power to change | business in community hands

Coordinating community business infrastructure

Market Development Evaluation and Learning

A report prepared for Power to Change
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About this paper

Power to Change supports and promotes community businesses both through specific programmes and through wider field-shaping market development. This strand of work aims to build a supportive policy environment and infrastructure for community business to flourish. As part of the ongoing evaluation of the market development work, this paper examines the strategic relationships between Power to Change and infrastructure bodies which support and represent community businesses.

About the author

Dr Rob Macmillan is a Principal Research Fellow at CRESR. He has over 20 years' experience of researching different aspects of the third sector, voluntary and community action and community development in collaboration with other academics and researchers, policy makers and funders, and with key third sector organisations. His main research interests are around capacity building and third sector infrastructure, the long-term qualitative dynamics of voluntary action, and the relationships between markets and the third sector.

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Contents

Key points

The analysis in this paper points towards five key findings/conclusions

1. **A pathway to collaboration** – Power to Change has been through a remarkable three-phase journey in its relationship with community business infrastructure since it was established in 2015. Initially it acted as a 'disruptor' by seeking to shake-up the support available for community businesses. This gave way to the emergence of bilateral strategic partner relationships with key infrastructure organisations. From 2018 onwards this developed into a deeper strategic collaboration between Power to Change and Co-ops UK, Plunkett Foundation and Locality ('CoPlunkAlity'), alongside new strategic partner relationships with others. The shift in approach was likened to '*a collaborative dance rather than a disruptor stance.*'

2. **Collaborative advantage** – The infrastructure collaboration has generated benefits at different levels: for the individuals involved (peer support and learning), for the collaborating organisations (dedicated resources for organisational development, sharing best practice, knowledge and expertise) and for frontline community businesses (improved and more streamlined support). It was easier for collaboration members to identify less tangible and process-related achievements (such as greater sharing of information, a united front and an amplified voice, and a complementary support offer for community business), compared with clear outcomes of the collaboration for community businesses as a whole.

3. **Collaborative inertia** – There are some downsides to working in collaboration, but these appear to be practical rather than strategic. Concerns among staff around overstretched capacity to engage and the time spent on collaborative work (compared to the 'day job') tend to prevail, such as reaching agreement, getting things done, and coordinating time. These operational matters appear to outweigh more fundamental strategic concerns facing collaborating organisations, around role, mission and inequalities of power between partners. Difficulties are seen as occasional or exceptional disruptions to an otherwise productive experience. The external context can sometimes promote competition between partners, and risks undermining the spirit of the collaboration, but an example during the pandemic was resolved quickly and demonstrated how strong relationships had been built over time.

4. **Drivers and dilemmas** – Three key facilitating factors underpin the collaboration: its resourcing (enabling things to happen and supporting staff capacity by backfilling time); relationship work (the role of trust and the groundwork of relationship building over time); and distributed leadership (leading by example and the authority to engage in collaboration from CEOs to other staff). Three main dilemmas arise in the collaboration: navigating individual organisational cultures and interests; (2) asymmetric power relationships, particularly between Power to Change as funder and infrastructure organisations; and (3) whether to extend the membership of the collaboration to other organisations.

5. **Looking ahead** – The question of the 'legacy' of stronger infrastructure support for community business after Power to Change closes down has been a rationale for the collaboration and a preoccupation as time has progressed. However, the award of extended funding for Power to Change and a new five year strategic plan to 2025 significantly changes the assumptions upon which the collaboration was working. The idea of and work around legacy may be less urgent, but the issue has not gone away. Ongoing resources for collaborative work are being reduced, which may alter the balance between collaborative advantage and inertia.

Introduction

Since Power to Change was launched in 2015 to support community businesses, it has engaged in different ways with other organisations whose remit and work covers similar ground. A range of generalist and specialist membership and umbrella bodies – intermediary or infrastructure organisations – provide services and support to their member and user organisations, and in various ways seek to promote their work and build a supportive environment for them to flourish. These organisations include national organisations such as Locality, Co-ops UK and Plunkett Foundation, alongside allied organisations whose work touches on community business, such as Social Enterprise UK, ACRE, UnLtd and the Ubele Initiative, and specialist groups such as Community Energy England or the Community-Led Housing Partnership. They may deliver programmes for Power to Change, take part in consultations, evaluation and research, help design programmes and funding streams, pass on information through their networks, or join in strategic initiatives.

Since 2018 a group of key strategic partners for Power to Change have formed a more structured, funded and facilitated collaboration – 'CoPlunkAlity' – which brings together Co-ops UK, Plunkett Foundation and Locality with Power to Change in a unique four-way strategic alliance. Under the auspices of Power to Change's Market Development team, there is dedicated support for the infrastructure collaboration. Over time the collaboration has deepened by strengthening relationships at Chief Executive level, and broadened by working through specific teams and functions in each organisation, such as policy work or marketing and communications. Alongside this strategic collaboration, new bilateral strategic partnerships have been formed with Social Enterprise UK, Community Energy England, the Community-led Housing Partnership and the Ubele Initiative.

As part of the evaluation of Power to Change's market development work, and linked to both a review of the collaboration's progress and then a rethink of Power to Change's strategy, a closer look at these collaborative arrangements was taken. The aim of this piece of work was ***to assess the value, reach and impact of PtC's additional investment in supporting collaboration amongst allied infrastructure bodies and networks***, focused around two core questions:

1. **What collaborative advantage**, in relation to market development for community business, is generated through the infrastructure network and allied strategic relationships?

2. To what extent and how is **collaborative inertia** experienced and mitigated in the infrastructure network and allied strategic networks?

This paper reports the findings and conclusions of the research. The paper is organised as follows. The next section provides some **context** by considering the changing field of infrastructure, discussing the significance of the infrastructure collaboration and outlining the concepts of collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia. This is followed by a detailed **findings** section, which in turn covers five key areas: a pathway to collaboration; collaborative advantage; collaborative inertia; drivers and dilemmas; and looking ahead. A **concluding** section discusses the overall findings and places the future of the infrastructure collaboration in a wider context. An **appendix** briefly outlines the methodology, involving interviews with Power to Change staff and representatives from its community business infrastructure partners, and a survey of senior staff in the 'CoPlunkAlity' collaboration.

Context: community business infrastructure and collaboration

Over a twenty year period from the early 2000s there has been a significant shift in how cross-cutting support for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector – its 'infrastructure' – has been imagined, organised, valued and financed. Before the 2010 Coalition government, the Labour government's ChangeUp programme invested some £230m in the sector's infrastructure, and other programmes also sought to build the sector's capacity. From 2010 onwards, policy shifted considerably. Public spending restraint and a change of policy priorities towards the idea of the 'Big Society' manifested in disinvestment and disenchantment with the traditional idea of supporting the supply-side of VCSE infrastructure. Alternative and more limited approaches were developed, such as demand-led voucher schemes, funder plus and investment readiness programmes. The preference was to direct resources for capacity building and organisational development support towards frontline voluntary organisations, community groups, social enterprises and community businesses (Macmillan, 2013).

These changes presented a significant challenge to the assumptions underpinning the work and strategies of existing national and local infrastructure bodies, or 'intermediaries'. Some closed, some contracted, and others sought to generate income through new consultancy-oriented business models and new support programmes. Overall and over time the field of infrastructure has become fragmented, perhaps more competitive and rather less well coordinated. Yet conversely, a common strategy encouraged within the sector and promoted by governments in a context of multiple providers and resource constraints is to pursue greater consolidation and a rationalisation of the field. This involves various forms of collaboration but particularly a stress towards mergers between organisations. It featured in the latter stages of the ChangeUp programme (Shared Intelligence, 2010), but was also promoted through the Coalition government's £30m Transforming Local Infrastructure programme (2012-2013). Mergers have occurred in VCSE infrastructure. For example, nationally, the Development Trusts Association and the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres joined forces to create Locality in 2011, and Volunteering England joined the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in 2013. Locally, significant rationalisations of VCSE infrastructure have taken place in Cumbria, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Suffolk.

