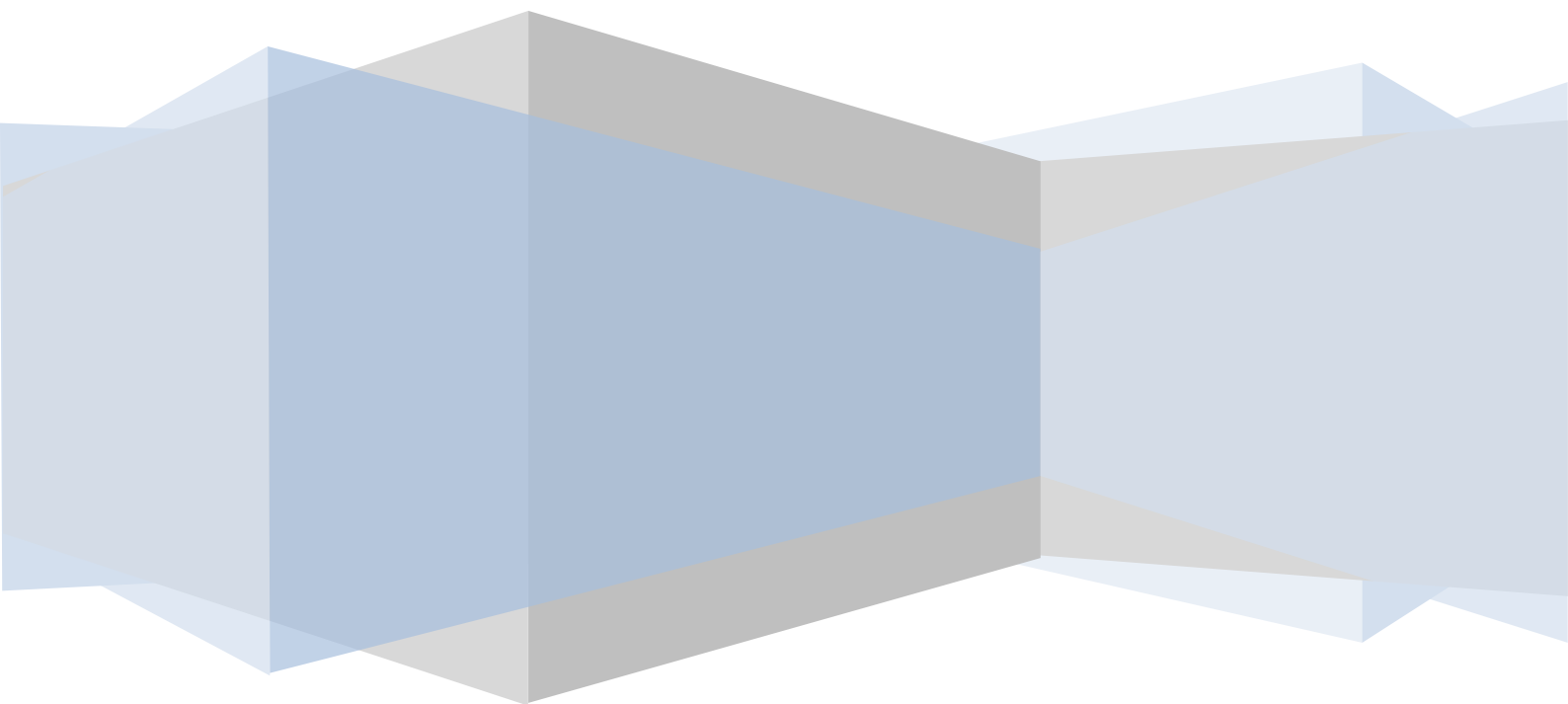


# **Validation of the findings of an inquiry into Collaborative Working Practice in Futures Work**

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



## Scope

This report represents the final component of an initiative to explore the collaborative working practice of FAN Club members in futures work.

To date, I have:

- Surveyed FAN Club members to gain a sense of their experience in collaborative working generally;
- Conducted one-to-one telephone interviews to explore members' experience of collaboration in futures work;
- Led a seminar to explore collaborative working in a leadership context at February's FAN Club meeting;
- Produced reports for Horizon Scanning Centre (HSC), provided copies of the reports to the Strategy Exchange at [www.nationalschool.gov.uk/strategyexchange](http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/strategyexchange) and a blog at [www.collaborativeworkingpracticeinfutures.blogspot.com](http://www.collaborativeworkingpracticeinfutures.blogspot.com) to describe the work and initial findings; and
- Updated members on the work completed to date by giving a presentation at the May FAN Club meeting.

This final phase of the work has been designed to validate or challenge the feedback so far received from FAN Club members and my own assumptions and conclusions formed through the process.

The objectives of the overall project have been:

- 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.

The following sections are included in this report:

1. Introduction
  2. Executive summary
  3. Motivators and challenges to effective collaborative working
  4. Potential risks and benefits of collaboration
  5. Future collaborative working
  6. Observations and recommendations
- Appendices

## 1. Introduction

In the first phase of the project – the Collaboration Health Check survey of FAN Club members' experience in collaboration generally - feedback suggested familiarity with joint working, but that good practice in the collaboration process and collaborative working behaviours was less common.

Through the inquiry interviews in phase two, members articulated a number of factors that acted as motivators to working collaboratively in futures work and other factors that represented challenges to doing so. In addition, I sought to gain an understanding of members' sense of how collaborative working could evolve and how FAN Club might support greater collaboration across the network. The FAN Club meeting held in February then provided an opportunity to address collaboration in the context of leadership, and provided an interesting insight to the part collaborative working can play in addressing public sector leadership challenges.

