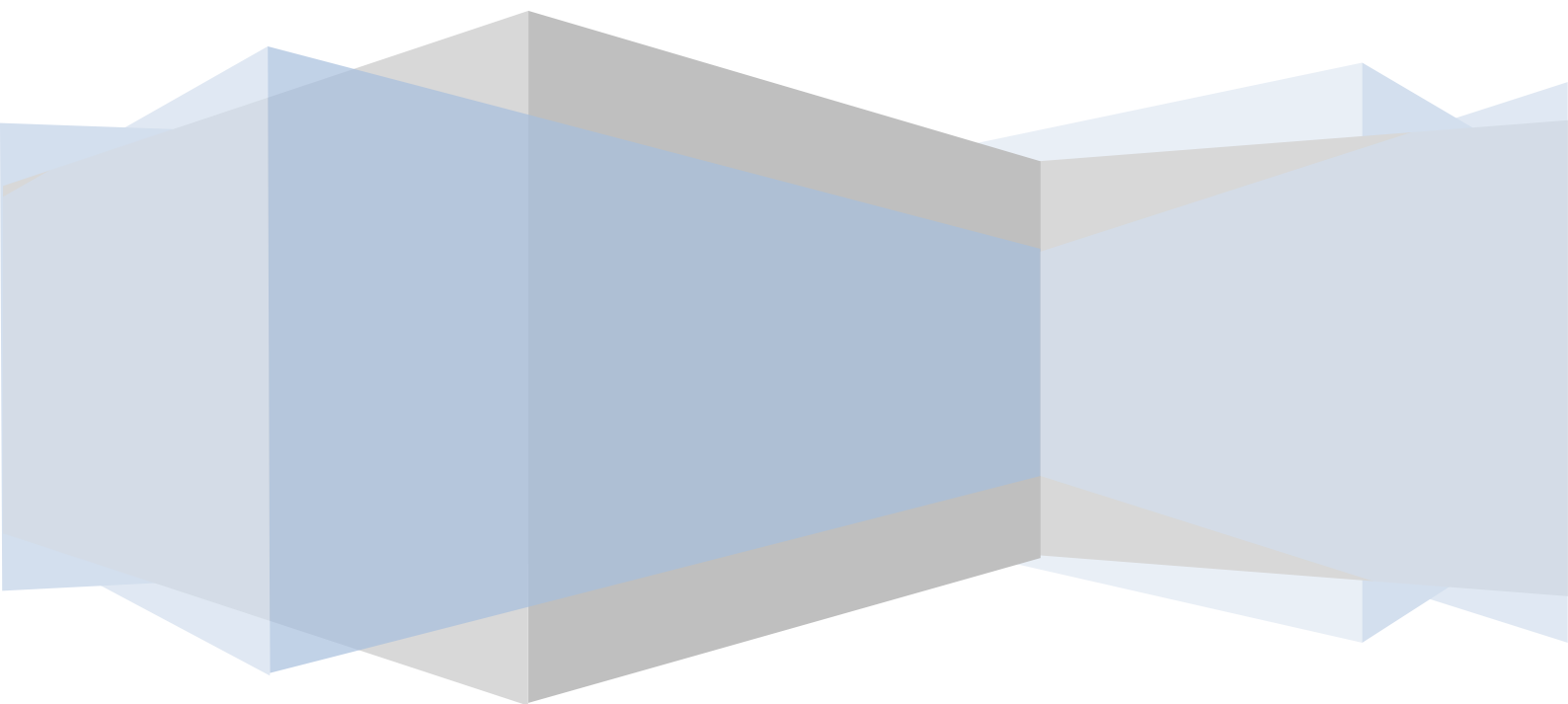


Interim Assessment of Collaborative Working Practice in Futures Work

Part of an inquiry for the Future Analysts
Network and the Horizon Scanning Centre

Steve Wells



Scope

This report provides a snapshot of the collaborative working experience in futures work of Future's Analysts Network (FAN Club) members, taken between December 2008 and January 2009. The Inquiry Interviews conducted in this phase represent one part of a project to explore collaborative working practice in futures work across the FAN Club. The objectives of the overall project are:

- To explore how a collaborative working approach could bring practitioners of futures thinking together outside as well as inside existing FAN Club events, to increase the potential of the network itself and help enhance FAN Club members' futures work;
- To understand how well the network sustains itself between meetings (through productive collaborations or conversations, for example); and
- To make recommendations about how we can encourage collaboration across the network and between the network events?

Based on observations over a period of time participating in FAN Club events, my hypothesis is that a focus on collaborative working (within teams and between organisations) can help maximise the return on time investment in futures thinking; for example by sharing information, perspectives, assumptions, potential futures and the challenges and opportunities they present.

My expectation is that this work will answer some questions and will also pose more, but in doing so will raise a number of issues that are pertinent to how practitioners can progress their futures thinking work and their collaborative working practice.

The recommendations developed through this phase need to pay attention to the strategic direction set by the HSC. The current aims and scope of the Centre according to the website are:

- To inform departmental and cross-departmental decision-making;
- To support horizon scanning carried out by others inside government; and
- To spot the implications of emerging science and technology and enable others to act on them.