Merger remains controversial, however, and is often resisted. Indeed, one interviewee in the research for this paper agreed with the sentiment behind the prevalent rhetorical question '*why can't there just be more rationalisation of these bloody infrastructure organisations?' by observing that 'there is definitely a vanity of small differences … in the infrastructure world, you know, 'actually we couldn't possibly work together or merge with this organisation because they only deal with this tiny bit of difference from what we do*''. Instead of merger, many organisations prefer to pursue the benefits of closer collaboration – of 'sharing without merging' (Pepin, 2005). In effect this is the strategy for supporting community business infrastructure adopted by Power to Change with Co-ops UK, Plunkett Foundation and Locality, which we explore in the findings section below.

One definition of collaborative working is '*when two or more organisations agree to work jointly because their combined resources enable a greater overall output than if they pursued the activity individually*' (ibid: 21). Collaboration usually has positive intent and high hopes, even if it arises out of adverse circumstances: by working together collaborating partners aim to generate outcomes they could not achieve alone. Often, however, it fails to live up to expectations. The experience of collaboration can be demanding and frustrating. Hence the hope for '**collaborative advantage**' often gives way to the experience of '**collaborative inertia**' (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). These concepts – see below – form the theoretical framework for the examination of the community business infrastructure collaboration, as detailed in the following findings section.

Collaborative advantage occurs where combining resources, capabilities and access to networks creates outcomes that could not be achieved by any organisations acting alone.	**Collaborative inertia** is where progress is frustratingly slower and more challenging or conflict-ridden than might be expected.

Findings

1. A pathway to collaboration

For Power to Change, the twin objectives of the CoPlunkAlity collaboration and other strategic partnerships, according to one of the survey respondents in the research underpinning this paper, are '*(1) to strengthen the support offer to community business from infrastructure intermediaries, particularly in our priority sectors, and (2) to encourage collaboration, reciprocation and greater effectiveness across the community business support ecosystem*'. This would involve, according to one CoPlunkAlity member, working together '*to ensure the long-term sustainability of the community business sector' with the aim 'to build a stronger, more coherent and more visible community business sector and ultimately that every community business in the country is a member of one of our three organisations and accessing our support*'.

Several developments in train from the mid-2010s can help explain the emergence of the CoPlunkAlity collaborative partnership. In essence there are three broad phases, starting in 2015 when Power to Change was established: an initial phase of somewhat fraught 'disruption' gives way to the emergence of bilateral strategic relationships between Power to Change and infrastructure bodies, which finally develops into a deeper strategic collaboration from 2018 onwards. The pathway to this collaboration is instructive as it highlights how the wider context in which Power to Change emerged shaped its approach, and how this began to change. The outcome was that a remarkable wholesale about-turn in approach occurred over a three year period.

From its foundation in 2015, Power to Change sought fundamentally to reconfigure and improve the context in which community businesses operate, including the support available to help them form, grow and thrive. A range of existing support organisations had long been promoting and developing trading organisations in the third sector, such as social enterprises and co-operatives, including more local and community-focused trading organisations. It seems that the establishment of Power to Change was associated with quite a critical stance towards existing infrastructure, which was seen as relatively fragile, fragmented and ineffective in advancing community business. As one external partner put it: '*they were there to solve the problems of the sector and all the existing organisations had therefore failed*'. Accordingly, Power to Change began with what was commonly described as a 'disruptor' mindset: '*it ruffled quite a few feathers*'. It would 'shake up' the support offered by infrastructure, which was seemingly held responsible for the poor state of support for community business: '*the starting assumption was this sector must be a bit rubbish and these people must be a bit rubbish if they haven't sorted this out, so we are sort of going to come in and sort it out*'. This may involve uncomfortable discussions about the need for consolidation and merger amongst infrastructure bodies: '*why not put a few of them together and that would improve sustainability, and that has clearly got nowhere because it had got everybody's hackles up and nobody really wanted to go down that road.*'

As noted above, this was part of a wider disenchantment in the very idea of infrastructure, manifest in scepticism about the value of providing funding to a 'supply side' of apparently ineffective membership and intermediary bodies to then support ordinary frontline voluntary and community organisations and community businesses. The prevailing sentiment, from government and key funders such as the Big Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Community Fund) had become one of supporting frontline organisations directly to purchase the support they need in order to build their organisational capabilities (Macmillan, 2011; Big Lottery Fund, 2012). This was evident in the experimental emergence in the mid-2010s of 'demand-led' capacity building voucher schemes, funder plus models, and attempts to develop market-places of support with 'Trip Advisor' rating and evaluation systems (Macmillan, 2013).

The concept of 'disintermediation', of cutting out the (intermediary) middleman, underpinned this thinking, and informed Power to Change's starting point. It was thought that this approach would enhance and shorten the route between funding for support and the support itself: '*if you just put on-line directories about support providers then community business would choose themselves…where they would get support from and also talk to each other and get the support that way*'. Power to Change had an almost antagonistic approach to existing infrastructure, and sought, unsuccessfully as it happened, to develop its own support market-place. The infrastructure organisations argued that community businesses benefit from having a structured approach, for example to peer networking, and '*they need trusted organisations to go to in times of difficulty*'. Power to Change began to reconsider its assumptions, as indicated in this reflection from a one of its staff members:

'you have got a market place of very small organisations that are relatively financially vulnerable that can't pay for the support that they need and…whatever you introduce in that market you can't really fundamentally change that and so the infrastructure needs support on an ongoing basis…what you have got is a relatively under resourced, sometimes poorly informed consumer who therefore actually needs support to figure out what they need and so intermediaries play a hugely important role. I think that…we have kind of unwound some of that over the last five years in terms of people's understanding of what role infrastructure plays.'

At the same time Power to Change was beginning to work closely with existing infrastructure bodies as delivery partners on its initial programmes, and these bodies had also been influential in the establishment of Power to Change in the first place. Relationships were transactional and delivery-based, but strategically tense: described by one interviewee as '*a bit rocky at first…we continued to work together etcetera, but it was all a bit difficult*' and '*slightly kind of scratchy*'. For the infrastructure bodies, Power to Change was a significant and very well-resourced, if time-limited, opportunity to boost the support available to community business. But it was and remains more than just a funding programme. It has had a broader set of strategic purposes. As a new presence in the field, it could not but recast relationships, and was even seen in some quarters as a threat to established roles and positions: '*a big shiny spaceship [that] had just landed on our field with lots of money and lots of attention*'. The concern was that it would shake things up, depart after spending out its endowment, and leave even more fragile infrastructure bodies to continue supporting community business. As one interviewee observed: '*at the end of their ten years or however long it was, they would be gone and we would still be here, but worse off and having to then try and pick up the pieces to rebuild a sense of community business.*'

Efforts to improve relationships began to coalesce around the idea of developing bilateral strategic partnerships. This involved recognising that existing infrastructure had a longer term importance and reach in the field beyond providing support and services to different kinds of community business. The case was pressed by the infrastructure bodies, but also involved considerable leadership across Power to Change, at the Board, senior executive and development manager levels: *'we realised that if we were going to get anywhere we had to be on the side of the sector not a disruptor of the sector and actually find our place in the ecosystem rather than thinking we were going to disrupt it'.*

Two issues underpinned the beginnings of a change of approach, providing strong rationales for recasting relationships with infrastructure. The first was a growing conversation around the time-limited nature of Power to Change's work, and therefore the concept of 'legacy' came to the fore, of what it would leave behind in terms of a supportive context for community business after it had ceased operations. Existing infrastructure assumed greater importance in these discussions, as it became the likeliest vehicle for maintaining the support and enhancing the field. As one interviewee recalled: '*actually, who's there to support community businesses when Power to Change has gone? So that idea of strengthening the infrastructure so that we could be more effective and more sustainable when Power to Change is off the table…made complete sense*'.

