



Collaborative Culture:

The Challenges for Cultural Partnerships in the Central South

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Executive Summary

This report examines the collaborative arrangements which exist to facilitate joint working between arts and cultural organisations in Dorset, Hampshire and the Central South coastal unitary councils. The area has a rich arts and cultural offer, with a wide variety of organisations and strong public engagement.

We found a complex mix of collaborative arrangements, with everything from informal networks of organisations through to more formalised groupings with established 'rules of engagement'. That is in large part a consequence of the freedom from central (i.e. Government) direction the sector has enjoyed: collaboration is a response to local need and not central dictat.

Most of those we spoke to were advocates of collaboration, although all shared some frustration with the way in which arrangements worked. Not all partnerships worked as well as they could, and some felt that collaborative arrangements lacked a sense of direction and purpose. There was a sense that we could be missing opportunities for improving the cultural offer through deeper, more robust collaborative arrangements.

In our view the sector needs to consider how well collaboration is working across the Central South. In doing so, they need to recognise the growing national trend towards co-operation and collaboration over a larger geographic scale, whether through combined authorities or the wider geographic scope of Local Economic Partnerships and other arrangements.

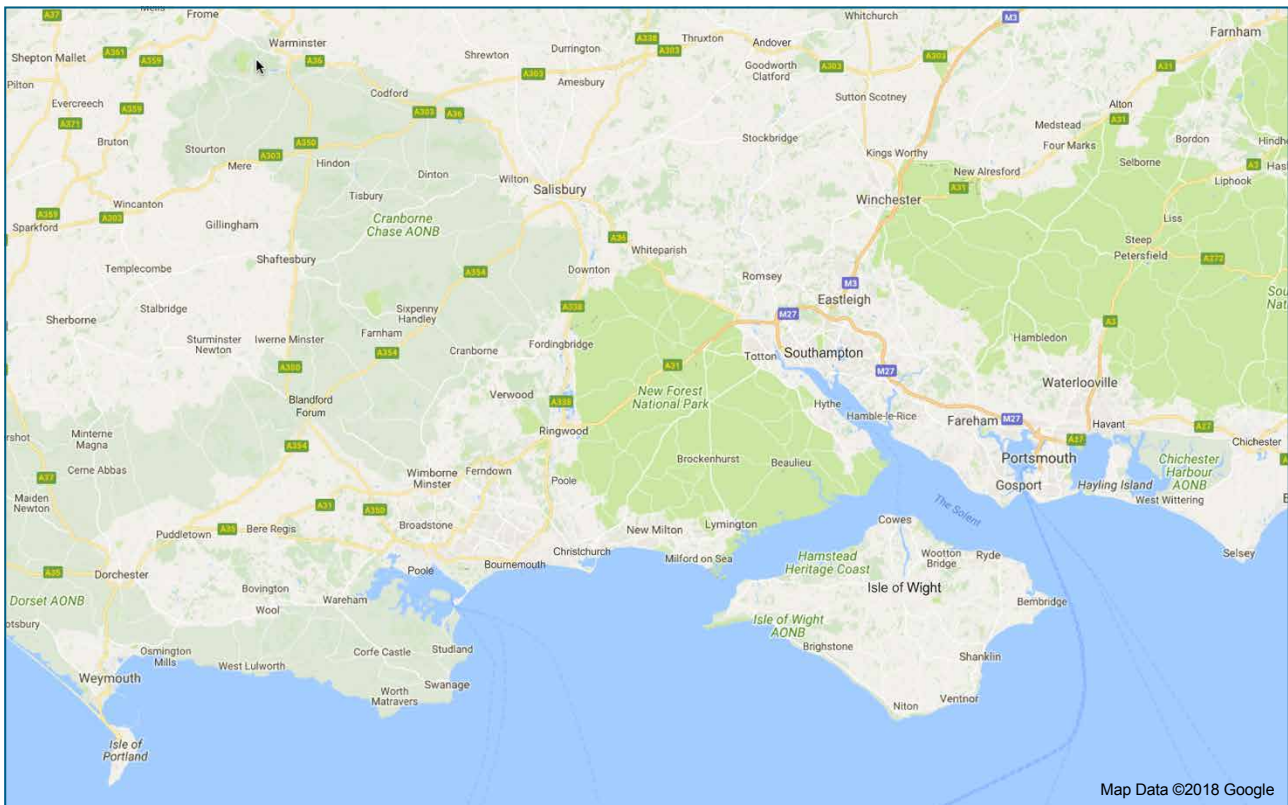
We suggest those from across the Central South's arts and cultural sector, including local councils and universities, need to discuss four questions:

- Are we sure all our partnerships are working as well as they might?
- Are we sure we have the 'right' mix of partnerships to help strengthen our cultural offer and maximise the contribution culture can make to broad economic and societal challenges?
- Is collaboration distracting us from finding new ways of working?
- Are we missing an opportunity to see the 'Central South' as a cultural whole?

This report ends by suggesting that the sector should explore the case for establishing a Central South Cultural Forum to help address these questions and facilitate collaborative working.

Introduction

The Central South of England - which, for this study, we have defined broadly as the city regions of Southampton and Portsmouth, the communities in Hampshire County and the Isle of Wight, together with the conurbation of Bournemouth and Poole and the County of Dorset - is home to around 2.74 million people¹ (see Map 1). It is multi-cultural, prosperous but with pockets of relative poverty and offers a diverse mix of built up city communities and rural towns and villages.



Map 1: The Central South of England, showing the core area considered by this report.

Our study examines the cultural partnerships working in all or part of the Counties and the urban coastal unitary councils. We have also sought to understand the audience catchments of cultural facilities and creative connections which shape the area's cultural geography.

Arts and culture thrive in the area and the level of cultural engagement is significantly above the national average (see below). The Creative Economy in the area is also thriving: Nesta, in their report on the Geography of Creativity, identify high rates of growth in the Portsmouth, Southampton and Bournemouth travel to work areas.²

Against this background of success, the institutional landscape within the cultural sector has experienced significant change in recent years. New institutions such as the Hampshire Cultural Trust, the Dorset-based Arts Development Company, Portsmouth Cultural Trust and Southampton Cultural Development Trust have been formed. New vehicles for collaboration have also emerged. Some of these such as the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire have focused on broad public policy themes while seeing the strength of the cultural sector as being a key asset to the area.

Others, such as the cultural education partnerships established by bridge organisations, facilitate cross sector working between arts and education, and within the arts sector networks such as the

Farnham Maltings based House network seek to develop sector strength.³ Arts Council England have also played a significant role in promoting excellence and good practice by investing both in talent and cultural infrastructure.

