



Structured collaboration: the key to enabling inclusive growth



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While the term ‘levelling up’, with its modern derivation in the world of video gaming, has been adopted to describe the aim of regional development ‘going up by a level’, its use can sometimes give the impression that progress in one area must come at the expense of another. Instead, I suggest reframing it as ‘raising up’ – a concept that emphasises lifting all parts of our nation without causing anyone to fall behind.

At the Institute for Collaborative Working (ICW), we firmly believe that structured collaboration is the key to

achieving this goal. By fostering organised, coordinated and sustainable partnerships, we can generate additional value and growth, benefiting even the most disadvantaged or overlooked regions.

Structured collaboration, as envisioned by the ICW, has the potential to transform our society. It goes beyond the public-private divide and encompasses all types of relationships, ecosystems and networks, regardless of their complexity. Through our interactions with members, we consistently witness new value being created, especially in public-private projects where diverse organisations collaborate successfully. Expanding such collaborative relationships presents a significant opportunity to accelerate the process of raising up our communities without excessive taxpayer funding – instead, requiring a more efficient allocation of existing budgets.

The power of collaboration

Collaboration has always been at the heart of human progress. Throughout history, great advances have been made when individuals and organisations come together to work towards common goals. From the construction of



ancient architectural wonders to the development of ground-breaking scientific discoveries, collaboration has been the driving force behind these accomplishments.

In the modern world, collaboration remains just as crucial, perhaps more so. Our society faces complex challenges that no single entity can address in isolation. Issues such as climate change, economic inequality and social disparities require multifaceted solutions that can only be achieved through collaboration.

Structured collaboration takes this concept a step further. It's not just about coming together and working on shared goals; it's about doing so in an organized, coordinated and sustainable manner. This structured approach ensures that collaboration doesn't become just a buzzword, but a strategic tool for progress.

At the ICW, we have been championing structured collaboration since 1990. We believe this approach holds the key to addressing some of the most pressing issues facing our society today. Through our annual awards, we have recognised and celebrated exceptional collaborative efforts across various sectors. These projects often involve organisations from different industries and backgrounds coming together to achieve remarkable outcomes. While their success stories may not always make the headlines, they serve as shining examples of what structured collaboration can achieve.

The concept of 'raising up' our communities embodies the core principles of structured collaboration. It emphasises that progress should not come at the expense of any particular group or region. Instead, we should aim to elevate all parts of our society, ensuring that no one is left behind. This approach is particularly pertinent in today's world, where economic disparities and social inequalities persist. 'Raising up' encourages us to address these disparities by working collectively to create opportunities and improve living conditions for all.

Collaborative community forums

To bring about 'raising up' in practice, we propose the establishment of a network of collaborative community forums across the nation. These forums would serve as hubs for central and local government, private-sector organisations, industry bodies, chambers of commerce, infrastructure owners and third-sector organisations. Such

a comprehensive approach creates a network of networks, with the government playing a catalytic role while empowering local communities.

The structure and composition of forums would be tailored to the specific needs of each community or ecosystem. Geography, demographics and location are essential factors to consider when designing such forums. Understanding the context is the cornerstone of effective collaboration.

Each forum must have a clear common purpose and specific desired outcomes. This ensures that collaboration remains focused on delivering tangible benefits to the people it serves. Moreover, the governance structure managing these forums will ensure that actions and objectives consistently align with the intended outcomes.

One crucial aspect of effective collaboration is getting the right balance of participants. As mentioned earlier, context matters. Therefore, it is essential to understand the specific regional context to establish the right ecosystem for achieving desired outcomes. This involves several key components:

- Clearly defining the desired final outcomes.
- Establishing objectives and measures that relate to these outcomes.
- Gaining clarity on the drivers, needs, concerns, and objectives of all players and stakeholders involved.
- Identifying, selecting, and exiting various collaborative partners based on the evolving circumstances.
- Developing structures that define how contributing collaborative partners will interact, including necessary governance structures.
- Determining the competencies required and providing the training to ensure they are in place.
- Cultivating and sustaining a collaborative culture.
- Measuring the effectiveness of delivering desired outcomes and monitoring progress towards achieving them.
- Developing a collaborative charter.

These elements combine to create a holistic approach to collaboration that is rooted in understanding, flexibility and adaptability.





The development of a collaborative charter is a key tool in achieving successful collaboration, serving as a point of reference for all partners and setting the direction and expectations. Such a document serves several critical functions:

- It ensures that specific relationship management plans are in place, with the right entities responsible for delivering individual elements of the collaboration.
- It establishes the tone for behaviours and culture within the collaborative relationship, fostering an environment of trust and cooperation.
- It upholds the principle that all participants must benefit.

Winning together

In any effective collaborative relationship, all parties must see value and mutual benefit. Communities that are ‘raised up’ experience economic growth, improved living standards, better healthcare, enhanced educational opportunities and a more favourable living environment. Local authorities benefit from reduced demand for social-service provision as incomes in the area rise and communities become healthier and happier. Central government benefits from increased tax revenue and reduced welfare costs.

Large private-sector organisations can also leverage the opportunities created by ‘raising up’ communities. Industries such as construction, manufacturing, IT, defence and medical can strengthen their supply chains, making them more resilient and sustainable. This can lead to a reduction in carbon emissions associated with their activities, aligning with the broader goals of environmental sustainability.

Collaboration is not just about solving existing problems – it is also a powerful driver of innovation and imagination. By working together, we can imagine new possibilities and pursue ambitious goals that may have seemed unattainable in isolation.

Consider this scenario: large organisations in the south-east of England, where the workforce is highly

qualified and content to remain where they reside, face challenges in recruiting talent to meet their growing business needs. Instead of relocating or outsourcing, they could collaborate with smaller organisations in the north-east, for example. These organisations could pool their resources and create shared facilities for their employees. This innovative approach would not only address workforce challenges, but also foster skills development, increase economic activity and provide more opportunities for social interaction and growth in local communities.

The lessons learnt from the pandemic, including the widespread adoption of hybrid working, have also opened new possibilities. Collaboration can drive these innovations and create solutions that benefit both businesses and society at large.

Central government plays a pivotal role in the overall initiative to ‘raise up’ communities. Its involvement is particularly essential when a central government activity or department is a significant employer in a specific area. However, it is important to note that this solution does not require exorbitant taxpayer funding. Instead, some initial investment is needed to establish an overall framework, initiate collaborative efforts and identify areas where this approach is desirable.

Central government can contribute in a number of practical ways:

- Acting as a matchmaker, facilitating connections between the right parties.
- Providing templates for establishing and monitoring collaborative communities focused on ‘raising up’.
- Offering advice and guidance to support the success of collaborative efforts.
- Encouraging private-sector participation through government procurement policies.
- Setting governance frameworks for the collaborative community forums.
- Outlining suitable training programs and helping parties understand the demand for these initiatives.
- Providing literature and documentation to assist in the implementation of collaborative projects.

A new vision for our society

The drivers of climate change, the quest for social value and the imperative of economic growth demand a fresh and more effective approach. The ICW stands ready to assist those who share our confidence and commitment to making society more inclusive, prosperous, sustainable and centred around social value. By embracing structured collaboration, we can build a brighter future for all, in which no one is left behind and progress is truly inclusive. Together, we can ‘raise up’ our communities and achieve remarkable outcomes that benefit everybody.

Frank Lee is Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Collaborative Working – a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to demonstrate the vital role that structured collaborative working plays in delivering key outcomes

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