The second issue was more prosaic, in that the valued role of infrastructure began to be appreciated, not just in terms of programme delivery, but also specifically in terms of supporting engagement, facilitating peer networks of community businesses and policy and advocacy work: '*we started to appreciate the value of what these guys delivered, about [how] the infrastructure is more than just the front line delivery*'. Power to Change established strategic partnerships with Locality first, then with Plunkett Foundation, followed by Co-ops UK. The process involved high level strategic discussions to build trust as the basis for a deeper and more productive relationship, and to overcome previous tensions: '*we did joint work together and I think doing joined activity is always the way of building trust and knowledge, because you're, you're in it together and you learn through that experience and the kind of heat of activity. We purposely did things that brought us together*'. Each agreement involved financial support for the strategic role of the partner. Subsequently it has replicated this approach in agreements with Social Enterprise UK (SEUK), Community Energy England, the Community-led Housing Partnership, and the Ubele Initiative.

A final phase of the path towards collaboration developed from 2018 onwards. Rather than bilateral relationships between Power to Change and each of the main infrastructure bodies, a four-way collaboration was proposed, an experiment where the funder joins the collaboration rather than simply funds it: '*rather than come to the table with an agenda of we are going to merge you all and let's have that conversation, let's come to the table and see collectively how we could move forward to strengthen infrastructure given that's in all of our interests*'. Another interviewee observed that there was '*a dawning realisation that actually if we work together - and you know, from our part as well, we needed to be a little bit more open to collaboration, and challenge, and…they had opened themselves up to actually the fact that we knew what we were talking about, then we were able to kind of make some more progress*'.

There seem to be two drivers of this development. The first was a deepening concern with legacy, as noted, and specifically the need to build a more sustainable field of community business support after Power to Change was due to close: '*the key for this is the legacy piece, it's then working closely together now and then hopefully that will continue…knowing that we will shut down, that those relationships will finish and like as soon as that, if we kept on that route which was just us and them, then as soon as that relationship, we shut down, and they're back at square one*'. The second was the establishment of the Market Development team in Power to Change, taking a broader view of how to create a supportive environment for community business, and hence with a remit extending to infrastructure. Rather than Power to Change seeking to intervene and strengthen infrastructure through dedicated resources and support, an argument was made for bringing the infrastructure organisations together, with Power to Change, to develop the possibilities for collective work to promote community business. One interviewee identified three elements to the shift: '*some challenge for the sector, that the infrastructure is vulnerable and there will be support, understanding of previous attempts to sort of force it into change had not worked and so then the experiment of what about if we actually took a more collaborative approach*'.

Although there were different roles played by each of the four organisations, and they worked with slightly different constituencies of community businesses, there was enough common ground in terms of mission to imagine a collaborative partnership: '*there were three organisations that would actually benefit from working more closely with Power to Change in order to create…to codesign the long term better conditions for community businesses to thrive once Power to Change had left the market*.' A workshop in 2018 brought the issue under discussion. From there a regular series of meetings between the four CEOs began to deepen relationships and created an agenda for closer work and alignment between the organisations. In the three years of the CoPlunkAlity collaboration to date a raft of projects and ideas for strengthening the common work of the group have been discussed and attempted, extending beyond the CEOs to accommodate the work of senior managers covering marketing and communications, membership, frontline development support and policy work. One interviewee looked back over the last five years: '*when we started I think our…we were trying to play this disruptor role that making change was about working almost against those organisations or in tension with them somehow. Rather than all sitting on the same side pushing for the same thing, there was a sense that we were trying to change what they did*'. In practice, through 'CoPlunkAlity', infrastructure organisations have actually changed in various ways '*but I think it's been much more successful as part of a collaborative dance rather than a disruptor stance*'.

As discussed in sections 2 and 3 below, the collaboration comes with both advantages and accompanying tensions and dilemmas.

2. Collaborative advantage

Collaboration of any kind implies some element of sharing and combining resources, capabilities and access to networks. It involves individuals and organisations spending time occupying the same space and concerns to see what kinds of activities, and possibly outcomes, are achieved through the collaboration that could not or would not have otherwise been possible. This is the idea of 'collaborative advantage'.

The CoPlunkAlity collaboration has involved shared work across multiple areas as indicated above. Interviewees highlighted a range of more specific pieces of work. In policy and advocacy, for example, the 'Communities in Charge' campaign to shape the agenda for the post-EU Shared Prosperity Fund was led by Locality on behalf of the collaboration, with resources from Power to Change to hire a consultant to coordinate the campaign and facilitate partnership working between the organisations. Alongside this has been a concerted push on the 2019 Conservative manifesto commitment to establish a Community Ownership Fund, and a joint submission to the 2020 review of civil society undertaken by Danny Kruger MP (Kruger, 2020). One respondent to the survey observed that '*The idea of "community power" is gaining prominence in policy debates, and this has been facilitated by the collaboration. I think these achievements have been facilitated by having the deliberate processes we have put in place to build consistent relationships, as well as the funding that has enabled us to focus capacity on them*'.

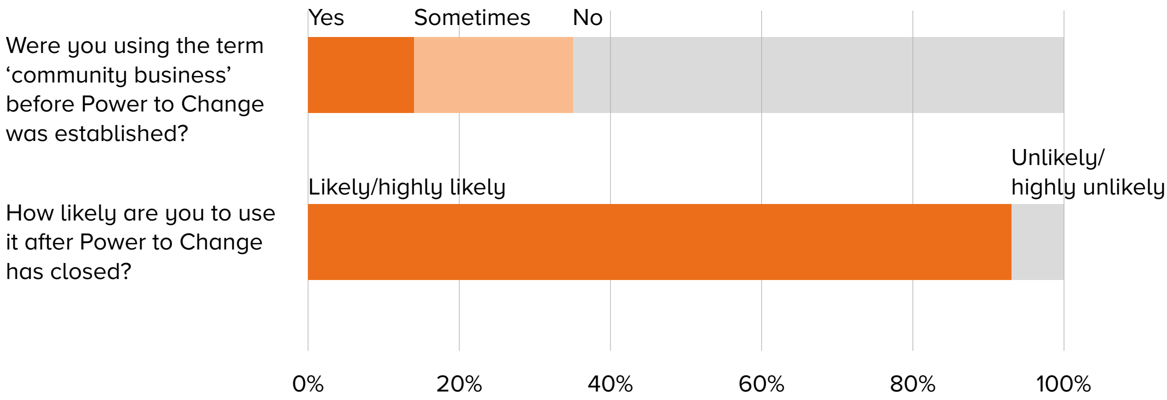
More generally CEOs of the four organisations report how they share insight, intelligence and contacts from their influencing work with government, and support each other to participate in policy discussion. Stronger aligned messaging has been pushed in collaborative work by marketing and communications leads across the four organisations. Work has been underway to map different memberships and consider a common membership offer, as well as to share understanding of different approaches to and challenges of frontline development work. In 2020 the four organisations came together quickly to co-design a Covid-19 emergency funding scheme for their respective members ('The C-19 Emergency Trading Income Support Scheme' or TISS) and undertook a common project around diversity and inclusion, where '*we will all be better held to account by actually doing it altogether*'.

In total this remains a large agenda, with the risk that it may have become too ambitious and extensive. As enthusiasm for the collaboration has grown, ideas for further work have multiplied. Certainly, and unsurprisingly, some elements appear to have progressed quickly and successfully (e.g. policy work, communications and marketing), whereas others have struggled and stalled (e.g. work on digital capabilities and infrastructure) or taken some time to bear fruit (e.g. frontline development work). The pandemic focused attention on pivoting resources quickly to support frontline community businesses facing emergency cashflow issues, and this had the effect of slowing down activity across other areas of the collaboration.

The advantages and achievements of the infrastructure collaboration were reported by interviewees in different ways, noting both discernible and also intangible outcomes; both process-related advantages and broader impacts; and identifying advantages arising at different levels – for individuals, collaborating organisations and for frontline community businesses. On the whole, interviewees found it easier to identify less tangible and process-related achievements, compared with clear outcomes of the collaboration for community businesses. As one interviewee noted: '*the bigger benefit is probably much more intangible in terms of the fact that we are all saying similar things now much more…you know the sort of alignment and the sharing that we do much more frequently…is strengthening our overall message*'.