However, there remain threats and challenges, and the constant pressure of expectations. Not least of these is the pressure on public funding which is key to supporting culture and creativity. One response to these pressures has been more joined up working to secure 'more for less'. Closer collaboration may also be a way of strengthening creative output and ensuring the economic and societal benefits of the arts are realised,⁴ although success is not guaranteed.

This study has sought to understand the nature and geographic reach of collaborative arrangements that have developed across this part of the Central South in recent years, what they are seeking to achieve and how they operate. We have not, at this stage, made specific recommendations. Instead, our aim is to prompt a discussion about how effective the Central South's cultural sector is at collaboration and how it can help the region's cultural offer survive and flourish.

The Context: Culture and Creativity in the Central South

The area we studied is home to many publicly supported and commercial cultural facilities, from the Lighthouse and Bournemouth International Centre in the west to Portsmouth Guildhall and The Spring, Havant in the east. It is home to 61 professional performing arts venues and public galleries, 7 of which have a capacity of over 1000 seats, and 58 museums.

There are numerous smaller venues and community spaces used for music, performance and exhibitions. The area has 29 National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) which receive support from the Arts Council England (ACE) - see Table 2. It is home to unique organisations like the Isle of Wight's Carnival Company and those with an international profile such as the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

Participation

Participation in cultural and creative activities is above the national average:⁵

- 37.6% of people spend time doing a creative, artistic, theatrical or musical activity (national average 34.7%) - in 19 of the 22 districts activity is significantly above average, at average in one area and below in only two.
- 56.4% of people have attended a cultural event, performance or festival (national average 52.2%) - attendance in most of the 22 council areas is significantly above that average, and significantly below in only one.

People move across boundaries to participate, with the largest urban areas - Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth, Poole, Winchester and, in the north of Hampshire, Basingstoke - attracting participants from surrounding more rural areas. The area's larger venues are in these urban centres, along with many smaller facilities, with cultural and creative organisations based across the area's towns and cities. Table 1 below shows the estimated catchment for the area's multi-use arts venues and theatres.⁶

Venue size	Estimated catchment for venue audiences			
	50% of audience within:		75% of audience within:	
	Distance (miles)	Distance (drive time, minutes)	Distance (miles)	Distance (drive time, minutes)
Small	3.9	10	8.4	20
Medium	4.9	15	10.6	25
Large	13.5	30	25.0	50

Table 1: Catchment of audiences for South Hampshire multi-use arts venues and theatres (Source: South Hampshire Cultural Infrastructure Audit)

The same study shows that the general catchment area for museums with locally significant collections can most readily be related to local population and local demographics. A 50% catchment radius equates to approximately 6.6 miles or up to 24.2 miles for 75% catchment. The catchment radius for museums with regional/national collections can extend from 62 miles (50%) to 115 miles (75%).

These summary data mask more complex differences in the audience for arts and culture. The socio-economic structure of communities in cities like Southampton and Portsmouth, and in areas such as Gosport and the Isle of Wight is very different from that of other parts of the area. Across the Central South there is a complex mosaic of different socio-economic groups from which audiences are drawn. Their cultural preferences and willingness to engage with traditional forms of culture will vary significantly.

Spending

Spending by Councils in supporting cultural organisations and activities varies across the Central South.⁷ Revenue spending varies significantly, from less than £1/head of population in some Dorset districts to between £10-14/head in the coastal unitary councils. According to CIPFA statistics, two councils spend nothing on arts and culture. In part this reflects local political choices, but the way in which data are recorded can under-report spend. Nor does it necessarily capture the different models for delivering arts and culture, which are discussed in this report. Councils can and do also make significant capital investment in arts and cultural facilities, often as part of wider regeneration schemes.

Some Councils have a deliberate policy of supporting major venues or facilities. Those commitments may tie up significant amounts of funding and will inevitably limit the Council's flexibility to fund other projects or programmes. Others have made clear commitments to new delivery models, again locking in funding for a period.

Arts Council England funding for NPOs across the area is summarised in Table 2. Such support is rarely made in respect of specific administrative geographies. Often it will acknowledge and support an organisation's work across a broad geography, encouraging participation, building audiences and strengthening creative practice. For example, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, one of the area's NPOs, works with and performs to communities across South East and South West England.

Spending by ACE, councils and other bodies on culture has been shaped by many factors; from the nature and history of local assets and historic capital investment decisions to decisions by councils about future financial support and delivery models.

National Portfolio Organisation	Discipline	Annual Grant 2018-22	Location
A Space Arts	Visual arts	£100,000.00	Southampton
Activate Performing Arts	Combined arts	£279,250.00	West Dorset
Art Asia Trust Limited	Theatre	£95,827.00	Southampton
Artsreach	Combined arts	£55,319.00	West Dorset
Artswork	Not discipline specific (Bridge)	£1,519,397.00	Southampton
Aspex Visual Arts Trust	Visual arts	£112,117.00	Portsmouth
The Wessex Museums Partnership.	Museums	£319,500.00	Poole
Bournemouth Borough Council	Combined arts	£150,000.00	Bournemouth
Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra	Music	£2,554,790.00	Poole
Bridport Arts Centre	Combined arts	£57,412.00	West Dorset
b-side Multimedia Festival CIC	Combined arts	£133,651.00	Weymouth and Portland
Chapel Arts Studios	Visual arts	£145,002.00	Test Valley
Diverse City	Combined arts	£480,000.00	Purbeck
John Hansard Gallery	Visual arts	£601,511.00	Southampton
Live Theatre Winchester Trust	Street Theatre	£134,158.00	Winchester
Pavilion Dance South West Ltd	Dance	£386,216.00	Bournemouth
Poole Arts Trust Ltd	Combined arts	£342,213.00	Poole
New Theatre Royal	Theatre	£249,950.00	Portsmouth
Proteus Theatre Company	Theatre	£68,600.00	Basingstoke and Deane
Shademakers UK Carnival Club	Combined arts	£50,290.00	Isle of Wight
Southampton City Council	Visual arts	£100,000.00	Southampton
The Anvil Trust Ltd	Music	£138,949.00	Basingstoke and Deane
The New Carnival Company CIC	Combined arts	£76,661.00	Isle of Wight
The Point	Combined arts	£125,000.00	Eastleigh
Nuffield Theatre Trust	Theatre	£974,349.00	Southampton
The Spring Arts & Heritage Centre	Combined arts	£120,000.00	Havant
The Tank Museum	Museums	£120,000.00	Purbeck
Turner Sims	Music	£43,122.00	Southampton
ZoieLogic Dance Theatre	Dance	£195,300.00	Southampton

Table 2: National Portfolio Organisations in the Central South (Note: Artswork is the Bridge organisation for Hampshire [including Southampton, IOW and Portsmouth], Surrey, Sussex, Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire)

Creative Industries

One further dimension is that offered by the Creative Industries,⁸ which are an important part of the local economy. They are inextricably linked with cultural and creative practice: much cultural activity contributes income to the local economy, including by attracting visitors. Businesses establish and grow when a creative individual is able to earn a living from their practice. A number of partnerships and organisations across the Central South focus on developing the creative industries by supporting practitioners and seeking to create a supportive environment for such businesses to establish and grow.⁹ This provides a link between the creative and economic geographies of the area.