This final phase of the project represents a revision from my original proposal, based on client feedback and the ongoing HSC work to explore strategic options for the FAN Club. One issue raised by HSC concerned the number of stakeholders that have been involved in the inquiry process. My perspective on this issue is that (within reason) any number of views expressed and shared are valid as a means to start dialogue over (in this case) how we collaborate effectively in futures work; particularly when the volume and expectation of multi-agency working is increasing.

The objective of this final phase of the collaborative working initiative is to validate or challenge my observations of the feedback so far received from FAN Club members.

I have now engaged over 50 FAN Club members through the different activities employed throughout this process. The majority of members have been from the public sector but I have also spoken to a number of members from the private sector – mainly management consultants. Here are the numbers of people engaged, by project phase:

- Collaboration Health Check (survey) = 17
- Initial inquiry interviews = 6
- Seminar = 25
- Validation interviews = 5
- Total involvement = 53

### Methodology

A second round of telephone interviews have been conducted with FAN Club members – recommended by HSC. The interviews sought to understand respondent's perspective on the feedback received throughout the first two phases of the project and also to gain insight to their own ideas for the Fan Club. Interviews typically lasted for between 45 minutes and an hour and were based on a series of themed questions (see appendix 1).

- Firstly, respondents were asked to share their level of agreement / disagreement with the issues raised by FAN Club members in previous phases of the inquiry in respect of their thoughts on the motivating factors that encourage collaboration, and the challenges to collaborating.
- Secondly, interviewees were asked to prioritise the potential risks and benefits of working collaboratively in futures work.
- Finally, I sought to engage respondents in an exploratory conversation about the future of collaboration in the context of futures work, collaboration between FAN Club members and the ideas for future FAN Club events.

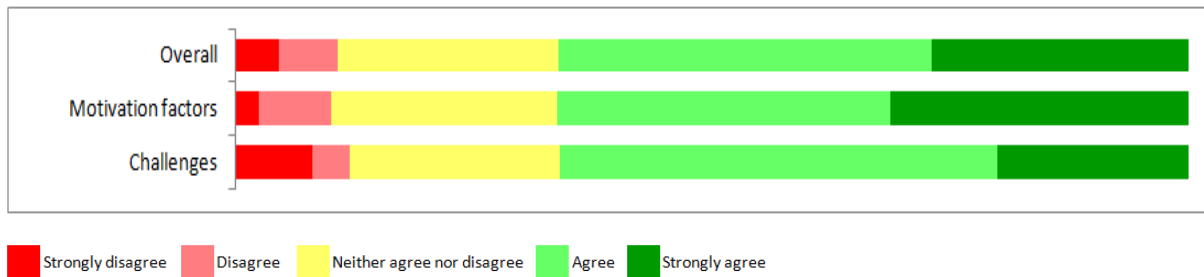
Having recorded the key points of the conversations I looked for indications of agreement with the findings of previous phases of the project as well as the challenges.

## 2. Executive Summary

The validation interviews showed a significant level of agreement with the feedback on motivators and challenges, risks and benefits and ideas raised, gathered through the previous phases of this initiative.

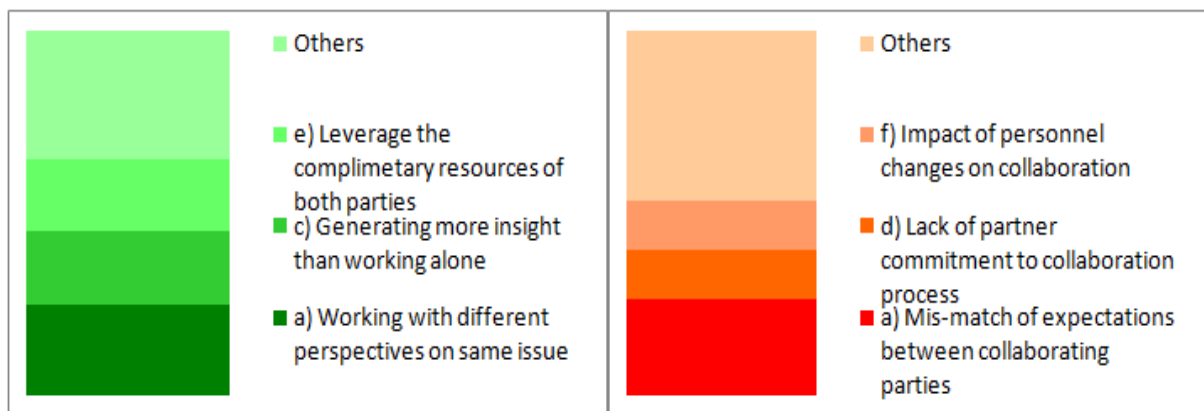
### Motivators and Challenges

Overall levels of disagreement with the motivational factors and challenges identified in the original inquiry interviews were very low. Areas of disagreement concerned control of collaboration and futures process and content. But there was strong agreement on the importance of relationships, resourcing and building on common ground.