One proxy measure of this alignment might be seen in Figure 1 below. This indicates how relevant CoPlunkAlity staff surveyed for this paper regard the term 'community business', which is the common area of focus for the collaboration. The results provide a small hint – although perhaps not surprising – that the term 'community business' has gained some traction across the collaboration.

Figure 1. Using the term 'community business'



Source: Survey of CoPlunkAlity staff, August-September 2020 (n=14)

There are some reservations about the term 'community business', particularly in relation to the now more established and familiar language of 'social enterprise'. One interviewee looked back to ask: '*Were we talking about community business before Power to Change? No, is the short answer. Not as a specific term. We talked about community ownership, community impact…as ways in which social enterprises were having an impact. But we didn't talk about community businesses as a term or as a subsector of social enterprise*'. A compromise of seeing community business as a sub-set of social enterprise appears now to have been reached, although it was also thought that use of the term may wane without Power to Change's advocacy.

At the most fundamental level, one interviewee noted that the success of the collaboration, given strong incentives to break ranks and act independently, was that it has held and continues, despite its inevitable ups and downs. This is both an achievement in itself and an outcome of other factors, such as relationship and trust building.

Interviewees noted that there was *greater sharing of information and intelligence* amongst CEOs and other leads across the four organisations compared with the situation before the collaboration. Previously CEOs might have guarded information as a prized resource for their own organisations, or ploughed their own furrow, but there was more open pooling of information through the collaboration. This became apparent during the early months of the pandemic: '*through the crisis we have had bi-weekly calls with all the CEOs and…we share that information in a way that three years ago we would have held it close, so we are all better informed…so none of that is tangible outputs, but it improves our collective intelligence and our collective ability to be effective*'. As trust had built up over time, the collaboration was described as a genuine partnership.

Coordinated messaging and common policy and influence work created a united front and an amplified voice promoting community business. The organisations' collective voice was much stronger for working in lockstep on campaigns. The Communities in Charge campaign, for example, was '*a great example of success*' and represented '*good joint work…[it's] shown what we can do together, and I think that's amplified what we would have been able to do on our own*'. Another interviewee commented that '*having a shared campaign was quite a big step forward…we are all in the grand scheme of things very small organisations and quite niche. If we want to be heard, it's going to be by working together*'.

It was suggested that work through the collaboration on several projects had brought the infrastructure organisations into much closer alignment, generating the prospect for a more comprehensive, efficient and *complementary support offer* for community business across the collaboration. This arose, for example, through discussions on shared membership and approaches to frontline development work. This involved '*a much more integrated approach to our external communications, our marketing activity, our evidence around our common memberships and how we kind of align them, so that's led to better co-ordination of messaging, it's led to some success around trying to align our offers so that they don't duplicate each other*'.

As noted, broader outcomes and impact were suggested at three levels – for individuals, infrastructure organisations and Power to Change, and for community businesses themselves.

The CEOs of the CoPlunkAlity members and Power to Change noted how closer work over the last three years had enabled them to provide peer support to each other, with relationships developed and strengthened to the point of enabling informal, trusted and honest conversations about developments and challenges. One observed that '*it feels like it's a safe space and, you know, a club, I think it has strengthened all of our relationships…yes as a CEO it's good, it's a support network…and we can just be absolutely honest with each other and get support…I think that's the kind of less tangible side of this*'. Interviewees noted how they had learnt from each other, in terms of experience, approaches and styles of engagement. Crucially this extended beyond the CEOs in that equivalent leads in the collaborating organisations met regularly and, it was suggested, would not hesitate to contact each other to discuss issues and problem-solving approaches. One interviewee noted that '*our senior staff across the organisation similarly have built relationships between themselves and talked to each other regularly. So, it's been an organic relationship development and I think we're at the stage where almost anybody across the organisations could just very quickly reach out to their counterpart in the other organisation, so it isn't just a kind of CEO conversation anymore*'. For one interviewee the altered 'way of working' was the biggest impact of the collaboration: '*it's very easy for us to just move into that collaborative mode in terms of thinking and design and implementation so I think that's the most important, main achievement so far*'.

Infrastructure organisations themselves had also been strengthened through the collaboration. This is partly a function of the terms of the relationship with Power to Change, which was able to provide dedicated resources for organisational development, and resources to 'backfill' staff time on collaborative activities. Shared work on common projects such as campaigning and communications enabled the members to pool resources, and share best practice, knowledge and expertise. One strategic partner observed how the relationship with Power to Change as an independent and trusted body had conferred greater legitimacy for the infrastructure body's position and work: '*I've dealt with some really big players and people like what we do but they don't take it seriously because it's like a nice to have rather than seeing it as core. So, the fact that Power to Change are saying their community is core…is really really helpful for me*'.

There appears to be a confident and widespread view that community businesses are in a better position as a result of the collaborative and strategic relationships. Certainly, eighty-six per cent of the staff survey respondents thought so. Interviewees also tended to suggest this, but perhaps more tentatively, noting the absence of direct evidence or counterfactual comparison. It was thought that there would be knock on effects for community businesses from building stronger infrastructure organisations. It was harder for interviewees to articulate how the benefits of the collaboration would flow through to frontline community businesses, as seen in this observation from one interviewee: '*it's a difficult one to attribute the cause and effect, but I suppose, I think we are a stronger organisation, as a result of it, so I think we're more plugged in, we're doing activities together which have enabled us to make more progress with some of our objectives, and therefore membership being in a better position because we are in a better position to be able to support them*'.

The work to align the offers across infrastructure would create a more coordinated landscape of support: '*it feels like there's a much less fragmented, less sub-optimal, less random system of support for community businesses*'. Seeing infrastructure organisations work together, it was suggested, would inspire confidence amongst community businesses: a '*sense of us all being aligned and singing from the same hymn sheet…a sense that actually, yes, this isn't all of us ploughing our own furrows, we are actually trying to push for a common set of things*'. This was offset, however, by the thought that very few community businesses would actually be aware of the collaboration, what it means and how the support available to them is different as a result: '*they wouldn't have had the opportunities that they've had in the last few years had that collaboration not been there, but I think the sadness of it is that they are not aware of the collaboration…they wouldn't recognise the benefit of it*'.

A striking feature across CoPlunkAlity and amongst other strategic partners was an awareness of the power in working together, however formally, to pool different strengths in complementary ways. This was well expressed by one interviewee in answering why they work in partnership with Power to Change: '*it's that sense of complementarity that we felt across a lot of our activities already – you know, we're clearly doing very similar things in all of these areas, and they should be mutually reinforcing rather than unaware of each other or just kind of happening in parallel. And also that there's a complementary aspect of us as organisations in that, you know, we have a big network and links and a bit of history and brand and breadth and all of those things. They have, you know, depth and resources and, you know, short lifespan but intensive engagement and business support and much more things around those areas.*'

But the work with infrastructure organisations was not just a simple marshalling of complementary strengths; it also involved two-way critical reflection, support and challenge. One strategic partner commented that: '*the members of staff [at Power to Change] are just like, you know, fantastic. You can be really open and honest with them and they're really receptive…they've been someone that I can use as a sounding board, kind of thinking about what our strategy is… to me it's more, rather than influenced us, it's more helped us stay on to our core mission and not divert from it'. Another articulated a deeply engaged relationship, rather than one simply of funder and recipient: 'We're definitely, you know, kind of one of their critical friends as well as delivery partners…We never go around a table as a tick box. People invite us and actually kind of take on board what we say….why would you, I don't know, invite someone in to fix something in your house and then try and tell them how to do it? or ignore what they're suggesting*?'

