

The key steps for collaboration in the NHS

NHS Trusts are now formally expected to collaborate with neighbouring Trusts and other local healthcare-related stakeholders to achieve measurable improvements in public health. But what does successful system-wide collaboration look like and how can it be sustained? What are the challenges and how can they be overcome?

Here we present 12 key take-away lessons based on data we've gathered from long-established multi-agency collaborations, including regional shared Staff Banks managed by NHS Professionals for the past six years and other examples from around the NHS and the public sector.

1. Success is more likely when all collaborators are focused on a common purpose or a single problem. The problem is not, for example: 'We haven't got a collaborative bank'. It is likely to be more specific: 'We don't have a mechanism for moving key talent around the system' or 'Agency spending is rising'.
2. Collaboration is a process, not a quick fix. Take time to 'work the problem' and co-design. Agree the process for governance and review as a priority to help ensure decisions don't disadvantage specific parties or the wider system.
3. Work to build trust. Take time to learn about the various parties in the collaboration and understand different perspectives, especially those outside the NHS. This takes work but it is one of the keys to a successful collaboration.
4. Be willing to compromise. All parties need to approach the collaborative process with an open mind.



5. Buy-in is required from various stakeholders. These include clinical leaders who need to be comfortable with any changes made to clinical governance processes, such as compliance and training.
6. Balance strategic and operational perspectives in the co-design process. This will help to create fully workable collaborative solutions.
7. Senior stakeholders need to 'give permission' for collaborators to compromise and work differently. Stakeholders also need to support measurements of success based on joint outcomes, not just benefits to a single organisation.
8. Explore technology solutions. Don't let concerns about partners using different technology platforms derail progress before exploring all possibilities for interoperability.



9. Sharing data and information is paramount. Better solutions come from shared insight and transparency across systems.
10. Divergence can exist within a collaborative solution. Collaboration does not always necessarily mean unifying systems, processes and practices.
11. Be prepared to innovate. For example, taking a system-wide approach to employer branding, recruitment, training and careers creates the opportunity for pooled funding and back office resources.
12. Think patient first, system second. When considering workforce, focus on what benefits the region's current talent pool so the system retains and nurtures staff. The needs of one organisation should not dominate.