### Risks and Benefits

A number of potential benefits and risks were identified by respondents in the inquiry interviews and all but one benefit and one risk were prioritised by members participating in the validation interviews. The most significant (top three) benefits and risks identified by interviewees in the final phase are shown in the charts below:



### The future for collaboration in futures work

The majority view was that while there is a perceived need to collaborate more – respondents accept the increasing interconnectivity, complexity and uncertainties in the environment – attitudes need to change within organisations to make more collaborative working a reality. Feedback from the previous interviews suggested that members would increasingly differentiate who they worked with based on potential partners’ reputation in collaboration and futures work where they were able to do so.

In terms of FAN Club activities going forward, questions were raised about the balance between content and process, although most of the ideas focus on collaborative engagement. Here, facilitated sessions at FAN Club were suggested to match members with issues, suitable tools, approaches and experts to foster collaboration. Critical in the opinion of most validation interview respondents is for any ideas implemented to meet a clear stakeholder need and for FAN Club to remain in contact with the progress made.

## Observations and Recommendations

Having undertaken a number of different activities throughout this initiative, I believe that there are clear consistencies between the inquiry interviews and the validation interviews and that a number of key messages have emerged, not least of which is the challenge that adopting a truly collaborative approach represents to many organisations; in the public (as well as the private sector).

I was encouraged by the sense that a more collaborative approach to FAN Club activities had engaged the respondents in a positive manner and yet significant cultural hurdles remain to encouraging a collaborative approach. Despite broad agreement that collaborative working would be beneficial in many circumstances, there remains a reluctance to genuinely seek true collaboration in many cases. My sense is that control (of the process and content) is a key issue as is the perception that organisational support for collaborative working can be fragile. Capability and competence are also doubtless playing a part.

My recommendations cover futures working, FAN Club events and HSC operations:

1. Use this work to inform FAN Club and HSC strategy and future activity
2. Implement selected ideas as pilots and exemplars of effective collaboration in futures work
3. Design collaborative working (not just networking) into FAN Club events
4. Develop a FAN Club – HSC charter
5. HSC provide collaborative working support to FAN Club members and other clients.

### 3. Motivators and challenges to effective collaborative working

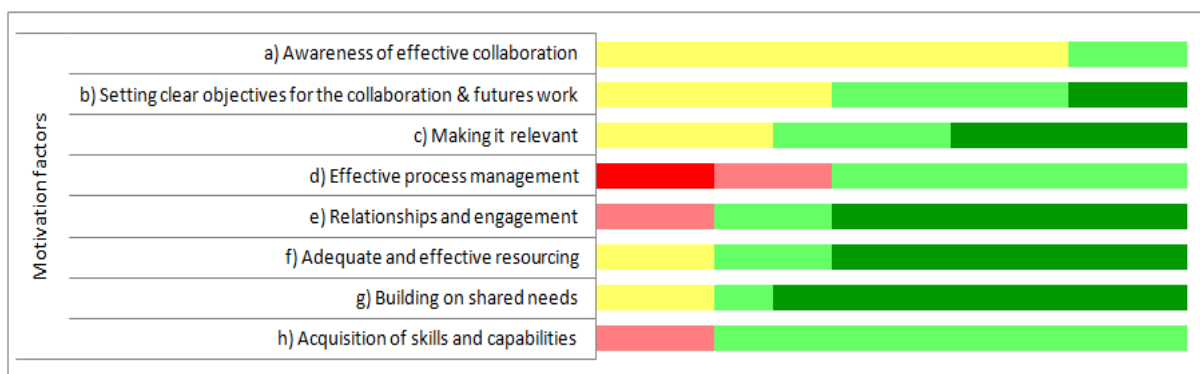
There was little disagreement with the factors identified as motivators and challenges to collaboration by FAN Club members in the earlier phase. Areas of disagreement concerned control of collaboration and futures process and content. But there was strong agreement on the importance of relationships, resourcing and building on common ground.

The opinion was expressed that an organisation’s own belief in its license to operate could be a powerful aid to meeting the challenges posed. Getting an organisation to this stage involves a significant investment in developing an appropriate culture; one that supports innovation (in futures and collaborative working) and builds on its formal raison d’être, manifesting itself in the influence it can exert when working with other stakeholders. “What helps us to achieve our outcomes?” was one question posed. If collaboration is seen as the way to “achieving our objective,” then it becomes an option. But personalities were also cited as being important. Some people have a positive approach to collaborating, others do not and this simple fact can have a significant impact on the decisions made about collaboration. Indeed, this tension can play out within an organisation as well as between different organisations.

#### 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: (See appendix 1 for a detail description of the attributes of each theme.)

- a) Awareness of effective collaboration
- b) Setting clear objectives for the collaboration as well as the futures work
- c) Making it relevant
- d) Effective process management
- e) Relationships and engagement
- f) Adequate and effective resourcing
- g) Building on shared needs
- h) Acquisition of skills and capabilities



■ Strongly disagree  
 ■ Disagree  
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree  
 ■ Agree  
 ■ Strongly agree

#### a) Awareness of effective collaboration

Members’ views on the awareness of effective collaborative working as a motivational factor were mainly neutral. Rather than being an encouragement to collaborate, a lack of awareness could be a negative or “cause some concern but it wouldn’t be critical.” Other views suggested that the (high) value of a potential collaboration would help ensure any concerns were resolved. Also, the broader context of the potential exercise would indicate how important this issue might be to the successful completion of the futures work.

#### b) Setting clear objectives for the collaboration as well as the futures work

There was limited strong agreement that setting clear objectives for the collaboration rather than just the futures work was important. One respondent however, confirmed that their organisation had tried to establish a collaboration with another stakeholder but the fact they had not addressed *how* they would work together meant the initiative, “never really got off the ground.”