A note on collaboration

Collaboration - which we define as "where two or more organisations work together to realize or achieve a goal or project"¹⁰ - takes many forms, from simple, often time-limited relationships between two organisations seeking to achieve a common aim through to formally constituted new structures which serve as an umbrella bringing together cultural organisations, albeit without the members losing their separate identities.

For the purposes of this report, we regard collaboration as distinct from organisational mergers, where the identity of two or more organisations are subsumed into a new entity.

Part I: Practice and perceptions

Our research draws on interviews with 17 individuals working across the sector. All are identified and acknowledged at the end of this report. However, we have not attributed comments to named individuals.

The collaborative relationships we discussed with participants are very diverse, with differing histories, objectives and membership. Some have clear governance arrangements, usually established from the outset, others have taken a much more fluid approach to evolving their 'rules' and how they work. Similarly, the 'membership' and geography of such relationships was in some cases tightly defined, in other cases loose and open.

Several participants painted a picture of much collaboration being informal, bringing together partners in a *"collaboration of the willing"*. A number spoke of the importance of one-to-one relationships in fostering collaboration. Membership of groups seeking to work together depended on *"who comes to the party"*, and most cautioned against partnerships which are shaped *"top down"*, suggesting *"relationships must be nurtured, not imposed"*. There was a wariness of making arrangements too formal, one interviewee suggesting that *"collaboration depends on space to grow a relationship"* and another argued that the first step was building an *"honest, open and trusting"* dialogue.

Whilst there was unanimity on the importance of collaboration, most acknowledged it was not easy. One participant felt that the sector *"does not have the skills or capacity to make collaboration happen. Without leadership, commitment and resources it will be a very weak alliance of like-minded people"*. Such partnerships are ineffective and usually short-lived, they peter out as members feel they are achieving nothing.

The purpose of collaborative arrangements varied. Some saw themselves simply as *"facilitators of partnerships, collaboration and ideas"*, *"preparing the flowerbed"* within which culture could flourish or encouraging the sector to *"see the bigger picture in an increasingly reductionist world"*, and even simply *"providing space to think"*. Others suggested it signalled a shift of purpose, moving from *"providing great art to making culture relevant"*.

Building on idea of *"relevance"*, some partnerships saw the future for culture as playing its part in addressing social and economic agendas, with collaboration a way of achieving that. They could, for example, see a role for culture in addressing societal problems such as loneliness, exclusion or poor mental health, or in making a contribution to the local economy. They also acknowledged that such a broadening of perspective helped open up new sources of funding.

Perhaps for that reason, it was notable that the cultural sector was open to collaboration with a range of partners. Aside from traditional relationships with Councils, most now saw an important role for Universities, business and other parts of the public and private sectors. That was both to broaden the reach of cultural activity and bring fresh perspectives.

Many saw collaboration as a necessity - *"collaboration and partnership are important in sustaining our offer as funding reduces"* or *"without collaboration local authorities will not be able to do anything significant in the field of culture in ten years"*. Several felt it offered a way of improving operational efficiency and value for money. At the commercial end of the sector, those in contractually-based commercial relationships nevertheless saw beyond that transactional relationship and spoke of the importance of evolving longer-term relationships with *"trusted partners"* to build business, improve efficiency and increase impact.

The geography of collaborative arrangements was also fluid. Many saw they had an important role in working at a local level, helping address local economic and societal challenges through culture. However, even partnerships clearly rooted in a place, usually city-based, spoke of “fuzzy” boundaries, and saw their influence “rippling out” beyond the urban boundary.

City-based partnerships were particularly conscious of the socio-economic challenges their communities faced, and saw their role as focusing on those communities. Where partnerships are driven by local authorities they may be less willing to step beyond administrative boundaries: local politicians understandably want to see a focus on their constituents. Council Officers themselves often felt that limited resources compelled them to focus almost entirely within their own boundaries.

Others did not see their activity should be constrained to a single place or within a narrow geography. The BSO, for example, work with communities over a broad swath of Southern England, reaching as far as Devon and Cornwall. They and the New Carnival Company, based on the Isle of Wight, have an international reach. Some collaborations, notably in the Higher Education sector, are between organisations which are geographically distant: Southampton University is partnering with Exeter University, and Portsmouth University with colleagues in Hull, in both cases on creative cluster bids.

Cultural professionals recognise that their boundaries are broader and softer, for example those working to shape the Isle of Wight cultural sector recognise the importance of links across the Solent. Many networks bring together creatives in the same field over a broad geography.

There was nervousness about joint working, some organisations feared a loss of identity, sovereignty or control by engaging in a collaborative partnership or programme. There was a concern from smaller entities that larger organisations may dominate any collaborative arrangements. We were also told of worries about creating “bureaucracy” through new partnerships and networks, without adding value to the cultural offer. Sometimes this nervousness seemed to verge on paranoia about the creation of a “Frankenstein’s monster” which will dominate and drive decisions.

There is also an innate caution, one participant suggested the sector is its own worst enemy, its “risk aversion and unwillingness to share” getting in the way. Others were more direct about barriers: one interviewee felt there was too strong a “competitive dynamic” between places and organisations, meaning that “egos get in the way” of collaboration. A participant spoke of “institutional arrogance” as a barrier.

It was suggested that collaboration may help overcome this competitive dynamic. One interviewee found that working in a broader geographic partnership “left us more open to collaboration by taking the competition out of it”. However, they went on to acknowledge that resource and budgetary pressures tend to discourage collaboration when cultural professionals see themselves as “chasing the same pot”.

