 2010 – September 2016). Local government has had no choice but to make substantial reductions on all but the most essential spending. Councils have implemented workforce restructures, redesigned job roles and services, and in many cases have shared back-office services to realise economies of scale. Anyone working in local government will have experienced an environment of constant change, with reduced resources and higher workloads.

But having made such substantial efficiencies over the last few years, it is time for a new approach. Continuing to make cuts to the workforce and to resources will likely have diminishing returns, affecting the quality of service delivery. It is time for a more systematic change – and with it consideration of what's most important to sustain councils and ensure thriving communities.

In our recent report [Producing the Goods – Collaboration as the Next Frontier of Productivity](#), we looked at how new forms of collaboration could be an effective way of driving productivity and impact in public services. We focused on three broad areas of collaboration: with other sectors, within the workforce, and with the public. Collaboration is, of course, a frequently-used term, at risk of becoming a meaningless buzzword, if used carelessly. What is crucial is to look at the detail of collaboration – what makes collaboration work, why people choose to collaborate, and how it can be done effectively.

Local government can tap into new insights, sources of capacity and ideas through effective collaboration with partners. For example, as the experts on their own jobs, collaboration with the workforce could identify how specific processes can be reformed to be more efficient and where expenditure can be reduced easily. Collaboration across public services can lead to more effective, coordinated care which reduces duplication, and provides an opportunity to work more preventatively, meaning money is potentially saved over the long term. And working with customer-facing services in different sectors provides an opportunity to provide low-level emotional support to those people who would otherwise be at risk of isolation and losing their independence. In Jersey, postmen and women [visit elderly people](#) as part of their daily rounds, helping to reduce loneliness and flagging up potential problems at an early stage to avoid crisis.



Image credit: NLGN, [Producing the Goods](#)

But to realise the potential of collaboration, public service leaders must be strategic and emotionally intelligent in how they collaborate. For example, councils everywhere want to develop their relationship with the public, harnessing the potential benefits of coproduction. This is one of the hardest forms of collaboration, but if it succeeds, it can also be one of the most fruitful. To do it effectively, councils need to understand why the public would want to work with their council.

Collaboration is most effective where it understands what motivates people to get involved. Some councils have already demonstrated this – Lambeth Council [triallyed](#) three different approaches to incentivising volunteers to get involved in cleaning up their street, and found that providing people with a substantial identity as a Street Champion was more effective than fiscal reward. Elsewhere, councils have drawn upon research into people's core values to shape their recruitment strategy for foster carers. [Research has found](#) that foster carers are more likely than the general public to hold values associated with making a difference and 'doing the right thing'; this insight was used to shape recruitment and retention strategies in foster care.

Part of the process of collaboration is about sharing what works- and what doesn't. Trialling new ideas is by definition a risky exercise. And councils do not have the luxury of a small start up which can try new products, experiment, and move on without fuss. They work in a highly politicised environment, are accountable to politicians, and by extension the local community. For this reason, councils should start small when collaborating, with the aim of trialling a discrete initiative – the results of which can be measured fairly easily. And then councils would ideally feel encouraged to share those results, for the benefit of the whole sector. Sharing what doesn't work as well as what does is a part of keeping public services sustainable, and ultimately contributes to improving outcomes for a place and population.

In the report, we show that collaboration isn't always simple – it's a mixture of art and science and needs to be done strategically. Sharing the results of these initiatives and being honest about the results with peers in local government and beyond will be a marker of good collaboration. Innovative, creative initiatives won't always work but understanding what doesn't work should be seen as essential to the process of driving improvement.

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## About the Author

[Lucy Terry](#) is senior researcher at NLGN, a think tank specialising in local government. Her interests include the future of the local government workforce, coproduction, and the future of public health. NLGN works closely with its [members](#) on practical issues of service delivery and organisational change as well as national policy.