Other views suggested that effective contracting – the process of agreeing *how* partners will engage, rather than the legal contract that lays down what they will do – is critical. Examples cited included how inputs and outputs would be shared, how the work would be split to maximise the impact of bringing complimentary people (skills, expertise), resources (information, funding) and difference to the table. An approach featuring careful contracting would help to ensure that the engagement is equitable in terms of weight of effort (inputs) and rewards (outputs).

An alternative view was that that effective contracting should be considered “a given” in the early stages of establishing a collaboration. Within the context of setting clear objectives, the issue of reward and recognition was raised. Rarely achieved, a consistent and shared reward and recognition process can be a powerful enabler to successful collaboration, including the delivery of mutual benefit. Clearly where different organisations – and even different departments in one organisation - focus on their individual operational objectives, the establishment of a common and shared approach remains problematic.

#### c) Making it relevant

There was some strong agreement that *making it relevant* was crucial as a motivational factor. As one respondent put it, “there’s no point if it’s not relevant to whoever is participating.” In any case, the key question remains; “what is the need that we will be fulfilling through collaborating in futures work?”

But there was caution here too. The real benefit – particularly with regard to futures work - is in taking a leap forward. Anything that minimises that, would damage the potential value of the exercise. The suggestion was made that developing a relationship and increasing the trust between stakeholders could be an effective approach to helping them take a leap of faith and engage fully in futures work.

#### d) Effective process management

There was significant agreement that evidence of effective collaboration and futures process management would encourage collaborative working.

Sometimes being a process advocate can feel like “a voice in the wilderness”, but quality process is critical. Getting the simple things right can have a major impact on outcomes, as long as the process is “fit for purpose,” according to one respondent. Another saw contracting – and continuous contracting – from coming together initially, setting the governance arrangements through to delivery, as the result of setting clear objectives early on.

But there was some strong disagreement, the argument being that support for the collaboration, “is always available” and evidence of process experience would not therefore represent a motivational factor.

#### e) Relationships and engagement

The opportunity to engage with other stakeholders, develop new relationships to exchange value was generally seen as a strong motivational factor. These new relationships also provide the opportunity for practitioners of futures work to influence potential partners. One respondent also reminds us that the relationships are formed between individuals and not organisations. This can be both a strength and weakness of collaboration as many examples rely on a few motivated individuals on both sides.

An alternative view is that trust – an expected output from relationship development – can be seen as firmly secondary to the completion of the futures work, and as such is not a major motivator for initiating collaboration.

f) Adequate and effective resourcing

FAN Club members generally agreed strongly that evidence of adequate and effective resourcing would be a motivator to collaboration. This starts with a focus between potential partners on common interests, developing trust through a good relationship, through to pooling and exchanging resources. The needs of the stakeholders in engaging collaboratively in futures work should be clearly defined to ensure the proposed approach will deliver to expectations and this must form part of effective contracting.

The neutral feedback here relates to the view that one person can, “make things happen” and so be the key to effective collaboration, particularly if they have an effective network into their own organisation and are an effective influencer with their partner stakeholders. Resourcing can mean a number of things – people, expertise, funding – and effective contracting should take place provide clarity about how all these issues are valued by both parties.

g) Building on shared needs

Developing understanding between stakeholders will provide the opportunities to see the common ground and shared interests that exist across different organisations. This issue is becoming increasingly critical and was the factor on which respondents agreed on most strongly.

While not disagreeing with this issue, a note of caution was struck by one FAN Club member. Of course there should be some overlap / common ground between the two (potentially) partner organisations, but critically also difference. The tension between similarity and difference can make it difficult to meet both parties’ needs, and “it can be hard to find partners anyway”.

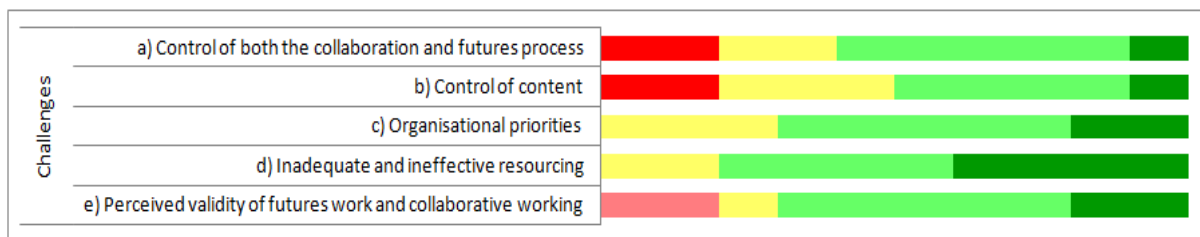
h) Acquisition of skills and capabilities

Most interviewees agreed that the opportunity to acquire new skills and capabilities would act as a motivational factor in initiating collaboration. There was some disagreement, however. The alternative view was that there are better ways of doing this; for example through a mentoring programme with another organisation, and that through these types of engagement, opportunities to collaborate may emerge.

**What challenges do you need to overcome to collaborate effectively?**

Equally, there were a number of challenges identified which can be summarised by these five themes: (See appendix 1 for a detail description of the attributes of each theme.)