New relationships are being discussed all the time, for example bhlive’s commercial partnerships across the South Coast and beyond are evolving, and organisations across the Isle of Wight are discussing shared cultural leadership. The membership of other partnerships continues to grow and broaden, the Dorset Arts Development Trust (facilitated by the Arts Development Company) now includes the Purbeck AONB, for example.

Collaboration has led to the creation of distinct new organisations: Dorset’s Arts Development Company is an example of a new model driven primarily by a desire to re-focus the sector, improve value for money and encourage strategic collaboration when resources are tight, whilst the creation

of the Hampshire Cultural Trust was principally a response to a desire to improve value for money and broaden the funding base to counter reducing budgets. The latter is a new entity with its own portfolio of services, but it has also sought to fulfil a role as an umbrella for cultural organisations in the County.

The diversity we found is not at all surprising, no relationship can grow and thrive if it is based on a standard template of how it should be built and run. Interviewees made it clear that a healthy collaboration evolves in response to the environment partners inhabit. However, there are clear common themes, and messages about what does and does not work, and the rocks on which a collaboration may flounder. Part II of this report takes an overview of the relationships we heard about from our interviews.

Part II: Patterns of collaboration

As our interviews make clear, every collaboration is unique. Each is shaped by the participants, their objectives, the environment within which it operates and its (or its partners') history. In a sector where there has been no top-down push towards collaboration 101 flowers have been allowed, even encouraged, to bloom. However, every successful collaboration shares some common features. Our participants gave us interesting insights into what they believed made partnerships work, and what were the barriers to their effective operation.

We have included an assessment of what motivates our partnerships, their form and their operational characteristics in the Appendix to this report. We believe it gives some indication of the lessons learned by partnerships of various sorts as they have evolved. The information is worth recording because it may offer some guidance both to existing relationships and for possible future arrangements.

However, some understanding of the operational arrangements of partnerships is also useful as part of a wider discussion about cultural collaboration. This section therefore summarises interviewees' observations about how effective collaboration is, what works and what doesn't.

Does collaboration add value?

All of our interviewees believed that collaboration added value, all felt it was an essential part of how they would need to work in future. For many the key benefit lay in the opportunity for a strategic discussion about the challenges facing the sector and exploration of how they should respond collectively. That in turn led to:

- The opportunity to build relationships between organisations, stimulating new ideas and developing professional practice.
- Encouragement to articulate the wider contribution culture can make to meeting society's challenges, allowing cultural organisations to identify new partners, find fresh funding streams, and shape practical projects and programmes.
- A fresh approach to realising value for money through new models for delivering cultural services and more effective ways of tackling shared challenges - from audience development to skills shortages.

There are also concerns that about the down-side risks of collaboration which can lead to disillusioned partners ceasing to collaborate:

- Creating "talking shops", which are tied down in bureaucracy - a process and target driven output regime - and lose a focus on delivering improvement.
- Linked to that, a concern that the sector lacks the skills to build effective partnerships, so new initiatives have a high risk of failure.
- Dominance of the relationship by a single, large organisation pursuing their own narrow priorities.
- Key organisations not joining, or being invited into, the dialogue: a "collaboration of the willing" (or the chosen) can be incomplete.

What characterises a successful collaboration?

Drawing on the experience of those we spoke to, there is a check-list of straightforward principles for those seeking to encourage collaboration to follow, none of which are unique to the cultural sector:

- **Clarity of purpose:** collaboration is driven by a shared sense of purpose, and participants must be clear what they are trying to achieve.
- **Independence:** the arrangement must not be perceived to be run by one organisation, or dependent on one organisation for resources.
- **Commitment:** key organisations must be willing to get involved without pre-conditions.
- **Time and space:** partners must begin by building relationships and develop mutual understanding and respect.
- **Openness and honesty:** develops by allowing time and space to build trust.
- **Capacity:** there should be a dedicated and independent resource able to invest the time, energy and skills in building collaboration.
- **Shared agenda:** the agenda should not be imposed, but allowed to evolve from an appreciation of shared interests and objectives.

There are also barriers to effective collaboration we identified:

- **Dictation:** top-down imposition of a partnership structure and agenda.
- **Over-management:** swamping an evolving collaborative relationship with targets, performance indicators and actions plans.
- **Suspicion:** perception (valid or otherwise) that one organisation is seeking to dominate the agenda for narrow, 'selfish' purposes.
- **Lack of capacity:** pressures, largely financial, deny the people, resource and time to build relationships.

Part III: Discussion

The complexity of the Central South

The cultural sector has a long history of collaboration. Unlike in other sectors, there has been no national policy drive towards collaboration, which has left the sector free to innovate. That may help explain the many different models working across the Central South we have been told about. It may also account for the lack of focus sometimes seen, and explain why some partnerships were viewed in different ways by different members.

Working together can encourage innovation and inventiveness, bringing together practitioners and disciplines to take a fresh perspective. A recent report by Kings College London¹¹ sees collaboration as a way of overcoming constraining institutional structures to open up wider engagement and facilitate co-creation, unleashing what they term the *cultural capability* of communities.

More recently, collaboration has been seen as a route to efficiency, a response to growing financial pressures.¹² That may be as simple as sharing administrative costs through to providing new opportunities for building audiences, widening impact or attracting new investment.

The Central South has a lively and well connected cultural ecology. There is a lot of joint working, with organisations coming together to develop and deliver projects and events. There are many complex relationships, and a shared understanding of the value of collaboration. New delivery models which are evolving - from the Arts Development Company in Dorset through to the Hampshire Cultural Trust - are basing their approach on the principle of collaboration, albeit in very different ways. The newly established Southampton Cultural Development Trust is determinedly evolving to facilitate collaboration. Portsmouth is exploring what form a Strategic Cultural Partnership might take, and the Isle of Wight are seeking to build on their cultural resilience project.

That cultural ecology is in part a response to the complexities of the area. There is a socio-economic mix of communities, with varied cultural preferences - from "great art" to events and activities which grow from informal participation by local people. There are differences in the provision of venues and facilities, in part reflecting local political choices: the dominance of city arts facilities is notable, with our urban areas providing a focus for both participation and attendance. The presence in our cities of Universities committed to arts and culture reinforces this.

The result is a complex set of relationships and movements across local councils' administrative boundaries: from audience flows through to professional collaboration. It is apparent that the natural geography of culture is not limited by those boundaries. Arts audiences and museum visitors do not define their activities using the borders between local authorities. The catchments of even smaller venues, theatres and museums extend to adjoining districts and areas, serving populations across local authority boundaries.