The clearest cited example of the tangible benefits of the collaboration for community businesses was access to Covid-19 emergency funding. Although Power to Change took the overall lead, the intention was that the fund would be co-designed and shared among CoPlunkAlity members. The process was not without tensions and difficulties, but the collaboration's involvement was said to be vital, impactful and 'anchoring' for Power to Change, as seen in this account: '*the fact that you have the relationships and collaboration there to make that work…. it was really a question about 'how do we design support where it is most needed?' and actually I think the collaboration…played an absolutely critical role, kind of in that, in terms of meeting it…there's no question that the collaborative partnership, not just shaped but defined the way that Power to Change responded and, I believe, for the better*'.

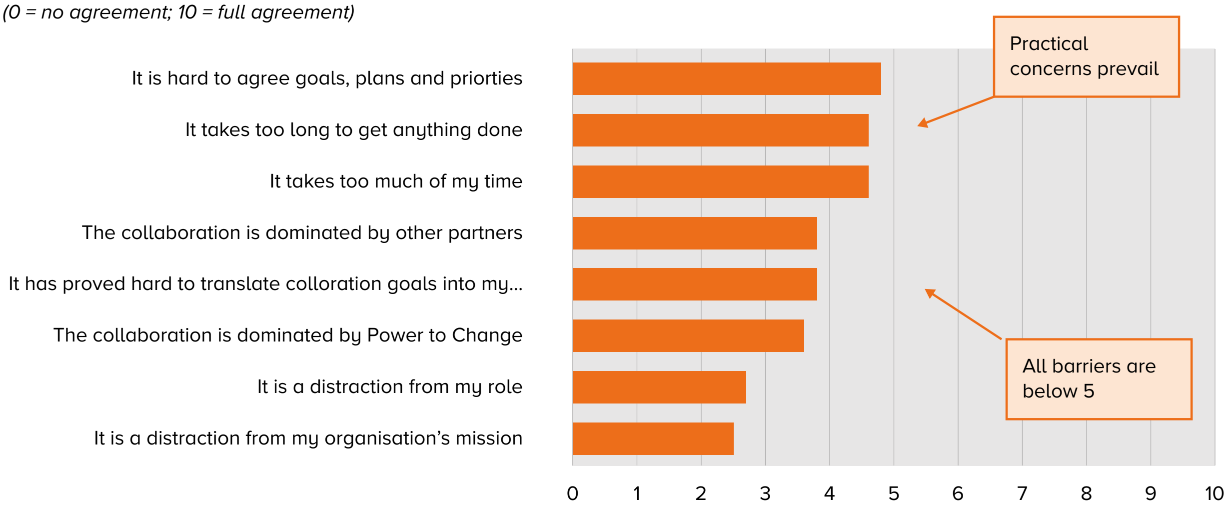
3. Collaborative inertia

Despite many, rich examples of the achievements and benefits of the CoPlunkAlity collaboration cited by interviewees, it is important to note that collaboration is not always sweetness and light. It can be time-consuming, distracting, frustrating, and more freighted with tension than collaborators hope. This is the idea of 'collaborative inertia' in practice. How does this idea manifest in this collaboration, if at all?

Figure 2 below indicates the consolidated survey results from CoPlunkAlity staff highlighting the significance of suggested barriers or sticking points in the collaboration. Respondents were invited to indicate their agreement or disagreement with eight statements of potential collaborative inertia.

Figure 2. Collaborative inertia in CoPlunkAlity

Significance of **eight barriers or sticking points** in the collaboration
(0 = no agreement; 10 = full agreement)



Source: Survey of CoPlunkAlity staff, August-September 2020 (n=14)

There are two points worth noting. First, the barriers are not generally regarded as much of a problem for relevant staff across the four organisations. All the scores are below 5 out of 10, indicating that respondents tend to disagree slightly with each of the statements. Second, comparing the eight barriers suggests that practical concerns around time and capacity tend to prevail, such as agreeing things, getting things done, coordinating time, and the time needed for collaborative work. These appear to outweigh more fundamental strategic concerns facing collaborating organisations, around role, mission and inequalities of power.

Interviewees were asked to talk through any challenges, barriers and sticking points within the collaboration. However, reported difficulties were occasional or exceptional disruptions and, it seems, enduring challenges were manageable. In general interviewees focused on positive features of the collaboration. Indeed, one interviewee struggled to find any challenges that hadn't been quickly resolved: '*It's been the best partnership that we've been involved in to my knowledge and it's been a very genuine one, so yes, I would really struggle to find anything negative to say…the relationships and the trust and the shared information and the culture that we now have between the four respective organisations, and that was not there before*'. This perspective perhaps highlights the importance of timing and the built up stock of collaborative relationships. At the point of the interviews, CoPlunkAlity members were working intensively to respond quickly to the unfolding crisis of Covid-19 as it affected community businesses in different ways. But this had been the outcome of three years of deepening collaboration, itself on top of ongoing bilateral and strategic relationships. As a result of trust-building work over time, some things, such as designing and launching an emergency Covid-19 funding package, can move very quickly indeed, but this can be tempered by the sheer transactional costs of working in partnership: 'we can react faster because of relationships, you know, understanding shared positions, just reach out, '*let's do this' but then, yes…just the nature of collaboration that, you know, that you're not just going out by yourself so you know, talking to someone always takes time…it's a by-product but…it's really just one of the things to consider*'.

Broadly speaking, then, interviews reflected an ongoing positive experience. This is not to say that no tensions or challenges were evident. Interviewees discussed several areas of difference or pointed towards issues through which to navigate or to keep an eye on. The main concerns were often inter-related, around capacity; focus; and differences in style, culture and processes. Collaboration takes time, and that is typically pressed in infrastructure organisations (as elsewhere), where demands and expectations for activity typically outstretch resources. One interviewee summarised this well: 'the collaboration is something that people do when they've got the time and space to do it but so often you're just, you know, kind of running the day job…I think the constraint has been, has really been, the kind of accounting for time, you know, that in some ways we're back to….where you've got an operating plan, you've got to deliver and then you've got, hold on, the partnership is pulling you out so it becomes an add on'. Collaborative work always raises the prospect that time pressures result in separation and trade-offs between the 'day job' and the collaboration. One interviewee was concerned that the collaboration may have '*taken over a lot of our time, time commitment, and potentially squashed other opportunities*'. A CoPlunkAlity staff member reinforced this: '*It has been a lot of work, but has come in waves - so we may be very busy working on collaborative activity and then not in touch for a period, before it all kicks off again. This can be somewhat exhausting when there are multiple other priorities to be manage that do not relate to the collaboration at all.*'

The relationship between capacity, focus and opportunities is complex. On the one hand, it is all too easy in resourced collaborations to become preoccupied with administrative process and minutiae around budgets, projects, agreements and reporting, at the expense of strategic discussion and direction, as observed here: '*especially with the CEO meeting, it gets too bogged down in admin sometimes. Like the administration, you know, like this is what budget we've got left or you know, people are putting proposals together and pitching them...I think we should be freeing up more time to do more forward thinking strategic work...taking the opportunity of thinking about the sector*'. Conversely, however, the space for strategic thinking through meetings at CEO and senior staff levels across the organisations can generate lots of ideas for collaborative projects. In practice they are not always followed through, partly due to capacity:

'we missed some opportunities I think that, in meetings, things were discussed and said, 'right, you know, we could do this' and to my knowledge things weren't then followed up or shared... and sometimes that's what happens in the meeting, you know, someone makes a comment of, 'let's work together on this' and it hasn't really been actioned or it's been actioned saying 'oh we're going to do that' but you know, some of these things just don't happen...Busy people – that's sometimes why these things don't happen'.