- a) Control of the collaboration and futures process
- b) Control of content
- c) Organisational priorities
- d) Inadequate and ineffective resourcing
- e) Perceived validity of futures work and collaborative working



a) Control of the collaboration and futures process

Control of the process as a challenge to effective collaboration in futures work attracted least consensus. On the one hand, there was strong agreement with the idea that a lack of control experienced as a result of inequity of power in the relationship, a sense of cultural difference and an

unwillingness to *give something up* would provide a significant hurdle to effective joint working. The solution at the out-set is seen as clarity in the contracting phase to establish working relationships; including responsibilities. According to feedback, this phase should also address the question of, “what are we prepared to give up for the good of the collaboration?”

When multiple agencies are involved, “question creep” could play a part, where the underlying reasons for engaging in collaborative futures work are expanding to pay attention to the needs of all parties at the expense of the collective needs of the collaboration. The issue of the relationship between commissioners and providers of futures work was also cited, suggesting that effective contracting should be applied to external futures practitioners too.

Strong disagreement comes in the form of a view that it is a question of having the right people with the right attitude to collaboration and futures, in the right place at the right time. The sensitivity of the subject area also has an impact; for example where a programme addresses key security issues.

#### b) Control of content

Feedback on the issue of control of content revealed similar results to the issue of process control.

Again clarity in the contracting phase to establish working relationships, including responsibilities was cited as important in avoiding conflict over control of content. Question creep was cited with regard to content (as well as its impact on process). These issues were all felt to be avoidable if shared understanding was achieved.

And like control of the process, strong disagreement comes in the form of a view that having the right people with the right attitude to collaboration and futures, in the right place at the right time will help assure against the potential fall-out from issues on control between partners. Again, the sensitivity of the subject area could also have an impact

#### c) Organisational priorities

There was no disagreement with the prospect of conflicting organisational priorities being a challenge to collaborative working.

Conflicting organisational priorities can become an increasing issue within your own organisation where your degree of control is relatively limited. The situation becomes more complicated where multiple stakeholders are involved. In some cases, public sector bodies are set up with apparently conflicting priorities.

The fact remains that some issues around priorities – in our own or our partner’s organisations - will remain out of the collaboration’s control. These occurrences should be minimised with effective contracting including agreement on contingencies.

One respondent commented that it is refreshing to note how creative third sector organisations can be in getting things done and managing conflicting priorities. What lessons can be learnt by the public sector?

#### d) Inadequate and ineffective resourcing

As with organisational priorities, there was no disagreement with regard to challenges associated with resourcing. With competition for individuals’ time, funding – an increasing challenge - and air time with senior stakeholders potentially de-railing collaboration, effective contracting is critical to minimise the challenge.

With resourcing a constant challenge, inadequacies can be off-set by innovation within the collaboration; perhaps by bringing other colleagues with new or different expertise into play or sharing tasks in a new way. So, “spreading the word” about collaboration in futures work across the organisation to generate a sense of interest / awareness could be beneficial in raising the profile of the exercise.

e) Perceived validity of futures work and collaboration

There was some disagreement that validity would be a challenge to successful collaborative futures work on the basis that some organisations “get it,” and already engage regularly in futures work and seek to take a collaborative approach where it makes sense to do so. But that view seemed to be in the minority.

Most respondents recognised the challenge in engaging senior stakeholders in futures work and in collaborating with other agencies. Futures work can be treated like a tick box exercise by some stakeholders – “we’ve done that now let’s move on.”

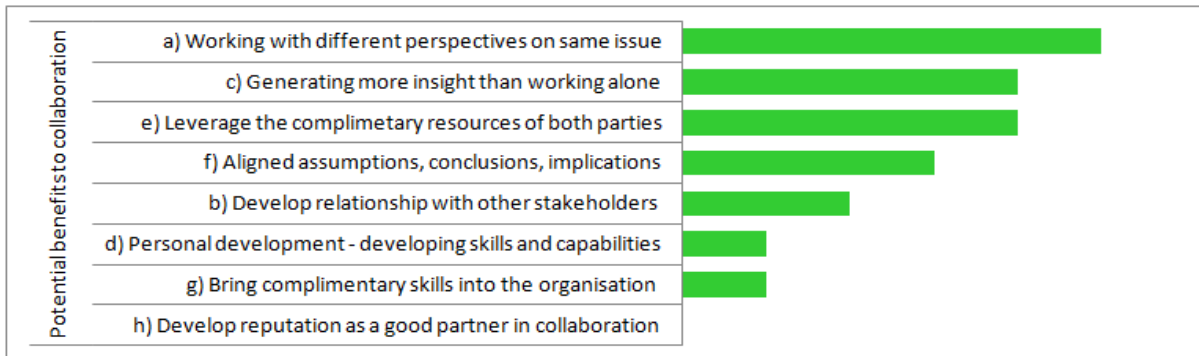
There is a sense though, that while success remains variable, the validity of futures work is increasing. Resourcing remains an issue with a number of colleagues in strategy / planning roles each with a small proportion of their objectives associated with futures analysis. In any case, there is a view that by focussing carefully on getting started, setting clear and realistic objectives we can successfully engage sceptical stakeholders.

#### 4. Potential risks and benefits of collaboration

In the first round of interviews, I sought to understand what risks and benefits FAN Club members saw in collaborating in futures work. For the validation interviews, I sought to gain a sense of priority on the risks and benefits identified.

##### Benefits

Feedback from respondents on the most significant benefits to collaborating focussed on working with multiple perspectives and the effectiveness and efficiency that can be derived through working with the *right* partner.



Relative importance of potential benefits to collaborative working assessed by interviewees.