The three work-streams designed to meet the aims and scope are:

- Producing a broad horizon scan - the Sigma Scan - looking at potential future issues and trends that may have an impact on public policy, to inform Government strategy and policy-making.
- Project work with stakeholders: demand-led opportunities for joint working on specific issues with stakeholders (departments or groups of departments)
- Provision of tools and support to spread good practice in departmental horizon scanning, including coaching, providing advice, brokering agreements and creating synergies that make the best use of resources and facilitate capacity-building.

In addition, the HSC was looking at:

- Connecting the scanning community better to current issues, and building its credibility in government; and
- Ensuring that HSC's outputs are rigorous and world-class, but also to ensure that people use them, especially in government. This means attaching them to policy processes.

The following sections are included in this report:

1. Introduction
2. Executive summary
3. What is your experience of collaborating in futures work?
4. What motivates you to collaborate and what challenges to collaboration have you found?
5. What value do you recognise and look for from collaborating on futures work?
6. What part do you see collaborative working in futures work, playing in the future?
7. Building on FAN Club events including collaborating between meetings
8. Observations
9. Appendix

1. Introduction

There are a plethora of words and phrases to describe joint working and therefore one of the biggest challenges when engaging in collaborative work can be coming to an understanding about the sort of relationship we are about to embark upon.

To avoid conflict later in the engagement and as the relationship with a new partner is developing, it is critical to be clear about what it is we are trying to achieve together, why we have opted to work together and how we will work together from early on in the collaboration process. For example, where collective goals are uncharted and uncertain new approaches and adaptation will be required. Where individual goals are clear and predictable, accepted 'best practice' approaches can be applied.

This model can be helpful in understanding how collaborative we need to be given the nature and clarity of the goals we are seeking to achieve.

- Compete** or go it alone – where the situation and solution are clear and the focus is on self and individual goals.
- Cooperate** – where the situation and solution are unclear and the stakeholders working to individual goals.
- Coordinate** - where the situation and solution are clear and the stakeholders are working to common goals.
- Co-create** or *partner* - when the situation and solution are unclear and the stakeholders are working to common goals.

Nature of goals	Collective	Coordinate	Co-create
	Individual	Compete	Cooperate
		Clear & predictable	Uncharted & uncertain
		Clarity of goals	

For the purpose of this project, I am using the word *collaboration* to describe a range of joint-working interventions.

Methodology

This part of the project is focused on understanding the experiences of FAN Club members in working collaboratively in futures' analysis and in identifying what opportunities exist for greater collaboration between members and between FAN Club events.

Telephone interviews have been conducted with FAN Club members about their experience of collaborating in futures work. Interviews typically lasted for between 45 minutes and an hour and were based on a series of themed questions (see section 9 – Appendix).

Having recorded the key points of the conversations I looked for similarities and differences in the feedback and have articulated the key messages.

I am grateful to those FAN Club members who contributed their time and views to this inquiry. They held a number of roles in the public and private sectors including:

- Policy development;
- Partnership development;
- Researcher,
- Programme management; and
- Independent consultant.

2. Executive Summary

Experience of collaboration in futures work based on the interviews undertaken is described as mainly mixed or poor. There is some *very good* experience and at the opposite end of the spectrum no experience, but these examples are in the minority. There is also evidence of limited success in adopting the outputs of futures work, for example taking them into policy development.

As identified in other research into collaborative working, the success of collaboration is highly dependent upon the motivation and commitment of a very few individuals.

But none of this is to say that collaboration does not take place; but it is much more common in operational areas as a way to support implementation for example, than in futures work.

Motivators and Challenges

There are a number of reasons why people will engage in collaboration and a number of challenges in doing so. Being aware of the option to collaborate is important, particularly where supported by examples of successful collaboration. But making the work relevant, promoting the advantages of participation, building on complimentary skills and capabilities and ensuring the project is effectively resourced are all critical.

Major challenges to collaborative working include the fear of giving up control of the process and / or content. Strategy and particularly futures work are often given a low priority, particularly in organisations subject to significant operational short-term pressures.

A number of potential risks and benefits were identified by respondents including:

Risks	Benefits
Mis-match of expectations between collaborating parties.	Develop new and improve existing relationships with stakeholders.
Loss of sole control over content & process.	Work with new perspectives and generating more insight than working alone.
Relationship not robust enough to sustain disagreement, conflict etc.	Configure complimentary resources of different organisations for increased effectiveness.
Resource withdrawal by either party due to changing priorities.	Develop new individual and organisational skills and capabilities.

The future for collaboration in futures work

The trend across many businesses is for increasing collaboration and the FAN Club' consensus is that futures work will also be subject to more collaborative working. In part, the trend is being driven by a simple necessity to collaborate as issues become bigger, more inter-connected, the stakeholder base becomes more dispersed all leading to increasing complexity and uncertainty.

Practitioners are likely to differentiate between potential partners based on their experience, capability and willingness to collaborate. The implication of this is that a lack of collaborative working capability could adversely impact an organisation's reputation.

Colleagues suggest that there are four areas where collaborative futures work could be promoted to greatest effect. Capability development is arguably the key issue in building awareness and confidence in futures analysis and effective collaborative working. Establishing communities of practice to address issues of shared interest - including both content and process - and the development of a support structure were felt to be important enablers to increasing the chances of successful collaborative futures analysis. Demonstrating success is linked to both the above points but it was felt that considering how to communicate and share good practice within and beyond immediate networks was critical. It was also felt that increased government support – particularly for local authorities – could help drive up standards in strategic thinking; including futures analysis and collaboration.