Collaboration works when there is enough common interest and focus to hold things together, and this appears certainly to be the case with CoPlunkAlity. Yet there are differences across the 'Venn diagram' of each organisation's focus, interests and membership, as observed here: '*it's not true to say that we all have exactly the same objectives, but, you know, there's a massive amount that we share...it's just one of the kind of issues that we just need to bear in mind sometimes, that some people will be more interested in some of the things we talk about at the time than others*'. It was noted in general that some organisations can be '*very adept at, you know, kind of fighting for their corner, in a sense, and so you have to be aware of who you're in the ring with*'. There is some indication that capacity surfaces as a problem at the point where wider frustrations, often to do with individual organisational interests, are actually playing out, as seen here: '*I don't think anybody's ever thought of withdrawing from the whole thing, but certainly there've been times through some of the specific strands of work where people have definitely internally questioned how much time this is taking and what's the benefit... so yes, a few little bits of, you know, 'why am I spending so much time going to these bloody collaboration meetings?*'

Certainly collaboration can be difficult and draining, and it can take lots of effort to agree common ground and ways forward. The work to develop a shared understanding of frontline development work appears to have been a case in point: '*basically it took a long time*' and people '*were really losing patience with it*', calling for a more directive approach: '*It's just totally took all of those interventions of us getting round the table just to really, really strengthen that relationship and really brought them out. Like what are our issues? What were the concerns?*'...you know, some of the commonalities and also what are the things that people were different'. Eventually '*we saw that what was happening all the time was their relationship was getting stronger and you know, they were getting used to working together and getting a shared understanding and then suddenly it all just really clicked*.'

Interviewees discussed one recent and significant moment of tension, which could have derailed the collaboration as a whole. It is instructive to consider this example, briefly, in order to draw out the lessons around when potential conflict can arise, and how it was managed. During Spring 2020 in the midst of the first pandemic lockdown, it transpired that two members of the collaboration, Power to Change and Locality, had each been approached separately by the National Lottery Community Fund to submit a proposal to be a partner in the distribution of Covid-19 funding to their members or through their networks of community businesses. It took a while for the issue to surface – '*neither of us was aware that the other had been asked until we sort of figured it out*' – but once the issue became apparent, it was resolved to join forces to design and submit a joint proposal.

The issue is highly sensitive in that it raised the prospect that a collaboration partner may 'break ranks' and pursue an independent course, rather than seek a collaborative solution. This could be for entirely legitimate reasons, having been approached with the opportunity of distributing funds to its members, but would it be seen as against the spirit of the collaboration, as '*marking a limit for the collaborative partnership*'? Instead of working together, the two organisations may have ended up in head to head competition, as recounted here: '*the prospects of lottery money came onto the scene and I think there was definitely tension there...I think there's a point at which the interests of your... I think the lottery experience was a real kind of crux of an organisation's own interests versus the collaboration's interest*'. This was reiterated by another interviewee: '*that was the first time that's really been tested...the first point at which, in the collaboration's history so far that there's been a need to choose like 'do we all go together, or...?*'... This is the first point where that really materialised and it definitely felt a bit uncomfortable'.

The collaboration's CEOs talked through the issue once a resolution had been found. It was suggested that after 'an initial awkwardness about how we would resolve this…an honest conversation that was had, it was aired and then we moved on'. In practice the external context of funding programme opportunities in the midst of a crisis was blamed: *'it was unfortunate and I think that was something of a test to the partnership…there are reasons why that happened, it wasn't, you know, the design of our making*'. Another noted how the context might shape the strategic calculations of individual organisations: '*it was quite externally driven, so it wasn't that we all looked at an opportunity and said 'right, we are going to deliberately go and compete against each other'. Somebody had approached us and said can you bid and so we said okay.*' But by assigning responsibility in this way, had they chosen to fudge the issue, pursuing a more convenient conflict avoidance strategy in order to preserve the collaboration?

The joint proposal was submitted, the funding programme was agreed and distributed, and the collaboration has in effect moved on. But the issue highlights the possibilities for conflicting interests and strategies to disrupt and unsettle the flow of otherwise deepening collaborative relationships. Moreover, it also provides an alert to the everyday interactive skill around holding tension and resolving potential conflicts. One interviewee analyses closely what was at stake:

'I don't think at any point it threatened the collaboration, but it did need a bit of sort of working through … [compared with a few years ago] breaking the collaboration is, it feels much harder now because… we have all invested so much into it and actually there will be its ups and downs, but you kind of, you ride them out because you sort of feel that the collective, you know, the bigger goal is more important, so yes I mean timing in that sense was quite good'.

4. Drivers and dilemmas

The main impression arising from the contrast between collaborative advantage discussed in section 2 and collaborative inertia discussed in section 3, is that interviewees are very positive about the collaborative and strategic relationships supported by Power to Change. It would be fair to say that aspects of collaborative advantage seem to prevail over experiences of collaborative inertia. In this section we take the discussion a little further by exploring the main drivers and dilemmas working through the collaboration: what factors facilitate the collaboration and what it has achieved, and what are the deeper issues and dilemmas it faces?

Drivers for collaboration

Beyond the basic assumption of sufficient alignment across the collaborating partners around a common purpose, the analysis suggests that there are three key facilitating factors underpinning the collaboration: its resourcing; relationship work; and distributed leadership.

First, the collaboration has been well supported through Power to Change, which enables things to happen, supports staff capacity by backfilling time, and directly assists the member infrastructure organisations with their own organisational development. This is articulated well here by one CEO: '*without Power to Change's funding to support this, progress would have been significantly less, because, you know, we all have busy schedules and things, so money does definitely bring us all to the table and allow us, to spend the time thinking about what we might do...so it kind of turbo charges the ability to do stuff...Without the funding attached to it, I think it would have just been another thing at the end of a to do list, that we had to try and find time to do, so I think that's, you know, it's important just to recognise how important that has been*'.

Collaborations can often be stymied or side-tracked by resource questions. One interviewee contrasted CoPlunkAlity with another unfunded collaborative gathering of senior executives: '*we have had God knows how many meetings...and we actually haven't done anything yet. But it's sort of inching towards doing something because actually nobody has the time really between meetings to do very much so you will have, a few people will do a few things and that gets you far enough to justify another meeting, but the pace of progress is really slow'. The need for adequate resourcing can get in the way, as noted here: 'people come together in partnerships in order to attract resources but they're spending all of their time trying to attract resources rather than doing things'. The resources for 'backfilling' have freed up staff time and 'made a huge difference particularly for organisations where people have targets of money to bring in'. The interviewee continues: 'normally what happens with all these things is that everyone's got really busy day jobs and then you say 'oh, here's a bit of, can you do this other thing with these other organisations?' and it never gets properly resourced and therefore the senior people can't really ever spend proper time with it, and it really suffers because of that.*'

There has been some realisation that supporting the collaboration may broadly enhance the sector but may not be sufficient to strengthen community business infrastructure. In addition, resources for direct organisational development may be needed, to help support the internal structure and operations of the partners. Accordingly, budgets supporting the collaborative partners were reprofiled to enable individual spending on organisational development, with separate resourcing for shared collaborative projects.

Second, the collaboration proceeds through the active relationship work undertaken by the four CEOs and senior staff, to build trust and overcome differences and difficulties. The role of trust and the groundwork of relationship building over time are thought to be highly significant both in establishing the collaboration and its longevity. As one interviewee observes: '*The collaboration was not something that we could have done in 2015. The only reason it was possible was because of sort of the three years in relationship building… I think you need a bedrock of understanding and trust in relationships before something like the collaboration even happens. I think for us to have started the collaboration in 2015 it wouldn't have worked because there wasn't enough common understanding and that trust… if you ever replicate through this you would need to do that groundwork in order to set up the collaboration*'.

The power of pre-existing relationships can also be seen in the contrast between different streams of work within the collaboration. For example, a pre-existing group (around communications) worked on a common project: '*most of the people who had to work together on the membership stuff already knew each other from that group and so that meant they kind of got going more quickly'. In contrast 'stuff about the frontline workforce [has] been much slower going because they didn't know each other… but it's taken about a year to get to that point where they can sort of hit the ground running and actually get on and do somethin*g.'

The collaboration is underpinned by Power to Change's facilitation through the Market Development team. Power to Change's development manager is seen as '*integral to the success of the collaboration…a huge enabler of the whole process and behind the scenes he does a lot to keep things progressing in between meetings and all of that stuff, so without somebody playing that role in a quite an active hands-on sort of way, it also wouldn't work*'.