A critical element to successfully reaping the benefits of working with different perspectives was described as being how we choose to respond to working with the inherent tension between our own organisation's thoughts, ideas and approaches and those of our partner.

The ability to develop personal and organisational capability, bring complimentary skills into the organisation and develop a reputation as a good partner were not seen as significant, although all were felt to be indirect benefits of effective collaboration.

##### Risks

Mis-match of expectations was felt to be the most significant risk in collaborating, by respondents. They also felt that partner' commitment, the impact of personnel changes during collaboration and a sub-optimal relationship between partners were major concerns.



Relative importance of potential risks to collaborative working assessed by interviewees.

Interestingly, interviewees - whilst acknowledging the risk – seemed to feel that there was a significantly greater risk of their partner's commitment waning rather than their own.

With regard to resourcing, the point was made that futures resources are generally spread thinly, so agreeing on a sensible time horizon as part of the common goal is important and would help to mitigate any ongoing risk. Equally, inefficiency from additional / unplanned tasks for example, can lead to tension within the relationship and lead to failure of the futures work and the collaboration. In the eyes of other stakeholders, some of the fallout from the failure could, "stick to us regardless of where the *fault* originated."

## 5. Future collaborative working

In seeking to understand how respondents saw collaboration in futures work evolving and the part FAN Club might play, I asked interviewees about their thoughts on the trend for collaborative working, what they would like to see happen at FAN Club, and their thoughts on a number of collaborative working ideas.

### How do you see collaborative working evolving in the future?

Most respondents saw a mixed picture in the trend for increasing collaboration. The majority view was that while there is a perceived need to collaborate more – respondents generally accepting the increasing interconnectivity, complexity and uncertainties in the environment – attitudes need to change within organisations to make it a reality.

Government and the public sector generally are thought to be getting better at identifying and building on existing relationships but the rate at which these engagements are translated to effective collaboration remains variable. In some organisations an attitude of, “we own the problem and therefore the solution,” prevails. Perhaps this attitude in part is responsible for a situation that continues to show that encouraging people to collaborate on mutual terms remains the exception rather than the rule.

While others remain unclear about the need to engage collaboratively, they can see it increasing simply through the cost benefits of undertaking futures work together with other stakeholders.

The observation was made that there is limited collaboration across FAN Club at the moment but that perhaps that is to come through greater exposure of collaboration as an approach to address leadership challenges in the public sector and in seeing and participating in real collaborative futures projects.

Information technology was cited as one area where improvements to reliability, connectivity and infrastructure could support increasing collaboration.

One thing remains a constant, and that is the need to manage networks and develop relationships; something that FAN Club is perceived to support very effectively.

### Are practitioners likely to differentiate between potential partners?

Initial feedback from the previous interviews suggested that members would differentiate between potential partners based on their reputation in collaboration and futures work where they were able to do so. But like many business situations, there can be little choice about who to work with.

Members participating in the validation interviews broadly agreed. Where there is choice, then working with “a like minded person is natural,” was a perspective shared by a number of respondents. Equally, there is sometimes a “need to get things done” so little choice other than to choose how much more effort (than the partner) to put in, where the collaborating organisation may not have all the resource or capability to be an *equal partner*.

Building relationships and developing trust is of course key, but personnel churn can make it hard to maintain relationships into a particular organisation / role. Also, the desire of some organisations to maintain a *command and control perspective* on its dealings with stakeholders remains a challenge. This view was supported by the observation that organisations contribute to the patterns of behaviour exhibited by their people through their culture. The reputation of these organisations will be enhanced by good people demonstrating good technical skills and collaborative behaviours and where choice does exist, they are therefore more likely to be approached to work collaboratively.

### What would you like to see happen through FAN Club in the future, in the context of collaboration?

Having asked a similar question in the previous phase, I sought respondents’ views on how collaborative working could be enhanced through FAN Club; both at planned events and between them. One response to these questions concerned the FAN Clubs’ aims. Is FAN Club aimed at experienced futures analysts or new-comers? How might the needs of these different members differ?

The issue of the balance between content and process was also cited; not that the respondent had the answer. There is support however, for highlighting the *network of practitioners'* aspect of FAN Club and for establishing a thread of *real futures project work* running through the programme of events. As in other feedback, FAN Club as a source of knowledge and contacts was a critical benefit of membership.

Building on the level of experience and expertise across the FAN Club (HSC, members and external contributors) the idea of a "Futures Clinic" at FAN Club events was raised. Another idea proposed included increasing the level of HSC futures consulting and brokering across the network and on specific projects, which is in a similar vein to the idea of HSC facilitated futures projects (see below).

As part of the effort to expand practice in futures work in the public sector particularly, a respondent suggested that at the end of each FAN Club session, attendees are asked what they have learned from the day's meeting that they intend to build into their practice or take action on.

There was support for a facilitated session at FAN Club to match members with issues and suitable tools, approaches and experts to foster collaboration, and to establish an information exchange that would seek to provide access and input to futures work at different levels; for example regional, national and international.

### **How would you rate these collaborative working ideas?**

A number of ideas emerged through phase two of this initiative focussing on the establishment of sub-groups within FAN Club, the development of futures collateral by members, the establishment of an explicit charter covering expectations between HSC and members and HSC leadership of members' multi-agency futures projects.

The ideas are described in a little more detail together with the feedback from the validation interviews below.