The complexity of the collaborative relationships we saw across the Central South - from strategic partnerships to looser networks - is in many respects healthy, showing how collaboration has evolved from a variety of distinct local circumstances. However, that complexity gives rise to as many challenges as opportunities. To an outsider the picture is confusing, and there may well be duplication of aims and objectives, further complicated by overlapping geographies. That may in turn diminish the impact of collaboration and dilute the value of investment to improve the cultural offer. Partnerships may become the prisoners of their histories, constrained by the perspectives of their founders.

Those interested in the continued delivery of a high quality cultural offer across the Central South will want to consider whether the complex pattern of collaboration we see is as effective as it could be. We suggest there are four inter-linked questions which merit debate:

Collaboration in practice

Collaboration is an established response to financial pressures, encouraging efficiency and resilience when resources are tight. It can make existing budgets go further and reduce overhead costs. Some collaborative partnerships have also unlocked new sources of funding, and new creative directions, by exploring how cultural activity can help with the broader challenges society faces such as exclusion, inequality and an ageing population.

Many of the arrangements across the Central South are products of that history. But that brings medium to long terms risks: partnerships built, sometimes quickly, as a response to adversity may struggle because they have not had time to develop. They may not have sufficient clarity about or shared understanding of their aims, have not had time to establish robust governance arrangements and may suffer from limited capacity to manage themselves and their evolving relationships. Partnerships require unique skills in those drawing them together, but that is not always recognised.

Our analysis outlined in Part II and the Appendix of this report suggests some of the key questions new partnerships, and perhaps many established ones, should ask themselves about function, form and their working style. It is not enough to call a handful of organisations meeting regularly a 'partnership'. Their efforts are only of benefit if they are properly resourced and supported, have a clarity of purpose and shared set of 'ground rules' for working together.

Question - are we sure all our partnerships are working as well as they might?

Improving the cultural offer and contribution

There is a complex mix of partnerships across the Central South. It is not easy to map the diversity of relationships, either geographically or by topic. That can make it harder to be clear whether we are collectively addressing the challenges the sector and the area faces effectively.

There is, for example, an acknowledged need for the sector to address the challenge of diminishing resources. Several partnerships are attempting to do that, asking how better to work together, exploring new ways of raising funds or looking to build engagement and income. Others are questioning how culture can contribute to ideas of place, to the local economy or to meeting our social challenges.

However, the complex nature of our partnerships means that there may be some duplication of effort, with several partnerships asking the same question, even chasing the same solution. Equally some topics may not be being explored comprehensively, for example the way in which engaging with culture can help improve individuals' mental health and wellbeing.

Without some awareness of who is doing what, and a sharing of information and experience, we cannot be certain we will achieve real improvement. Our results may be patchy, and not easily replicated. Importantly, there may be gaps, either in what we are doing or where we are doing it. Opportunities may be missed.

Question - do we have partnerships that will strengthen the area's cultural offer, and ensure culture can help in meeting our economic and societal challenges?

Collaboration vs. radical change

There is no indication that there will be any early relief from the financial pressures the cultural sector faces. To keep their heads above water the sector has two choices: be more efficient or do things differently. The former involves a search for financial savings through sharing facilities or resources, working together to build audiences and exploring co-production, whilst the latter represents a more fundamental questioning of the role of culture and how it is delivered.

Neither are mutually exclusive, and both avenues are being explored. However, that is being done in an environment which remains protective of individual identity and autonomy, and wedded to existing patterns of support for facilities and institutions. With a few exceptions, collaboration has not given rise to significant change in the organisational landscape for culture. As a result, we still see, for example, similar facilities located in close proximity to each other, but in different ownership, when there are opportunities for collaborative working, sharing services, joint programming or possibly rationalisation.

There are instances where the sector has responded to the challenges of finance or its evolving role and contribution with real changes to how it works. But they are limited, whilst the sector is not short of partnerships which provide a forum for debate and dialogue. Sometimes creating a new partnership is not the answer, and simply avoids a bigger question about how we can and must deliver differently. An inevitable desire to protect autonomy and identity must be balanced with an assessment of the greater impact, capacity and focus that could come by bring some organisations together.

Question - *is collaboration distracting us from finding new ways of working?*

The 'big picture'

The Central South is a connected, coherent area with its own mix of local identities. It has a strong cultural offer, but our research suggests that collaborative arrangements lying behind that offer are fragmented. They are the compromise between different perspective of geography: administrative vs. cultural. On occasion there is even a degree of parochialism, captured in the memorable phrase used by an interviewee - "*institutional arrogance*". Our cultural geography can be very localised, with our cultural organisations working at a smaller scale than the audiences for culture or the reach of practitioners.

Other organisations see the world differently. The Solent LEP or the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire, for example, take a more holistic view of the Central South, basing economic and other planning on a broader South Hampshire geography, which includes the Isle of Wight.¹³ That view is not limited by administrative boundaries, and will frequently take into account the significant economic and other connections between South Hampshire and the conurbation of Bournemouth and Poole: indeed a strategic economic partnership which included Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth, Poole and the Isle of Wight existed 20 years ago.¹⁴

Similarly, communities to the north of our study area look towards their immediate neighbours in adjacent counties - Surrey, Berkshire or Wiltshire. Economic and other ties in Basingstoke, for example, are with the Thames Valley, in the north east of Hampshire communities look towards Surrey's Blackwater Valley. Rural Dorset is closely linked with southern coastal communities, but also has links with other rural areas.

There are other arguments for taking a broader perspective. When it comes to regional and national debates, on whatever topic, national policy is encouraging strategic collaboration, as we have seen with initiatives such as the creation of Combined Authorities, LEPs that work with business over broad geographies or cross-sector working on public health.

Collective voices carry weight. As Lord Jim O'Neill, former Treasury Minister, told a South Coast meeting when talking about the power of the 8 million people in the Northern Powerhouse, *"if you can get them to behave as one collective group of consumers, or one collective group of producers, that is a game-changer"*.¹⁵ Whilst the context is different, Lord O'Neill very simply and eloquently makes the case for collaboration on an ambitious scale.

However, there is no opportunity to take a strategic perspective on culture across the Central South, there is no wider cultural vision equivalent to an LEP's Strategic Economic Plan, and no forum in which to debate that wider perspective. Nor is there an opportunity to allow relationships to form across the whole geography - building on organisational and creative synergies - and the capacity, the time and space, to think about the future.

Question - are we missing an opportunity to see the 'Central South' as a cultural whole?