Third, the collaboration is deeper and wider than simply a CEO network, extending into the core business of each of the collaborating partners. This involves a distributed form of leadership, authorised and encouraged by the CEOs to their respective teams to engage in joint work around a shared vision, and leading by example: '*I think we did lead by example in the sense of…we had strong enough relationships to make it work for us at our level… I think if we hadn't been internally each saying 'this is really important*', I am not sure anybody would have really gone along with it because I think we had to set that tone sort of from the top'. Naming the collaboration informally appears to have helped embed the idea amongst staff teams: '*the fact that everybody calls it the CoPlunkAlity Partnership…the shorthand, so people know about it, and it's kind of, you know, it's a nickname for the partnership which has helped I think with the wider staff recognition of what we're doing, even if people aren't necessarily involved on a day to day basis, with the stuff that we're doing, they all know we're part of the CoPlunkAlity partnership*.'

A path-breaking moment came through an away-day for senior staff across the four organisations, since when the collaborative approach began to cascade through the organisations. One interviewee commented that '*it helped that the relationships were good between the four Chief Execs and I think there was a level of trust there, so that when, you know, when either of us – any of us – four were speaking, you know, personally speaking for myself, I didn't at any point feel nervous or 'what's she going to say?' or 'what's he going to say?*'' Another affirms this picture: '*out of that we got some points of energy and points of light where people thought, in a kind of an entrepreneurial way we could take this and do stuff with it, sometimes further, you know, they had a licence…I guess what we were doing as Chief Execs was giving a permission slip for that to happen*'. The idea of a '*permission slip*' expresses the authority passed on by CEOs to other staff to engage in collaborative effort across the four organisations. CEOs have been able to enthuse collaboration: '*because they're doing it at the top, it means that they've set the behaviours for everyone else and they've said, 'look this is what we want to do' which they then really encourage people, giving them the leeway to say, 'right let's do this' and the initiative to do it*'. However, one staff member observed that '*It is easier for us to collaborate on something reactive, where there is an external driver for us to work together (e.g. a policy opportunity). It's harder to do it proactively, and feels like that takes up more time without as much obvious benefit. So, meeting regularly to talk about forward priorities can feel a bit like hard work if there isn't a lot of obvious immediate scope to collaborate*'.

Dilemmas and challenges in collaboration

Inevitably collaboration raises difficult strategic challenges for would-be partners, and this is no less evident in CoPlunkAlity. Collaboration brings organisations into a risky but sometimes generous terrain of sharing resources and compromising independence. Three dilemmas can be seen through the analysis: (1) navigating individual organisational cultures and interests, occasional disruptions and the need for relationship recovery work; (2) asymmetric power relationships across the collaboration; and (3) whether to extend the membership of the collaboration.

First, the recent example of potential competition to lead the distribution of a Covid-19 emergency funding package, detailed in section 3, highlights a gap opening up between individual organisational interests and the collective interests of the collaboration. It draws attention to the need to understand how collaborating partners navigate the tension between the two, and how differences in cultures, expectations and approaches play out. Are these differences accommodated, or do they serve to undermine the foundations of the collaboration?

Any collaboration is likely to face periods of challenge and sometimes conflict. In that specific example, one interviewee noted that '*we always knew this was going to happen one day*.' But resolving the problem involved both a practical-functional dimension compelled by the demands of the crisis – the two organisations concerned worked together on a joint bid led by one of them – and a relationship recovery dimension. There were sufficient stocks of trust, commitment to and investment in the collaboration, that the CEOs talked the issue through and reflected on what it meant for the collaboration. Positions were explained and clarified, all in the task of recovering what might otherwise have been fractured relationships.

Second, the collaborating partners are not equal in terms of resources, position and role – there are asymmetric power relationships. Plunkett Foundation is much smaller than either Locality or Co-ops UK, and this has an impact on capacity to engage in the collaboration, and ability to work in partnership with others. Perhaps more fundamentally, however, Power to Change operates within the collaboration and engages in joint work, but it also funds it. This places it in a structurally dominant position as a funder, as observed by one interviewee: '*in general Power to Change is actually quite good at realising when they are exerting their funding power…It's an interesting collaboration because they are a funder and an infrastructure organisation at times, as well, and so I think in general they recognise mostly where their power stems from their funding.' As funder, Power to Change have 'a lever at very rudimental level', the power to withdraw funding, although this would be regarded as a last resort: 'it's like a nuclear button. I mean it's like, you know, the chances of it getting pressed are really slim.*'

There are nuances of perspective here. For example, a Power to Change view is that '*we do shape things…the fact that we are funding it isn't entirely irrelevant… we shape some of the overarching approach and framing.*' Yet in addition it is felt that '*in discussions I don't ever feel that we…our voice holds greater sway particularly*', and for individual topics or projects '*we don't have a veto role or a final decision role or anything like that…if you actually looked at it you'd think it doesn't work, we must be somehow controlling more than we are controlling, but in reality it doesn't feel like that.*' A slightly different take is provided by one interviewee over the C-19 Trading Income Support Scheme: '*we theoretically co-designed that, which is what we all say, but I don't think we really co-designed it…Power to Change did it with heavy inputs and influence from us all, but it was clear at times that Power to Change had the final decision, which is kind of fine, you know, somebody had to take the final decision*'. A survey respondent observed: '*There seems to be a genuine commitment to involving partners in the development of PtC strategy, demonstrated by recent engagement regarding the trust's response to C19. However, this tends to be consultation, rather than a form of co-production or collaboration.*'

Fourth, as with any set of structured collaborative relationships, there is the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion: of who is involved and in what ways, and who is excluded or marginalised. Who an organisation like Power to Change chooses to work alongside, with financial backing, has been a source of tension, as indicated here: '*their system of building their networks and their collaborators is not clear, and I just think that they're talking to many of the usual suspects, and that's difficult because, actually, they're missing – they're missing a whole swathe of organisations, people, opportunitie*s.'

There is an evident insider-outsider dynamic in the collaborative relationships between members of the CoPlunkAlity collaboration on the one hand and other strategic partners on the other. Two questions immediately arise. First, whether membership of the collaboration should be revisited, although it should be noted that there have been several discussions focusing on whether other organisations might be invited to join the collaboration. And second, whether other mechanisms are required to bring together a broader range of infrastructure organisations, as indicated here: '*I think there needs to be multiple conversations and I think the existing partnership should have a leading role on those conversations*'.

Those outside the collaboration tend to see themselves as part of a '*second division*' or 'tier 2' of bilateral relationships. One recalled a recent meeting which highlighted the distinction, and also the different forms of relationship involved: '*we sat around the table with some of the other strategic partners who've been strategic partners for a longer time. They're the tier-1 strategic partners; we're very much kind of tier 2…It's not an official term…you know, they're bigger organisations, they've been involved for a longer term…. It was more of a two-way conversation or a bigger kind of influence on Power to Change than perhaps we have, and I don't know whether that's just because we're a newer partner, a smaller, less important partner, or we just haven't established our kind of footing on having those discussions that are a little bit more strategic rather than kind of us, you know, talking about our programme or something*'.

This reflection appears to accept that CoPlunkAlity involves more established organisations with longer and closer ties to Power to Change's work, and closer overall alignment of interests and objectives. A Power to Change respondent noted that '*We have made less progress with strategic partners beyond CoPlunkAlity*'. One strategic partner, however, preferred the resultant informal and supportive nature of their relationship with Power to Change: '*I like the fact that it's kind of a rolling and evolving thing rather than having formal stuff attached to it.*' Others work with a broader constituency of organisations and are less engaged in the community-led focus of community business.

This draws attention to a deeper sense of common purpose and aligned mission underpinning the collaboration, as noted here: '*when you really focus down on what brings us all together and what we share, actually we're probably the right organisations around the table, which is not to say that we all don't have lots of existing relationships with other people… the core partnership is probably the right one because we are focused on the communities, place, and enterprise, those two things that really bring us all together*'. One interviewee argued for retaining a core of strategic collaborating partners, for 'small and beautiful when it comes to collaboration' due to existing levels of trust and positive conversations. This was reinforced by another: '*There is something about the close, the tight knit group and the real, the closeness of the alignment that means that we get more done than it being kind of a looser network…I think it's really helped to be quite small. And in terms of really building trust and getting and trying to actually make some progress*'.