- a) *Introduce sub-groups to follow up on specific issues raised at FAN Club meetings.*
  - *Establishment of a public sector only group*
  - *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.*

While there was broad support for establishing sub-groups from respondents in the last phase, the validation interviews revealed a degree of scepticism about their value.

The overriding concern was about the real *need* for creating another group; and having done so, would members want to belong to that rather than the original Fan Club? Some members suggested however, where there was significant overlapping interest between members that the idea had merit; bringing together local and central government to consider the tension and conflict that can exist between national policy and local strategy, for example.

Two other key points were discussed in the validation interviews. The first was a confirmation that the current balance between and involvement of the public, private and academic sectors seems right and withdrawing the ability to network across sectors would be detrimental to FAN Club. Secondly, any grouping or clustering of members should be on the basis of making sense of the inputs to futures work rather than analysing the outputs. This would in itself foster a more collaborative approach as colleagues experience working with alternative – and sometimes challenging – perspectives.

- b) *The development of some academic or thought leadership pieces and possibly intellectual property around futures work.*

Validation interview respondents were supportive of the idea to generate thought leadership pieces on futures work but unclear as to whether the branding of this work should be

Foresight, HSC or FAN Club. The challenge to this idea was the question, why build these materials? It was felt that the answer would go a long way to determining which brand was used to head up and lead any work.

- c) *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.*

There is clearly a significant amount of trust that has been built between FAN Club members and HSC about what to expect from an event. And there was support – not necessarily unanimous – for a more explicit articulation of the *deal* between members and HSC.

Respondents would be interested in seeing certain elements contained within any *charter* covering FAN Club activity. Some members were interested in a knowledge management element: who has done what work on which scenarios, for example. Based on the needs of members and HSC the balance between content and process / techniques could be clearly defined. One of the key drivers of change could be selected for FAN Club members to work on and there could be some expectations established about the basis on which individual members could consult with FAN Club more broadly on one of their own futures projects.

- d) *Establishment under HSC leadership of joint FAN Club experimental futures projects.*

This idea emerged between the previous and current phases and received measured support. The key issue here according to respondents is client need; if there is a clear need then this looks likely to be an interesting way to progress. It may be that Fan Club members can play a role in determining what needs exist. If there are clear needs, then a selection process could be implemented to consider HSC, FAN Club members and potential clients' needs.

It was felt that the focus of a chosen project should include the delivery of content; co-creation of the project plan, research needs, sense-making and associated analysis. HSC could be accountable for project management and for brokering in other FAN Club members / resources as required and for keeping FAN Club up to date with progress and findings. This approach would be most suited to a public sector focussed multi-government agency initiative.

## **6. Observations and Recommendations**

### **Observations**

I was encouraged by the sense that a more collaborative approach to FAN Club activities had engaged the respondents in a positive manner.

Having undertaken a number of different activities throughout this initiative (the Collaboration Health Check survey, the initial inquiry interviews, collaboration seminar at the February FAN Club event and the validation interviews most recently conducted), I believe that there are some interesting consistencies and key messages to emerge, not least of which is the challenge that adopting a truly collaborative approach represents to many organisations; in the public or private sector.

I do feel that there are some significant cultural hurdles to overcome in encouraging a collaborative approach. Despite broad agreement that given current and anticipated challenges, collaborative working would be beneficial in many circumstances, there remains a reluctance to genuinely seek true collaboration in many cases. My sense is that control is a key issue as is the perception that organisational support for collaborative working can be fragile. Capability and competence is also doubtless playing a part.

As in other industries and sectors, collaborative working and particularly partnership are the most difficult of business interventions to successfully engage in, and rely significantly on an in depth appreciation of all four phases of the collaboration cycle (see appendix 2). Critically, openness in any relationship to the prospect of collaboration, including a preparedness to give something up for the good of partnership, needs to be present at the start, and not just when it suits us.

### **The Collaboration Health Check**

Analysis of the Collaboration Health Check feedback showed that FAN Club members did have some experience of collaborative working although experiences of good practice in the collaboration process (the collaboration cycle – see appendix 2) and collaborative behaviours were less favourable than other aspects. In terms of behaviours, there seems to be a particular issue with regard to openness about partners, with partners.

Two other aspects are worthy of mention. While members showed an understanding of the value of collaboration, the value they considered tended to be that accruing to their own organisation, and not necessarily to their partners or other stakeholders. Also, in terms of engagement, respondent's feedback suggested they were comfortable with the need to work with external stakeholders but overlooked the importance of engaging internally.

### **Inquiry interviews**

Through the inquiry interviews, I sought to understand the nature of FAN Club members' experience of collaborating in futures work. It quickly became clear that while information is often exchanged and relationships exist between organisations, the nature of these interactions is often restricted to consultation about an area of technical competence. In any case, the minority of respondents rated organisational performance in collaborative working as either very good or non-existent, the majority thought it either mixed or poor.

While members identified a number of enablers to collaborative working such as; clear objectives, building on shared needs, combining complimentary resources and skills, significant challenges to working in collaboration remain. The control of futures content and process, organisational priorities, concerns over resourcing and the perceived value of futures work and collaboration were all cited as challenges to effective joint working. Underneath some of these issues was the sense that organisational attitude and collaborative working as a key component of leadership were adding to the forces against more collaboration in futures work.