Building collaboration between FAN Club events

The value that FAN Club members currently gain from participating at events is focused on information exchange; capability development; networking; futures content; and futures practice. These form the basis for a number of collaborative working ideas to consider between meetings, including:

- Introducing a range of sub-groups to follow up on specific issues e.g. devolved governments, local government.
- The establishment of a public sector only group.
- The development of some academic or thought leadership pieces on futures work.
- Establishing an *operational charter* between the Horizon Scanning Centre (HSC) and FAN Club.

Observations

From the interviews conducted it is clear that collaboration is common place for many colleagues, albeit in an operational situation, but that genuine collaboration remains rare in futures analysis. But it seems that there is broad agreement that collaboration in futures work is a good idea that would realise significant benefits. And yet there is a reluctance to “get stuck in and have a go” in part due to a perceived lack of organisational support, a desire to maintain control over process and content and perhaps limited capability in *true* collaboration – informal or formalised. At FAN Club meetings interaction is common, but this can be experienced as *listening and telling* and rarely dialogic, and not what I would describe as collaboration.

In my experience building effective collaboration requires due consideration of organisational culture, stakeholder engagement and effective contracting.

- Organisational culture – how supportive is the organisation to collaboration and what does it expect?
- Stakeholder engagement - how are relationships with stakeholders developed and nurtured and what are the supporting processes and behaviours?
- Contracting – what do the collaborating parties want from and have to offer each other? What do they want to deliver to their stakeholders and how will they work together to achieve their objectives?

Recommendations

Given the feedback from the interviewees, my own observations, the HSC objectives and Dr Horton’s comments there are three potential areas of activity that could be addressed to enhance collaborative working:

- A collaborative working agreement between HSC and FAN Club - an explicit “deal” between HSC and the FAN Club could be established where HSC support’s FAN Club member needs and in return FAN Club members work to support HSC objectives.
- Establish special / common interest groups – designed to help colleagues understand more about each other’s organisation; investigate the “organisational fit” for collaborative working; develop the relationships on which collaboration / partnership could be built.
- Capability building – establish protected time within an extended FAN Club programme to focus on capability development with the establishment of a *Futures Academy*, facilitated by collaborative working between HSC and FAN Club members.

3. What is your experience of collaborating in futures work?

Respondents generally reported some experience of collaborative working as part of their operational activities, but limited collaboration in futures work specifically. Those that had collaborated on futures work reported “some success”.

Successful collaborations – as described by respondents - tended to be built on the sharing of information, ideas and interpretations but rarely on the joint-sense-making of the underlying information or the potential implications.

Examples of limited success in getting this work as far as policy were cited, although whether this was a result of an issue with the perceived value of the futures work or a lack of engagement / collaboration with senior stakeholders remains open to conjecture. Perhaps related to this point was the “need to demonstrate success” to support a team’s value proposition relating to futures work. Part of that process would be a need to point to positive outcomes for futures work and the part the collaborative work played as a way to help set stakeholder expectations.



What was interesting about the feedback on the success or otherwise of collaborative futures work was that most examples are based on individuals being committed and motivated to work with other individuals or agencies they already know well.

Little or no experience.

Most respondents described some or significant experience in operational collaborative working but limited or no experience of collaborating in futures work. “Collaboration is a way of life, but not in futures work,” said one respondent.

The culture of some organisations is being challenged by the perceived need to increase currently low levels of strategic thinking capability; including futures analysis and collaboration.

Whereas there is a degree of scepticism about the applicability and value of futures work, enlightened individuals are looking to improve the number and quality of connections they have with other agencies. Major national and international challenges such as the current financial crisis, climate change, water management and health are expected to continue to be a major driver of analytical work, trend analysis, forecasting, horizon scanning and other futures work across many national and international stakeholders.

Having acknowledged this situation, capability development in futures work is seen as critical.

Some experience and mixed success.

Where there was some experience of collaboration, success did not always follow automatically.

Dissatisfaction was expressed about the tendency to bring external consultants into an organisation where there is limited awareness and understanding of futures analysis; where the rigour in the work that is completed is around trends and not broader complexities and uncertainties and limited attention is paid to the transfer of skills and capability into the organisation.

Opportunities to collaborate are often missed and should be taken on those issues where there are shared agendas and even common frameworks provided by government; for example the development of Sustainable Community Strategies that local authorities are required to have in place.

A major challenge can be simply encouraging the stakeholders to see the value of taking a strategic / long-term view; to move from a reactive to proactive footing and therefore engage in futures work. When stakeholders are motivated to engage together, they often primarily have their own agendas in mind. This leads to a sub-optimal outcome of the initiative delivering different value to different

stakeholders, although it does allow them to “tick the collaboration box.” It is perhaps this situation that gives rise to the comment that interactions tend to be transactional and “real collaboration doesn’t get started at the strategic or problem-solving level.” Consultation is also mistaken for collaboration. A number of examples of effective consultation were tabled; where information was sought by an organisation and provided to it by another.

On the one hand, acknowledging different agendas can help to establish a creative tension and manage expectations but where an open and honest conversation in these circumstances does not happen; poor collaboration tends to be the outcome.