5. Looking ahead

A significant shift in the landscape surrounding the CoPlunkAlity collaboration occurred during the course of the research reported in this paper. Power to Change had been gearing towards its eventual closure in 2022 as its endowment was spent down. However, a case was prepared for funding to extend its work for a further period. An additional £20m from the National Lottery Community Fund was agreed and announced in March 2021, followed by work to restructure the organisation and develop a new five-year strategic plan, launched in June 2021 (Power to Change, 2021).

The new strategy looks to strengthen community businesses, with priorities around community business at the heart of a fairer economy, more resilient community business, and a more diverse, equitable and inclusive sector. With reduced resources compared to its first 6 years, Power to Change aims to deploy its funding more strategically to develop the sector. Infrastructure remains a key priority, under a workstream 'Enabling conditions for community business', but the assumptions under which it was operating have changed substantially.

The new strategy will affect the resourcing and broad agenda for CoPlunkAlity, and indeed other strategic relationships. There will be less money available to support the collaboration and partners, initially because resources have been repurposed to create Covid-19 renewal funding, but also under the new strategic direction. Perhaps more significantly, the terms under which the collaboration had been operating will be different. During the interviews for this research, questions of Power to Change's 'legacy' were, alongside the pandemic, front and centre of discussions about the future. The original rationale for the collaboration involved helping to secure stronger infrastructure for community business after Power to Change was due to exit the field in 2022. There was hence some urgency, '*as the clock ticks*', for the start of a legacy conversation '*sooner rather than later*'.

Considerations were around how to manage the transition to life beyond Power to Change, and how to make the legacy as sustainable as possible, seeing '*closure as a handover rather than the end of something…creating a sense of continuity through working more closely with infrastructure partners*'. As one interviewee argued, '*an important part of that is also that we need a strong sustainable infrastructure sector to support community business, at the end of it. I think we've all been very keen to collaborate on that, you know, what does a strong infrastructure sector look like?*' Would, for example, key functions or programmes be transferred to the partnership or individual organisations? And how would this be decided and implemented? According to one interviewee: '*we need to be cracking on with what is the disbursement, transition programme for that. And it means some difficult conversations*'. Some frustration was expressed here, as recalled by one interviewee: 'One of my colleagues described it as, you know, 'when are the adults going to let the children kind of go out to play on their own?'' For Power to Change '*the collaboration will really almost come into its own in helping us kind of exit in a way that doesn't feel like an abrupt sort of 'right, done''*.

At the time of the interviews the future was uncertain, given both the ongoing impact of Covid-19 and the need for an appropriate response to support community businesses, but also because discussions about extended funding were still underway. Several pathways for the future of the collaboration were in play. If Power to Change's life was extended, there would be less money, and so '*relationships will necessarily need to change…will it be more like a network? You know will it be more of an informal thing rather than something which has quite a big budget attached to it?*' If Power to Change was to have closed as initially envisaged, the collaboration's '*weight is even more, the fact that it exists is potentially more important*' as a site for continuing aspects of the work. In the midst of the uncertainty, however, there was some confidence that it would continue in some form: '*as CEOs we would still meet. Not necessarily with the full agenda that we have now because some of it linked to … funded pieces and funded projects, but that we would still need to have that kind of informal sharing and intelligence gathering and checking in and that sort of thing*'.

With the new funding in place and new strategic plan for 2021 through to 2025 launched, the questions for Power to Change's collaborative relationships become how they proceed, what are their priorities, and what is the future for infrastructure collaborations? Lower resources may reduce or slow down the various collaborative projects that have been developed over the last three years. On the one hand this will make the collaborative work a little harder, effectively shifting the balance slightly between collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia. On the other hand, it appears from the interviews that considerable collaborative progress had been achieved across the partners, and this may provide the momentum and advantage to keep going even though resources will be tighter. One remaining question concerns the attention given to 'legacy'. Should the question be discarded, postponed for five years, or should it remain an active part of the collaboration's agenda?

Conclusions and implications

This paper has examined the strategic collaborative relationship between Power to Change and community business infrastructure organisations in terms of collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia. Overall, the conclusion is that **collaborative advantage seems to outweigh collaborative inertia**. Interviewees identified a wide range of benefits to the collaborative work, and there is strong alignment around a core purpose of supporting community business. There is some confidence that community businesses are in a better position as a result of the collaboration, but it is harder to pinpoint strong evidence of impact. Interviewees point to intangible process-related impacts, such as trust, peer support and willingness to share information.

There are also sticking points and obstacles in the collaboration, but these tend to be practical matters of capacity and organisation, such as agreeing objectives and work-plans, time and capacity, distraction from existing work, rather than fundamental conflicts or differences in objectives, approach or culture. The fact that Power to Change is both a funder as well as a member of the collaboration is recognised as relevant, in shaping the broad agenda for the collaboration, but it is not always evident in practice. There are occasionally challenging or disruptive moments in the collaboration, but these have been worked through, and strong relationships of trust have prevailed.

It is important to place the collaboration and the findings of this research in context. There are two implications of this. First, **Power to Change has been a pioneer in a tentative renaissance of the idea of infrastructure** (Macmillan, 2021). As noted above, it has been on a significant journey in its relationship with community business infrastructure since it was established in 2015. It has shifted away from an at best lukewarm orientation towards infrastructure, where it was seeking to shake up the support system. This was in line with prevailing thinking about infrastructure at the time. Now it recognises the value, reach and strategic position of infrastructure bodies, and has been prepared to invest time and resources in strengthening them. Developing the collaboration to pursue these objectives was likened to 'a collaborative dance rather than a disruptor stance.' In advancing the coordination of community business infrastructure, Power to Change has led the way by moving against the trend towards otherwise fragmented infrastructure.

Second, the **longer term legacy of Power to Change, in terms of a stronger support environment and infrastructure for community business, remains an important part of the agenda**, even though it has received extended funding and has launched a new strategic plan to 2025. The impetus behind the collaboration was boosted by the concern with legacy given a pending closure date of 2022. Arguably this has driven some of the intensity of collaborative work programme – in effect Power to Change was in a hurry to strengthen community business infrastructure. Ongoing resources for the collaboration are being reduced and the idea of and work around legacy may be less urgent, but the issue has not gone away. There may be merit in using Power to Change's legitimacy, convening power, networks and partnerships **to facilitate and broaden a strategic conversation around the role of community business infrastructure** in the coming years. This might continue a pathway towards a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to support.

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Appendix – about the research

As part of the evaluation of Power to Change's market development work, the research for this paper aimed to assess the value, reach and impact of PtC's additional investment in supporting collaboration amongst allied infrastructure bodies and networks, focused around two core questions:

1. What collaborative advantage, in relation to market development for community business, is generated through the infrastructure network and allied strategic relationships?
2. To what extent and how is collaborative inertia experienced and mitigated in the infrastructure network and allied strategic networks?

Fieldwork was carried out between April and November 2020 and involved:

- Ten semi-structured online interviews with nine participants, from Power to Change and seven other organisations with whom it has strategic relationships: Co-ops UK, Locality, Plunkett Foundation, Social Enterprise UK, The Ubele Initiative, Community Energy England, and the Community led Housing Partnership. Interviews were with CEOs, Deputy CEOs and coordinators, along with two interviews with the Power to Change Development Manager responsible for infrastructure. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed for analysis.
- Fourteen responses (87.5% response rate) to a mostly open-ended 15-question, survey of relevant senior staff in Power to Change, Co-ops UK, Plunkett Foundation and Locality.
- Analysis of Power to Change documents on infrastructure: grant committee reports and notes of meetings.
- Attendance at two meetings of CEOs of the 'CoPlunkAlity' strategic collaboration

Brief interim reports were produced in October 2020 and February 2021.

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