Part IV: A way forward

The Case for a Central South Cultural Forum

As we have said throughout this report, the Central South is already rich in collaboration, and new partnerships are under discussion. The pattern we see is somewhat *ad hoc*, with dialogue and partnership often resulting from chance conversations, or as a result of strong personal relationships. But given this vibrancy it may seem slightly perverse for us to suggest adding to an already crowded, and possibly confusing, stage. We would certainly not want to propose something more for the sake of neatness.

However, we suggest there is a gap to be filled. The arrangements we see have developed from relationships built up at a local level. Some may overlap in geography or purpose, usually as a result of chance rather than by design. There is every chance that the same or similar topics are being discussed more than once, with similar solutions being found and applied locally. Many of our partnerships are working well but taken together our approach is not co-ordinated or efficient. We are not learning from our peers.

In our view, this fractured process risks being less than effective at a time when there is a growing case for an holistic look at the provision of culture across a broad geography. That “bigger picture” is increasingly necessary as drivers ranging from financial pressures to government policies on regional support and investment suggest we can no longer work at a local level in relative isolation.

We would encourage organisations and partnerships with a stake in the area’s cultural sector to consider the case for a *Central South Cultural Forum*. In our view that would help give a coherent approach to culture, its contribution and its future across the area. The complexity and diversity of what exists at the moment is too disjointed, notwithstanding pockets of strength. The area needs a greater sense of shared purpose and direction.

To punch above our cultural weight the Central South needs a forum in which organisations with a shared passion and different perspectives can come together to examine the role and contribution of culture across that wider geography, understand linkages and synergies, and identify the potential for closer working. Such a body could also play a key role in making the case for culture with local, regional and national organisations who invest, or could be persuaded to invest, in the sector because of its broad benefits to society and the economy.

Purpose

A forum would give all those in our area with an interest in culture and its contribution to society the capacity to discuss some key topics vital to the sector’s continuing health:

- Giving the Central South a powerful voice in regional and national cultural debates. There is a vital need to articulate the strength of the area’s cultural offer, particularly when other substantial city regions are lobbying hard for their own place.
- Improving the area’s cultural offer by encouraging co-production, co-investment etc.
- Democratising culture and widening participation by breaking down institutional barriers to create a wider range of opportunities.

- Making the case for investment by major funders to develop a locally, regionally and nationally significant cultural offer. A strong, united voice would make a powerful case to funders, and should encourage them to reappraise how they allocate resources.
- Developing a shared understanding of how creative and cultural activity can play a role in addressing complex, shared economic and societal challenges more effectively.
- Understanding, analysing and encouraging new delivery models for creative and cultural activity which improve efficiency and outcomes.

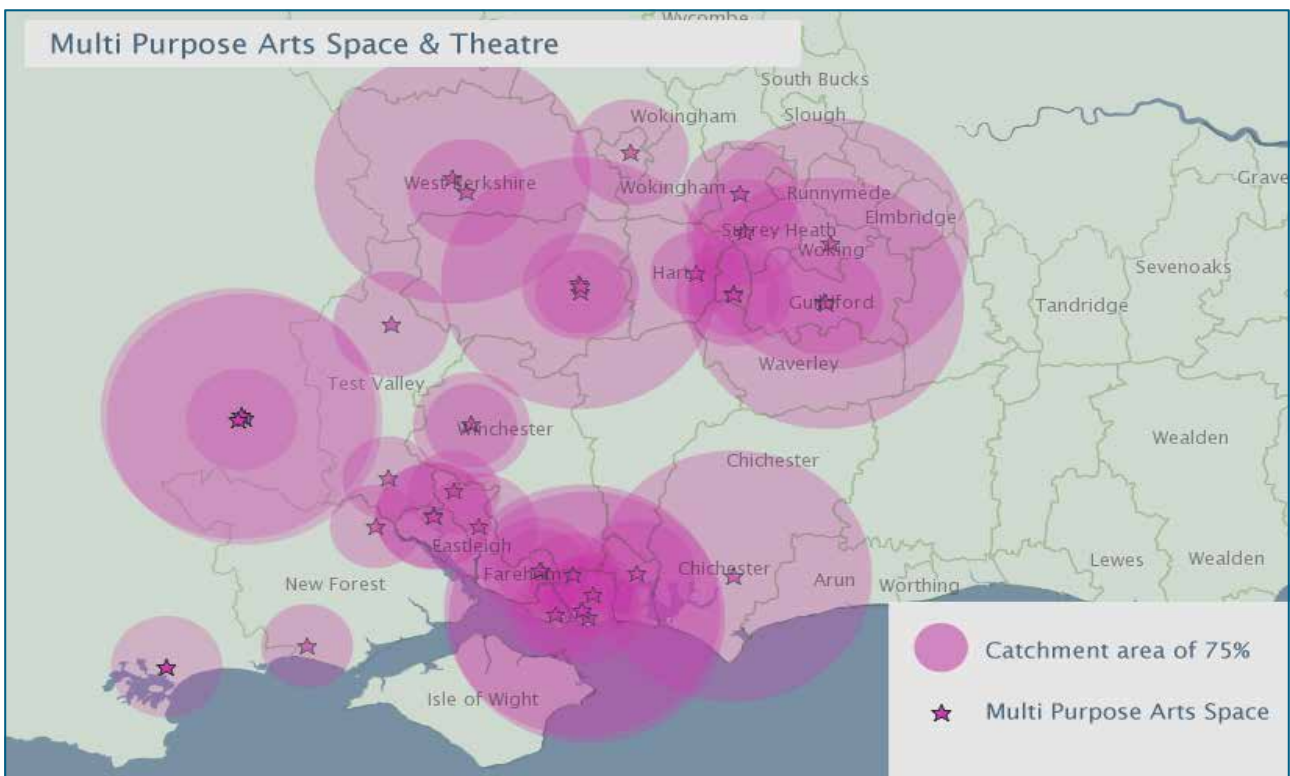
Form

We have used the term “forum” deliberately to avoid constraining the approach we propose. As we hope our assessment makes clear, we are not arguing for a formal arrangement replete with constitutions, membership lists and performance targets. Whatever form it takes, the forum’s remit is clearly “strategic” in the way this report characterises collaboration. It must be allowed to “evolve”, with time and space to build its membership, understand its remit and develop its *modus operandi*.

Geography

The geographic scope of such a Forum is for discussion, but is important. It is essential that any arrangement should reflect a coherent cultural identity and be based on existing collaborative networks, audiences, communities and economies. It must also develop from what constitutes a recognisable geography for all parties.