Good but

In one example of collaborative futures work, an exercise involving mainly statisticians and economists from a range of different organisations developed some significant, high quality content, but found that the work “didn’t really go anywhere.” Why the work didn’t, “go anywhere” is unclear but it could be a lack of understanding on the part of the stakeholder clients about futures work, issues around how the stakeholders were engaged in the initial contract to set up the work or throughout the project.

Despite the quality of the outputs, tensions were still exposed during the collaborative work, particularly around control of the process and content. Indeed, the lack of a clear process contributed to limited collective sense-making which could have enhanced the outputs and may have made a positive contribution to stakeholder engagement by building a broad commitment to and ownership of the output.

It was also interesting to note that it felt easier to collaborate with stakeholders outside the immediate organisation; colleagues inside seemingly less inclined to engage in proposed futures work.

When collaborating on futures work, works well

The benefits of effective collaboration extend beyond the quality of the content produced. Relationships developed, the reputation of the participants as trusted colleagues as well as the opportunity to share in the provision of resources, gain access to different perspectives and developing capability are all considered to be of high value.

In one example cited, a forum with representation from a number of different organisations collaborated on the development of a broad-based futures project. The aim of the project was to create a basis for informed collective action.

Participation generated both individual and organisational benefits. There was implicit agreement that throughout the engagement the majority view would prevail, even though some members of the forum were expected to hold and advocate the views held by their organisation even though they differed from that developed by the forum. Nevertheless, the attention that was paid to the development of relationships across the forum allowed these creative tensions to exist within the collaboration.

The characteristics of this collaboration included:

- Shared resourcing
- Collective decision making
- Willingness to engage in a collaborative manner
- Shared ownership of the process and outputs

4. What motivates you to collaborate and what challenges to collaboration have you found?

Feedback suggests that in a number of cases, one part of an organisation can be an advocate of futures work and of collaboration but another has reservations. Advocates tend to be those individuals who are familiar with the techniques and approaches whereas those without experience can question the value of these approaches.

Many organisations are focussed on the short term; the achievement of current year targets, sometimes ignoring the signals from futures work, but choosing to deal with the consequences as they occur. An activity that opens up the complexities of an uncertain future and a team that advocates sharing that vulnerability with “outsiders” faces significant challenges in encouraging the organisation to adopt and embrace the approaches in the way the organisation conducts its forecasting, strategy and policy development work.

Creating awareness of the value of futures work and collaboration are felt to be important in generating motivation and encouragement to engage in this work. But the resourcing allocated to this work can be at risk when an organisation is looking to focus on the near-term, particularly as resources become stretched and investments in non-operational activities become squeezed.

Ideally, all organisations would maintain a healthy balance of short and long-term activities, but an organisation’s ability or willingness to do so is a factor of its culture as much as its resources. Despite the current fashion for collaboration, one piece of advice from one respondent was, “don’t collaborate unless you need to.”

What motivates and encourages collaboration?

Respondents identified a range of factors that act as motivation or encouragement to collaborate. They can be summarised by eight themes:

- Awareness of effective collaboration – seeing examples of previous projects and talking to colleagues who have taken part in them; access to events featuring collaborative and futures work and actually engaging in and promoting successful work.
- Setting clear objectives for the collaboration as well as the futures work – understanding what a valuable outcome (in terms of both content and the engagement) looks like; how clients and other stakeholders will benefit; what informed decisions will be taken as a result of the work.
- Making it relevant – using information / content already in the public arena; working with the near horizon to maintain a connection with what is going on now for participants and other stakeholders; working to client’s needs; building on connections with other major current events and engaging with other stakeholders to jointly make sense of them.
- Effective process management – of the futures work and the collaboration to help participants navigate their way to an effective outcome.
- Relationships and engagement – the opportunity to develop relationships and interact with a range of different stakeholders to bring new insights into the organisation as information and evidence.
- Adequate and effective resourcing – demonstrable cost effective exercises achievable through pooling resources including financial, people, expertise and information; opportunity to get the right people in the room at the right time around an issue of common interest.
- Building on shared needs – connecting agendas across different organisations to maximise return on investment in shared cost, information and relationships.
- Acquisition of skills and capabilities - building capability development into futures / collaborative work; prospect of development of in-house capability; development of a positive reputation in futures work and collaboration.

What challenges do you need to overcome to collaborate effectively?

Equally, there were a number of challenges identified and they can be summarised by these five themes:

