

Blog: You can't mandate collaboration

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Local and national government in Wales have collided over an attempt by the Local Government Minister to require local authorities to work together to deliver public services. The Minister's proposals aligned groups of local authorities with the seven health boards with the aim of improving co-operation across councils and with health boards to generate more efficient and effective delivery of local public services. Welsh local government and the WLGA objected to these proposals and have refused to implement them.

Setting aside the debates about size, scale and efficiency, this experience provides further evidence, if more were needed, that you cannot mandate organisations to work together. Collaboration is motivated by a range of factors, including the desire to improve services, to engage better with users, to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and to encourage innovation. Policy makers and regulators anxious to improve public services may claim that these factors exist in a variety of policy and services areas, but unless they are acknowledged as relevant and important by those on the ground meaningful collaboration will not happen.

Evaluations of numerous 'partnership' initiatives in the different countries of the UK have shown how damaging mandated collaboration can be. From area based initiatives that made money available to local authorities and services provided they worked in particular configurations to the formalised and explicit mandation of the 'duty to co-operate' introduced in the context of Local Area Agreements, the consequences of mandation are greater inefficiency and considerable wasted human effort, as individual public servants engage in what they know will be fruitless attempts to 'work together' in the absence of local political and professional will to do so.

One claim of supporters of mandated collaboration is that 'it brings partners to the table'. Well it may do but that is usually all it does. Partners come with the intention of ensuring that either nothing happens or that whatever does happen simply reflects what they were intending to do anyway.

Others claim that mandated collaboration can generate success. Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, Joint health and social care strategies/partnerships are often cited in support of this claim. But the point about these examples (which are by no means unqualified successes either) is that the legislation or the policy direction was a response to local political and professional demands. Here mandation acted to reinforce and support what local authorities and other public service providers believed was the right way to proceed.

Another way of looking at this debate is to see attempts to mandate collaboration as another expression of the UK's rather dysfunctional central-local relationships. Attending to these might help create the conditions for collaboration, local public services and local democracy to flourish.

Professor Helen Sullivan

Centre for Public Policy

University of Melbourne

Helen.Sullivan@unimelb.edu.au (<mailto:Helen.Sullivan@unimelb.edu.au>)

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