It is arguable that in Hampshire and to a lesser extent in Dorset there are two foci for cultural activity. One lies along the south coast, reflecting the concentration of organisations, facilities and collaborative working in that area. A second lies to the north of the Counties, and links towns such as Basingstoke and Andover with West Surrey, Wiltshire and Berkshire (Map 2 - we did not find similar data for all of Dorset, although we note that the coastal area offers a concentration of facilities and organisations).



Map 2: Catchment for multi-purpose arts spaces and theatres in Hampshire (Source: South Hampshire Cultural Infrastructure Audit)¹⁶

This mapping of arts spaces and theatres reinforces the notion of separate cultural geographies centred to the north and along the South Coast, a similar but less distinct pattern is seen if audience data for museums and galleries is examined. That perspective also sits well with other organisational and partnership boundaries. Of the area's 29 NPOs, 17 are based within the coastal unitary areas, reinforcing the southern coastal focus for much cultural activity. Our research suggests that east-west links are stronger than north-south, both for organisations and audiences.

Any wider collaborative arrangement will also depend on the local appetite for collaboration between local authorities, universities, LEPs and arts and cultural organisations. At present that appears to vary across the Central South, with the radical administrative reform being taken forward in Dorset not being promoted in Hampshire. Given the cross-organisational nature of many of the partnerships we saw, that wider context will also be important as the cultural sector and its partners to decide whether they collectively see a case for a Cultural Forum.

Leadership

If there is support for a Forum of some description, we would end by reinforcing our earlier comments about the importance of clear, articulate leadership with the ability to pull partners together around a shared vision and agenda. The urban commentator Charles Landry, in a recent blog¹⁷ discussing how to shape successful places, describes the role of what he called The Connector:

"... standing above the nitty gritty of the day to day ... look at 'what really matters' and where opportunities lie ... they can focus on bringing people, organizations, ideas and resources together and avoid getting involved in interest group politics. They take an eagle-eye view of things and rove over concerns and see lines of alignment, partnering potential and synergies between supposedly disparate things."

Landry is talking about individuals or organisations working to a shared strategic objective. In our view, the Central South, however one defines it, needs its own "Cultural Connector".

Part V: Recommendations

The findings from the research and interviews outlined in this report were considered at a roundtable discussion which brought together 16 of the participants in the study. They discussed the questions SPC raised in our report and the ways in which the cultural sector could benefit from closer collaboration. They also considered what might be done to facilitate that collaboration and what it might achieve.

Five broad topics emerged from the afternoon's conversation:

1. An informal forum

There was widespread recognition of the value in making space for informal conversations. Creating opportunities for networking allowed for individuals and organisations to share ideas and build collaborative projects. That was best done through regular informal get-togethers, perhaps with a focus on specific themes or topics of shared interest.

Some form of informal forum also offers a vehicle for cultural practitioners to establish a dialogue with other key sectors, for example with health colleagues or those interested in tourism and economic development.

2. Focusing on a 'common thread'

Participants suggested that an informal forum could add value by promoting discussion on a 'common thread' of shared interests and ambitions which would ensure all benefitted from involvement. Suggested topics included:

- Building audiences and engagement.
- Talent development.
- Working with Universities to develop the digital 'offer'.
- The role of culture in driving social change.
- The role of culture in maintaining and improving quality of life for older people.
- The contribution made by the area's cultural offer to shaping places and creating a distinctive identity.

3. Excellence

Championing excellence in culture across the area could provide a focus for collaboration between organisations and practitioners. The sector could benefit from a shared discussion about how to develop and improve further the area's strengths. One participant suggested the area's reputation for 'outdoor' culture - festivals, carnivals and similar events - may be a unique and distinctive 'offer' from the Central South which could provide that focus.

4. Profile

Whilst the area already has a strong and diverse cultural offer, it sometimes flew 'beneath the radar', and did not enjoy the wider reputation it merited. There was a case for working together to raise our cultural profile, which could help attract practitioners, funding and audiences.

5. A culture 'connector'

An ongoing informal dialogue will need to be catalysed, probably by one individual who provides some 'soft' leadership in encouraging collaboration, setting dates and agendas for meetings, and helping keep the sector in touch with the wider societal and economic picture. In some respects that role may be akin to that of the 'Connector' highlighted in the research report. The role is not one of providing cultural leadership for the area: that can only come from organisations across the sector. Rather, it is one of facilitation, encouragement and enabling.

Policy recommendations

The SPC's research has identified a vibrant cultural ecology across the Central South. It is built on strong performers across a range of disciplines - from theatre to music, dance to visual arts. There is a healthy network of National Portfolio Organisations producing highly regarded work. The breadth and range of that ecology reflects the complex geography and demographics of the area.

There is also a broad range of collaborative arrangements which take a variety of forms. Those arrangements have evolved to suit local circumstances, and the sector has benefitted from the lack of Government diktat on partnership working. However, our research does suggest that there would be some benefit in taking a collective step back to review how well collaboration works, looking afresh at what it is trying to achieve and whether the arrangements in place are working well.

The Research Report also argues strongly that the cultural sector needs to develop a shared dialogue across a broad geography. This reflects a growing regional or sub-regional theme evident in national policy-making and allows cultural organisations to engage with and respond to the sub-regional and regional perspective of organisations such as LEPs or local authorities. It can also be an effective response to the more challenging financial circumstances the sector faces. We suggest that a more strategic approach to collaboration will help culture become part of the solution to the wider economic and societal challenges we face.

As a result of our research and the discussions at the September round-table, the SPC makes five policy recommendations below. It is for the sector collectively, working with partners from the Arts Council England through to Local Enterprise Partnerships and local councils, to decide how they wish to respond to these recommendations.

1. Individual cultural partnerships and other collaborative arrangements across the Central South's cultural sector should consider how best they might review their effectiveness.

A review should explore practical matters such as clarity of purpose, governance and impact. Regular self-assessments of effectiveness should, in any event, be normal practice for all such arrangements, albeit they ought to be scaled to match the character of the partnership.

Those reviews should consider the impact of individual partnerships, but there is also a need to discuss the overall impact of collaboration across the sector.

2. Cultural organisations across the Central South should establish an informal cultural forum to develop a strategic dialogue across the area.

The organisations which took part in this research should be the core of that forum, and it should, at least initially, aim to reflect the broad geography of our research. This should be 'light touch', with minimum bureaucracy, whose main aim is to provide a platform for collective dialogue and debate. Its membership, role and geographic reach should not be tightly defined from the outset, and will naturally evolve over time as participants wish.

It should be clear from the outset that the role of any forum established is not to usurp the role of individual collaborative arrangements. It should only have a role where a topic merits wider discussion - i.e. where collective discussion can add value.