- Control of the collaboration and futures process – a reluctance to work with someone else’s idea; ownership of new ideas and new ways of working can be closely guarded; the expectation of one party (e.g. the largest organisation, the organisation who had the original idea) to exert its power; to be dominant over the other party(s); differing context and objectives held by the parties leading to conflict; a risk averse culture preventing openness and sharing; an unwillingness to give something (control) up for the good of the collaboration; perceived risk to own organisation’s reputation; governance requirements for collaborative working.
- Control of content – a reluctance share information that can relate directly to the availability of funding or be considered as business confidential; insights from futures work can be considered sensitive from a competitive standpoint and therefore be closely guarded; concern about the impact of the inherent complexity and uncertainty of futures work.
- Organisational priorities – activities are not perceived to be in line with operational or existing strategic priorities; breaking out of a short-term / operational organisational mindset; personal motivation to collaborate at odds with the cautious, introspective culture of the organisation.
- Inadequate and ineffective resourcing – funding, people with the appropriate skills and time; competition for funding from other activities, particularly when resources are constrained (which can lead to a lack of transparency), external consultants brought in to do the work (but with a focus on content rather than process and without a clear knowledge transfer element to the assignment).
- Perceived validity of futures work and collaboration – a lack of recognition of the potential value of futures work; a perception that futures and collaboration could just be “another fad”; the reaction from senior stakeholders when the outcome is not what they are prepared to accept; a perception that senior stakeholder’s do not know, "what are those policy guys up to now"; perception that there will be limited opportunity to influence existing strategies; measuring the effectiveness of futures work and collaboration can be problematic.

What are the greatest potential risks and benefits to collaborating with stakeholders on futures work?

In addition to looking at the motivating factors and challenges to collaborating on futures work, we also addressed how respondents experienced risks and benefits. Prioritised in line with respondents’ feedback, here is what they identified:

Risks

- Mis-match of expectations between collaborating parties
- Loss of sole control over content & process
- Resources being withdrawn during the collaboration by either collaborating partner or own organisation
- Lack of partner commitment to collaboration process in terms of priority, resourcing, openness etc.
- Leaders commit to collaboration but organisation doesn't
- Impact of personnel changes (leavers) on collaboration
- Resource pressure from project creep result in additional unplanned resources being pulled in
- Sub-optimal relationship; e.g. parent / child leading to a sense of a lack of equity
- Relationship not robust enough to sustain disagreement, conflict etc.
- Reputation - in case of "failure"
- Failure to meet return on investment expectations

Benefits

- Working with a different perspective on same / similar issue
- Develop relationship with other stakeholders
- Generating more insight than working alone
- Personal development – developing skills and capabilities, particularly in the near-term
- Leverage resources of different organisations to help organisational capacity, allowing us to do what we couldn't do alone (joint working, funding, resourcing etc.)
- Aligned assumptions, conclusions, implications between stakeholders
- To gain complimentary skills into the organisation
- Develop a reputation as a good partner / leader in collaborative working

5. What value do you recognise and look for from collaborating on futures work?

By working collaboratively on futures analysis value can be recognised by the:

- Applicability of futures work to all parties;
- Development of actionable outcomes;
- Relationships and reputation developed;
- Effectiveness and efficiency with which work is undertaken; and
- Successful capability development

The applicability of futures work is felt to be critical as this is more likely to lead to informed decision making and action. Part of applicability is about making sense of new and important insights and an understanding of the potential implications for the business.

Maintaining existing and developing new productive relationships is highly valued and much collaborative working happens as a result of good relationships that already exist between individuals.

Collaboration can have a positive impact on networks and contribute directly to their development; a point that was made particularly in reference to the value gained from participation at FAN Club events.

Effective collaborative working has a benefit to reputation. Indeed, some stakeholders have expressed their organisational aims to be perceived as leaders in a particular area. So the development and maintenance of a good reputation is seen as valuable. Having the relationship, the ability and willingness to challenge assumptions held by individuals in both organisations and be open to challenge in return are important aspects of effective collaboration.

Collaborative working offers the opportunity to share resources (people, funding and information). This raises the benefit of cost effective working as well as the potential to work jointly on appropriate business solutions.

Learning from the experience of joint working including receiving “a helping hand to guide us,” receiving advice on tools and techniques is critical to supporting capability development. In essence, stakeholders are looking to develop a degree of self-sufficiency so where appropriate they can work independently of other agencies.

How is value delivered?

Colleagues also shared their perspective on how value can be delivered by collaborating. Top of the list was effective contracting. Fundamentally this was about being clear what questions are being asked and why they are being asked. Ensuring a clear link to a particular problem / issue and agreeing, setting and working toward achieving shared objectives were critical factors.

An assessment of when to engage and who with by establishing a pre-collaboration forum to open dialogue with other interested parties (e.g. providers of information, other stakeholders with desire / need to jointly work on a futures issue) was one idea shared. This approach can also help to accelerate the development of new relationships.

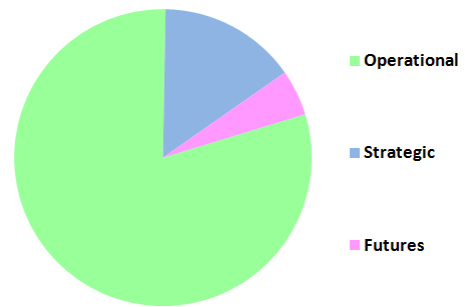
It was felt to be important that participants in collaborative futures work focus on both similarities (e.g. common areas of interest) and differences (e.g. complementary skills and unique perspectives on the same issue) as the common ground is likely to be the basis for successful exploration of how the differences can be configured for effective working. This does call for openness to other people's ideas and to working collaboratively. (Often collaborative working appeals to an individual's values and their working preferences.) Testing assumptions; both about our own organisation and our partners' and being open to challenge although relatively rare and potentially risky can go a long way to help the exploration.

The majority of colleagues have experience of and capability in operational activity, but far fewer in strategic thinking and futures work, so demonstrating value can be challenging.