## **Collaboration seminar**

For me, the February FAN Club meeting including the focus on public sector leadership challenges provided a pertinent link to this collaboration work; particularly with five of the 17 leadership challenges identified for the workshops including *collaboration*. In the seminar I led, the opportunity to display leadership qualities in exploring partnership tools and other content within an exercise using the collaboration cycle was taken up by only a few of the members participating.

## **Validation interviews**

The validation interviews conducted in the final phase of the initiative were in direct response to client feedback about the robustness of the findings and the connection with HSC work to explore options for the FAN Club in the future. In my view, the findings have been validated with significant agreement with the motivational factors encouraging collaborative working identified by the earlier inquiry interviews. More alternative views were shared through the validation interviews with regard to the challenges to effective collaboration, but there was still a good level of agreement with the previous feedback. The basis for these alternative views was that the challenges would be overcome if the value at stake in collaborative futures work was high enough. My proposition is that by establishing appropriate collaborative working principles at the outset, futures analysts will minimise any risk and be prepared to address the challenges leading to a more effective and efficient outcome.

Through the validation interviews, I was able to rank the risks and benefits to effective collaboration based on respondents' feedback. This prioritisation exercise also provided validation of the previous inquiry interviews, with just a single risk and a single benefit failing to make the prioritised list.

There was both support for and challenge to the previous feedback about how collaboration in futures work might evolve and how FAN Club could continue to support members of the network.

A consistent theme on the trend for increasing collaboration was the imperative to clarify *stakeholder need* before initiating collaboration. My sense is that this can represent a passive approach to collaboration; waiting for an opportunity to collaborate that primarily achieves our objective and if that overlaps with the aims of another organisation, we will engage with them on our terms. But other organisations do have a more open perspective on the possibility of partnership and are active in looking for opportunities to do so.

There were mixed views about the ideas for FAN Club in the future, although there was some support for each idea. But the common factor for the implementation of any of the ideas was once again establishing stakeholder need. More work would need to be undertaken to implement those ideas with the greatest chances of success, which in turn could further enhance the reputation of FAN Club.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Informing strategy and future activity**

This work should be reviewed by HSC and FAN Club members to inform the options and planning for future FAN Club activity. It can also help inform how HSC might operate with its stakeholders across government and the broader public sector. HSC has a major role to play in creating an environment that encourages collaboration (not just networking) through the activities at FAN Club meetings, the initiation of multi-agency futures projects, to *account managing* key stakeholders across the public sector.

### **2. Implement selected ideas as pilots**

Implement one or two pilot projects designed to demonstrate the significance of effective collaboration in futures work. Engage a number of collaborative working advocates in an area of shared technical interest and share progress with FAN Club. The chosen initiative should have minimal risk associated with it and create a sense of *value* to those involved and those who *missed out*.

### **3. Design collaborative working into FAN Club events**

Design future FAN Club events to include space for genuine collaboration and not just networking, consulting (on someone else's project) or exchanging content and futures approaches.

### **4. FAN Club charter**

Be clear about the collaboration between HSC and FAN Club members; what can each expect to contribute to and receive from the other.

### **5. HSC provide collaborative working support**

HSC colleagues should have the capability to provide collaborative working support to their clients (FAN Club members and other stakeholders) to encourage appropriate effective collaboration, enhance their consulting activities in futures work and enhance the reputation of futures work across their current and future client base.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 - Interview guide

Most interviews lasted for between 45 minutes and one hour. Here are the questions based on feedback from FAN Club members collected in previous phases that formed the basis of the interview.

#### 1. How do you respond to FAN Club members' views?

For 1.1 and 1.2 I asked respondents to share their level of agreement / disagreement with the issues raised by FAN Club members in previous phases of the inquiry.

##### 1.1 What motivates you to collaborate? Do you agree strongly, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree or disagree strongly.

- a) **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.
- b) **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.
- c) **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.
- d) **Effective process management** – of the futures work and the collaboration to help participants navigate their way to an effective outcome.
- e) **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.
- f) **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.
- g) **Building on shared needs** – connecting agendas across different organisations to maximise return on investment in shared cost, information and relationships.
- h) **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.

##### 1.2 What challenges to collaboration do you face?

- a) **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.
- b) **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.
- c) **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.
- d) **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).

- e) **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.

### **Risk & Opportunity**

For the following two questions, I asked respondents to indicate their sense of the most important risks and benefits of collaborative working by allocating six points to the list of risks, and four points to the list of benefits.

#### **1.3 What are the greatest potential risks to successful collaboration?**

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

#### **1.4 What are the greatest potential benefits to collaboration?**

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

## **2. Collaboration and the FAN Club in the future**

### **2.1 How do you see collaborative working evolving in the future?**

- a) 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.
- b) 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.

### **2.2 What would you like to see happen through FAN Club in the future, in the context of collaboration?**

- a) At FAN Club meetings to encourage greater collaboration?
- b) Between FAN Club meetings to encourage greater collaboration?

### **2.3 How would you rate these collaborative working ideas?**

- a) Introduce sub-groups to follow up on specific issues raised at FAN Club meetings.
  - o A devolved government sub-group to focus on common / shared issues in futures work in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
  - o Establishing a *Community of Local Government Futures Practice* to explore common needs, issues and processes.
  - o Establishment of a public sector only group.
- b) Convening a group of stakeholders to test assumptions and implications of a specific futures project.
- c) The development of some academic or thought leadership pieces and possibly intellectual property around futures work.
- d) 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.
- e) Establishment under HSC leadership of joint FAN Club experimental futures projects.

## Appendix 2 – Collaboration Cycle