3. The agenda for the cultural forum should be guided by the 'common thread' of shared interests and ambitions.

There are a number of topics identified in our research report and from the round-table discussion of our findings which offer a basis for a productive collective discussion and joint action.

One topic around which the forum could coalesce is the notion of championing excellence, where there is merit in a shared discussion about how to develop and improve further the area's strengths.

4. ACE, in consultation with organisations across the Central South, should identify an individual to support the area's cultural sector in establishing the cultural forum.

We see this as a 'soft' leadership role, bringing together individuals and organisations and facilitating debate and discussion. Its purpose is to help the cultural sector in the area establish a shared voice and identify common interests. We do not see the role as spokesperson for culture in the area or in any way representing the sector - those are gaps the forum should fill.

5. The Central South's cultural sector, supported by ACE, should host an event to engage political and business leaders in understanding the contribution culture makes to the area's communities and economy.

The contribution culture makes to society is not widely appreciated, and this would be a first step in persuading key decision-makers that investment in the sector has a broad benefit. It would also be a catalyst for the cultural forum we have recommended.

As a next step, we suggest those contributing to this study should come together to discuss how they should respond to our findings and recommendations. In doing so, they should include others from the cultural sector who may have a contribution to make.

Appendix: A typology of collaborative arrangements

Our discussions about the different collaborative arrangements we saw allowed us to develop some understanding of the characteristics of different arrangements, and how their structures and working arrangements were related to their objectives. This appendix outlines a simple typology which, it is suggested, may help in reviewing existing collaboration and in shaping new arrangements.

What drives partners to collaborate?

Notwithstanding the diversity of collaborative arrangements, we identified six drivers to collaboration:

- **Resilience:** seeking to make organisations more 'resilient' - more able to resist the challenges of the future, from changing financial circumstances to the shifting expectations of what culture contributes to society. This was not simply a reaction to adversity, many recognised that the way culture is delivered should evolve to stay relevant.
- **Impact:** seeking to broaden the impact of culture, for example, to realise its broader economic contribution or explore the role it can play in tackling societal challenges from improving health and wellbeing to addressing educational under-achievement or social isolation. Again, many saw this as an opportunity to develop cultural practice and ensure the arts remain relevant, rather than a path they were compelled to take. Such collaboration usually involved organisations outside the cultural sector.
- **Direction:** facilitating dialogue and debate to understand the 'bigger picture' for culture, exploring how the cultural offer can be 'improved' and shaping the role it plays in the local community. One participant described this role as "*preparing the flowerbed*" to encourage cultural activity to flourish.
- **Value:** in response to reduced funding contributions from the Government, Government agencies and local authorities, cultural organisations have sought to collaborate to improve value for money. These arrangements aim to make financial savings or try to achieve more within a given budget, exploring innovation on how they achieve outcomes. Searching for improved efficiency can move beyond collaboration to drive new models for delivering cultural activity, for example the Hampshire Cultural Trust.
- **Achievement:** to assist organisations achieve their own objectives, including enhancing their own profile or reputation, or delivering projects they cannot realise alone. Whilst the motivation for individual partners may be selfish, collaboration will nevertheless be mutually beneficial.
- **Development:** developing the creative practice of individuals and organisations by sharing ideas and experience. Pavilion Dance South West, for example, brought together dance practitioners across the region to explore co-production and joint creative development.

Of course, individual organisations may have a variety of motives for collaborating. However, this simple categorisation may help us understand the rationale for collaboration, and shape how it works.

What form does collaboration take?

Notwithstanding the complexity and variety of collaborative relationships we observed, we believe they can be broadly divided into three forms:

- **Strategic** - shared dialogue to help shape the future of the cultural and creative sector and understanding its broader contribution to meeting societal and economic challenges. Strategic

collaboration is usually place-specific in that it reflects a coherent cultural geography, but it is often also a response to the characteristics of an economic or administrative geography.

- **Operational** - a relationship with more specific aims, usually to deliver a service or project. Such a relationship is often based on some form of written agreement, with agreed performance targets or objectives. Partners make a formal commitment to their contribution, and to some degree subsume individual autonomy within the partnership.
- **Networked** - allows organisations with shared aims to maintain a dialogue, sharing experience and best practice, and to provide a 'voice' on issues of shared concern. Networks are usually loose and voluntary, there are few, if any, membership rules and governance arrangements are minimal.

Again, these simple categorisations are intended to help focus on the nature of collaborative arrangements.

We consider that the drivers for collaboration help determine the form a collaborative partnership takes - to some extent form follows function. Table 3 shows what our research suggests are the principal motivational drivers for strategic, operational and networked relationships.

Form \ Drivers	Resilience	Impact	Direction	Value	Achievement	Development
Strategic	X	X	X			
Operational		X		X	X	
Networked			X			X

Table 3: The suggested motivational drivers for collaborative relationships.

What can collaboration achieve?

It was apparent from our interviews that each form of relationship had some common characteristics describing aspects of how the arrangement works and what it can do well. It appeared to us that in some instances these characteristics are unique to one form of collaboration, in others they may be shared with others forms of collaboration. Table 4 (overleaf) outlines the principal features which, we suggest, characterise each relationship.

Whilst we would not go so far as to suggest there is a simple template for collaboration which determines the nature of any partnership according to partners' motivation and delimits how it should work, our analysis does suggest that the nature of any collaboration should be shaped by a clear understanding of the collective motivation and of what partners are seeking to achieve.

Key characteristics	Collaboration		
	Strategic	Operational	Networked
Focus on 'place'	X		
Develop shared vision	X		
Address broad challenges, for example on the economy or society	X		
Respond quickly and flexibly to new circumstances	X		X
Enhance capacity	X		X
Focus on improved delivery		X	
Offer governance arrangements to underpin collaboration		X	
Agree joint targets and performance monitoring		X	
Focus on improved practice		X	X
Encourage co-production and joint delivery		X	X
Bring together those with common area of practice			X
Encourage sharing professional knowledge and experience			X
Provide effective, informed lobbying	X		X

Table 4: Key Features of Strategic, Operational and Networked Collaborative Relationships.

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About the Southern Policy Centre

The Southern Policy Centre was established in 2014 as the only cross-party think tank for Central Southern England. Our focus stretches from Dorset to West Sussex, and the Isle of Wight to Oxfordshire. We aim to provide a distinctive voice for the Central South on questions of public policy.

The Southern Policy Centre's research interests range from exploring the future of public services to the use of open data and new forms of public participation in decision making.