In many cases, futures work and collaboration are not a part of an individual's role profile / job spec and success in these areas relies heavily on the motivation of individuals that "like working collaboratively." The idea of including collaborative working and futures analysis as core performance managed competencies was shared.

The exception rather than the rule is to imbed futures thinking with strategy development as part of the business cycle; an approach that has proven to be effective for one organisation.

A minority of colleagues recognise the importance of futures work and connection through strategy to operations.



6. What part do you see collaborative working in futures work playing in the future?

Respondent's feedback to questions about the part that collaborative working could play in futures work fell into three core themes. They were: the trend in collaboration; differentiation between potential partners; and the promotion of collaboration and futures work.

The trend in collaboration

The consensus is that there will be more collaboration in futures work going forward, although the context is that current levels of collaborative working are low. According to respondents, there are a number of factors that are combining to make collaboration more likely and a more attractive option but they fundamentally believe there is an increasing necessity to collaborate (in many areas).

There is broad agreement that there is increasing complexity and uncertainty both in the external environment and from an organisational perspective. Problems are becoming "bigger" and are felt to be "impossible to solve by working alone". In addition, there is greater connectivity between issues; an acknowledgement that effective sense-making needs to consider the whole system and that solution development needs a more appropriate – collaborative - response.

There is a stakeholder angle to the complexity too. Individuals within organisations can be geographically dispersed as can stakeholders in collaborating organisations. The stakeholder base is also expanding in line with the increasing connectivity between issues, making for a much more complex stakeholder context.

The use of technology is seen by some respondents as a way to encourage more collaboration. Solutions such as mobile telecommunications, video link-ups, Skype, social networking, blogs were all suggested as part of a portfolio approach to technology enabled collaboration.

There was also a belief that through taking a collaborative approach in sense-making, solution development and engaging with new or different perspectives, innovation in approach and outcome is more likely to be achievable.

Differentiation between potential partners

Responses concerning how colleagues would differentiate between who they work with on futures work were interesting.

While it is not always possible or practical to choose not to work with a particular stakeholder, where it is possible colleagues will differentiate between potential partners based on their experience, capability and willingness to collaborate. Where there is choice, practitioners will work with those stakeholders who have a good reputation for collaboration, which is likely to include those stakeholders where a productive relationship already exists.

Indeed one respondent confirmed that they had chosen to not work with some organisations because of their lack of a collaborative approach. They went on to say that a good relationship can sustain a joint venture through the dips; "It's easy to sustain a collaboration when everything is going well."

These views were reinforced by one colleague who said, "a failure to collaborate will be damaging to those organisations that don't (develop and exercise the capability)."

What is needed promote futures work & collaboration?

Under the core themes of actions to improve capability development; establishing communities of practice; demonstrating success; and improving support from central government, respondents shared a number of thoughts on how to promote futures work and collaboration.

Capability development

Capability development was identified as the key issue, at the individual and organisational level. Development needs exist for process (tools, techniques, skills) and behaviours (curiosity, creativity and innovation, respect, mutuality, honesty).

Organisationally, there is a need to recognise the value and contribution that futures work and collaboration can bring, so setting up the appropriate climate inside the business is critical. It must be acceptable for colleagues to be proactive about collaborating with other stakeholders and when collaboration is the appropriate approach, it must be a priority for the organisation to fully support those involved.

Formalising futures work and collaboration as a part of corporate process particularly, is critical. Imbedding futures work and collaboration into the organisation through recognised business processes; the basic business cycle, strategy development, planning and performance management / leader behaviours all help to support the development and adoption of new approaches.

Collaborative behaviours are particularly important to consider in how we go about improving relationships with external stakeholders; for example openness, transparency and mutuality. Some respondents have experience of parent - child relationships between collaborating partners which add unnecessary tension to the relationships. Perhaps a more formal approach to collaboration would be beneficial here; providing guidance to an approach acceptable to both parties.

For one respondent, futures analysis looks set to remain a niche activity so targeted training and awareness for internal colleagues is important.

Establishing communities of practice

The idea of establishing *Communities of Practice* emerged in a number of the interviews. Communities could be based on levels of competence (e.g. beginner, mid-level etc) or on particular subject areas (e.g. local government, environmental).

In any case, a *Futures Analysts' Good Practice Lab* would provide participants the opportunity to explore aspects of futures work, develop skills, and advocacy. It could use existing real case studies and current futures needs to demonstrate and promote good practice.

The community would also provide stakeholder management support to help engage senior management, gain their support and sponsorship to ensure any momentum generated was maintained.

Demonstrating success

The ability to demonstrate success, particularly the outcomes of futures work and collaboration would play a key role in generating awareness.

Creating case studies through “quick wins for our own organisation” will accelerate awareness and help to encourage a willingness to engage in the work within the organisation and with other external stakeholders.

One organisation is actively looking to target appropriate stakeholders, agree a subject and issue that makes sense to both parties and engage collaboratively in a piece of futures work. It is hoped that this approach of taking “safe risks” and publicising success will help to raise the profile of the work inside the organisation concerned and help to develop the organisation’s reputation with external stakeholders.

Government support

The suggestion was made that Local Authorities would benefit from greater Central Government support, perhaps by adopting a “carrot and stick” approach to encouraging futures work. Strategies could be reviewed for their “fitness for purpose for 15 years” and the collaborative working component could feature.

More open collaboration between local and central Government could help resolve the apparent dichotomy where the centre doubts its ability to influence at the local level, with local government experiencing a dictatorial central body. Is there an opportunity for central Government to provide a national framework for the development of local strategy?

7. Building on FAN Club events including collaborating between meetings

In March 2008 Waverly Management Consulting produced a research report entitled “From the Mundane to the Inspirational” to explore FAN Club membership interests and motivations. The findings confirmed that members were, “typically happy with meetings, content and the benefits of belonging to the network.”

There is some common ground with the feedback obtained through the interviews conducted as part of this work in relation to the value that participants realise. In addition I have sought respondent’s thoughts about how the existing FAN Club events could be built upon and what could happen between planned events.

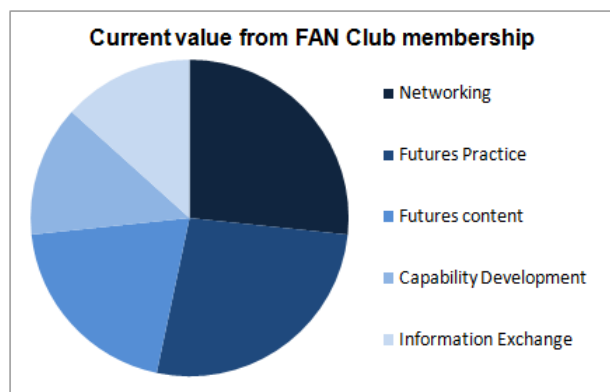
Existing value

There were five themes that respondents focused on in terms of the value they gain from attendance at FAN Club events: information exchange; capability development; networking; futures content; and futures practice. Based on the feedback, here are the definitions that I would apply to the themes:

Networking – the opportunity to make contact with colleagues in other organisations to gain insight to examples of good futures content, practice and process.

Futures Practice – understand what approaches speakers and colleagues are employing in successful futures work, what lessons they have learned.

Futures Content - understand what content speakers and colleagues have developed and what insights have been taken into the operation and how they have informed decision-making.



Networking and understanding Futures Practice were felt by respondents to offer most value.

Capability Development – seeking out best practice to support own and organisational development. (In one example an organisation is seeking direct support from HSC to develop capability within their organisation.)

Information Exchange – sharing content and process in an exchange of value between members.

Collaborative working ideas

At this stage, perhaps more *thoughts* than *ideas*, a number of potential initiatives linked to the existing FAN Club schedule but focused on additional interactions were raised by respondents.

- Introduce sub-groups to follow up on specific issues raised at FAN Club meetings.
- A devolved government sub-group to focus on common / shared issues in futures work in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Convening a group of stakeholders to test assumptions and implications of a specific futures project.
- Establishing a *Community of Local Government Futures Practice* to explore common needs, issues and processes.
- Establishment of a public sector only group.
- The development of some academic or thought leadership pieces and possibly intellectual property around futures work.
- Establishing a direct and explicit link between the HSC objectives and those of the FAN Club; potentially to address the strategic direction of the HSC and FAN Club.

On the flip side however, concerns were expressed about the difficulty in collaborating between FAN Club sessions with time, knowing who to contact and about what and a perceived difficulty in linking solutions with issues all cited. The key driver to increasing collaboration will be identifying the need that could be addressed through this approach.

8. Observations and Recommendations

Observations

From the interviews conducted it is clear that some level of collaboration is common place for the majority of respondents, and yet they also confirm that collaborative working beyond some sharing of information or consulting on technical content issues is rare in futures work. But it seems that there is broad agreement that collaboration in futures analysis is a good idea that would realise significant benefits.

With or without collaborative working experience in futures work, the expectation (and in some cases actual experience) is that some differentiation of who to work with is made, based on the potential collaborator's experience in, and history of joint working, and particularly on the quality of existing relationships.

It seems in some cases that there is a reluctance to “get stuck in and have a go” as far as driving a collaborative working agenda in futures work is concerned. In some cases, the lack of clarity over what the problem is today that we are trying to solve with futures thinking and collaboration is an issue. Organisational politics plays a part as does the expectation that control over process and content is critical. Some bigger organisations convey a desire to be / remain self-sufficient and other small organisations experience a parent – child relationship when they do try to work with bigger organisations. In other cases it simply seems to be a lack of support from other colleagues inside the organisation. The phrase, “there is a lot of talk about joint working but little action” was used.

For one organisation, there were good examples of effective futures work and collaboration. The secret here seemed to be individual motivation, connections with like-minded colleagues inside and outside the organisation and the integration of futures work into core organisational business and organisational capability development processes.

At FAN Club meetings and in the feedback through the interview process significant interaction can be observed, but this can be experienced as *listening and telling* and rarely dialogic, leading me to conclude that true collaboration remains the exception rather than the rule.

Recommendations

Given the feedback from the interviewees, my own observations, the HSC objectives and Dr Horton's comments I believe there are three potential areas of activity that might be addressed: collaboration between HSC and the FAN Club; establishing and facilitating special / common interest groups; and capability building.

Collaborative working agreement between HSC and FAN Club

An explicit “deal” between HSC and the FAN Club could be established where HSC support's FAN Club member needs and in return FAN Club members work to support HSC objectives.

The agreement would include specific objectives, perhaps a charter to articulate expectations, for example through advocacy back into their own organisations / departments and providing technical expertise on futures projects brought to the table by HSC and the centre's partners.

There should be a commitment to continuously monitor and re-contract as appropriate to ensure the validity of the ongoing process.

Special / common interest groups.

Finding common ground on issues, problems and needs is crucial in looking for, identifying and implementing collaboration. The same applies to encouraging collaboration between FAN Club members between planned events. Establishing facilitated common interest groups – perhaps outside of the core FAN Club meetings - came up as an idea a number of times during the interview process. A public sector only group was one such idea, but it could equally apply to topic areas.

Establishing interest in joint working could be initiated by designing and implementing an intervention to explore potential collaboration. The intervention could be set up with the objectives of:

- Understanding more about each other's organisation;
- Investigating the "organisational fit" for collaborative working;
- Developing the relationships on which collaboration / partnership could be built;
- Understanding and sharing the unique perspectives on the issue held by the participating parties; and
- Developing specific ideas for futures projects.

There may be a pro-forma for the collaboration; the process, collaboration charter, metrics and monitoring and a communications plan. (Generating and publicising quick collaborative working wins will provide valuable collateral to advocates in their organisations / departments.)

A pilot project could be implemented and the progress and outcomes would be shared with the wider FAN Club membership.

Capability building

Current FAN Club meetings are increasingly squeezed for time and there is a risk that in trying to meet all delegates' needs, current levels of satisfaction will start to reduce. Perhaps increasing the number of meetings with an alternating emphasis on *Futures Live* work and capability development would provide opportunity to cater for both, or establish a *Futures Academy* led and facilitated by HSC and supported by FAN Club members themselves.

In addition to providing case studies / best practice examples in futures work, supporting skills and capabilities such as leadership, wicked problems and collaborative working could be brought to the table.

Capability development activities could be supported by establishing and facilitating "practitioner" workshops where the emphasis is on amplifying existing practice in the room and encouraging joint sense-making of additional tools, techniques and approaches.

Project clinics could be established where a FAN Club member can bring a project issue to a facilitated session and seek feedback and coaching from an action learning group.

Questions to consider

There are a number of questions about organisational culture; stakeholder / client engagement and contracting that could be considered when exploring a collaborative working approach.

- Organisational Culture**
 - Does the organisation actively support collaborative working?
 - Are collaborative behaviours recognised by peers, line managers and performance management systems?
 - Is the organisation open to co-creation, sharing control of process and content?
 - Does the organisation always expect to lead or share the leadership of an initiative?
- Stakeholder engagement**
 - How are relationships with stakeholders developed and nurtured?
 - When dealing with potential partners, are honesty, respect and mutuality always exhibited?
 - Is *connecting* to form relationships as the basis for potential collaboration an explicit part of the relationship development process?
- Contracting**
 - What does the organisation and potential partner want from the engagement?
 - How will it be delivered?
 - How will they work together?
 - What do we want, what do we have to offer?
 - What are the resources, risks and rewards and how will they be allocated?
 - What are the factors that will determine success or otherwise?

One final observation: it is interesting to note that FAN Club members seem to seek certainty and simplicity (answers and solutions) in an area that is actually about complexity and uncertainty.

9. Appendix

Interview guide

Most interviews lasted for between 45 minutes and one hour. Here are the questions that formed the basis of the interview. Not all questions were posed to all participants due to timing and the emergent nature of the conversation.

1) What is your / your organisation's experience of collaborating in futures work?

- How would you describe your experience of collaborative working with external (to your immediate organisation) stakeholders over the last 12 months?
- What degree of success have you enjoyed through your collaborative working?
- What form did your most effective collaboration take?
- How do you rate your organisation's performance in collaborative working? Very Good; Good; Neutral; Mixed; Poor; No collaboration.
- Do you build on your networking at FAN Club events by collaborating between meetings?"
- Why? / Why not? / What would encourage you to do so?

2) What are your / your organisation's Hurdles and Enablers to collaboration?

- Could the degree to which connections are made between different pieces of futures work in different government departments be improved?
- Can it feel unsafe to raise awareness amongst senior management of the "bad news" that can emerge through futures work?
- Is ownership of the work and particularly insights developed closely guarded? If so, on what grounds?
- What motivates you / enables you to collaborate and with whom? In your organisation? At FAN Club events? Between FAN Club meetings?
- What prevents you from seeking collaboration?
- What are the greatest potential risks / benefits to collaborating with stakeholders?

3) What is the value to you / your organisation of collaborating?

- How do you assess when to collaborate?
- How does or how could collaborating in your futures work add value to the process and outputs?
- What is it that you value most from working with your collaborating partners?
- What do you look for in determining the success or otherwise of a collaboration initiative?

4) What part do you see collaborative working in futures work, playing in the future?

- Do you see more or fewer opportunities for working collaboratively in futures work? Why?
- What do you need / want to do to improve your collaborative working?
- What does your organisation need to do to support / encourage collaborative working?
- What do your stakeholders need to do to support / encourage collaborative working?
- Do you believe that an organisation's willingness and ability to collaborate effectively will become a crucial differentiator for who you will work with in the future?

5) Anything you would like to add?